

**“In Defense of Dawdling”**  
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In her book *Beyond the Power Struggle*, psychologist Susan Campbell discusses various ways in which tension can arise between people, both in love and in work. Conflict has various roots, she says. One of them is differences in style, which can lead to misunderstandings.

As Campbell sees it, there are various pairs of polar opposites. Somehow, they always seem to end up working together, or being married to each other, in the dance of “opposites attract.” Thus there are *savers* and *spenders*. There are *lookers* and *leapers*. There are *thinkers* and *feelers*, and *lovers* and *warriors*. Finally, most on point for this morning, there are *scurriers* - and *dawdlers*.

Where do you fit into this polarity? Are you a scurrier, a dawdler, or somewhere in between? Do you always seem to be waiting for someone? Or are you the one who tends to keep people waiting?

If you have a project or assignment, do you get right to work on it? Or do you find yourself wanting time to sit and think about it for a while? Do you need time for intuitive reflection, for mulling over? Do you need to let your ideas gestate before you take action?

If you have to go somewhere, but can choose your means of travel, what do you choose? Do you invariably fly? Or do you consider taking a train, or even a boat?

If you're out for a walk, do you walk briskly, as though to a destination? Or do you amble along, stopping to examine the small treasures you find along the way?

Do schedules and deadlines come easily to you? Do they seem necessary, a matter of course? Or do you find they raise your inner resistance? Do they violate some part of your inner being? Do you often find yourself out of synch with the rhythm of the world?

Perhaps you're flexible, able to be either way, depending on what's appropriate. But chances are that you lean to one side of the spectrum or the other - fast lane or slow motion, driven or “go-with-the-flow.”

There's room in this world for both kinds of people. Each brings strengths to the workplace, to a friendship, to love. The gifts of the scurrer may be more obvious. We all know the virtues of punctuality. It fosters predictability and trust in relationships; it allows others to make plans and rely on them.

But dawdlers bring their own gifts to a relationship. Sometimes, punctuality can be an idol, to which the needs of human beings are sacrificed. For example, how often have we listened poorly to someone, because we were anxious that we were running late?

There's a balance here, I think - a middle way. But the balance has become skewed in our time. The world - or at least the Western, industrialized world - seems continually to be speeding up. It seems to be crowding out the dawdlers - those who live life in the slow lane. It's crowding out those who take time to listen, and to ponder - people who find it valuable to "waste time in idle lingering," which is the dictionary definition of "dawdle." If the art of dawdling is lost, I fear that we'll have lost something precious, irreplaceable.

It's said that, in one of the African wars, a group of English soldiers were engaged in a forced march across the wilderness. Onward they raced - until their African guides called a halt to the march. "What on earth are you doing?" cried the British commander, "We can't stop now!" "Oh yes we can," replied the lead guide. "We *must* stop - and let our souls catch up with us!"

How many of us go through our days with the feeling that our soul is several blocks behind us, struggling to catch up? And what about our bodies - are they keeping pace? What are the *physical* costs of quickening the pace, or being out of touch with the rhythms of nature?

Taking it one step further, how much of the damage we've done to the environment is a result of our impatience with biological rhythms? The automobile is an obvious example, but there are others. What if we stopped working when the sun went down - wouldn't we save energy? And what if we took hot weather as a signal to slow down, or stop work altogether, instead of creating an artificial environment with air conditioning?

There's a rhythm of things we ignore at our peril. Some things will simply not be rushed. Soup needs time to simmer, and the taste is best if it waits a day. Members of the "slow food movement" know that. Bread needs time to rise, and

fall, and rise again - and in the process, flavor develops. Ideas need time to percolate and develop. Babies need time to grow.

Some things are like the cocoons that a teacher brought into her classroom. The children watched and waited eagerly for something to happen. Finally, one day, one of the cocoons broke open, and a tiny head began to emerge. Ronny, who had been especially interested in what was happening, watched with wide-eyed amazement as the new butterfly struggled to escape. Wanting to help, he took a pencil and broke some of the material around the opening. When the butterfly emerged, it was crippled. Soon, it died.

Ronny was heartbroken. "I only wanted to help," he kept saying. The other butterfly struggled alone. When it emerged, it was healthy and beautiful. The children took it outside, and set it free.

Human development is like that. We can do lots to enhance a child's opportunities to learn. But the learning still unfolds at its own pace. Many educators even believe that rushing some learning is harmful. The trick is to find the right time, the "teachable moment" - and not to push.

Grieving is like that, too. After a loss, people often expect to "get over it" quickly. And there certainly is such a thing as grief unnecessarily prolonged. But grieving is not a process that can be speeded up. Trying to "get over it" too quickly may actually end up prolonging it.

Ministry also takes time. Sometimes I'll feel under pressure to produce, and often it's unavoidable. But if I'm *always* under that pressure, other things get lost: Time to reflect and ruminate. Time to think about situations, and allow intuitions to emerge. Time to generate ideas for sermons and programs, time to think about the long-term good of the congregation. Perhaps most important, time to stop and deeply listen, to hear what people are really trying to tell me.

Think about it - do you feel the need for more dawdling time in your life? This may mean more than simply taking a vacation for a few weeks. If all our dawdling time is compressed into vacation, we may just take the pressure patterns with us.

I'll never forget the vacation I spent on one of the outposts of Vancouver Island - Bamfield, British Columbia. There can't be any more laid-back place than Bamfield; it's one of the dawdling capitals of the world. But my first night there, I was in a dither: "Oh, I *should* be reading one of the books I brought with me! But

oh - I *should* be going out and watching the sunset!" Fortunately, I caught myself in the act of that foolishness, and laughed out loud at myself. After that, the vacation got a lot calmer.

If that's the way our vacations begin, maybe they're not enough. Perhaps we need to work an attitude of leisure into everything we do. We might even become what Jeremy Rifkin once called "time rebels" - refusing to be pulled into the ethic that "faster is better."

We could make time in our lives for prayer, or meditation, or both. You know the rule, I think - "Take half an hour a day for meditation. But if you're too busy to do that - then take a full hour."

Even better, we could incorporate "sabbath consciousness" into every hour, every minute of the day. We could practice what Thich Nhat Hanh called "mindfulness." In mindfulness, every breath becomes precious. Every step becomes a miracle. We "wash the dishes to wash the dishes" - not to get the dishes done.

I like to think of congregations as being pockets of resistance to the speed culture. At it's best, a church or synagogue is a place where time is savored, and made sacred. A place that makes time for people of all ages. A place where each of us is known, not for what we *do*, but for the blessings that we *are*.

Summer is here. I wish for you some time to follow the rhythms of your own body. Some time to tend the garden of your soul.

I wish for you some time to spend idly and fruitlessly. May you do your part to lower the national productivity.

May you find time to see a rose open, or hear the grass grow.  
Time to hear the questions of a child, and the stories of an older person.

May you savor the miracles that burst out everywhere:  
The fingernail of a newborn.  
The sun making rainbows through a glass of water.  
The patient spider weaving her web, and the heron standing watch by the shore.

And may you carry these blessings with you always - into the fall, through the winter and spring - until summer comes round once again.