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# Are you too busy to change the world?

by Ken Burnett

I wonder if, like me, you sometimes feel this modern world is going just too fast? Perhaps, as I am, you're increasingly doubting that the many technological advances of our times are actually making our lives easier and better, like they promised they would? By any chance, does your daily email mountain also seem to you ever harder to climb and less interesting too, as mine does? Or like me does it trouble you that while we can now be reached by telephone pretty much wherever we happen to be, this additional intrusion hasn't really made us more effective, more efficient or happier, as it should have done?

If any of the above doubts apply, you're not alone. I suspect a lot of us share them, and with good reason. They've hit me particularly hard because I've chosen a lifestyle somewhat different from most.

I've lived in rural France for 13 years now, while most of my clients, colleagues and business contacts live in other lands (mainly in or around London). In the early days of this self-imposed separation – not so long ago if you think about it – I used to secretly revel in my new limited availability, in people's reluctance to disturb me with an international call, in the fact that my attendance at meetings was a bonus rather than the accepted norm.

The invisible, imaginary line that was implied by my physical distance meant that I could play with my kids while others were working. Or I could take my dogs for long walks in the early mornings while my colleagues endured commutes by tube, bus and train, or wrestled with technology that hadn't quite caught up with me yet. Some years back I visited Greenpeace in Washington with their international director of fundraising, from Amsterdam. He had 13 emails waiting while I, an email virgin, had none. So while he toiled indoors I went for a long walk outside. It was cherry blossom time in DC then – lovely!

Then in rapid succession to my French fortress came email, the Internet, mobile phones and lower call charges. And conference calls. And FedEx and DHL. And, I suppose, our society's increasing familiarity and ease with modern technology, matched by a growing impatience in our species which means nothing can be waited for, gratification has to be instant, responses have to be now, or next day at latest. From these miracles of modern communication there is no escape, for in these busy, competitive times everything is a race against the clock.

But is the rush of modern life a reality or just an illusion, a media-fuelled misunderstanding? The truth is we really don't need more time. Modern men and women enjoy more leisure time these days than ever before,

yet somehow we imagine the opposite. Something in our modern lives appears to compel us to cram in as much experience and consumption as possible, in the misguided notion that this is how we will add meaning and fulfilment to our increasingly empty lives.

Progress might not be making our species happier. These days our society's unease may not be coming as it traditionally has, from relative poverty, from our people having to go without, so much as from our prosperity, our being increasingly able to go 'with'. General affluence, it appears, does not automatically arrive in the company of general contentment. It's in the most affluent of societies that one finds the longest queues outside the psychiatrists' door. And affluent people in a rush are most likely to head that queue.

As living standards improve people don't necessarily feel the benefits. Although many now are starting work later in life, are retiring earlier and in reality have oodles more time than our ancestors, we persist in feeling time poor. Obesity is now as large a health risk for the affluent as going hungry is for the poor and, like poverty in the developing world, it's growing in our society. Instead of more money making us happier, griping apparently rises with income.

Could this be an opportunity for charity fundraisers and other do-gooders? I think so. Who better to offer fulfilment and meaning in life for those without it? Perhaps in this new progress paradigm, voluntary organisations can expand their role. If fulfilment is moving up people's hierarchies of basic needs, where better could they turn to find what's lacking in their lives, than to worthwhile causes? If significant sections of society face a problem that stems from their growing affluence, maybe we're just the folks to relieve them of it. If the meaning of life is becoming increasingly incomprehensible, cannot fundraisers and the causes they work for help many people find the answers they seek?

This might be a better role for the charity worker than that which he or she currently enjoys.

As I explained at the outset of this piece I'm disillusioned with recent so-called technological advances. But the wonder of modern gadgetry and gimmickry is how good you feel when you do without them. This reminds me of the story of the rabbi and the poor man who lived in one small room with his wife and three children.

'I can't stand it!' wailed the man. 'What can I do?' The rabbi told him to get a dog. The dog barked at the children and messed up the floor. Then the rabbi suggested he get some hens. The dog chased the hens, which frightened the baby. 'Get a goat' insisted the rabbi. And so on, until the rabbi added a horse and the whole thing became completely impossible. 'Now, get rid of them all,' said the rabbi, 'and tell me how you feel.' 'It's wonderful!' cried the man in gratitude. 'There's just me and the wife and the children, and we have the whole room to ourselves.'

Possibly the gadget we really need is the one that we can program to get rid of all the others.

All progress may indeed be in the hands of unreasonable people, but it seems to me that the rest of us should reserve a healthy scepticism for all changes and, supposed, advances. To underline this point let me end with a quote from a perhaps unlikely source that at first glance appears to contradict my opening remarks.

**Advances – what advances? The number of hours women devote to housework has not changed since 1930, despite all the vacuum cleaners, washer/dryers, trash compactors, garbage disposals, wash-and-wear fabrics. Why does it still take as long to clean the house as it did in 1930?**

**It's because there haven't been any advances. Yet 30,000 years ago when men were doing cave paintings at Lascaux, they worked just 20 hours a week and the rest of the time they could play, or sleep, or do whatever they wanted.**

Ian Malcolm, the mathematician in Michael Crichton's  
*Jurassic Park*

Evidence perhaps that in reality we have made no progress whatsoever. But I suspect that 30,000 years ago, while the men had all that time to play, sleep, or whatever, the women still had to spend just as long doing the housework.  
*Plus ça change.*

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