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“Hyper-scheduling”

You would think that the University of Richmond would be a place of calm reflection and deep insight with its Arcadian campus and vast buffet of intellectual and creative stimulation, but it's not. This is not to say that I don't love this place, because I do. Never in my life have I had so many wonderful opportunities to learn and engage with keen minds and visionary thinkers. Never in my life have I worked in such sylvan beauty. Never in my life have I been so inspired by the intellect and creativity of my students. So what's the problem?

It's not “mush”, but speed that is our real problem. And I'm not talking about addiction to amphetamine - I'm talking about addiction to a manic lifestyle. The Quest Question for this season is “what moves us?” and I'd like to start a campus conversation about the hyper-scheduling that leads us to live such manic, frantic lives. We laugh it off, make excuses for it, or pretend that this is “inevitable” or “necessary,” but rarely if ever do we stop to seriously reflect on this socially acceptable addiction or its hidden costs.

I've been thinking about this for a while, and when I heard Dr. Len Goldberg speak at an RC Leadership Dinner, I decided to write about it. He will be retiring soon, after years of bountiful service to the university, so he speaks from experience. During his talk he reminded us all to slow down a bit and take time to relax, reflect and enjoy life. Dr. Goldberg challenged us all to consider deeply what is most important in life, and to make sure that we don't miss it, that we don't let it pass us by in our sometimes frenetic, frenzied existence.

Our addiction to speed is partly due to the influence of technology: new wonders that have freed us from wasteful labors have also freed our schedules to be packed with ever more activity so that ultimately our oft-promised leisure time never quite materializes. And when it

does, this “empty” time makes us nervous, edgy, longing to fill it, to move on to the next event or achievement. While we may be able to shrug this off as a “lifestyle choice”, this speed-lust has other manifestations that are physically threatening. If you think about the way we drive around campus at reckless speeds, talking on cell phones – it’s only a matter of time before someone gets run down by a frantic speed-freak. Will that grab our attention?

And where are we going in such a hurry? Don’t we all end up at the same Finish Line? Is the end of our physical movement any less final if our lives were jam-packed with activity and accomplishment? What moves us to hyper-schedule ourselves so that we feel compelled to rush about nilly-willy, vaguely feeling the stress and shallowness of it all but rarely stopping to ponder it deeply? You probably don’t have time to think about this right now, but you can get back to me when you get a chance.

For the past three semesters there has been a marked increase in CAPS visits related to stress, and this stress is reflected on campuses nationwide. And it’s not just the students. We faculty and staff are on the same treadmill. We know this is a problem, we joke about it as we pass one another in a blur, but we continue running, running, running. If it weren’t so unhealthy and unproductive it might be funny, sort of like that opening scene in the Jetson’s cartoon where George is on the runaway treadmill yelling “Jane, stop this crazy thing!”.

The hardcore speed addict may react angrily to such discussion or he might breathlessly note that this is the “price” of “success” – but is it? Is our overachiever-hyper-scheduling a successful and admirable existence? I doubt it. In fact, stress studies are clear on its negative impact on health, though we willingly sacrifice our bodies. But rarely do we consider that the quality of our lives, our thinking and our creativity is seriously compromised and corroded by hyper-scheduling. It’s like going to a buffet when I’m really hungry: I scarf up all the tasty

choices but afterwards I only feel bloated, unsatisfied and unclear about any one of the specific items I ate. When we overcrowd our schedules, we may get a variety of experiences but the limited time we have to engage with each often makes them shallow encounters that don't satisfy us or enhance our thinking or inspire our creativity – we're too busy looking at our watch.

And this is not a new problem. Thoreau and Emerson reminded their contemporaries of the value of a simpler life and of making time for contemplation. Thoreau warned us against becoming “slave drivers” of ourselves and Emerson noted that learning without “solitude, inquest and self-recovery” is a “fatal disservice”. Maybe if we are courageous enough to trim a few activities or commitments from our schedule, we can retrieve our lost leisure and engage in those necessary and practical reflections to digest our experiences so they enrich our lives and our minds instead of merely filling them. Let's talk about it.