

**THE FIRST UNITARIAN SOCIETY OF MILWAUKEE**

**“The Things  
That Sustain Us Are Slow”**

**by  
The Reverend Dena McPhetres**

**THE FIRST UNITARIAN SOCIETY OF MILWAUKEE**

1342 North Astor Street • Milwaukee WI 53202

Telephone: 414 273-5257 • Fax: 414 273-5254

*E-Mail: [office@uumilwaukee.org](mailto:office@uumilwaukee.org)*

*Visit us on the World Wide Web at [www.uumilwaukee.org](http://www.uumilwaukee.org)*

## **“The Things That Sustain Us Are Slow”**

The Reverend Dena McPhetres

During the years I lived in Minneapolis, I was privileged to see many creative metaphors come to life in the shape of giant puppets in the Heart of the Beast Theatre’s annual May Day parade. One of their bigger-than-life puppets that I love is “The Queen of Slowness.”

The first time I saw the Queen of Slowness, I felt an instant recognition and identification with her, both for the yearning for quiet and stillness that I carried inside me, and also for the fact that I often do things at a slower pace than the culture around me. An archetype of the Queen of Slowness was just what I needed for validation, and just what I wanted to aspire to in my life more often.

The Spring Equinox happened yesterday, the moment in the yearly cycle of the sun and earth in which the hours of light and dark are equal – a moment of balance before the days lengthen farther into Spring. We claim in our greeting each Sunday here at First Church that we hope you will find this community a place where you can find and keep your balance. In the interest of supporting you to do that, I’d like to talk today about how to find and nurture the things in our lives that sustain us, and I’d like to talk about how the things that sustain us are slow.

These words will be heard in the present context of an urban 21st century lifestyle, which is mostly fast. We travel fast, we work fast, we play quickly, we eat quickly, and most of us don’t sleep enough. We lead over-scheduled lives, and our children lead over-scheduled lives. One of the families in our congregation, I won’t say who, reflected with me recently that their child had named one of the parents the “blur” parent. No judgment here – I’m just saying that’s the way it is in our culture when we have to get so much done in so little time.

In this century, already, we have become accustomed to fast communication – instant messaging, sound bites, texting and twitter. We have instant “hook-up” dating, and drive-up funerals. Even spirituality is marketed as something that can be accomplished quickly. A few years ago, I read a book called, “Benedict’s Way on the Freeway,” which described, compellingly, I must say, a way for lay people to observe St. Benedict’s rule and the prayerful hours from monastic life amid and amongst our busy secular schedules.

I don’t have anything in particular against going fast. It’s fun to go fast sometimes. Running is fun, so is flying, and so I hear, is sky-diving. Those of us who watched the Winter Olympics vicariously enjoyed the fast sports of speed-skating, downhill skiing, the luge and the bobsled. I am grateful for life-saving measures that move fast, like ambulances, paramedics, emergency room doctors and nurses. There are good things that go fast. But, I believe, the things that sustain us are slow.

Sustainability is a word that gets used a lot these days. What does it mean to sustain or to be sustained? Sustain comes from a Latin word that means “to hold up.” Sustainability has to do with the long-term maintenance of well-being – of both human beings and all of life on earth. A sustainable lifestyle is one that can be supported over a long period of time by using

natural resources in a manner that will not compromise the ability of future generations to be sustained.

It is my contention that the things, the qualities, the relationships and the resources that sustain us take time to build and grow and maintain. A sustainable life requires ongoing investments of time. Fast food, fast relationships, fast families, fast communities are not sustaining. They are quick, perhaps even exciting, but not necessarily nurturing, nutritious, supportive or lasting. There's only so long that you can go fast without consequences.

The story from Wendell Berry that I shared earlier comes from another century, but I know people in rural New Hampshire who are living the lifestyle he describes right now. I know people who live on land that has been in their family for generations. People who raise chickens and pigs every year for food. People who grow gardens and can vegetables. People who chop cords of wood to heat their homes. People who come to church on Sunday morning with mud on their boots from doing barn chores. Perhaps you have friends who are living this way in Wisconsin.

The difference is that in this century, these people have made a conscious choice to stay on the land, to grow and to eat slow food, to create and enjoy slow families, and to put time and energy into the relationships that comprise lasting communities. This choice is not a given, like it may have been in earlier centuries.

Let's take a look at these *slow* elements of life and how they overlap: slow food, slow families and slow communities.

I'm curious: how many of you were raised in families that ate dinner together on a regular basis? (Raise your hand.) And those of you who *have* raised or *are* raising children now – how many of you have been able to sit down and eat meals together with your children on a regular basis? And how many of you who live by yourself, actually sit down at a table to eat your meals?

These simple questions about how we eat reveal something about the pace of life in our current century. One way to take a step toward creating slow families is to sit down and enjoy eating a meal together, preferably a meal made of slow food.

What is slow food? Food that takes time to prepare, that is made from fresh, natural, minimally processed, preferably locally grown ingredients. The Slow Food Movement arose in response to the fast food, fast lifestyle, industrial agriculture system prevalent in American society during the last half of the last century. The Slow Food mission is to preserve and protect local foods and food traditions, and to promote food that is good, clean and fair.

*Good* food tastes good. (Slow Food USA sponsors "taste education events" to reacquaint people with how fresh locally grown food tastes, and the organization works to save seed from traditional grains, vegetables, and fruits that are under threat of extinction)

*Clean* food is grown, produced and transported with minimal negative impact on the earth. (The Slow Food Movement supports family farms, farmers' markets, and school gardens)

*Fair* food brings a living wage to those who produce it. (The Slow Food Movement facilitates farmer-chef connections, and Community Supported Agriculture — where urban residents buy a share in a farm, providing necessary start-up capital, and then receive weekly baskets of seasonal garden produce throughout the growing season)

In his book, *Fast Food Nation*, Eric Schlosser claims that “a generation ago, three-quarters of the money used to buy food in the United States was spent to prepare meals at home. Today about half of the money used to buy food is spent at restaurants — mainly at fast food restaurants. . . In 1970, Americans spent about \$6 billion on fast food; in 2001, they spent more than \$110 billion.”

Food writer Michael Pollan claims that one in three American children eat fast food every single day. Let’s look at a typical “happy meal” from McDonald’s. A “happy meal,” in case you don’t know, is specifically marketed to children. It consists of a hamburger, small portion of French fries, a small soft drink, and a little toy, all packaged in a colorful carton with a golden arches handle. Let’s contrast this unique American meal with a story from France.

Vivienne Walt, an American living in Paris, wrote a column that recently appeared in *Time* magazine, describing her 3-year-old son’s culinary experience in the school lunch program there.

She had initially fed her son leftovers for lunch at home, figuring that he needed a break from school in the middle of the day. But when a school official summoned her to the office with a concerned tone of voice, interrogated her as to what she fed her son, and then showed her the elaborate school lunch menu, she gave in.

The brochure she was given “listed in great detail the lunch menu for each school day over a two-month period. . . The variety is astonishing: no single meal is repeated over the 32 school days, and every meal includes an hors d’oeuvre, salad, main course, cheese plate and dessert.”

Vivienne writes, “Public schools in France are overcrowded, rigid and hierarchical. And parents, who are never addressed by their first names, are strongly discouraged from entering school buildings, let alone classrooms. I cannot tell you what my child learns, paints or builds on any given school day.

“But I do know that on February 4, he ate hake in Basque sauce, mashed pumpkin, cracked rice, Edam cheese and organic fruits for lunch. . . The French don’t need their First Lady to plant a vegetable garden at the Elysee Palace to encourage good eating habits. They already know the rules: Sit down and take your time, because food is serious business.”

Let’s turn our attention to something called the Slow Family Movement. Slow Family advocates recommend something really radical in our current culture. They recommend that families put free time into their weekly schedule. (Do you remember free time — when you get to choose what to do or simply choose to do nothing?)

They suggest families pause every day and just let things that happened that day sink in, allowing the integration of information and experiences. They advise that families seek a balance between doing and being. They believe that families should be the *well* where you go to fill up, and that slowing down family activities will help replenish the well.

There is a book written by Bill Doherty, a family therapist and Unitarian Universalist from Minnesota, called *The Intentional Family*, published in 1997 that sounds many of the same notes.

Doherty claims that building healthy families is accomplished through being intentional about the many daily rituals in the home, such as mealtimes, bedtime rituals, greeting and parting rituals, and yearly celebrations like birthdays, anniversaries, and holidays.

Doherty says, "Becoming an intentional family means learning to manage the two principal drains on the energy of most Americans: time demands *outside* the home and electronic technology *inside* the home."

He calls technology "the pet that has taken over the house." Taming technology, by having TV-free mealtimes, or ipod/iphone/blackberry/texting and cell phone-free *in-person* conversations, or an evening when you don't use electricity can do wonders to reconnect family members.

And just a word about a new concept one of you introduced me to recently: Slow Consumption. Instead of purchasing new things that are designed not to last, and that cost more to repair than to replace, the idea is to seek out durable goods. Saul Griffith, a MacArthur Fellow, calls this "heirloom design."

"The best way to lower the quantity of energy required to manufacture and distribute consumer goods," he argues, "is to make those products not only durable, but repairable and upgradable." He thinks we could add highly skilled maintenance and repair jobs to the local economy if manufacturing went in the direction of durable products. What a concept!

I have to laugh when I look around my house, for I have been opting for heirloom design my entire adult life. Most of my furniture I inherited from my grandparents and great-aunts and uncles. I use dishes that my parents bought when I was a teenager and china from my grandmother's buffet.

Yet when my tea kettle started leaking recently, my immediate thought was: I'll have to go buy a shiny new tea kettle! Since reading about Slow Consumption, now I think I'll go to Goodwill and look for a durable tea kettle, maybe one like my grandmother used.

If you like this idea of slowing down in your life, but are not sure how to do it, let me commend to you a list I found on the Internet, called "Life in the Present: A 10-Step Approach," written by Leo Babauta.

1. Do one thing at a time.
2. Do it slowly and deliberately.

3. Do less.
4. Put space between things. Don't schedule things close together.
5. Spend at least five minutes each day doing nothing.
6. Stop worrying about the future - focus on the present.
7. When you're talking to someone, be present.
8. Eat slowly and savor your food.
9. Live slowly and savor your life.
10. Make your chores into a meditation.

And then: keep practicing.

In conclusion, the Queen of Slowness has this to say: it's all connected. Preparing and eating slow food helps create slow families. Slow families help create slow communities. Slow consumption helps create *sustainable* communities. And sustainable communities may just help save the earth and the human race.

On this weekend, which contained the first day of Spring and a fresh snowfall, things might seem a bit out of balance. May we make choices to move toward balance, anyway. May we take the first step to slow down, be still, and notice the life we are privileged to live. And may all come into balance for a moment in the shifting, moving, currents of life that surround us.

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