

TIME AND WISDOM



The more we hurry the get things done, the harder it is to access innate wisdom. The solution: realizing that we have the power to step back from our thoughts, quiet our minds, reflect.

Aristotle once said, "A wise man is never in a hurry." If we apply that statement to business people today, then most of us look pretty foolish.

I recently sat through a management meeting where an outside facilitator declared that no decision should take more than 27 minutes and proceeded to try to impose that arbitrary rule. In our rush to work within that time constraint, we quickly got into a ferocious argument over issues that all arose from differing interpretations of what "now" meant. To the head of operations, "now" meant within the next 30 to 60 days. To the CEO, "now" meant within a couple of years. It wasn't until the fury had run its course that a certain inquisitiveness crept into the conversation, and the arguing parties discovered that they were actually in almost complete agreement as to the best course of action both short- and long-term.

There's no doubt but that wisdom can be elusive. But what does haste have to do with it? Was Aristotle suggesting that a wise person is never late or never finds him or herself running to catch a flight?

You've probably experienced the frustration of getting stuck in traffic while rushing to the airport. One such incident stands out vividly. I was trying to get from downtown Chicago to O'Hare, and traffic was backed up all the way to the Ohio Street entrance ramp. As I began to fume, I noticed myself becoming resentful – resentful of the client for keeping me so late, of the other drivers for picking that moment to get on the expressway, of the politicians for not expanding highway capacity fast enough, of my partners for expecting me to charge billable hours. I was even resentful of my son's anticipated disappointment over my late arrival home.

As I worked myself into a state of anger and despair, suddenly my circumstances struck me as hilarious. Here I was, drowning myself in pity, worry, and fear when absolutely no one else cared! My anger turned to lightheartedness and laughter. And in that moment I knew everything was going to turn out just fine. I felt as though I had all the time in the world.

And everything did turn our fine. When I got to the airport 15 minutes after the scheduled departure, the agent suggested I check the gate. It turned out that the flight had a short delay and was being held.

What stands out about that cab ride is that moment when I suddenly decided not to take my thoughts so seriously. It's not that I wasn't having thoughts of anger, selfishness, or worry; but rather that I simply made a conscious decision to turn my attention in another direction. I did not argue with myself, tell myself to think positively, bargain with my ego, or stop looking at my watch. Instead, I merely turned

my back on the thoughts that were gripping me so fiercely. The moment I did that, my mind cleared; and I began to see what had been right in front of me all along.

Traffic was moving, slowly but steadily. Since a lot of other people were stuck in traffic, there were bound to be other flights with empty seats. I could call ahead. I could ask the cab driver to drop me off as close as possible to the gate. A feeling of utter calmness came over me and with it a deep sense of gratitude for how much my son loved me, how lucky I was to work with neat clients, and how appreciative I was of the efforts everyone in the firm was making to serve our clients' needs.

Since that day, it has become more and more obvious to me that my habit of always being in a hurry was nothing more than the outward manifestation of my innermost thoughts. I was acting in accordance with my inner state of mind. Ironically, one of the things taking time away from my family was my habit of paying undue attention to these harried thoughts. It was as if I were a puppet who had forgotten that he was also the puppet master and capable of choosing which thoughts to act on.

Life presents many opportunities and temptations, but we have the power not to become helpless in the face of them. Transcending reality is nothing more than remembering that we are the thinker. Reality is simply our thoughts in action. Changing our reality is nothing more than realizing that we have the power to step back from our thoughts and contemplate the spaces between them. It is in these spaces that wisdom, common sense and insight reside, in a kind of timelessness that some would call our divine mind. This state of mind is the source of all wisdom, a wisdom that is timeless, transcendent, and total.

Paradoxically, the harder we chase wisdom, the more elusive it becomes. In our hurry to act wisely, the more foolishly we behave. The more pressure we put upon ourselves, the less we act with common sense. The more we worry, the further the obvious answer slips away from us. The more upset we become, the more difficult it is to see the situation clearly and make adjustments.

You can't chase down wisdom. Wisdom can only be revealed, and revelation is possible only when our thoughts are tranquil. The very nature of insight, literally "sight from within," is that it never answers directly with knowledge or words, but rather with the revelation - the taking of form - of whatever is being sought.

So if you want to allay the anxiety that comes from being in a hurry to catch a flight, don't set the alarm to awaken you earlier. Instead, experience peace of mind, and let the details of life take care of themselves. Time slows down when our thoughts are not tumbling all over each other in our urgency to get everything done. Dreams begin to come true.

A colleague tells the story of how she met her future husband. She was in her early thirties and had all but given up hope of ever finding a man she truly loved. Then she simply forgot about it, took a new job, moved across the country, and began looking in other directions. In other words, she just stopped paying attention to her obsessive thoughts of finding the right man.

You can guess the rest. A co-worker invited her to play tennis, mixed doubles, neglecting to mention that the fourth player was a really cute guy. They fell in love that day and just a few months later decided to get married.

Everyone has this source of wisdom within them, just as we all have the power to realize our dreams. But to reach this deeper intelligence, we must somehow transcend the anxieties created by our external needs and desires. When all the writer can think about is disappointing his son because of a missed flight, how can he find common sense or peace of mind? When his thinking is in such turmoil, how can he ever express his love? And when a woman is blinded by her preoccupation with falling in love, how can she ever find the right man?

The search for timeless beauty is a journey that each person must take for himself or herself, for the answers are within us. These answers can never be explained, for they reveal themselves only as feelings, which are nearly impossible to express in words. For instance, you know that your thoughts are quiet and calm only because you are feeling tranquil and peaceful. In this quietude, thoughts based upon a deeper intelligence arise and take form, quite apart from any conscious action on your part!

Trying to achieve this state of mind by positive thinking, physical exercise, religious ceremony or rigorous study may produce a short-lived effect. But soon our habitual thoughts return, and the light fades. These habitual thoughts relating to busyness, pressure, or deadlines deny us our God-given capacity to find common sense.

Sages from the past caution us that we cannot explain the search for inner truth. Buddha asks us to forgo our desires; Jesus, to trust in faith; Mohammed, to submit to God's will; Plato, to "know thyself." Ralph Waldo Emerson writes, "Man is a stream whose source is hidden. Our being is descending into us from we know not whence."

That is man's uniqueness: that he can be aware of this source, experienced as a feeling that takes form right in front of his eyes moment after moment after moment.

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