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A Talk with William Powers, author of *New Slow City:*

*Living Simply in the World's Fastest City*

Born and raised on Long Island, William Powers has worked for over a decade in development aid and conservation in Latin America, Africa, Native North America, and Washington, DC. He is a senior fellow at the World Policy Institute and is on the adjunct faculty of New York University. A third generation New Yorker, Powers has also spent two decades exploring the American culture-of-speed and its alternatives in some fifty countries around the world. He has covered the subject in his four books and written about it in the Washington Post and the Atlantic. An expert on sustainable development, he is a freelance writer and speaker. More information at www.WilliamPowersBooks.com.

Why did you write this book?

*New Slow City* originated with a somewhat angry question. It came from a reader of *Twelve by Twelve: A One-Room Cabin Off the Grid and Beyond the American Dream*, my previous book about living in a twelve-foot-by-twelve-foot off-grid cabin in North Carolina. “It’s easy,” she wrote, “to find minimalism, joy, connection to nature, and abundant time in a shack in the woods. But how the hell are the rest of us supposed to stay sane in our busy modern lives?”

I received a hundred variations of this question in emails, after lectures, and during television and radio interviews about *Twelve by Twelve*. I always answered by saying I was living 12 x 12 values... but in Queens, New York — the home to which I returned after my time in the cabin.

But as each year passed, the reader’s doubt increasingly became my own as overwork, material clutter, and the lack of contact with nature — “civilization,” in short — brought me to a point of extreme unhappiness in Queens. Eventually, I too doubted it was possible to live 12 x 12 in a city, and I felt an urgent need to decamp far from urban life.

Not so fast. As I reached this point, my newlywed wife, Melissa, was offered an excellent job that demanded we stay put in New York City, and I suddenly had no choice but to figure out how to take what I’d learned in the 12 x 12 — about the Leisure Ethic, connecting to nature, and living simply — and somehow make it work in the real-world context of a marriage and two careers. In an attempt to do this, Melissa and I embarked on an experiment. We sold or gave away 80 percent of our stuff, left our 1,600-square-foot Queens townhouse, crossed the Williamsburg Bridge, and moved into a tiny rental: a 340-square-foot “micro-apartment” — roughly two 12 x 12s — on the fifth floor of a nineteenth-century walk-up in downtown Manhattan.

Voila, *New Slow City* was born! It’s a memoir of a year living the Leisure Ethic in a New York minute, an adventure into smart-city trends ranging within the growing global Slow Movement (Slow Food, Slow Money, etc.).

As the world accelerates, shouldn’t we also go faster to keep up and stay competitive? Slow feels a little, well… Luddite.

At first blush, Slow evokes an interminable line at the Department of Motor Vehicles. Slow is an old-fashioned rotary phone, the kind that took so long to dial that, as comedian Louis CK jokes, you kind of hated friends who had 0s and 9s in their numbers. Slow is un-American — it’s inefficient, dull, and Luddite. Right?

Well, how about another perspective. Gallup recently reported that 70 percent of American employees are either unhappy or disengaged at work. Anxiety levels among adolescents and adults are soaring, even compared to just two decades ago. One out of every four adults in America experiences some form of depression in the course of their lives. In Japan, they have a name for people who die from overworking: karoshi. Could we in the United States be tipping toward becoming a nation of karoshis? I, for one, became so stressed by constant work and the pace of city life that — before our Slow Year experiment — I found myself nearly a karoshi myself. I’m convinced that society must find a new equilibrium between the demands of business, the consumptive habits of society, and our own personal happiness.

Being “Slow” means being self-paced. Slow is not at all Luddite. It means cultivating positive qualities — being receptive, intuitive, patient, reflective— instead of the fast qualities so common today: being busy, controlling, impatient, agitated, acquisitive.

By living and working smarter instead of faster, you’re likely be more competitive.

How do you work smarter?

Borrowing from author and entrepreneur Tim Ferris, I spent my Slow Year practicing two principles at the same time: 80/20 and the Hodgkinson’s Principle.

The 80/20 principle says that we accomplish 80 percent of work results in just 20 percent of our time. Conversely, we more or less waste the other 80 percent of our time on a paltry 20 percent of the results.

Dutifully, in *New Slow City* I 80/20 my life and find that the principle holds true. In one particular week, for example, I looked at all the potential work streams — in international consulting, writing, and speaking — that I could pursue, and distilled out that week’s most strategic one in terms of income-to-time-invested and my current level of enthusiasm: a high-end magazine article. Then I overlaid the Hodgkinson’s Principle. Hodgkinson’s says that work expands to fill the amount of time available to accomplish it.

Thus, having chosen the one most critical work activity, I corralled it into a tight timeframe, and found it works: I condensed what might have been five days of work into two.

This approach spawned “reverse weekends” for me, where I worked smarter for two-days and took five-day weekends. This is not a utopian idea. Even Carlos Slim, the world’s richest person, has recently called for a 3-day work week and Google is increasingly experimenting in lowering hours and thus increasing employee creativity and efficiency.

Granted, using 80/20 and the Hodgkinson’s Principle won’t be ideal for everyone or all the time. This approach is more suited to entrepreneurs and hourly workers able to prioritize their own time and tasks, nailing the most important ones as quickly as possible and thus freeing up time. But almost anyone can create a small sideline work stream and apply these principles; eventually, perhaps, this side income might become one’s main income.

How else can I slow down in my busy modern life?

Two great Slow City tools my wife and I discovered are urban sanctuaries and third-story living.

First, Melissa and I began spending more and more time in natural and reflective places right in Manhattan. She loves Central Park’s Ramble — with its circuitous paths looping down past waterfalls and pine groves — and the Tudor City gardens perched above First Avenue and 40th Street, an oasis to which she flees from her Midtown office to eat brown-bag lunches amid birdsong. My favorite sanctuaries: Pier 45’s tip, where the West Side High- way fades to a hum; a back seat in the cathedral of St. John the Divine in late afternoon; and the High Line, a new park sanctuary created from unused urban infrastructure. Moongazing on our micro-apartment rooftop one night after dinner, we mused on two other urban sanctuaries: Washington Square and Madison Square Parks on warm days, when we love to kick off sandals and lie back to savor that sensual press of our bodies to the Earth. Gravity’s eros. And it’s mutual, since our bodies exert a tiny gravity on the Earth.

A second tool is “living at the third story,” which challenges the street-level commandment that thou must ingest sample sale and fast food come-ons wholesale. I only need half my attention on the street, I discovered, to keep from sleepwalking into traffic and other pedestrians. As the rest of my focus rises out of the buy-o-sphere and into the biosphere, I notice nut-brown oak branches and green leaves fluttering with white butterflies. An off-turquoise sky. Stretchy clouds. A devious gargoyle winking down at me from a portico. As gridlock, taxi-top strip-club ads, and the crush of shoppers gets backgrounded, my body relaxes. My new foreground: the ebony shine of a baby grand piano through an apartment window. And — look! — there’s the bright white Washing- ton Square Arch capped with a red-tailed hawk, the sunlight gleaming on its wings.

Besides those two tools, we also experimented in:

• Technology fasts. We tuned off our gadgets for weekends (sometimes for 5-day weekends!), utilizing the “vacation auto-response” on our email. This helped quality of our relationship because we had more time focused on other and the “real” world around us.

• Silent meals. Even in Manhattan’s fine restaurants, we’d eat in total silence, deeply savor the food, scents, soundscape, and visual beauty of the restaurant in a meditative manner. This made our lives feel deeper, richer, more sensual and enjoyable.

Before your Slow Year, you took and your newlywed bride took “uni-moons” instead of a honey moon. What’s that?

Yes, as good New Yorkers Melissa and I had gotten caught up in the prevailing turbo-capitalist ethos. Americans work longer hours than the citizens of any other country — fourteen more hours per week than an average European — and on average we leave unused, and so waste, 30 percent of our vacation time. I’d taken on so many work commitments, mostly subconsciously, to fit in and feel valued within the American system. I overworked, eating quick meals at the laptop or between flight connections.

So, even as Melissa and I married, in a small ceremony with family and close friends, our overworking led us to join the disquieting “uni-moon” trend. Instead of a honey- moon trip together in the busy weeks after our wedding, we each took separate, individual vacations without each other — uni-moons, or what amounted to a few days of free time at the end of separate work trips. She took hers in the Dominican Republic after a UN capacity-building workshop; I took mine in Paris on a forty-eight-hour stopover after a community forestry consultancy in Liberia, West Africa. Strolling, alone, in Montmartre that first evening, I found myself on the smartphone, checking work emails. Looking up from my phone, I was jolted aware that the Eiffel Tower and all of Paris were stretched out before me in all their beauty. I thought back to my North Carolina 12 x 12 and wondered what had happened to one of the big lessons I learned there: the need to balance my constant doing with the joy of simply being — a kind of Leisure Ethic.

So you decided to change. What’s the biggest thing you learned?

It’s hard to reduce what I learned to a soundbyte. It took much effort to try and stretch a New York minute into an hour, and a great way to discover what I learned is through the new trend of Slow Reading. We’re so distracted by quick Tweets and the barrage of email that we rarely sit with a book—New Slow City for example!—on a non-Internet-connected device or better yet the physical book, and simply enjoy it for hours on end. Slow Reading is a radical act in our workaholic era, where economic growth is put before life itself.

The global environmental crisis is in no small part related to our constant doing—consuming, burning fossil fuels, etc.— instead of a benign and joyful being.

Ninetieth century British essayist Thomas Carlyle wrote that “man was created to work, not to speculate, or feel, or dream. Every idle moment is treason.” This is even more the prevailing ethos today. It’s treasonous to ask for something the American labor movement demanded, a century back, when union members hoisted banners reading BREAD AND ROSES. The bread was good wages. And the roses? American workers were demanding time, in the form of shorter working hours. Time to smell the roses.

Well, they didn’t get it. As Executive Director of the non-profit work-life-balance group Take Back Your Time! John de Graaf put it to me, “We’re working more than we were a generation ago. Without leisure, we’re slaves. This is a freedom fight.” (continued)

Time is a renewable resource, but we’re sold the idea it’s scarce. It’s been stolen from overworked single-moms and business executives. And from almost everybody I know. There’s a David-and-Goliath battle underway today all around the globe. People like de Graaf put happiness first. Journalists like Carl Honoré report on how American workers lost the roses. There’s spiking interest in the international Slow Food movement and in decompression activities like Tai Chi, Tantric sex, and Slow Travel. In Austria each year, people gather from all over Europe in the town of Wagrain for the annual conference of the Society for Deceleration of Time, whose members explore pragmatic means of slowing down. In Japan, the Sloth Club advocates a less-hurried and more- harmonious lifestyle, and it has swollen to seven hundred members, part of a trend called the “Latinization of Japan.”

But do these growing movements stand a chance against the Goliath of overwork?

I think they do. But it starts with each of us creating space to slow down a little and ask the core questions, like: How do we find balance in a world that is changing more quickly than ever before in history? How do we overcome our culture’s ingrained habits of too much clutter, total work, and permanent distraction? And how can we incubate a new culture that’s slower, saner, and fit for the future?

**BOOK INFORMATION**

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