

Always in a Hurry



Haste is our enemy. It puts us under stress, raises our blood pressure, makes us impatient, renders us more vulnerable to accidents and, most seriously of all, blinds us to the needs of others. Haste is normally not a virtue, irrespective of the goodness of the thing towards which we are hurrying.

In 1970, Princeton University did some research with seminary students to determine whether being committed to helping others in fact made a real difference in a practical situation. They set up this scenario: They would interview a seminarian in an office and, as the interview was ending, ask that seminarian to immediately walk over to a designated classroom across the campus to give a talk. But they always put a tight timeline between when the interview ended and when the seminarian was supposed to appear in the classroom, forcing the seminarian to hurry. On the way to the talk, each seminarian encountered an actor playing a distressed person (akin to the Good Samaritan scene in the gospels). The test was to see whether or not the seminarian would stop and help. What was the result?

One would guess that, being seminarians committed to service, these individuals might be more likely to stop than most other people. But that wasn't the case. Being seminarians seemed to have no effect on their behavior in this situation. Only one thing did: They were prone to stop and help or to not stop and help mostly on the basis of whether they were in a hurry or not. If they were pressured for time, they didn't stop; if they were not pressured for time, they were more likely to stop.

From this experiment its authors drew several conclusions: First, that morality becomes a luxury as the speed of our daily lives increases; and, second, that because of time pressures we tend not to see a given situation as a moral one. In essence, the more in a hurry we are, the less likely we are to stop and help someone else in need. Haste and hurry, perhaps more than anything else, prevent us from

being good Samaritans.

We know this from our own experience. Our struggle to give proper time to family, prayer, and helping others has mainly to do with time. We're invariably too busy, too pressured, too hurried, too-driven, to stop and help. A writer that I know confesses that when she comes to die what she will regret most about her life is not the times she broke a commandment, but the many times she stepped over her own children on her way to her den to write. Along similar lines, we tend to blame secular ideology for so much of the breakdown of the family in our society today when, in fact, perhaps the biggest strain of all on the family is the pressure that comes from the workplace that has us under constant pressure, forever in a hurry, and daily stepping over our children because of the pressures of work.

I know this all too well, of course, from my own experience. I am forever pressured, forever in a hurry, forever over-extended, and forever stepping over all kinds of things that call for my attention on my way to work. As a priest, I can rationalize this by pointing to the importance of the ministry. Ministry is meant to conscript us beyond our own agenda, but deeper down, I know that much of this is a rationalization. Sometimes too I rationalize my busyness and hurry by taking consolation in the fact that I came to be this way legitimately. It's in my genes. Both my father and my mother exhibited a similar struggle. They were wonderful, moral, and loving parents, but they were often over-extended. Responding to too many demands is a mixed virtue.

It's no accident that virtually all of the classical spiritual writers, writing without the benefit of the Princeton study, warn about the dangers of overwork. Indeed, the dangers of haste and hurry are already written into the very first page of scripture where God invites us to make sure to keep proper Sabbath. When we are in a hurry we see little beyond our own agenda.

The positive side to haste and hurry is that they are, perhaps, the opposite of acedia. The driven-person who is always in a hurry at least isn't constantly struggling to get through the morning to the lunch hour. She always has a purpose. As well, haste and hurry can help make for a productive individual who is affirmed and admired for what he does, even as he is stepping over his own children to get to his workplace. I know this too: I get a lot of affirmation for my work, even as I have to admit that pressure and hurry prevent me much of the time from being a Good Samaritan.

Haste makes waste, so goes the saying. It also makes for a spiritual and a human blindness that can severely limit our compassion.

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