

THE SLOW MOVEMENT: ON THE SNAIL'S TRAIL

By Sue Jackson

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In 1986, the famous Spanish Steps in Rome was the site of a unique event. A group of irate citizens assembled to protest the opening of a McDonalds nearby - all brandishing bowls of pasta. With characteristic Italian style, with the writer, Carlo Petrini, as their spokesperson, and the snail – that ultimate slow mover - as their mascot, the Slow Movement was born.

Since then, the Slow Movement has developed into a major cultural shift as the key principle of slowing down is applied to more and more areas of life. But Slow Food is where it all began and is what commonly springs to mind whenever Slow is mentioned, so that's where we will start.

Slow Food doesn't necessarily mean that food is cooked slowly, although traditional methods of food preparation are favoured. What Slow Food is all about is connection – of consumers with food producers, of diners with each other and of all of us with our bodies and the land. To achieve these objectives, advocates encourages us to choose fresh, seasonal, local produce that we can either savour alone, or better still, share with others during relaxing meals,

For devotees of Slow Food, Fast Food is public enemy number 1. In Petrini's words: '(Fast foods) diminish opportunities for conversation, communion, quiet reflection, and sensuous pleasure, thus short-changing the hungers of the soul.'

It's the 'hungers of the soul', not just of the body, that I believe Slow Food satisfies. Even the name chosen for its local branches – 'convivia' – is deeply evocative. Convivia, meaning 'feasts, entertainments, banquets' (the root of words like conviviality) instantly conjures up for me, a Latin student from way back, delightful visions of replete diners, in togas and laurel wreaths, wine goblets in hand, reclining on divans, entertained by fire eaters and dancing girls. The good news is that 1200 people across Australia already belong to convivia, and they welcome new members.

In fact, Slow Food has become enormously popular world-wide and currently boasts a membership of 80,000 in over 100 countries. It has friends in high places too. One of them, the celebrity chef, Nigella, swears by meat from Shedbush farm, where all the farming is 'slow'. On this idyllic small holding in Dorset, the exclusively rare and traditional breeds are fed an organic, GMO-free diet, receive only homeopathic remedies, and are allowed to grow and mature at their own natural pace.

Slow Food has suffered from an image problem at times, but the characterisation of Slow Food as an exclusive club for fat cat 'foodies' is hardly fair. The original protest on the Spanish Steps combined food and humour with a political and social agenda, and Slow Food has been particularly successful in retaining all those elements. Slow Food's fundamental messages are that the choices we make in the kitchen have a profound effect on our rural environment and the livelihoods of our farmers, and that there is an inextricable link between the plate and the planet.

The Ark of Taste - another great name - is one attempt to translate Slow Food principles into practice. Just like the original Ark, The Ark of Taste aims to preserve endangered plants and animals - this time around - from the rising tide of globalization and homogenisation of food. It operates by cataloguing disappearing foods, reviving rare breeds and plant species and selecting products to join the Ark. The irony is that the best way of all to preserve threatened foods for future generations is to eat them now – a win/win situation if ever there was one. The Italian Valchiavenna goat, the American Navajo-Churro sheep, Greek fava beans indigenous to the island of Santorini, as well as our own Leatherwood honey and Bunya nuts have all found berths on the Ark.

Terra Madre (Mother Earth) - a Turin-based world conference for food communities - is another initiative of Slow Food. In 2006, more than 9000 people from over 1500 communities - farmers, hunters, cooks, cheese makers, bakers, vintners, breeders, fishermen and women - met face-to-face with consumers, food industry academics, ecologists and futurists for conversation and debate. This meeting provided a unique opportunity for food producers from places as far apart as Mongolia and Brazil to talk to each other and to share their dreams for the future.

What could Trevi in Italy, Aylsham in Norfolk, Hersbruck in Bavaria and Sokndal in Norway possibly have in common? All are members of Cittaslow or the Slow Cities movement, probably the most famous offshoot of Slow Food. I'm sure it will come as no surprise to hear that Cittaslow originated in Italy.

The aim of Cittaslow is to put the brakes on in urban centres, and to make them more people-friendly, so green space, parklands and committed areas for

leisure activities are top priority. It is fascinating to hear what some advocates believe will make all the difference to the quality of urban life – an end to car alarms; the banning of neon signs; or no more instant macaroni.

Members of Cittislow hope that by supporting local specialities, particularly those with their roots in tradition, by celebrating the unique cultural mix of areas and by promoting the distinctive features of particular towns they will be able to resist ‘the homogenization and Americanization of cities’.

Cittaslow networks now exist in Germany, Norway and the UK as well as Italy, and many towns elsewhere are working towards accreditation. And sometimes they vye with each other in the process. In Wales, the Flintshire town of Mold and the Carmarthenshire town of Llandeilo are pulling out all stops to win ‘Slow Food Capital’ status. If I was a betting woman, I’d put my money on tiny Llandeilo because Mold has a McDonald’s, while it only has a traditional chip shop.

Music to a traveller’s ears is the statement from Cittaslow that one of its key objectives is to ‘encourage a spirit of genuine hospitality towards guests of the town’.

Speaking of travellers, another burgeoning area of the Slow Movement is Slow Travel. Slow Travel has a strong environmental agenda that encourages people to consider carefully the environmental impact of their journeys. Taking a ‘slow boat to China’ would definitely win the Slow Travel stamp of approval. So too would using trains, trams, buses, bicycles and of course feet to reach our destinations. What Slow Travel aims to minimize is the skyrocketing use of fast

but heavily polluting planes. Indeed, companies now exist that help prospective travellers to plan trips which minimise carbon use.

Slow travellers are keen to appreciate the trip for its own sake, rather than be preoccupied with the destination. The attitude 'It's Tuesday. It must be Belgium' is not for them. Slow Travel promotes the idea that people need time to adjust to foreign countries and new cultures and that journeying there and moving on slowly provide them with 'an in-between time', a hiatus, to make those adjustments.

Slow Leisure shares a similar concern for peoples' emotional well-being. Members insist that the important things in life just shouldn't be rushed. Sleeping, for example, they argue is an under-rated activity, and they promote the idea of sleeping for as long as we need, until our natural rhythms awaken us. They also encourage people to remove their watches at weekends and on holidays.

At first glance, it seems odd that there would be the necessity for a group with the avowed aim of slowing down leisure, but that's only until we recall how often our leisure time is organised with military precision, so that it's sometimes as heavily scheduled and jam-packed with activities as our working days. For many people there is simply no time left – no 'window of opportunity' – for anything as unproductive as smelling the roses.

And yes, a Slow Work movement does exist, but it is more popular in some quarters than others. A French woman who recently wrote a book called *Bonjour Paresse* (Hello, Laziness) subtitled *The Art and Importance of Doing the Least Possible in the Workplace* isn't too popular; her company has threatened disciplinary action.

Some university students have developed their own particular take on Slow Work, called Go Slow. This is based on the subtle but sensible idea that students need to learn to quieten their minds. It sounds somewhat counter-intuitive, to slow students down, using strategies like yoga and meditation, so that they can accomplish more. And in some households, speeding them up might seem to be the bigger challenge.

Getting back to leisure, there is a Slow Arts and Crafts movement, whose members are less inclined to be driven by commercial success and more interested in creativity for its own sake. I recently saw something that I'm convinced was created by a slow craftsperson. It was an exhibit at the Royal Melbourne Show - a scrumptious-looking replica of a full-blown Aussie afternoon tea, complete with lamingtons, cocktail frankfurts on sticks and of course a pavlova – all knitted.

The revival of ancient crafts is another goal of Slow Arts and Crafts, and its members include weavers, coopers, saddlers, wheelwrights, thatchers and fletchers (who, I was interested to learn, make bows and arrows).

When you tire of your hobbies, there is always Slow Sex. Sting came in for considerable ridicule some years ago when he publicly declared his passion for Tantric sex, but he was obviously just ahead of his time. Nowadays Slow Sex is hot. A selection of headlines from its numerous websites include 'Why Slow Sex Rocks: like a bottle of fine wine, great sex takes time'; 'Senior citizens sexuality: like lava bubbling below the surface'; and 'Have slow steady sex', with an interval for ice cream – either consumed or applied.

It may seem odd that such an intimate area of life can be afflicted by the fast bug, but in my experience as a therapist that is definitely the case. Even though they often have a wow of a time once they get going, because of the rat race they are running, many people rarely find the time.

Snails, as we know, never run races. And like all champions of Slow, they are experts on the good life.

For a start, they certainly get out and about. You find them everywhere - in fresh water, in the sea and on land. They enjoy their food and can accommodate meat eaters and, as gardeners can attest, many vegetarians in their ranks. They pace their lives to perfection, and even on the move they alternate body contractions with periods of stretching – my yoga teacher would approve.

Snails are equipped to enjoy maximum comfort in their passage through life. They have not one, but two, sets of sensory detectors – eyes on stalks and feelers – to ensure they avoid obstacles. Their hard spiral shells protect them from attack from above. And best of all, they have a marvellous mechanism for ensuring their path is always smooth. They secrete mucus as they move which reduces friction and minimizes the risk of injury. As the snail's trail unrolls beneath them, they slowly glide along, like celebrities on a red carpet.