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INNOVATION WILL MEAN MORE THAN JUST BEING FAST

It's about time we learn to take our time

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Recently, the successful and well-received implementation of a later start time — by 45 minutes — at Nanyang Girls' High School prompted Dr Michael Chee, director of the Centre of Cognitive Neuroscience at Duke-NUS Medical School, to highlight the dangers of inadequate sleep.

I read both pieces of news with great interest, because it led me to think about our relationship with time, since the lack of sleep has surely something to do with the competing uses to which time is allocated.

J T Fraser, the late polymath founder of the International Society for the Study of Time, wrote: "Tell me what you think of time, and I shall know what to think of you."

I think that a society's most fundamental relationship is with time. What form that particular relationship takes depends on the sociocultural, political and economic context in question, and of course it changes with, well, time.

But time has been the principle that informs us when to sow and harvest, defines when children come of age, and structures how we sequence and coordinate our myriad activities.

Indeed, many metaphors of time abound. It did not take me much time to come up with a fairly long list. Such metaphors enjoin us, variously, to save time, make time, to be in time or to be on time. We sometimes kill time, mark time, and wish we could turn back time. We fret that we run out of time, dread the bad times, cherish the good times, and look forward to time-outs and time off. And every major religion has its own version of the end times.

In Singapore, though, with our predilection for efficiency, certain metaphors are privileged. In economic life, the perennial focus on productivity speaks to our obsession with how much and how quickly we can get things done in our factories and workplaces. In our education system, the way we separate our children into different academic streams is based on a time-related word: Express. And in National Service, the phrase "take your time" is usually uttered by a platoon sergeant with sarcasm dripping off his sharp tongue.

Modern Singapore is certainly a place in a hurry. Its economic success can be explained by its ability to accelerate and pull away from the chasing pack of competitors. In terms of the Olympic motto "Citius, Altius, Fortius" (Latin for "Faster, Higher, Stronger"), while we found it hard because of geography and size to check the boxes on "stronger" and "higher", we could always count on being faster. Faster in terms of efficiency, of eliminating distractions, of securing consensus, of responding to shocks and challenges.

If Singaporeans are to cultivate a culture of innovation, they must rethink their relationship with time — the quantity of things done must give way to the quality of things done. TODAY FILE PHOTO

But what happens when sheer speed no longer suffices as the central principle by which we organise ourselves? The next economic frontiers identified by the Report of the Committee on the Future Economy are those of creativity and innovation, both of which cannot be reached through the application of speed alone.

Time is the very essence of the creative and innovation process. Time is needed for exploration, for multiple iterations of an idea, for experimentation, and especially to learn and recover from inevitable failures.

You need time to go off on tangents and to explore hidden by-ways because you never know where you might find serendipity, or where serendipity might find you. Dr Daniel J Levitin of McGill University's Laboratory for Music, Cognition and Expertise advocates deliberately being in a "task-negative mode" — daydreaming — because it is during those times that answers to intractable problems seem to pop into existence.

And yet ironically, most governments' responses to the challenge of innovation take the form of incubators and accelerators, both of which seek to compress what is naturally an evolutionary process, and which can be effective only up to a point.

Not only that — what happens when the fast and ever-accelerating pace of life begins to take its toll on society, in terms of sleep deprivation, chronic fatigue and deteriorating mental health? Society's response then is nostalgia for a simpler and presumably slower time. In Singapore, it manifests itself in lamenting the loss of the "kampung spirit".

In Robert Levine's A Geography of Time, he argues that people are prone to live faster lives in places where economic activity is robust, there is a high degree of industrialisation and urbanisation, cooler climates, and a cultural orientation towards individualism.

If Mr Levine is correct in assessing that cooler temperatures are a key determinant of a faster pace of life, then Singapore is exceptional also in terms of conquering time through conquering the climate with air-conditioning. And given that the air-conditioner is ultimately a net heat-generating device, one can only wonder how sustainable this pace of life can be.

If we are to genuinely cultivate a culture of creativity and innovation, we need to fundamentally rethink our relationship with time: The quantity of the things we do must give way to the quality of the things we do.

We need to give time to reflection and rumination, not because they are luxuries but because they are now indispensable to reinventing our economy. And in case this sounds like the naivete of those who do not bear the burdens of high office, former United States Secretary of State George Shultz made sure to set aside an hour each week to unplug from the humdrum of daily routine in order to contemplate the strategic big picture.

In Peter Hill's Stargazing: Memoirs of a Young Lighthouse Keeper, he wrote: "Then stare at the sky and contemplate the vastness of the universe. Gradually you turn into a lighthouse keeper. But take your time, for time is precious."

That usage is alien to us. It is about time we reclaim the original meaning of "take your time".

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