

The Pope is right – we've lost the ability to slow down and think



In his Christmas message, the Pope said, "The faster we can move, the more efficient our time-saving appliances become, the less time we have."

How we rush to fill our days with those time-saving appliances that soon become mere time-filling devices. Mobile phones, iPads, Facebook, tweeting – all, at their best, are staggeringly efficient things that produce extraordinary advances in our working lives. I have written whole articles on my phone while on the train and filed them to newspapers instantaneously – a process that would once have needed a pen and paper, a copytaker, a railway station telephone box and a team of hot metal print workers.

Those same marvellous things then come along and devour our spare hours, destroying our capacity for spiritualism, for reading long books and for just thinking. We shouldn't really blame the devices themselves, more our capacity for being waylaid by short-term gratification. That man avidly staring at his phone on the 7.32am from Guildford might be reading Proust or the Bible on his mobile – except he's not.

It's in the downtime of life, the spare, empty hours, that we often have the best thoughts, when the mind is seemingly at its most fallow. At the weekend, the gifted comedian, Miranda Hart – her Christmas special is on telly tonight – said in an interview, "Living on my own has been good for me: having times of being lonely and bored is good for creativity." That's only true if you let the lonely and bored mind wander around a bit, untethered by the constant, furious need to communicate and receive information.

As the old line goes, "Don't just do something; sit there!"

Harry Mount's latest book is How England Made the English: From Hedgerows to Heathrow. He is also the author of Amo, Amas, Amat and All That: How to Become a Latin Lover and A Lust for Windowsills - a Guide to British Buildings from Portcullis to Pebbledash. A former leader writer for the Telegraph, he writes about politics, buildings and language for lots of British and American newspapers and magazines.

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