

The Power of Stupidity



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Chapter 16 – Stupidity and Haste

We are in the habit of believing that “quick” means clever and “slow” stands for stupid. But it is also common knowledge that “haste makes waste” – being in a hurry can cause all sorts of mistakes. We have always been quite confused about the value of speed and the advantages of slowness. The hare and the tortoise were probably part of folklore three thousand years ago, even before that apologue became part of a Greek collection known as Aesop’s fables.

So what’s new? Haste mania – as an increasingly dangerous source of stupidity. More so now than at any other time in human history. Everybody seems to be always in a rush, though quite often it isn’t at all clear where they think they are going – or why.

It’s true that a bright person can understand before others catch up. But this is not the product of hasty thinking. It’s the result of listening – and more effective focus on a subject or a situation. It doesn’t necessarily take much time, but it’s a state of mind that is basically different from “haste.”

Intelligence doesn’t have to be “fast” or “slow.” A quick intuition can be refreshing – when it works. Sometimes fast action is necessary. But in many situations we would be less stupid if we didn’t “jump to conclusions” and we spent a little time making sure that we have understood.

“Being in a hurry” has become a habit, regardless of any real need for speed. It causes unnecessary tension and anxiety. It’s true that some things are happening faster, but not all and not always. Anyhow, even when they do, hysterical haste is not an effective way of coping with change (and even less so with unexpected circumstances.)

This doesn't mean that we can, or we should, go back to the "old ways", to the times when things were slow simply because they couldn't be any faster. Relaxing as that can be, when it's a choice, this isn't the same world as it was when going from here to there meant walking, or riding a horse – and communication took months or years to do what now happens in minutes.

A few generations are a relatively short time for humanity to adjust to the speed of transport and communication. There is more going on than we have had a chance to really understand. And we are making things worse by being obsessed with haste.

Just "being slow" doesn't solve the problem. This isn't a matter of how long it takes, but of how it's done.

It can be quite stupid to waste time, to hesitate, to miss an opportunity by dithering when it was the right time to act. But it is just as stupid to rush into doing something before we have had the time to think, to be in a hurry when it isn't necessary, and so to make mistakes that it will take longer to correct, causing a further state of haste, leading into a vicious circle that could have been avoided by getting it right in the beginning.

There is so much of that going on this we have lost sight of what was the purpose (or the problem) in the first place. So "the tail is wagging the dog" and the opportunities multiply for the power of stupidity to wipe out any trace of common sense that may be lingering in the mess.

Haste, when not dictated by a precise need, is nearly always stupid. Not only because it causes mistakes. It also makes us nervous, jumpy and uncomfortable, rushing ahead with no sense of direction, infecting other people with the same disease, chasing nobody knows what and going nobody knows where.

In Lewis Carroll's *Through the Looking Glass* the Red Queen of Chess tells bewildered Alice that «*in this place it takes all the running you can do to keep in the same place.*» This is no longer a little girl's nightmare. It's an effective description of the anxiety-driven haste syndrome.¹

The haste addicts seem to believe that everything is always in "constantly accelerated motion" – and the only way of "keeping up" is to "run faster to stay in the same place", otherwise one is "left behind."²

One of several things they don't understand is that "behind", more often than is generally understood, can be a favorable position. To let others rush ahead and see where they hit the pitfalls. Or to deliberately "step back" and gain a wider perspective and a better view of the environment.³

Of course there are ways of "slowness" that should, wherever possible, be eliminated or drastically reduced. As in the case of poorly organized services that make us waste a lot of time. Such as three hours in airport procedures and surface transport for a one-hour flight. Or the simplest matters being made absurdly complicated by the stupidity of bureaucracy (see chapter 12.)

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¹ Biologist Leigh van Valen, in 1973, defined the "Red Queen Effect" as an evolutionary principle that «*regardless of how well a species adapts to its current environment, it must keep evolving to keep up with its competitors and enemies who are also evolving.*» It's pretty obvious that the same concept can be applied in human affairs. But this is no good reason for the haste mania, which does not generate successful competition, or positive evolution, but nearsighted and self-destructive neurosis.

² Anxious haste is often caused by fear. See chapter 14

³ Hasty or superficial thinking can cause a warping of perspective, as we shall see in chapter 21.

Technologies, in spite of their claimed “speed”, are increasingly wasting our time (and money) with inefficiency and malfunctioning, unnecessary complication and all sorts of uncomfortable messing around that could be easily eliminated if they were conceived to fit human needs and they were used with a bit of common sense. (See chapter 19.)

A list of things that are stupidly slow could be very long. And every day the inexhaustible resources human stupidity are coming up with a new one. Nobody seems to be doing anything seriously about this problem. While everybody is rushing around without knowing why.

The speed obsession is mostly at the workplace, but it has also invaded private life. Fast food, fast holidays, fast play, amusement and entertainment, fast (and thus often false)enthusiasm and disappointment, fast solutions that make the problems worse.

Fast information that, by being too quick, doesn’t know what it’s saying. Fast books that, by rushing to explain everything in a few pages, make us totally confused – or are written so hastily that the author had no time to understand what he or she was writing about. Fast chasing of practically anything, even though we don’t know what it is.

In the superficial culture of appearances, even the pleasures of life, including sex, are pictured as “fast”, run-of-the mill standardized commodities in easy-open packaging, to be “consumed” as quickly and carelessly as an ice cream cone.

To make good pasta sauce we don’t need a cyclotron. It’s enough to have simple tools and good ingredients. But it takes care, experience, intelligence, taste and patience. If we don’t have the time, we can buy it in a jar or a box. But the taste will be awful if the manufacturer hasn’t invested a great deal of time, expertise and attention into making it properly. It’s nice when someone saves us time and effort and gives us a pleasant experience. But many do the opposite.

Wasting time isn’t useful or amusing. But finding time is a basis for intelligence. It isn’t only necessary, it is also pleasant, relaxing and rewarding. We can save a lot of time by avoiding messy consequences when we have had the time to understand what we were doing. Haste is often a result, but also a cause, of poor thinking and anxiety.

We don’t do things faster by being in a hurry. An intelligent process is not only more effective, but also shorter, because it reduces the risk of having to go back and fix the mistakes caused by hasty decisions.

If we want to go somewhere in a shorter time, it is much more effective to plan an intelligent route than to go rushing with no clear direction.

A quick intuition can find a useful shortcut, or seize an unexpected opportunity. But we don’t get to that “magic moment” unless our mind is properly trained, and we have developed, over time, the necessary resources of experience and knowhow.

There are situations in which crucial moves must be made in a very short time – but hasty decisions can be disastrous. It happens in all sorts of fields, from scientific experiments to applied technologies, in organization management as in everyday life.

A good example is competitive sport, that can appear always dominated by haste. A fraction of a second can make the difference between victory or defeat. In practically all disciplines there are moments in which extreme lucidity, as well as fitness, is needed in a very short time. But this is not haste – or improvisation. Behind that “instant” performance there are many long years of training, exercise, commitment, meticulous preparation.

Let’s stop and think, right now, if only for a few minutes. That “we don’t have the time” is nearly always a delusion – or a lack of perspective.

Reversing the obnoxious cycle of haste isn’t easy. But, when we are able to do it, the results can be pleasantly surprising. Any interruption of this obsessive habit is a way of reducing the power of stupidity.

A description of the book
is online – stupidity.it