

America Worships Speed

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THERE can be little doubt that one of the most revered and well-fed gods of any so-called advanced civilization is the God of Speed. Millions of dollars are regularly spent in his name and thousands of sacrifices are quietly laid before his throne.

Oatmeal is better and worth the additional expense if it can be prepared faster. TV sets automatically represent a significant step forward if they can warm up and tune in instantly. Airlines which advertise faster transit have far more passengers than those which offer nothing more than good service and the time to take a nap. Hamburger joints which can take your order, fill it, and have it in your hands all in one five-second motion seem to be doing much better than equally inexpensive restaurants which allow time for conversation as well as digestion. Speed is expensive—but most people are willing to pay despite the fact that the God of Speed appears to be insatiable.

One of our most influential social organizations, the school, has closely followed society in the worship of speed. Perhaps no other religion has so many loyal communicants. Certainly the opulence of the God of Speed is unparalleled by any other, even by the God of Education for All.

It is an understatement to point out that schools place a premium on speed.

Speed is not just admired; it is a way of life. It means the difference between success and failure, smart and stupid. If John can solve the algebraic problem faster than Bill, John is a "better" student. It really doesn't matter if Bill's computations are more logical than John's, John still wins. It also doesn't matter if Bill composed a sonnet between multiplying and computing the square root; he is obviously not as smart as John. Often the difference between an "A" and a "C" or an IQ of 120 and one of 80 is nothing more than speed. He who is quick is praised, and he who is not, if he is lucky, receives a "C" and a condescending pat on the back.

Many explain that schools are justified in praising speed since it is a factor of intelligence. Yet one must wonder if speed is not more an element of the testing device used to measure intelligence than of intelligence itself. Certainly speed alone has no rapport with integrity, fairness, individual dignity, or the ability to understand or transmit skills, concepts, or values. In fact, it could be strongly argued that praising speed has a detrimental effect on the intellect and on the educational process.

Schools have so overemphasized speed that students are willing to pay nearly any price to vie for its rewards. This unhealthy phenomenon would be easier to study if

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adults were not also overcome themselves with the constant thirst for more speed. Most highway deaths have some connection with going too fast. Heart attacks are often explained as being the result of "living too much too fast." Millions of dollars have been cut from federal support of certain areas of education because, in many cases, results were not instantaneous. It is inestimable how many "C's" are the result of students being pushed too quickly.

Most of the virtues of slowness have been forgotten or are dismissed as being "old fashioned." Taking your time is practically synonymous with being lazy, having nothing better to do, or even with being retarded. Very few students, when given an essay question, take the time to read the question carefully. Instead, they glance at it once and sprint into writing as if to see who will leave the class with the shortest pencil, all of them knowing full well that the more they write, the more the teacher thinks they know.

Other Factors

Caution has become an ignored and emaciated god who lives in the slums around the corner from the grand cathedral of Saint Speed. Occasionally, people take note of him, only when they are forced to wait or have nothing else to do. But rarely do they ever take time to remember him on purpose. After all, caution necessitates reflection and reflection necessitates time. Caution may well mean being unable to finish the examination as fast as the girl next to you. In our schools, caution is no longer equated with analyzing or evaluating; it is seen more often than not as an indication of a "slow learner"—and students, like adults, don't like being called "slow."

Likewise thoroughness has fallen into the bad graces of the classroom. Being thorough takes too much time. With 50 questions and only 60 minutes to do them in, it is far better to go ahead and make a fair guess at some of them. Never forget: if you find you are spending too much time on one question, leave it and go on to the next.

Even the Temple of Patience no longer has regular visitors, except of course for those who lag, dawdle, and dilly-dally. In society, the most capable detectors of such slowpokes are the New York cab drivers who manage to evoke unimaginable volume from their horns when one of these "Sunday drivers" does not accelerate the instant the light turns green. In school, those chosen to identify the slowpokes are the teachers who have only to look around the room after saying "time's up, pencils down."

Perhaps worst of all, creativity, one of the most important factors which affect an individual's life, is having occasional spats with Speed. It is not enough in our schools to be creative. One must be creative and fast, even to the point of being sloppy.

Speed obviously holds a spell over most of our classrooms. Perhaps since we are all under the same trance, it is only the foreigner from a "backward" country who is so readily amazed by it. To us, speed worship is as American as apple pie and Sesame Street. It is something with which we live every day. It has turned our society into a rat race and our schools into an "on-your-mark-get-set-go" institution where those who run after the "A's" get them. Those who take the time actually to learn often get nothing more than "C's." Truly there is nothing average about being patient, cautious, thorough, or even creative.

It is not at all surprising that blind worship of such a demoniac god as Speed is what led someone many years ago to speak of us as a nation of "speed demons." It is surprising that some actually regard this as a compliment.

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