

Addiction and Mood Disorder in the Fast Food University

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Indeed we know what to do with space but do not know what to do with time, except to make it subservient to space. Most of us seem to labor for the sake of things in space. As a result we suffer from a deeply rooted dread of time and stand aghast when compelled to look it in the face. Time to us is a sarcasm, a slick treacherous monster with a jaw like a furnace incinerating every moment of our lives. Shrinking, therefore, from facing time, we escape for shelter to things of space. The intentions we are unable to carry out we deposit in space; possessions become symbols of our repressions, jubilees of frustrations. But things of space are not fireproof; they only add fuel to the flames. Is the joy of possession an antidote to the terror of time that grows to be a dread of inevitable death? Things, when magnified, are forgeries of happiness, they are a threat to our lives; we are more harassed than supported by the Frankensteins of spatial things.

—Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel, *The Sabbath*¹

This isn't about good people versus bad people. It's about a machine taking over this country. It's like something out of science fiction. The land, the cattle, the humans, the machine doesn't give a shit. Pennies a pound, pennies a pound, that's all it cares about, a few more pennies a pound.

—Rancher, *Fast Food Nation*²

It is a great honor to serve as a respondent to Susan Laird's presidential address. One of the greatest gifts I have received during my many years as a society member is her friendship, philosophical and otherwise, our ongoing discussions of not merely philosophy in general, but of our own personal quests for wisdom. Perhaps more than anyone Laird has encouraged me to allow myself the right to connect my professional practice of philosophy to my personal quest, to see that the two cannot (for me at least) be fruitfully separated. In other words, she has helped me better understand and take seriously how I must and might apply Ludwig Wittgenstein's remark: "What good is philosophy if it does not make you better?"

In her essay Laird is quite persuasive in arguing that the examination of foodways is educationally important. She is so successful that I see my essay merely as an extension or companion to hers, rather than a critique. Specifically, I wish to extend her account from fast food to fast drink and drugs, especially as these exist where and how I have tried to live: the college and university campus as an administrator, educator, and professor of philosophy. My ultimate goal is to encourage a role for college and university teachers of philosophy, for us, as critics of the very culture in which we live and breathe, the increasingly addictive culture of "fast food higher education."

What right do I have to speak of higher education in this way? In their book, *College of the Overwhelmed: The Mental Health Crisis on Campus*, Richard Radison and Theresa Fay Geronimo write:

If your son or daughter is in college, the chances are almost one in two that he or she will become depressed to the point of being unable to function, one in two that he or she will have regular episodes of binge drinking (with the resulting significant risk of dangerous consequences such as sexual assault and car accidents), and one in ten that he or she will seriously

consider suicide. In fact since 1988, the likelihood of a college student's suffering depression has doubled, suicidal ideation has tripled, and sexual assaults have quadrupled.³

In short, the best legal way to make sure that your adolescent becomes mentally disordered is to enroll him or her in college!

The matter is, I confess, a very personal one for me. In an alternative session address delivered at the Philosophy of Education Society conference in Toronto, I described how my initial attachments to philosophy were, might I say, not of the purest type. Socratic machismo, rather than purity of heart, was what I wanted as I read more and more of Plato's dialogues. As someone who grew up in a dysfunctional family, as what psychoanalyst Alice Miller would call a "gifted child," I had learned to think (at least to manipulate concepts), but not to intelligently identify, honor, and cope with my feelings. Baffled by my emotional life, fearful of my own body except when I was high or hiding, I was fascinated with this man Socrates, who, I was told, was the greatest philosopher of them all, in part because he no longer felt at all. (But boy, could he use words and thoughts to do amazing things!) In what I now agree, along with Leslie Haywood, is a prime example of the practice of "male anorexic logic," I yearned to emulate this "father" of philosophy, to learn to die.⁴ And surprisingly enough, as a dual-diagnosed individual, mood-disordered and addicted to drugs and alcohol, I found the life of professional philosophy, of philosophical dying in the university, surprisingly easy — until one day, through some miracle or bit of chance, I no longer did.

When I left rehab in 1988, after decades of drug and alcohol abuse, an addictions counselor said to me, "Welcome to the human race." My personal coeducation had begun. That is, I had to find a form of philosophical practice that meant something other than continuing to grow an already swelled academic head, full of its opinions and explanations and heretofore fueled by my ever more fantastic plans for "understanding everything." I had to find myself, my feelings, my embodied self. If I was to remain a lover of wisdom without destroying myself I had to find something a lot like Richard Schusterman's somasethetics.

Yet there was a part of me, perhaps the male anorexic part, that remained convinced that I was a Socratic rock. I remained caught up in the culture of the fast food nation and fast food university, at best the equivalent of a dry drunk. I found that I was not the only academic caught up in the increasingly rapid and mindless "rat race." In the end, I could not help but notice the same dialectic of addiction and mood disorder in many colleagues that I found in myself and in so many of my students. I could, by this time, even feel it in my body.

Let me now speak more explicitly of time and addiction. I want to suggest how the sort of anorexic logic fostered by the "fast food nation" is grounded in an unsavory view of time and relationship, which in turn license addiction.

One, but certainly not the only, way to approach the matter is through Martin Buber's key distinction between two ways of being, that of I-Thou and I-It. In her journal, *An Interrupted Life*, Etty Hillesum speaks of life in the I-It, as well as of addictiveness in general:

Whenever I saw a beautiful flower, what I longed to do was press it to my heart, or eat it up... I yearned physically for all I thought was beautiful, I wanted to own it. Hence that painful longing that could never be satisfied, the pining for something I thought unattainable, which I called my creative urge.⁵

As Laird points out, there is no room in such an attitude for mutuality. The I-It is, instead, a way of being in which power, in which manipulation and control, is in the ascendant. Here we might speak of addiction as a mode of relation and not simply an endless lust for this or that object of desire. For the addict, then, every thing ends up serving the Frankenstein machine. As Abraham Joshua Heschel points out, it is in this way of being that time must become an enemy, and isolation must become the norm, isolation from others, nature, the spirit, from ourselves. This is our life, the whirlpool of fast food nation. How can that life be changed or at least challenged?

Following the advice of various twelve-step programs, themselves somaesthetic practices worth philosophic study, I suggest that we consider detachment as a curative to addiction. Properly understood, detachment is not meant as slavery, passivity, or powerlessness per se. Instead, detachment indicates discernment, a sense of what is possible and what is wise. In short, detachment involves the ability to step out of the fast food whirlpool and learn to live in the present.⁶

In the "fast food nation," we seem to believe that we are what we own or control. There is, as Laird's remarks on Mary Wollstonecraft make clear, a ground of property, a material ground for all this. And perhaps in Wollstonecraft's utopia, having achieved detachment properly understood, we will again be capable (as Erich Fromm put it) to focus on "what we are" rather than on "what we have." And if attention to the former, the mindful self, fosters a sense of the ineffable rather than our ever more frantic attempts at explaining, doing, and acquiring, all the better. For action is aimless and empty without contemplation, without stillness.

Is not learning proper ways to wonder, to sense what we are and cannot say, as important as learning how to feed the machine? If we are to restore the spirit of liberal education to the university, if our productions are to have any worth, I believe that we must heed Heschel's acute remark: "The highest goal of spiritual living is not to collect a wealth of information but to face sacred moments."⁷ Here is where our first move against fastness must take its stand. How much havoc must there be until we understand that in our forgetfulness of our humanity, our distraction, we forget the most important thing of all?

Fellow academics, let me share with you the kind of questions that arise for me as I ponder Laird's essay. First, if I allow myself to be caught up in the whirlpool of the "fast food university," how can I set a positive example for those I teach? How complicit am I, through my at least tacit acceptance of academic fastness, in fostering the crisis that Radison and Geronimo speak of? Moreover, how much danger is there that I will lose my heart? Through my publishing, am I in danger of perishing? Can the blind lead the blind?

Somehow I need to ask these questions not only in my mind, but also in my body. To what extent has academic fastness overtaken my own work, infiltrated it, so to speak, so as to render it impotent against the very evils I speak of? To overcome the

imperatives of the “fast food nation” must we not first of all, become mindful, become still? And if we even begin to desire the cultivation of this ability, desire it in the body, what will happen next?

As I enter the next moment of my life, while writing these lines, I am aware that to be struck by the enigma and to pause, rather than flee and forget, is to live within the core.⁸

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1. Abraham Joshua Heschel, *The Sabbath: Its Meaning For Modern Man* (New York: Farrar, Strauss, and Girous, 1979), 5–6.
 2. *Fast Food Nation*, directed by Robert Linklater (Los Angeles: Twentieth Century Fox, 2006).
 3. Richard Radison and Theresa Fay Geronimo, *College of the Overwhelmed: The Mental Health Crisis on Campus* (San Francisco: Jossey Bass, 2004), 1.
 4. For an excellent discussion of what I am referring to here, see Leslie Haywood, *Dedication to Hunger: The Anorexic Aesthetic in Modern Culture* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996).
 5. Etty Hillesum, *An Interrupted Life* (New York: Henry Holt, 1996), 14.
 6. For a similar account of addiction see Gerald G. May, *Addiction and Grace: Spirituality in the Healing of Addictions* (San Francisco: Harper, 1989).
 7. Heschel, *Sabbath*, 7.
 8. Abraham Joshua Heschel, *Man Is Not Alone: A Philosophy of Religion* (New York: Farrar, Strauss, and Giroux, 1951), 16.