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RUN SLOWER: THE NEW SUPERPOWER FOR OUR SPED UP WORLD

April Rinne

Human beings run faster when we've lost our way. –Rollo May

Take your pick of reasons to run.

New and unexpected change happens every week, if not multiple times a day. It could be a new schedule that disrupts a routine that took ages to get right. Or a team that's behind schedule. Or a time-sensitive opportunity on the horizon. Or not knowing how long you can make your rent payments. Or worrying about your safety. Or your family's or friends' safety. Or a melting planet.

Should you walk, sprint, or simply stay put?

Individuals and organizations alike are struggling to answer this question. In the workplace, human resources leaders often argue that when uncertainty looms, it's necessary to "fire fast." When you're not sure where revenue will come from, one of the easiest things to do is reduce your team. After all, salaries are the single-largest line item for most organizations' budgets.

Yet if we dig into the research, we learn that the opposite is true: since 1980, companies that delay layoffs as long as possible perform better over time than companies that fire fast.[1] Why?

It turns out that not only is top talent hard to replace, but layoffs are devastating to the morale and productivity of the team that remains.[2] Organizations that place economic efficiencies over fundamental fairness end up showing their true cards. Values and trustworthiness are hard to recoup.

The lesson here is not that layoffs should never be made or that we should never take swift action. It's that responding quickly doesn't necessarily mean responding wisely. In a world in flux, fastest doesn't always finish first.

THE SUPERPOWER: RUN SLOWER

To thrive in a fast-paced world, slow your own pace.

In an upside-down world that coaxes, cajoles, and coerces you to run ever faster, your key to true success and growth is to do the opposite: learn how to run *slower*.

The old script says we must run faster to keep up. But a world in flux has different race conditions because the finish line keeps shifting. Whether it's business demands, home and family priorities, responsibilities to juggle, relationships to nurture, or relentless uncertainty to decipher: the faster we run, and the more we run without resting or reflecting or even paying attention, the worse our results will be over time.

Yet for most people, running faster remains our default. We're stuck in the old script, and it does not bode well. Especially if we're running faster alone.

When we learn to run slower, the outcomes are better across the board: wiser decisions, less stress, greater resilience, improved health, a stronger connection with our emotions and intuition, presence, focus, and clarity of purpose. Paradoxically, slowing down actually gives us *more* time, which leads to less anxiety. Slowing down enhances our productivity in ways that matter and sends burnout to the dustbin. In reality, *there are many kinds of growth that can come only with rest.*

It took me ages to learn to run slower. For much of my life, I ran as fast as I could: towards goals set by others, away from things I feared, but without giving much thought to why. When my parents died, I wanted to run as fast as I could away from the situation … and yet I didn't. I stood my ground, and that began my practice of this superpower. It would take many more years to really understand the dynamics of what was unfolding, both internally and in my relationship with the outside world.

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Today I can run much slower than I used to, though there's still plenty of room for improvement. Through trial, error, and deliberate practice, I've learned to cherish the power of the pause. I'm more present and less anxious. It's humbling to admit, but I can see so many things that I simply ran past before. Some things I used to fear have even become sources of joy.

To be clear, running slower does not mean stopping, laziness, stagnation, lack of purpose, or (perhaps the most startling objection) not caring. Nor can it be solved by merely taking a vacation, downloading an app, or seeking a "one-and-done" quick fix (ironically, this will bring a world of misery because what you seek to "fix" is constantly changing). In reality, running slower means plenty of motion and inquiry—at a sustainable pace. It means caring enough to quiet the mind and focus on what really matters.

Of course, there are times when running faster is the right thing to do: swerving to avoid oncoming traffic and signing up for a pandemic vaccination are two things that come to mind. And when we're in the flow—completely immersed in what we're doing—we may feel as if we're more alive, moving and thinking faster than ever.

But on the whole, we are hampered and harmed far more often by our minds racing when we'd rather be calm. We spend our time in constant pursuit of expectations set by others, then wonder where our time (and our hopes, dreams, and desires) went.

We are running chronically ever faster and, in so doing, running right past life itself. But it doesn't have to be this way, and right here is where to start.

THE OLD SCRIPT AT WARP SPEED

In 2010, researchers at Harvard University revealed that 47 percent of our waking hours are spent thinking about what *isn't* going on.[3] At the time, smartphones were only three years old. We were just beginning to adjust to mobile devices that within a decade would become not only our telephones but our televisions, teachers, bank tellers, transportation providers, food procurers, travel agents, dating services, laundromats, confession booths, and so much more. And yet each of these apps, each button on your smartphone, is another distraction: another opportunity to veer your thoughts elsewhere, away from the magic of life unfolding right in front of you.

Today our on-demand economy has exploded, along with insta-everything expectations, 24/7 lifestyles, and the perception of being "always on." Today, we take it for granted that Amazon will deliver the next day, if not sooner; we hail a car to pick us up and get frustrated if it takes longer than three minutes; and we outsource tasks in the spirit of "optimizing" our lives by saving five minutes. Never mind that this activity used to bring us joy or in contact with family or friends; it's far better to preserve that time for being "productive."

But here's the rub: we're miserable from all this running. Millennials are dubbed the Burnout Generation, having internalized the idea—which is reinforced by society, our education system, and often our peers and parents—that our self-worth is directly derived from how much we work. Thus, we should be working *all the time*.[4]

Yet Millennials are the tip of the iceberg. Executives and managers report ever-increasing demands on their time. Leaders are concerned about the well-being of their teams at the same time that they're under pressure (and rewarded) to prioritize quarterly returns over long-term health. Teachers have more to teach to more students, with more difficult circumstances and fewer resources year after year. Ministers, caregivers, and others committed to service are totally spent. Parents "optimize" their children's playtime. The list goes on.

The seed of this problem is planted when we're young and told that we can, and should, "do it all." (This is often a nuance of the old script.) On the one hand, this message encourages ambition and achievement: great! At the same time, it leaves you feeling forever as though you're falling short: you don't do enough, earn enough, or have enough. The implicit message is: *You're not enough.* So keep going and run faster.

This leads to a kind of internal persecution: not that you're not capable, but that if you just work harder, *you can be better at everything!* Paradoxically, this message results in what psychoanalyst Josh Cohen calls "a strange composite of exhaustion and anxiety, a permanent state of dissatisfaction with who we are and what we have. And it leaves us feeling that we are servants rather than masters of … the unending work we put into achieving our so-called best selves."[5]

While each person's life circumstances are unique, this run-ever-faster reality is pervasive across contemporary culture. Women and men alike aspire to "have it all" and "make it." You're running fast to keep up with monthly bills or your neighbors' display of wealth (real or not), while your neighbors are doing the same thing.

The crux is: all this running is unsustainable and making us crazy, yet somehow we can't seem to stop. But nobody else is going to stop the merry-go-round.

There's an inextricable link between your ability to slow down and your ability to thrive. Yet this is an increasingly fraught balance to strike because we inhabit a world—a system—that is *designed*, intentionally or not, to thwart our doing so.

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YOU ARE NOT A TO-DO LIST

But it doesn't have to be this way. Even better, not every place or culture is hell-bent on running faster and always-doing. Have you ever considered not-doing?

Not-doing doesn't mean merely not working. We often lump activities like meditation and journaling in a sort of "doing nothing" bucket. But these things are very much "doing": you're engaged, occupied, thinking. When I say not-doing, I mean really *doing nothing*. No specific action, no distractions, no goals. And importantly, trusting that the sky will not come crashing down. In fact, it might even be lighter and brighter when you actually stop to appreciate it.

NIKS, ANYONE?

In the Netherlands, *niksen* is the socially acceptable and culturally celebrated concept of not-doing.[6] The term literally means "to do nothing," or to do something specifically without any productive purpose. It's about "daring to be idle."[7]

The benefits of *niksen* are profound. Dutch researchers have found that people who regularly "*niks*" have lower anxiety, improved immune systems, and even an enhanced ability to come up with new ideas and solve problems.[8] The key is to niks regularly (even two minutes a day is a start), without intention and without considering whether it's productive.

Doing nothing often leads to the very best of something. –WINNIE THE POOH

WU WEI

Chinese Buddhism has embraced the concept of *wu wei*, meaning "lack of exertion" or "action through least action," since 700 BCE.[9] *Wu wei* is central to the philosophy of Taoism. *Wu wei* is different from *niksen* in that its goals are clearly strategic: it's a sort of selective passivity that focuses on adjusting ourselves to a given situation rather than frantically seeking to control it. *Wu wei* can be achieved only when you've slowed down enough to truly gauge the situation at hand.

Wu wei is often compared to being "in the zone" or a state of flow. It's like water, trees, or moss. Not only do these things bend, mold, and adjust themselves to the shape of their surroundings—wind, rock, or soil—but their strength and resilience comes from a slow-growth process. Their power comes from not rushing.

When my parents died, my world simultaneously ground to a halt and tripled in speed. On the one hand, there were so many things to figure out; on the other hand, time stood still. There was nothing to do and everything to do. I was faced with a gaping hole that I could fill with busyness, or with grief.

In retrospect, the most helpful thing I "did" was not-doing. As a young person who wanted nothing more than to graduate and "get going" with life, taking a semester off and an extra year to graduate was hard. Friends graduated while I grieved. My sister, Allison, did even better: she put an indefinite X through her calendar (which ended up lasting almost two years). Allison and I stood in the thick, tragic truth of our situation and re-rooted, each in our own ways given our respective life experiences. We didn't distract ourselves; we dug into our souls, and that made all the difference.

In the twenty-five-plus years since then, the world has sped up while humanity's ability to slow down and not-do has stalled. In the face of collective anxiety and doubt world-wide, the best thing we can do is incorporate *not-doing* into our lives. This can mean pausing, daydreaming, or sitting still. It's the simple yet profound act of holding yourself in the great space that is the unknown, in order to discover what you've been running too fast to become.

Not-doing is when you overcome all things. —LAO TZU

PRODUCTIVITY: FOR WHAT AND FOR WHOM?

Somehow, a lot of people have landed in a world of exhaustion with a resounding thud. All too often, work is allowed to fill whatever time we give it. Why?

Technology certainly is one culprit, affording insta-always connectivity in our pockets. Meanwhile, contemporary mass-market consumerism and free-market capitalism fuel notions of never having enough, being enough, and—by extension—working hard enough. That's how consumerism thrives: *by making sure we never see ourselves as enough*. Yet whether you accept this messaging, indeed *if you even see it*, is a function of your mindset. Are you questioning this system, or are you too busy hustling on its hamster wheel to notice that you may be running right past life?

My path to running slower has been circuitous and perplexing at times. I have gotten much better at it and recognize it is a lifelong practice. But for a long time, I had more questions than answers.

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In the immediate aftermath of my parents' accident, I was torn in two directions. On the one hand, I wanted to *run as fast as I could* away from what had happened. On the other hand, I'd been stopped in my tracks and brutally reminded of the fragility of life. Should I run faster into life, because mine could end soon too? Or should I hit the pause button and get clear about exactly what I was running towards, away from, or for?

I opted for the latter, despite some mentors encouraging me to stay the course, go straight to graduate school, or get a job at a consulting firm or a bank. From their perspective, I was credentialed and primed to get my career underway pronto. Ready, set, go!

Yet I also could not stop wondering: *What are we racing for? And why?*

The old script was all around me. Not only did I feel the pressure to conform personally, I saw my peers rushing to climb the corporate ladder. And I kept second-guessing what my parental sounding board might have said. Would I build something I truly believed in, or was I destined to be a cog in a wheel of someone else's dream? Would I choose my path, or would it be chosen for me?

At twenty-two, I wanted nothing more than to contribute to the world, especially in ways that would have made my parents proud. But how could I do that without knowing what really mattered to me—and how could I do that without slowing down enough to take stock of the question?

The insights of this story extend far beyond my situation, though here's how things played out back then: I skipped Wall Street and landed a job researching and guiding hiking and biking trips, beginning in Italy and progressing from there. For almost four years, I traveled with a backpack and without a permanent address, fueled by insatiable curiosity to understand how the rest of the world lives. I got into crazy trouble, learned firsthand about global development, and earned a black belt in cultural diplomacy and self-sufficiency. I earned far less than I would have on Wall Street, but I spent far less too. I lived at the pace of wherever I was, and my entire future changed as a result.

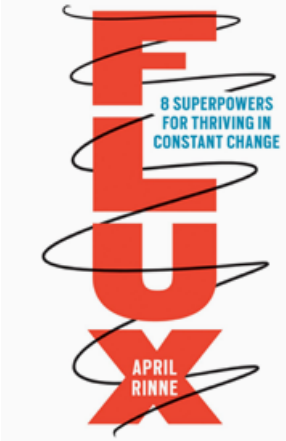
Learning to run slower precisely when society told me to run faster made all the difference. It felt risky to pause, with my irrational-yet-full-blown fear that I might die tomorrow. But it felt far riskier to not even try. Ever since that time and continuing to this day, I regularly ask myself and have asked hundreds of others: *If you were on your deathbed tomorrow, what would you wish you'd done?* No one has *ever* answered, *Run faster.*

Keep in mind, this isn't just about how this plays out for you or me individually. Collectively, the push to run faster is also destroying the planet. We're caught in a never-ending cycle of rushing, producing, consuming, and grasping for more. In this quest, we're burning ourselves out *and* burning ourselves up. The faster we produce and consume goods, the more we damage the environment. The more we look for happiness and satisfaction outside ourselves—a new car, a new dress, almost anything that allows us to "buy and display our way out of sadness," as psychology professor Tim Kasser says—the more likely we are to be depressed.[10] We're taught to consume, consume, consume—and please don't think about the side effects, thank you very much.

Yet did you know that before marketing ate the word, to consume meant to *destroy*, as in "consumed by fire," and *to squander*, as in "to spend wastefully?"[11]

For today's leaders, the stakes of running fast are high. At risk is not only one's well-being, business success, and health of the economy. The survival of Earth's life-support systems and the welfare of future generations are up for grabs as well. Against this backdrop, learning to run slower could solve a lot of other problems too. It's almost completely at odds with the old script, yet it's our best shot at staving off collapse.

Info



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Endnotes

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