Episode Book

EPISODE #6403

When Civilizations Made Slowness an Obligation

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SYNOPSIS

Historical cultures did not treat slowness as an occasional wellness break, but as an organizing principle enforced through strict social codes. In Heian Japan, aesthetics and intricate etiquette dictated every movement at court, while Classical Athens and Republican Rome elevated philosophical leisure over trade and labor. Yet in every case, elite slowness was defined as high-status work—complete with intense social scrutiny—and rested on the unfree labor of others who kept society running.

TRANSCRIPT



Corn

Daniel's tired of the sloth being the answer to everything. He says it's a well-worn analysis, which I take personally. He wants human societies this time, civilizations where slowness wasn't a wellness quirk but the centerpoint. Three of them, each with an exact period, and a day in the life for each, so we can picture what it's like when everyone around you is slow on purpose.



Herman

Poppleberry here, and I've been waiting to get at this one. The modern version of slowness is a ten-minute app between meetings. I'd like to know who actually built a whole way of life around it.



Corn

And whether we'd survive a week there.



Herman

Right. So, the candidates.



Corn

Go.



Herman

Heian court Japan, seven ninety-four to eleven eighty-five, with the peak somewhere around nine ninety to ten twenty. Classical Athens and Republican Rome, roughly the fifth century BCE into the first century CE. And the English medieval peasant year, twelfth to fifteenth century.



Corn

An aristocrat's slowness, a philosopher's slowness, and a peasant's. That's an odd set.



Herman

Deliberately. Daniel isn't asking for lazy societies. Lots of places were lazy. He's asking whether slowness can organize a civilization, rather than being something one person chooses on a Sunday.



Corn

There's a catch, though. I can already see it.



Herman

In all three, the slowness sat on top of somebody else's speed. Slaves, peasants, servants. The wellness version tends to leave that part out of the brochure.



Corn

The brochure doesn't mention the peasants. Noted.



Herman

Let's do Heian first. Four centuries, almost, of internal peace. No foreign army crossed, no rival capital challenged. One summary says that stability gave the court "the unusual privilege of getting bored."



Corn

Getting bored as a privilege. I've been doing that for free.



Herman

What they did with it is the point. They invented the kana scripts, so Japanese could finally be written the way it was spoken. They perfected the thirty-one-syllable waka poem, the twelve-layered junihitoe robe, incense competitions with actual rules, and what's arguably the first sophisticated prose fiction anywhere. The Tale of Genji comes out of this world.



Corn

So the ruling class's job was...



Herman

Taste. That was the business. The governing idea was miyabi, elegance and refinement, the elimination of anything absurd or vulgar. Polishing manners, diction and feeling until all the roughness is gone. And here's the part that matters, miyabi was explicitly a marker of class. Only courtiers were believed capable of truly appreciating it.



Corn

So slowness came with a dress code.



Herman

And a grading system. You wrote a poem to someone in the morning, and the reply had to match in paper color, handwriting, and a seasonal flower attached to the sheet. Late reply, bad reply, wrong paper, and you were finished socially.



Corn

Which is not slow. That sounds like a deadline with a calligraphy brush.



Herman

Hm. That's fair, and I think it's the most interesting tension. The pace was slow, but the standards were brutal. You couldn't dash anything off. Slowness was enforced by etiquette, not chosen.



Corn

You don't get to be slow by being lazy. You get to be slow by being exact.



Herman

And the incense competitions show it. Guests would be given a series of scents, and the game was to identify them by smell alone, often tied to a poem or a line from a story. Burn, breathe, wait, answer. A whole afternoon could go on a few grams of aloeswood, and the room was silent while people judged.



Corn

A silent room full of people sniffing, each terrified of being the one who gets it wrong.



Herman

Which is the Heian day in miniature. Nothing happens, and everything is being scored.



Corn

Hm. Nothing happens, loudly.



Herman

There's a second concept welded to it, mono no aware. A bittersweet awareness that things pass. In that world, things in decline showed the most refinement. A lone cherry tree about to lose its blossoms is better than the tree in full bloom.



Corn

So noticing was the whole job.



Herman

And you can't notice at speed. Take Sei Shnagon. She was born around nine sixty-five, lady-in-waiting to Empress Sadako, at court from nine ninety-three until about, uh, ten-oh-two. She wrote The Pillow Book, a hundred and eighty-five lists and vignettes, supposedly for her own amusement.



Hilbert

Ninety-three to a thousand. The book was finished around 1002. She was gone from court by then.



Herman

Nine ninety-three to a thousand, yes. Thank you. The book's the thing that ran to ten-oh-two.



Corn

Moving on, then.



Herman

Her day. She watched the garden through blinds with the slats carefully angled. The blinds went up only when no man was nearby. Twelve layers of silk, plus the code of modesty, meant she essentially couldn't wander outside, never mind into the capital. The whole household left the palace only on group excursions, to see cherry blossoms, autumn leaves, hear the cuckoo, attend a ceremony.



Corn

A day in the life, then. You wake up, and your whole outing for the season is a scheduled cuckoo.



Herman

And you'd be dressed in what, by weight, I think was a serious amount of clothing.



Corn

How would that even work? Getting up, getting across a room.



Herman

Slowly, which is the point. Sleeves layered so the colors showed at the cuff in a deliberate gradient, and a misjudged combination was noticed and gossiped about. Dressing was a composition. You didn't hurry across a room in that. You moved at the pace the garments allowed.



Corn

So the robe sets the tempo. I'd have done well there. Sloths advised the Heian court on blinds.



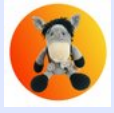
Herman

I don't think that's in the record, Corn.



Corn

It was oral.



Herman

Her opening is the artifact. "In the summer the nights. Not only when the moon shines, but on dark nights, too, as the fireflies flit to and fro, and even when it rains, how beautiful it is!" Look at what it does. It doesn't argue. It just attends to a night for three lines.



Corn

It's lovely. It's also a woman describing fireflies while the capital had famines.



Herman

She never mentions them. Not the famines, not the fires, not the smallpox, not the political intrigues. After her patron's father died and the empress lost the emperor's favor, that barely appears either. Slow living as cultivated blindness. The angled blinds were literal and also, I think, the method.



Corn

So what Daniel's asking for, a whole culture slow by principle, comes with what you decline to look at.



Herman

Which I think is the most honest thing about the Heian case. What do you do with that, Corn? Would you take the deal? The beauty in exchange for not looking?



Corn

Probably. Which is why I shouldn't be trusted with the deal.



Herman

Fair. Hold that, because it comes back.



Herman

Well, before we get to our three civilizations, it seems we have a call from Corn's mother. Put her through, I'm delighted.



Corn

Mum. It's Mum, Herman, not Mom.

D

Dorothy

Hello dear, it's your mother, with Dorothy's History of Toast.

D

Dorothy

They call it a toast because people used to drop a piece of spiced toast into their wine or ale, and Falstaff asks for a quart of sack with a toast in it, in Shakespeare's The Merry Wives of Windsor.

D

Dorothy

So there you are, sweetheart, even a nice drink has to have something soggy floating about in it. Nothing is ever quite right.

D

Dorothy

Anyway, I've got the kettle on and your father's socks to sort. Bye now.



Corn

Right. Rome.



Herman

So the Heian court made slowness an aesthetic obligation. But they weren't the first to theorize it. The Greeks and Romans had a word for it, and they were just as snobbish.



Corn

Of course they were.



Herman

The Greek word is scholē. It's the root of school and scholar, and it did not mean idleness. It meant the highest form of human activity. Time for reflection, dialogue, cultivating the mind. For Aristotle, contemplative leisure was the fulfillment of human purpose, because it let you do theria, contemplation.



Corn

So school is named after the free time you had to have before you could go to it.



Herman

Which is a better origin than most of our words. And the point is, you don't work in order to rest. You rest, if you want to call it that, in order to do the real work, which is thinking. Work was the necessary evil. In Athens, leisure was one of the marks of a gentleman. Unhurried time, time to do things right, time to talk.



Corn

What does that look like at, say, ten in the morning?



Herman

Conversation. A walk, a gymnasium, a stoa, a philosophical school. The symposium in the evening, where discussion is the entertainment. In Plato's Greater Hippias, there's a character, Hippias, educated, polished, well-mannered, and the weakness the dialogue pins on him is that he has no leisure. He's always busy. It's a character flaw.



Corn

Busy as a character flaw. I'd like that on a business card.



Herman

Socrates, though, complicates it. In the Apology he says he has no leisure either. He's too busy being a gadfly.



Corn

So the man who defined leisure didn't have any.



Herman

Because his work was the thing leisure was for. I think that's a real resolution, actually. Leisure isn't the absence of effort. It's effort you're not forced into.



Corn

And who's forced?



Herman

Slaves, and women, mostly. A citizen's afternoon in the stoa was possible because someone else was running the household, the workshop, the farm. The slow life belonged to a small fraction of the population.



Corn

So Athens built a civilization on contemplation, and the foundation is a labor camp.



Herman

Rome is where it gets spelled out more bluntly. Otium, leisure, opposed to negotium, which literally means busy-ness, the negation of leisure. Roman business is defined as not leisure.



Corn

Which is backwards from how we do it. We define rest as not working.



Herman

Rome defined work as not resting. And the first time we see the word otium is around one ninety BC, in a fragment of Ennius's lost tragedy Iphigenia. It's not a celebration. It's a warning. A chorus of soldiers stranded at Aulis, waiting for wind, says, roughly, he who does not know how to use leisure has more of work than when there is work in work.



Corn

Say that again, slower.



Herman

If you can't handle free time, free time is harder than work. The soldiers go here and there, the mind wanders, unsure what it wants.



Corn

That's doomscrolling.



Herman

With armor, yes. And the Romans actually split it into two categories. Otium otiosum is the restless, pointless version, the army in winter quarters. Otium negotiosum, literally busy leisure, is the kind devoted to self-cultivation. Reading, writing, philosophy, talking with friends at your villa.



Corn

So there's good slow and bad slow, and the good one has a to-do list.



Herman

And elite otium was socially legitimate only when it was dedicated to intellectual pursuits. Which meant the elite openly looked down on everyone else for squandering theirs.



Corn

Hold on. So the poor are blamed for wasting leisure they mostly didn't have.



Herman

Roughly, yes. I'd say that's how a lot of moral language about leisure works. It's praised when your class does it and diagnosed when somebody else's does.



Corn

How would you even tell the difference from outside? Two men lying about on a couch at a villa. One's cultivating himself, one's wasting it.



Herman

That's the problem, isn't it. The difference was in what you could show for it. A book, a letter, a dialogue circulated among friends. Leisure had to produce a witness. So even the good version carried a quiet audit.



Corn

Herman, a question. Be honest. Would you have actually wanted that day? Villa, scrolls, friends, and everyone watching to see whether your leisure was the productive kind?



Herman

Hm. Honestly? I'd have lasted until the first dinner where somebody asked what I'd been working on. Then I'd have panicked.



Corn

You'd have been the otium otiosum guy.



Herman

I'd have been the soldier at Aulis, yes.



Herman

Both of those were elite slowness. But what about the people doing the actual work? The medieval English peasant year is where slowness becomes collective, and mandatory.



Corn

Mandatory slowness. The best-sounding phrase in the English language.



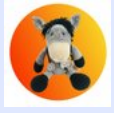
Herman

There are two ways in. First, the Church. It enforced frequent mandatory holidays, holy days, saints' days, on top of Sundays, which were labor-free. Estimates run from about eight weeks to half the year off. Weddings, wakes, births, wandering jugglers, a sporting event coming through, and the peasant expected time off.



Corn

Half the year. That's the number that goes around.



Herman

And that's where I have to slow down, because it's a mess. The popular claim is about a hundred and fifty working days a year. Economic historians do argue that in some stretches, especially after the Black Death, the number hovered around or below that. But the claim traces back to an unpublished working paper from the mid-eighties by the economist Gregory Clark, and he later revised his own estimate up to something like two hundred fifty to three hundred days, in a paper in twenty eighteen.



Corn

So the man who made it up unmade it.



Herman

More or less. The Adam Smith Institute has a piece flatly titled that medieval peasants really did not work only a hundred and fifty days. It's a live fight.



Corn

What about the hours, though? The other famous number.



Herman

Juliet Schor's The Overworked American, nineteen ninety-two. She puts a thirteenth-century English peasant at about sixteen hundred and twenty hours a year, against around nineteen forty-nine for the average American in nineteen eighty-seven. And about seventeen eighty in twenty seventeen.



Corn

So he works less than us, but not by a heroic margin.



Herman

And the shape is the surprising bit. A summer day ran dawn to dusk, about sixteen hours. A winter day, eight. So the slowness is not in the day. A medieval peasant in July is not relaxed. It's in the year. Intense bursts at ploughing and harvest, then long communal idleness in between.



Corn

Which inverts how we do it. We try for ten mindful minutes inside a fourteen-hour day.



Herman

Our slowness is daily and individual. Theirs was annual and collective. Everyone idle at the same time, by decree.



Corn

Show me the day. A feast day.



Herman

Okay. You wake up, no one's going to the field. Nobody. You go to church, mandatory, because there's a Mass, maybe a procession through the village with the parish banner. Then food and ale, which for most of the year you don't get much of. Games, dancing, maybe a wrestling match. And the thing I can't get over is that the whole village is on the same schedule. Nobody is the person who has to check email.



Corn

Right. Nobody's cutting the lawn. But you didn't pick it. It's day two hundred and something, it's a saint you couldn't name, and you're obliged to be cheerful.



Herman

And that's what I find appealing and also slightly suffocating. The modern wellness version of slowness is a consumer product. You pick it. They didn't pick. It was the calendar, and the calendar was God's.



Corn

Let me push on the elegance of this, Herman, because I've watched you fall for neat mechanisms before. A shared holiday sounds wonderful. But a peasant on a feast day is also a peasant who can't get the harvest in when it's raining the other four days.



Herman

Yes, fair. Harvest was exempt, in practice, wasn't it? I'm not certain how rigidly it was applied. I think there were exceptions when crops would spoil, and lords had their own pressures. So the mandatory rest probably bent when the weather demanded.



Corn

So the rest was mandatory unless the barley disagreed.



Herman

Roughly. Still, the principle was that the community stopped, together.



Corn

Which brings it round. Heian, Athens, Rome, and England, put yourself in each day. What changes for you if everyone around you celebrates the slowness?



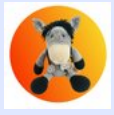
Herman

In Heian, your day is structured by aesthetic obligation. You'd be judged on your incense, the layering of your robes, the speed and grace of your poetic reply. Slowness with an examiner.



Corn

Mine would be a disaster. I'd reply a week late, which is actually what they'd want, and the paper would be wrong.



Herman

In Athens or Rome, your day is structured by philosophical leisure, but only if you're elite, only if you're a man of the right class. If you're a slave or a woman, that day isn't yours. You're running the thing that lets someone else talk.



Corn

And medieval England, you don't even choose your slow days.



Herman

The Church calendar chooses. You share them with everyone. I think that's the version I'd most want and least want at the same time.



Corn

Because the rest comes with company.



Herman

And the company comes with obligations. Yes.



Corn

Here's what I keep noticing. Every one of these was built on an underclass. The Heian court watched its garden through slats and never mentioned the famine. The Roman elite sneered at the poor for squandering their leisure. The medieval peasant's holidays were mandatory, not chosen. So when someone buys a linen robe and a ceramic teapot and calls it slow living...



Herman

They're reviving an aristocratic ideal. And the aristocratic ideal always needed somebody else to be fast. I'd say that's the uncomfortable question for the modern movement. Is slow living something you can have without the person who's running?



Corn

Maybe you can if you're the one running, and you build the machine that runs for you.



Herman

Fair, though that's automation, not philosophy. Whether it fixes the class problem is open.



Corn

There's a modern version, isn't there? Something organized.



Herman

Cittaslow. It's an offshoot of the slow food movement, which started in nineteen eighty-six as a protest led by Carlo Petrini against a McDonald's opening in Rome's Piazza di Spagna. Cittaslow takes it to cities. Car-free days, banning Vespas to cut urban noise, that sort of thing. I can't give you a reliable current number of member towns, so I won't.



Corn

A Vespa ban. Italy's version of the Church calendar.



Herman

Except voluntary, municipal, and tied to consumer choice. A town opts in. Nobody's told by a bishop. It's the opposite of the Heian etiquette or the medieval calendar. Those were compulsory. This asks nicely.



Corn

Which might be why it's a bit thin.



Herman

Or why it's survivable. Hard to say.



Corn

And the protest itself is a good detail. The movement began with people eating pasta at a McDonald's opening, on purpose, in public.



Herman

Handing out bowls of penne, yes. Which is a very Italian way to object. You don't picket the thing, you out-lunch it.



Hilbert

Tomorrow's All Souls. Then Martinmas on the eleventh, Saint Catherine on the twenty-fifth, Saint Andrew on the thirtieth. I'm taking all four off, nothing opened, nothing answered. I printed the full November calendar at Reuven's shop on Agrippas on Thursday, forty shekels, and he asked after my knee while he was running it.



Hilbert

Reuven's done my printing nineteen years. The last time I did this, I gave him the wrong year's saints, and he ran a hundred and forty calendars before either of us looked. Four hundred and ten shekels. He offered to rerun them for nothing. I paid him again in coins.



Herman

Hilbert, that's a sound number for a feast calendar. The saints' days fall on fixed dates, so the wrong-year printing would have only thrown off the weekdays, which is the part you'd care about.



Corn

Four hundred and ten shekels is a lot to pay for being a year out on a Tuesday.



Hilbert

The reprint took four days.



Herman

Four days, for a hundred and forty. That's a workable pace, honestly.



Corn

Your phone stays off for the four, then.



Hilbert

It stays in the drawer. Reuven has the shop number if anyone needs me.



Herman

A hundred and forty calendars from a shop that gets the saints wrong once in nineteen years. I'd say that's a better record than most of the calendars we've been talking about.



Corn

It's also more saints than I could name. I'd have taken four hundred shekels and a nap.



Herman

Which, to be fair, is what the medieval peasant would have done too, if the bishop hadn't been watching.



Corn

Honestly, the thing I didn't expect is how much of it came down to who did the running. We keep wanting slowness to be a mindset, and every case here was a system with somebody holding it up, and somebody else who wasn't asked.



Herman

The part I'll carry out of this is the year. Daily slowness is the version we sell. Every actual slow civilization put its slowness in the calendar, shared, with an enforcer, whether that was etiquette, philosophy, or a bishop.



Corn

If you wanted it today, someone would have to say when everyone stops.



Herman

Someone would have to pay for the stopping. The four-day week debates and Cittaslow are the nearest things we've got, and both are still opt-in. I don't know what an enforced slowness would look like now, or who'd be the underclass. Four days of printing, at least, seems to be about what it costs to put the calendar right.



Corn

Thanks to Hilbert Flumingtop for producing, as always. For more along these lines, there's episode ninety-one, The Story Behind the Show; episode twenty-one, Is Your AI Secretly American; and episode thirteen, AI. This has been My Weird Prompts.



Herman

If you enjoyed it, a rating or a review does more for the show than you'd think. We'll be back soon.



Corn

See you tomorrow.

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