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The Eternal Present: Slow Knowledge and the Renewal of Time

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A woman is seated in a chair at the center of a large, light-filled atrium. Across from her sits an adolescent girl, Asian or Asian-American, maybe thirteen years old. They are both perfectly still. They look intently at each other. That is all. Minute after minute passes. Neither of them moves. I look more closely. Utter stillness. Not quite repose, for there is a sense of intentionality to their engagement with each other, but deep stillness and calm. I look around the room and see a hundred or so persons also taking in the scene. Everyone is silent, though there are occasional sounds—shoes shuffling on the floor, a cough, a sigh. It takes me a few minutes to understand what is going on, what I am seeing. I feel my own anxiety to place myself somehow in this scene, to find the appropriate categories for grasping what is unfolding before me. I ask a person nearby; he tells me: it's Marina Abramovic. She is performing "The Artist Is Present," part of a retrospective of her work at the Museum of Modern Art in New York City.¹ "Oh," I say, "thanks." It's performance art. Got it. But knowing this only helps a little. What are they doing? What is going on here? What is my part, if any, in what is happening? My mind, as usual, is racing ahead trying to figure it out. Which in this moment I cannot do. So, I pause (inwardly), take a step back and try to reorient myself. I take a breath, then another. I look again at the two figures.

Their stillness is uncanny. This is part of what is making me anxious, I think. They are absorbed completely in the simple act of gazing at each other. I smile, thinking at first of the "stare-downs" I used to have with my brother when we were kids. Who would flinch (and fall into uncontrollable laughter) first? It was a game of chicken. With the eyes. Usually it was of short duration, and someone had to lose. This is different. The quality of attention, in particular, feels utterly different. These two are not trying to knock each other off their chairs. No one is trying to "win" at anything. They are, it seems, simply giving themselves to the work of beholding and being beheld. Extraordinary. I am not sitting in the chair. But I feel a jolt run through my body as I begin to feel the depth and power of this moment. The sense of nakedness, of naked abandon, of vulnerability. What else? Tenderness. Yes, I sense a certain tenderness passing between these two figures. And not just between them. Also touching those of us gathered in the room watching them. How is that possible? We are all

strangers to one another after all. And yet within this space, for these few moments there is a remarkable and palpable sense of intimacy.

I am not sure at how long I stand there. But after a while, I feel the need to move, to get some relief from the intensity of this exchange. I leave the room where the artist and her companion are sitting and walk into a nearby gallery. (Later I learn that anyone visiting the museum can occupy the chair opposite the artist and that over the course of the exhibit many, many people do just that.) I am not ready to look at anything else, not yet. I have to gather myself a little first.

Eventually, I do begin to take in some of the other art in the museum. But my mind keeps returning to that room and to those two seated figures. During the next couple of hours, I return to the atrium several more times. Each time I do, I am struck by how still these two figures are, how alive. Also how still and alive I feel entering into that space. Those of us beholding the scene are respectful and quiet but also animated, exchanging brief whispers, glances, smiles. We are captivated, enthralled.

Suddenly the girl sitting opposite the artist gets up, makes a gentle bow, and leaves the center of the space. She goes to sit with her father, who has been standing there watching her. They exchange a hug, then some quiet words. She seems thrilled. Then another person moves into the center of the space and sits down in the chair across from the artist and the process begins again.

A few minutes later, my curiosity gets the better of me and I approach the girl to ask whether I may speak with her for a moment. "Sure," she says. "How long were you sitting there?" I ask. "Three hours," she says. "I was only going to sit there for ten minutes or so, but something happened. I did not want to leave."

I think about this experience for a long time afterward. I am still thinking about it. Especially the long, slow unfolding of attention and awareness that was at the center of it—shared by the two principals to be sure, but also in some mysterious way by those of us who entered the space and beheld the two of them beholding each other. And the strange sense—whether real or imagined—of time being suspended, of feeling drawn into a space where whatever was going to happen would happen gradually, imperceptibly, unconstrained by the usual boundaries of chronology. Or where nothing at all would happen and time and purpose would lose their usual meanings and perhaps their unquestioned value.

* * *

The term "slow knowledge" has emerged in contemporary discourse as part of a larger discussion about how and how quickly we acquire knowledge. And to what end. Also about the value we place on speed and efficiency in acquiring knowledge, and about how well we are able to absorb the rapidly increasing volume of information made available to us through improvements in technology. David Orr's trenchant essay on this subject, which first appeared in the journal *Conservation Biology* in 2002 and was later reprinted in his 2004 book, *The Nature of Design: Ecology, Culture and Human Intention*, makes a strong argument for the need to reassess our often uncritical attitudes toward "fast" knowledge and to open ourselves (again) to slower modes of knowledge. Orr pits these two ways of knowing sharply against each other, partly

for the sake of rhetorical clarity, but also in order to raise questions about the broad assumption—so much in evidence in our digital age—that we can no longer *afford* to move or think slowly, that to do so is to risk falling behind. Many assume that our only real choice is to find ways of moving and thinking more quickly and efficiently, and that we must learn to process and hold more, not less, information.²

Framing the argument this way may feel too simple. It *is* too simple. Those like Orr who advocate for the value of retrieving slower modes of knowing and being are not generally arguing against speed or efficiency themselves. There is no question about the value of speed and efficiency when it comes to what we expect and hope for from emergency disaster-relief services, for example; nor do we want medical breakthroughs or tax refunds to arrive more slowly. Similarly, there is no denying the significance of the kind of knowledge that comes to us quickly and intuitively, such as the flashes of insight or understanding so well known to scientists, artists, and mystics. No, it is not speed itself that is the problem. It is the cult of speed and its evil cousin the cult of utility: the unquestioned assumption that both speed and utility are to be valued above all else, and that anything that hinders us from realizing maximum speed and utility cannot and should not be given any serious consideration. These are not new ideas.³ But they have become a particularly prominent feature of contemporary life. And resisting them or articulating an alternative vision of existence is not easy. Still, one sees increasing signs of wide-ranging and diverse forms of resistance gathering around the notion that we have underestimated and undervalued slowness. To realize the kind of cultural, political, and spiritual renewal we so desperately need will require us to reexamine and perhaps reimagine certain older, slower modes of knowing. Hence, the growing attention being given not only to slow knowledge, but also to slow food, slow medicine, slow travel, slow *living*.⁴ What these diverse movements and initiatives hold in common is a desire to rethink our relationship to *time*. In particular, to consider when and how our habitual attention to the movement (and urgency) of chronological time should give way to an awareness of time that is less constraining, more spacious, free, and open. And to consider the possibility that this slower, more spacious relationship with time might still be able to contribute something significant to our understanding of who we are in the world.

If this sounds like an argument for the continued value of contemplative practice and distinctively contemplative approaches of knowledge, it is. Although the understanding of contemplative practice and knowledge itself will likely need to be stretched to include expressions and forms not always included in more traditional understandings of this idea: for example, in the case of that performance of contemplative practice at the Museum of Modern Art. One of the striking features of that event was its seemingly cavalier disregard of time. It is true that during this particular exhibition the museum maintained its usual opening and closing hours; time retained certain recognizable and socially sanctioned boundaries. But not completely. The artist herself often arrived early and remained in place long after the museum closed. And within the space of the performance, time was unrestrained, unrestricted, boundless. There was no effort made to “keep things moving,” or to determine how long those who chose to sit opposite the artist could remain there. Time unfolded

freely and fluidly. Those who entered that space were invited to lose themselves in that expansive space. To be, as the artist herself was, *present*.

This will perhaps remind some of the kind of attitude one is expected to cultivate when entering the sacred space of a church, temple, or mosque, or it may call to mind the stillness and openness that characterizes certain kinds of meditation practices. These analogies are instructive, for in such spaces and amid such practices, time indeed takes on a different character. If time itself does not “slow down” in any objective sense, our *experience* of time changes. We enter into a different kind of relationship to it. The unrelenting force of *chronos* gradually gives way to the more capacious sense of *kairos*.

One might well ask in response to such an account: So what? What difference does it make to open oneself to such a capacious relationship with time? To a way of living that may well seem simply to be a form of time wasting?

* * *

I want to consider these questions, especially as they arise in traditions of contemplative practice (whether broadly or narrowly construed). In particular, I want to consider whether such practiced, intentional squandering of time—and the attitude toward knowledge implied by it—can be defended, made sense of, perhaps even understood as contributing to a larger, more encompassing renewal of self and culture.

It is useful here to recall that still strange experiment of Henry David Thoreau’s at Walden Pond. In the “Sounds” chapter of *Walden*, Thoreau describes both his practice and his orientation during his first summer there.

I did not read books the first summer; I hoed beans. Nay, I often did better than this. There were times when I could not afford to sacrifice the bloom of the present moment to any work, whether of the head or the hands. I love a broad margin to my life. Sometimes, in a summer morning, having taken my accustomed bath, I sat in my sunny doorway from sunrise till noon, rapt in a reverie, amidst the pines and hickories and sumachs, in undisturbed solitude and stillness, while the birds sang around or flitted noiseless through the house, until by the sun falling in at my west window, or the noise of some traveller’s wagon on the distant highway, I was reminded of the lapse of time.⁵

This deceptively simple account reveals more than it seems to do at first glance, suggesting the kind of practice Thoreau took to be central to his experiment in living at Walden Pond. Not only does this habitually wide-ranging reader refrain from reading for the sake of tending his garden; at times he eschews *all* work (whether of the head or the hands) for the sake of what he refers to as the “bloom of the present moment.” He allows himself to become lost in that moment, until to his surprise he realizes the entire day has passed.

It is tempting to dismiss Thoreau’s account as the reflections of a romantic dreamer or idler. But there is something utterly serious in his account of his days at Walden, the meaning of which becomes clear when read in the context of his long opening chapter, “Economy.” There, with sustained attention to the most practical dimensions of what is required for everyday living, the significance of a life committed to idle-

ness emerges: his cultivation of a more spacious sense of time, his willingness to open himself to the world without calculation (either economic or chronological) reveals an ethical commitment to take up less room, to leave more for others, to reconfigure the very meaning of community. It recasts the very meaning of purpose, and argues for the need to let the apparently aimless awareness of oneself as alive in the world gather and deepen—not simply as a personal choice, but as necessary to the renewal of social and political life. Here and elsewhere in *Walden*, one encounters an orientation to living that expresses a fierce critique of the unquestioned primacy of chronological time and an effort to retrieve a way of living that is more spacious and free.⁶

Ancient contemplative traditions of Christianity also struggled with these questions. A story from the *Apophthegmata Patrum* relates that “Abba Sisoës [one day] said to a brother, ‘How are you getting on?’ and he replied: ‘I am wasting my time, father.’ The old man said, ‘If I happen to waste a day, I am grateful for it.’”⁷ It is not easy to discern the particular anxiety that underlay this brother’s response to Abba Sisoës, or to be certain of the meaning of the elder’s expression of gratitude for his own occasional experiences of simple, profligate living. But seen in the context of the monks’ consistent expression of hope that they might learn to live with *amerimnia* or “freedom from care,” Sisoës’s response illuminates the value early monastic communities attributed to relinquishing all plans, all projects, all designs for one’s life, all concerns regarding progress—especially progress in the spiritual life—for the sake of an inner disposition of freedom and openness that allows one’s relationship to time to take on a completely new meaning.

This commitment to a more spacious relationship to time also helps to account for the monks’ often surprising attitudes toward the manner and means and time required to acquire knowledge. A story about Abba Pambo points to the extraordinary patience some of the monks displayed in incorporating the teaching of their elders. One day, in response to a request from an elder for a word, Pambo was given these words from Psalm 38—“I said I will take heed to thy way, that I offend not with my tongue”—and departed without staying to hear the elder recite the second half of the verse. He said to himself, “this one will suffice, if I can practically acquire it.” More than six months passed before he returned to consult with the elder again. When he did so, the old man reproved Pambo for staying away so long. But Pambo replied that the reason for his long absence was that he had been fully occupied during the past months with the text he had been given. Even now, he said, “he had not yet learnt to practice the verse of the Psalm.” Many years later, Pambo was asked by one of his companions whether he had finally mastered the text. He responded: “I have scarcely succeeded in accomplishing it during nineteen years.”⁸ Stories like this are common in early Christian monastic literature. Whether or not we judge the time frame described to be entirely credible, the point of the story is clear: certain kinds of knowledge cannot be acquired quickly or efficiently. It takes time. A long time. Such knowledge needs to be incorporated slowly and carefully into the lived experience of the contemplative until the very framework of thought and awareness has been transformed: until the consciousness of oneself in relation to God and others has become suffused with a sense of eternity, or what the tradition has often referred to simply as the reign of heaven.⁹

There is a paradox or tension here relating to the whole question of how one should understand both time and work within contemplative practice. Throughout the Christian contemplative tradition one finds a positive valuation of the need for patient attention to time's slow unfolding, on the importance of the gradual deepening of awareness—especially awareness of the divine—that can only be acquired through long experience. But there is also a wide acknowledgment that such awareness is itself a gift and can be made present in its entirety in a flash. The question of the relative value of work is similarly ambiguous. There is frequent allusion in the Christian contemplative tradition to the distinction between “acquired” and “infused” contemplation, and to the dialectical tension between “work” and “rest.” These distinctions touch on fundamental questions relating to the very character of contemplative experience. How much depends on the contemplative's own effort? How much is pure gift and must be received as such in a place of rest or receptivity? How much time does it take to open up one's awareness to the divine presence? Does time itself (or at least our conventional understanding of time) sometimes disappear as a category of experience? Does slowness in relation to contemplative practice refer primarily to process (how one seeks knowledge) or to experience (the sense of timelessness that opens up within contemplative practice)?

Let me offer an example of how these questions are treated in the work of the fourteenth century Flemish mystic John Ruusbroec. In *The Spiritual Espousals*, written sometime in the mid-1330s, Ruusbroec describes the “eternal coming of the bridegroom” Christ as “a new birth and a new illumination which knows no interruption” and that is “ceaselessly renewed in the hidden depths of the spirit. . . . The coming of the Bridegroom,” Ruusbroec claims, “is so fast that he has always come and is always abiding . . . because his coming occurs beyond time in an eternal now, which is ever received with new pleasure and new joy.”¹⁰ This dense account of mystical experience offers a fascinating insight into how such experience alters (or can alter) one's very sense of time. There is in this account no sense of past or future. There is only an “eternal now.” Still, there is also, paradoxically, a “coming” which suggests duration or movement through time. But it is an “eternal coming” that “knows no interruption” and which is “ceaselessly renewed” within the one who receives it. There is only now. That is, eternity.

This sense of entering a dimension of experience that is for all intents and purposes timeless finds echoes throughout the Christian contemplative tradition; here one often finds a similar tension between the apparent expansiveness of time and its intense compression. Nor should one ignore the ordinary practices that gave rise to such expansive/compressed awareness: especially the daily practice of sustained attention to self, community, and God in the context of the liturgy, silence, manual labor, reading, and service to others. This is the ground and the space, not unlike Thoreau's broad margin, that creates the possibility of entering and living within the “bloom of the present moment.”

The American Trappist monk and writer Thomas Merton offers an eloquent account of this reality in a talk he gave to the community at Redwoods Monastery in California shortly before his death in 1968.¹¹ Merton was addressing the community

on the question of how to live a life of authentic and abiding prayer. In particular, he found himself drawn toward the question of how we can avoid turning prayer into simply another activity governed by the tyranny of chronological time.

We were indoctrinated so much into means and ends that we don't realize that there is a different dimension in the life of prayer. In technology you have this horizontal progress, where you must start at one point and move to another and then to another. But that is not the way to build a life of prayer. In prayer, we discover what we already have. You start where you are and you deepen what you already have and you realize you are already there. We already have everything, but we don't know it and we don't experience it. Everything has been given to us in Christ. All we need is to experience what we already possess.

Here, arising from the heart of the Christian monastic tradition, we encounter a simple, clear, evocative account of what prayer is or should be: the unfolding of a palpable sense of divine presence, born of the realization of what we already know, of what already lives within us. This account is consistent with the testimony of monks and mystics from the earliest period of Christianity until now and reflects the simple clarity that can arise within our consciousness when we relinquish the categories of means and ends, when we allow ourselves to live into the eternal present.

Still, Merton knew from his own experience how difficult it could be to let go of the old mental habits, especially the habit of giving into the relentless claim of time upon our souls. "If we really want prayer," he notes, "we'll have to give it time. We must slow down to a human tempo and we'll begin to have time to listen. And as soon as we listen to what's going on, things will begin to take shape by themselves. But for this we have to experience time in a new way." This is not easy to do. Merton's own awareness of this more expansive sense of time came relatively late in his life, after he moved to the hermitage. It was there, he notes, that he began to become "attentive to the times of day: when the birds began to sing, and the deer came out of the morning fog, and the sun came up"—rhythms rooted in the cycles of the natural world. He became aware of how, even in the monastery, there was a widespread "feeling that we have to keep moving." When *chronos* trumps *kairos* we lose our capacity for a more spacious, encompassing experience of prayer. Here we come to the fundamental issue: time becomes a commodity. "For each one of us time is mortgaged. We experience time as unlimited indebtedness. We are sharecroppers of time." It is sobering to recall that he uttered these words in 1968, long before the ubiquitous presence of the always-on Internet or social networking or the twenty-four-hour news cycle. But the image is, if anything, even more poignant for us: whole hours, days, weeks already accounted for, already spent, long before we ever have the opportunity to live into them. Time as endless indebtedness: that rich space closed up, lost to us forever.

Seen from this perspective, the approach to time and prayer and knowledge found in contemplative traditions begins to seem both utterly radical and necessary. "We must approach the whole idea of time in a new way," says Merton. "We are free to live. And [we] must get free from all imaginary claims. We live in the fullness of time. Every moment is God's own good time, his *kairos*. . . . We have what we seek. We

don't have to rush after it. It is there all the time, and if we give it time it will make itself known to us."

It is not easy to imagine living this way. There is an inevitable sense of foolishness that comes with letting go so completely of the idea of purpose. Or perhaps it is something even more disturbing than this: the sense that here in this spaciousness, we no longer control anything—knowledge, existence, anything. This radical relinquishment of control is critical to the emerging sense of what it will mean to live more slowly, more openly, more fully. There is an intense vulnerability here that has always been central to the life of prayer. It is the vulnerability of the gaze, in which we risk beholding another even as we open ourselves to being beheld. Here time no longer seems to matter. There is only a mysterious unfolding of timeless presence.

* * *

I returned recently to the exhibit by Marina Abramovic. Not in real time (the exhibit closed in May 2010) but, as happens increasingly in our lives, through the eternal present of the Web. I was surprised by what I discovered there. Someone had photographed the participants in the exhibit—all those who sat opposite the artist for a few moments or a few hours, as well as the artist herself. I sat for a long time looking at those faces. Those beautiful faces. After maybe ten minutes, I began to notice something: many of them had tears streaming down their faces. Sitting in that public space, gazing into the eyes of the artist, they had suddenly found themselves weeping. It is impossible to know what those tears express. But their presence within the immense stillness of those days gave me pause. What were we looking for, those of us who stumbled upon that space and ended up staying for long minutes or hours? What did we find? Whatever it was, I know that the slow, unfolding of time into which we all entered was part of it, was the necessary condition for the birth and illumination that occurred that day. And which, for me anyway, continues to be ceaselessly renewed even now.

NOTES

1. The exhibit ran from March 14 to May 31, 2010, at the Museum of Modern Art in New York City. For further information on the exhibit, see the exhibition catalogue, *Marina Abramovic: The Artist Is Present*, ed. Mary Christian (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 2010); the museum website, <http://www.moma.org/visit/calendar/exhibitions/965>; and the documentary directed by Matthew Akers, *Marina Abramovic: The Artist Is Present*, accessed November 1, 2012 (Music Box Films, 2012).

2. David Orr, *The Nature of Design: Ecology, Culture, and Human Intention* (New York: Oxford, 2002), 35–42.

3. The fundamental questions of how and why we place such a strong value on "utility" and "purpose" and why alternative modes of being, rooted in idleness, play, and prayer, have such a difficult time being accepted and cultivated in contemporary American culture have been examined, albeit from different perspectives, by Mark Slouka, "Quitting the Paint Factory: On the Virtues of Idleness," *Harpers* (2004); and Walter Burghart, "Contemplation: A Long, Loving Look at the Real," *Church* (winter 1989): 14–18.

4. See Carl Honoré, *In Praise of Slowness: Challenging the Cult of Speed* (New York: HarperOne,

2005); Carlo Petrini, *Slow Food Nation: Why Our Food Should Be Good, Clean, Fair* (New York: Rizzoli, 2007); Victoria Sweet, *God's Hotel: A Doctor, a Hospital, and a Pilgrimage to the Heart of Medicine* (New York: Riverhead, 2012).

5. Henry David Thoreau, *Walden*, ed. J. Lyndon Shanley (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1971), 111.

6. Critical questions have been and continue to be raised regarding how Thoreau's own relative social and economic privilege affected his thinking about simple living. These are legitimate and important questions and touch on the complex social and economic realities underlying any efforts—then or now—to attempt to live with a different relationship to time and work. One way of framing these questions is to situate them within the long-standing and varied conversation within North American culture about what it means to practice “simple living.” See, for example, Lawrence Buell, “Downwardly Mobile for Conscience's Sake: Voluntary Simplicity from Thoreau to Lily Bart,” *American Literary History* 17, no. 4 (2005): 653–665. For a thoughtful response to these questions in the context of the contemporary North American classroom, see Matthew Little, “An Approach to Thoreau's ‘Economy’ with Students ‘Who are Said to be in Moderate Circumstances’ (or Plan to Be So)” *Pedagogy* 9, no. 3 (fall 2009): 555–561. On the broader question of how Thoreau's political commitments informed his thinking about the experiment at Walden Pond and how his experiments in the work of solitude informed his thinking about the work of social, political engagement, see Rebecca Solnit, “Prisons and Paradises,” in *Storming the Gates of Paradise: Landscapes for Politics* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007), 1–11. For a discussion of Thoreau's vision of time understood as a reclaiming of paradise, see Douglas E. Christie, *The Blue Sapphire of the Mind: Notes for a Contemplative Ecology* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013), 313–353, especially 341–346.

7. Sisoës 54; Benedicta Ward, *The Desert Christian: The Sayings of the Desert Fathers* (New York: MacMillan, 1975), 222.

8. Socrates, *Historica Ecclesia*, IV, 23.

9. There is always present in the contemplative tradition a suspicion of purpose that is too narrowly conceived, because it threatens to undermine the upwelling of the free and spontaneous response to life that is the soul's true freedom. Even amid the kind of necessary and helpful distinctions that sometimes arose in ancient monastic literature—such as John Cassian's well-known differentiation between the *scopos* or immediate aim of the contemplative life (purity of heart) and the *telos* or ultimate end of that life (the reign of heaven)—there is a sense that contemplative living cannot be reduced to means and ends (John Cassian, *Conference* I). It always transcends them, reaches past them into the space of pure freedom—the reign of heaven. For a discussion of the background of this distinction, see Columba Stewart, *Cassian the Monk* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), 38–39. As Stewart notes, “the two fundamental themes of ‘purity of heart’ and ‘reign of heaven’ . . . underlie the whole of [Cassian's] theology” (38).

10. John Ruusbroec, *The Spiritual Espousals and Other Works*, introduction and translation by James Wiseman, OSB (New York: Paulist, 1985), 147–148.

11. David Steindl-Rast, “Man of Prayer,” in *Thomas Merton Monk: A Monastic Tribute*, ed. Brother Patrick Hart (Kalamazoo: Cistercian Publications, 1983), 79–89. Quotations are taken from 79–81.