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The History of Hurry: A Historical Reflection on John Mark Comer's *The Ruthless Elimination of Hurry*

Maren Schettler

Winner of the 2022 Gladys Boen Scholarship

The Gladys Boen Scholarship is awarded "for the best short story, poem or collection of poems, or essay submitted by an undergraduate currently enrolled in the university." The Creative Writing Scholarship Committee had this to say on Maren Schettler's "The History of Hurry": *"With its fragmented form and its melding of criticism with the personal essay, Maren Schettler's essay enacts the very principle defended in her essay's argument: that we must slow down, resist the urge to hurry, and break free from the rule of clocks and calendars."*

*Hurry is the great enemy of spiritual life in our day.
You must ruthlessly eliminate hurry from your life.*
– Dallas Willard (Comer 19)

"How're you doing?"

"I'm fine, just busy, you know?"

I sighed and let my head fall onto my arms, which were crossed on the table in front of me. It was a miracle I even had an hour of my day free to meet up with Brenna, my old roommate from college, but I couldn't get out of my head. The color-coded blocks highlighted on my phone's calendar were plastered on the walls inside my brain, and there

was no escaping them.

"Hey...have you been taking care of yourself?" Brenna said, tapping my arm to get my attention. I kept my head down, and my words came out muffled behind my sleeves.

"What do you mean?"

"I mean, getting sleep, drinking water, eating healthy, exercising...?"

Ha, I thought. Who on earth has time for that?

"I don't know what to do, Brenna. I'm out of college, and it's not like I'm working 70 hours a week. I get paid well enough, and I'm working full time, but even after balancing everything, scheduling everything, and organizing everything, I'm just *tired*, down to my bones. What am I doing wrong? Why don't I feel like I have time to be healthy, to breathe, to *live*?"

*

They are too alive to die, and too dead to live.

–Byung-Chul Han (pp. 9)

How did we get here? Or, perhaps I should first ask, where is here?

"Here" is:

my soul is exhausted—no, numb
 my emotional and social capacity is eaten away every day of my life
 I have no idea what I'm thinking or feeling at any given moment
 my mind is entirely consumed by my agenda
 there is no love, joy, or peace in my life
 instead, I'm irritable, hypersensitive, restless; I can't seem to stop working, I can't get my priorities straight, I can't take care of my body; I try to escape from reality, I isolate, I substitute spiritual growth with activities that are truly a waste of time.

Now, how did we get here?

*

We will just skim our lives instead of actually living them.

–John Ortberg (27)

We scoff at the idea of horse-drawn buggies, building fires to cook food, or mailing letters. Now we have bullet trains, microwaves, and international instant messaging. Slow is bad. Fast is good.

In fact, fast is so good that our attention span has recently diminished to less than that of a goldfish (ours at eight seconds, Goldie's at nine). So good that the average iPhone operator touches his or her phone 2,617 times a day, because everyone is addicted to their time-saving time suck. (If you are in denial, turn off your phone for 24—no—12 hours and get back to me.) So good that we are unable to form deep, intentional relationships because all we are trying to do is save time and be productive rather than be purposeful.

Life has not always been as frenetic as it is today. We have to drastically alter our minds to imagine what our days would look like without smartphones, motor vehicles, home appliances, the Internet: most of the technology we rely so heavily on today came into existence within only the last century. Living a hurried life is a *recent* societal standard. In the "old days," leisure time was a sign of wealth; now, busyness and overtime pay are the mark of a successful businessperson. Time is money, but what is your time really worth?

Speaking of the "old days" ...

*

*The gods confound the man who first found out
How to distinguish hours! Confound him, too,
Who in this place set up a sun-dial
To cut and hack my days so wretchedly
Into small portions!*

–Plautus, ca. 200 BC (30)

The stream of time has run whether a measurement of time has existed or not. The first commonly used household "clock" was the Roman

sundial, which divided the day into twelve hours. Though sundials had been used by earlier, more ancient cultures, the Greeks and Romans refined the science and geometry that made a twelve-hour day (mostly) consistent across seasons. They also cut the day into ante meridiem (AM) and post meridiem (PM).

Have you ever gone a day without checking the time? It feels stressful if you don't.

Why?

*

The solution to an overbusy life is not more time.

It's to slow down and simplify our lives around what really matters.

–John Mark Comer (62)

"There just aren't enough hours in a day."

"Maren, there have always been the same number of hours in a day."

"It doesn't feel like it."

"Well, yeah, because you've been filling every second of it. You're basically moving your body from place to place to place, and not allowing your soul to catch up. You've been hurrying through the last couple years. How far behind do you think your soul is?"

"It's not like that."

"Really? How have you been spending your limited days? You should be focusing on what matters."

What matters?

To St. Benedict, prayer mattered. The next step in the evolution of time management, in the most literal sense of the phrase, was organizing the day around prayer. Seven times a day, monks were called to collective prayer. Within another century (around 1100), monasteries used mechanical clocks to divide their days.

The first poor decision in a long series of poor decisions.

*

Here was man's declaration of independence from the sun, new proof of his mastery over himself and his surroundings. Only later would it be revealed that he has accomplished this mastery by putting himself under dominion of a machine with imperious demands all its own.

–Daniel J. Boorstin (31)

Most historians agree that the turning point of the use of timekeeping occurred in 1370: in Cologne, Germany, the first public clock tower was erected for all to see, a dominating structure in the city which displayed society-wide artificial time. The day was no longer dictated by the rising and setting of the sun, nor did seasons or celestial bodies determine the length of workdays. How devastating for our bodies to be commanded not by the natural world, but by the manmade formations of time that changed the human norm from simple living to forced productivity, to be woken by the drone of an alarm clock rather than by the sun.

Currently one in three adults do not get enough sleep. How much is enough? At least seven hours. Well, the working class in earlier centuries probably got that much or less sleep, because they began work when the sun came up, right? Wrong. Prior to Edison's invention of the light bulb, which enabled people to stay up long after dark, the average person got

eleven

hours of sleep

a night.

*

The Sabbath—the Jewish institution co-opted by Christianity...reflected a now-battered belief that a sustained spiritual life is simply unfeasible for most mortals without these refuges from noise and work to buffer us and remind us who we really are.

–Andrew Sullivan (35)

Whether you are Christian or Jewish, atheist or agnostic, we all feel like we could use a day off. At one point, most people did in fact have a day off—every week. A day on which the racket of the world was turned off, stores were closed, people were forced to stay home and restfully reflect on their week. Beginning in the 1960s, that day has been filled for the sake of convenience, of needless productivity, and of our inability to slow our lives down. We stop—or “shabbat,” as referred to in Judeo-Christian culture—not to be idle or slothful, but to actively refresh our minds and hearts. To allow our souls to catch up. Leisure time used to be a sign of status, that one had the money to afford doing nothing. Busyness has recently replaced relaxation as a sign of wealth. Our society has begun to glorify the workaholic, the god of productivity.

If you need further convincing that days off are not in fact a sign of laziness but instead a major contributor to a healthy lifestyle, look to the Seventh-day Adventists. This sect of Christianity prioritizes Sabbath most out of any Christian denomination. A study done on what groups of people were considered the happiest people on earth revealed Seventh-day Adventists to be towards the top of the list, and they were noted to live ten years longer than the average American. Every day of those additional ten years corresponds to a Sabbath that would be taken throughout their lives. If you would like to understand the math behind it, here you go:

Let’s say you were taught to Sabbath at a young age. If you practiced Sabbath every week until age 79, which is the average American life expectancy, that would be around 3,600 days of rest. How many years is that? Almost exactly ten years of added life.

*

After a millennia of slow, gradual acceleration, in recent decades the sheer velocity of our culture has reached an exponential fever pitch... What is all this distraction, addiction, and pace of life doing to our souls?

—John Mark Comer (43)

According to most historians, the year 2007 was the next worldwide inflection point after 1440 (in which the invention of the printing press ignited the Reformation and Enlightenment). In 2007, Steve Jobs released the iPhone, Facebook became wildly used, and Twitter was invented, to name a few of the world-shattering technological advances. How have these supposed labor-saving devices destroyed our intentionally-lived-out days? Rather than spend time looking around downtown for a restaurant, you look up reviews on one and how to get there. You text your friends and stay up-to-date on social media rather than meeting up with friends for a meal or coffee. You sit for hours scrolling, scrolling, scrolling. You cannot live without your smartphone.

Newsflash: people want money. How do the big shots in Silicon Valley make money? They take your time by distracting you with the newest, flashiest, sleekest, most convenience-oriented device or app. They offer dopamine hit after dopamine hit. You are the product. Your attention and peace of mind are for sale.

That takes us to today.

*

"If there's a secret to happiness, it's simple—presence to the moment."

—John Mark Comer (24)

"How do I get out of this cycle? The whole world is running on this wild, frantic schedule, and there's no way I can stop."

"Close your eyes."

"What? No," I scoffed, glancing around thinking about how weird my friend could decide to be in the middle of this coffee shop.

"Just do it, don't worry, this'll be good."

"...Fine," I say, shutting my eyes and hoping that Brenna wouldn't

do anything embarrassing.

“Okay,” she said, “first, take a deep breath. Think about what you’re feeling.”

The colored blocks of my phone’s agenda spun around my head, and it was almost impossible to sit still thinking about how much I had to do today...and tomorrow....

“Don’t think about the rest of the week,” Brenna added knowingly, and I momentarily hated her for that, but pushing away the schedule, I could almost relax. I took another few seconds to breathe deeply again, without her asking me to.

“If you didn’t have to worry about tomorrow, you would just have today. And if you just had today, wouldn’t you do everything you could to try to fulfill your purpose here? Would you finish out this afternoon and evening running around with your head cut off to reach your deadlines? Remind yourself that you work hard, and if you took a day off every week, it wouldn’t be lazy, it would be deserved. You can still work hard and live a restful life. You just can’t live the way everyone else seems to have accepted as the only way to live.”

In that coffee shop, in the quiet space created and afforded to me by my friend, I finally felt that peace was possible. At any moment, I could change my life and be better for it. All I had to do was slow... down.

*

Love is painfully time-consuming.

—John Mark Comer (23)

Love—whether it is self-love, selfless love, brotherly love, or romantic love—is viewed by people groups and religions of all types to be the ultimate goal, purpose, or motivator of life. Christians say God himself is love; Socrates claimed that love is the word that frees us from life’s burdens; the Beatles say it’s all you need.

I would personally agree with all three of these statements, but you may not, and I’m not going to try to convince you otherwise. I will say this: If you want to offer love to others or receive love from others, it

cannot be done in a hurry.

How do we slow down?

Here are a few ideas:

- 1.) Be okay with being alone. Be okay with being bored. Be okay with being still. You don't need to go on your phone at every spare moment. Sit, think, pray, meditate—whatever you need to do to take stock of your mind, heart, and soul throughout the day.
- 2.) Take a day off often and consistently. This doesn't have to be Sabbath per se; there is time to rest or take a vacation, even if you think there's not.
- 3.) Simplify your life. We get caught up in the little, ultimately meaningless things, like clothes we wear, shows we watch, emails we answer. Do everything you can to minimize your possessions: less stuff you own means less stuff to worry about.
- 4.) Literally slow down. Walk places. Drive the speed limit. Read poetry rather than skim articles on the Internet. Dumb down your smartphone. Limit your screen time. Eat in, don't take out. Journal.

You may not want to do all these things, but know that not a single one of them would be harmful to your health. You can return to the simple life. It won't be easy in this fast-paced world that we've created for ourselves, to slow down and love and live. But it will be worth it.

So, why not?

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Maren Schettler is a sophomore English major, minoring in music and political science. She hopes to pursue a career in writing or editing for a news publication or a ministry. While she enjoys school, her favorite pastimes are playing flute, spending time with friends and family, camping, biking, and finding new coffee shops to sit (or sip!) and read in.