Limping down the fast lane

More haste, more speed, but are we really getting anywhere?

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Are there times when you can’t quite settle to anything? You fitfully pick up a novel, put it down, glance at the newspaper, start writing a letter home, try to stretch to some yoga, plan next week’s menus and then come back to the novel you abandoned half an hour earlier.

When a friend saw me doing that just recently, he said it’s all down to the job. We now live in a world that has speeded up to such an extent that it addles our brains. You may have heard about the research at the United Nations in New York that found that delegates now speak something like 30 per cent faster than they did 10 years ago. We all know that a gabbled message is a garbled message; we also know that people – incongruously – never tire of telling us that communication is their prime concern.

But it is not just speed; we are constantly solicited by electronic gadgetry. We feverishly check our emails every 30 minutes and text on our mobile phones. We now have the unparalleled joys of Twitter and receive messages from Facebook telling us that Joe is now friends with Fiona. A recent article – which I of course read on the Internet – said that we should stop this constant need to share every last tedious detail with the world and that if you are tweeting you are not mentally present in the room.

Businessmen and women are often photographed looking at their watch, and the not so subliminal message is that they are important and busy people who work to a cast-iron schedule. In films people dash into restaurants, order food after a lengthy negotiation on how they want it cooked (only egg whites and the fish cut on the bias), and then announce as soon as the meal is brought to the table, “I gotta go.” Only people in a constant hurry live exciting and fulfilled lives.

I was recently at an airport standing in line to pay for my duty free. A man just in front of me was carrying a backpack, a briefcase and clutching his purchases. At this point he decided he just had to make a phone call, so there he was balancing his luggage, shopping and trying to pay whilst talking on the phone. Could the call not have waited until he’d bought the goods, a wait of no more than five minutes? We’re all going completely bonkers.

Many agree that email is now our main source of work enquiries, so of course we have to check if we have been offered a week in the Caribbean. You just know that the day you decide to act cool you will miss your chance of a week on palm-fringed beach. Checking emails every 20 minutes is no more than a reaffirmation of our irrepressible optimism.

But we could afford to slow down, just a bit. In the old days when I had black hair and a six-pack, offers of work would come by mail. Yes, the postman brought you a letter. You then sat down and
wrote a reply using your very best penmanship, saying that you’d be delighted to work at the Toad Lickers Conference next July. You affixed a stamp and posted your letter. Our concession to technology was a telephone answering machine – I had one the size of a small suitcase that hummed. In today’s sensual overload it is hard to convey the excitement of that blinking red light that indicated you had a message.

Of course we had our stresses back in those halcyon days. We were worried about posture and our spines and draughts in the booth and would it be a good idea to learn another language. But it was all that bit slower, even a bit gentler perhaps.

And although it now sounds tremendously quaint, it worked.

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