Waste Your Time, Your Life May Depend On It

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Welcome back, in relatively short order, to the Convivial Society. *This is an uncharacteristic installment in that it follow so quickly on the previous one and has, to my mind, a rather blog-ish feel to it (at least in its initial conception). But I hope you'll indulge me, because the striking contrast I'm highlighting here is very much worth a moments consideration.*

The Convivial Society *operates on a model inspired by Tim Carmody's idea of "unlocking the commons." In short, the writing is public and free to all, but sustained by the patronage of those who value the work and have the means to support it.*

The "tyranny of tiny tasks" and "fidelity to daily tasks."

There are two wildly different forms of life, even different life-worlds, lurking in those two phrases. A reader's comment led me to note the contrast between these two lines, both of which were quoted in the previous installment.

Here's the first line, "tyranny of tiny tasks," in context from a paragraph by Tim Wu commenting on "time-saving" technologies:

> "The problem is that, as every individual task becomes easier, we demand much more of both ourselves and others. Instead of fewer difficult tasks (writing several long letters) we are left with a larger volume of small tasks (writing hundreds of e-mails). We have become plagued by **a tyranny of tiny tasks**, individually simple but collectively oppressive."

The thing to note here is how the accomplishment of legitimate tasks morphs into a tyranny of tiny tasks when the performance of tasks is submitted to the logic of the time-saving technique.

Here's the second, "fidelity to daily tasks," from Albert Borgmann discussing the social dimensions of tending a hearth:

> "It was a focus, a hearth, a place that gathered the work and leisure of a family and gave the house its center. Its coldness marked the morning, and the spreading of its warmth the beginning of the day. It assigned to the different family members tasks that defined their place in the household. The mother built the fire, the children kept the firebox filled, and the father cut the firewood. It provided for the entire family a regular and bodily engagement with the rhythm of the seasons that was woven together of the threat of cold and the solace of warmth, the smell of wood smoke, the exertion of sawing and of carrying, the teaching of skills, and **the fidelity to daily tasks**."

When I first wrote that essay, and even yesterday when I revised it, the juxtaposition of those two lines escaped me. But when a reader commented on the idea of a tyranny of tiny tasks, my mind immediately drifted to Borgmann's phrase. And then it struck me that the contrast between the forms of life suggested by these two phrases tells us a great deal about the roots of so much of our exhaustion and dissatisfaction. I imagine that in some cases the very same task could be experienced and described either as Wu's tyranny or Borgmann's fidelity. I do not want to succumb to the tyranny of tiny tasks. I do want to live so that I might speak of my fidelity to daily tasks, inasmuch as this implies the performance of tasks that legitimately elicit such fidelity. But what makes the difference?

There are at least two ways to think about this. The first has to do with an order external to us and the other with how we internalize that order.

Externally, we live within social and material structures that school us to

embrace the techno-economic imperative to optimize all aspects of experience for speed, convenience, and efficiency. We may argue about a lot, but one thing most of us take for granted is that whatever can be done faster and more efficiently should be. Whatever labor can be saved, ought to be saved. It's a long standing imperative. Fifty years ago, social critic Ivan Illich argued that "people need new tools to work with rather than tools that 'work' for them." Instead, Illich observed that "for a hundred years we have tried to make machines work for men and to school men for life in their service."

Given these background assumptions, it is easy to see why the most popular and compelling way to market new technologies over the course of the past century has been to promote them as "time-saving." I should say at some point, and now is as good a time as any, that I'm not suggesting that time and labor should never be "saved." The problem is that "saving" time and labor have become default settings and social imperatives. Rather than wisely judging what labor or time can and ought to be "saved," our tendency is to buy into the promise indiscriminately.

So apart from the very real question of whether any time is ever indeed saved or if, as Wu observed, it is just the case that more is always demanded of us, there is also another question to consider, one that we are tacitly discouraged from ever entertaining: What precisely are we saving time to do?

I think the implicit answer is always something like "to enjoy the goods and services of consumer capitalism" as if this was our highest calling as human beings, that which would bring us true happiness and satisfaction. But it is never quite put this way, nor do we put it this way to ourselves. Instead, the terms of the offer are far more vague and generic. Most of the persuasion, if we may call it that, is done by how our tasks are framed whenever a machine or system is created to do them for us. Suddenly, previously dignified work becomes "drudgery," labor that some might have found satisfying becomes

insufficiently “creative.” The sense is that we might unlock some higher plane of existence if only we adopt a more efficient technique or outsource our involvement in a task to a new technology. Then and only then will we be able to do “what really matters,” and “what really matters” is always sufficiently vague to allow us to imagine that we are choosing these ends for ourselves and simply being empowered by new tools to achieve them.

In truth, this is just how we are convinced to give up on living. As Lewis Mumford put it in 1964, “Under the pretext of saving labor, the ultimate end of this technics is to displace life, or rather, to transfer the attributes of life to the machine and the mechanical collective, allowing only so much of the organism to remain as may be controlled and manipulated.”

Within the order that generates the tyranny of tiny tasks, the one which privileges efficiency and tempts us with the promise of time-saved for the sake of some nebulous higher purpose, a human being is valuable only to the degree that they become sites of automated consumption and on-demand productivity. And the order that demands this from us is never satiated. For its purposes, you will never purchase enough or produce enough. It’s a self-perpetuating engine of desire for what it alone can offer.

Lewis Mumford, again, described this dynamic about as well as one can:

> The bargain we are being asked to ratify takes the form of a magnificent bribe. Under the democratic-authoritarian social contract, each member of the community may claim every material advantage, every intellectual and emotional stimulus he may desire, in quantities hardly available hitherto even for a restricted minority: food, housing, swift transportation, instantaneous communication, medical care, entertainment, education. But on one condition: that one must not merely ask for nothing that the system does not provide, but likewise agree to take everything offered, duly processed and fabricated, homogenized and equalized, in the precise quantities that the system, rather than the person, requires. Once one opts for the system no further choice remains. In a word, if one

> surrenders one's life at source, authoritarian technics will give back as much of it as can be mechanically graded, quantitatively multiplied, collectively manipulated and magnified.

This external order also fosters a corresponding mode of being within us. We come to understand our own experience according to the logic of the techno-economic order. We presume that our worth is bound up with our productivity. We enter into an adversarial relationship with time. We develop a distaste for rest. We forget how to play. Our relationships are instrumentalized. The world becomes to us, in Hartmut Rosa's memorable phrase, nothing more than a series of points of aggressions, "all matters to be settled, attended to, mastered, completed, resolved, gotten out of the way." In this mode, we will always seize upon the time-saving promise, however hollow, and our life will be ruled by the tyranny of tiny tasks because we will never be doing something for its own sake. And it will be so because the order to which we are conforming our own inner life is an order ruled by idols, to borrow a religious concept, which have no interest in our well-being, idols invoked by the names Productivity, Optimization, Efficiency, and Profit.

The question, then, is this: how do we refuse this tyranny and embrace instead a form of life that makes it plausible for us to speak of what Borgmann called fidelity to daily tasks?

I'll offer some suggestions below, but I'll welcome your own reflections on the matter in comments below, which I'll open to all readers for this one.

I believe it starts with a series of refusals. A refusal to thoughtlessly submit to the idols. It may not be in our power to overthrow them altogether, but we can certainly deny them the mesmerizing hold they can have on our moral imagination. We can recognize the emptiness of their promises. We can see them for what they are: a shameless effort to align our desires with the goals of a system which cares nothing for us. The time-saving promise will lose its allure as soon as the background assumptions and values that sustained it lose their taken-for-granted status. As always, I encourage you to ask the

seemingly stupid question: Why should I be productive? Why should I do something faster? Why is efficiency good? Maybe you'll get good affirming answers. Maybe you'll discover a more complex reality that requires us to think more critically and act more circumspectly.

Secondly, we should be suspicious of the presumption that how something gets done is a matter of indifference and that what is of real consequence is only the end or the output. This presumption sustains the belief that any part of a process or practice can be automated or eliminated without affecting or jeopardizing the integrity of the whole enterprise, in part because it entails the belief that all that ever matters is the outcome of the process and not the meaning of the process or how we are shaped by it. Under certain circumstances it may, in fact, be true that how something gets done is a matter of relative unimportance, but this is far from universally true. While the techno-economic order knows only quantifiable outcomes and measurable outputs, much of what ultimately matters, what is of greatest human concern, transpires in the particular and idiosyncratic ways we pursue our goals—in the ways we are involved, invested, and engaged in the tasks that make up our days.

Most importantly perhaps, I think that we should recognize that with all the talk of automated labor and outsourced intelligence we are being distracted from the one element of most profound human consequence—care. Care is what creates the possibility of purposeful action. Care is what issues forth in meaningful knowledge of the world and others. Care is ultimately what transforms the quality of our involvement and engagement with the world so that we pass from "getting things done" to living.

Implicit in the promise of outsourcing and automation and time-saving devices is a freedom to be something other than what we ought to be. The liberation we are offered is a liberation from the very care-driven involvement in the world and in our communities that would render our lives meaningful and satisfying. In other words, the promise of liberation traps us within the

tyranny of tiny tasks by convincing us to see the stuff of everyday life and ordinary relationships as obstacles in search of an elusive higher purpose—Creativity, Diversion, Wellness, Self-actualization, whatever. But in this way it turns out that we are only ever serving the demands of the system that wants nothing more than our ceaseless consumption and production.

Within this system and by its terms, we do best to waste as much time as possible, to slow down when we are encouraged to speed up, to disregard the demand to measure and assess, to relish inefficiency, to remember, as my friend Evan Selinger once put it, that "effort is the currency of care." And such effort is best not "saved," because our living is bound up with our caring.

Borgmann's "fidelity to daily tasks" stands in stark contrast to the tyranny of tiny tasks precisely because it implies relationship. Fidelity, faithfulness, keeping faith. Is it possible to view our tasks as a means of keeping faith—with our neighbors, with our friends, with our family, perhaps even with ourselves? Perhaps not. Then we should question why we are undertaking these tasks to begin with. But if they can be so construed, then we should consider whether their performance is not, in fact, an obstacle to some higher, more fulfilling but ill-defined state of being human, but rather the very stuff in which our being human consists. If the point is to care and to love and to keep faith, then what is to be gained by outsourcing or eliminating the very ways we may be called upon to do so?

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