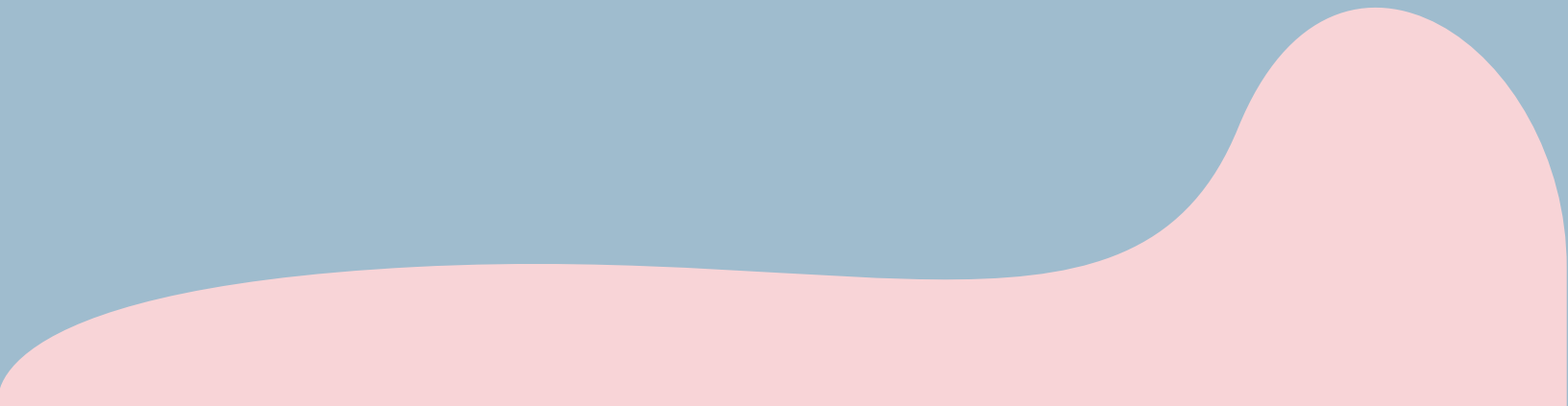


TEN TOOLS FOR SLOW LIVING

by

OLIVIA JOFFREY





WHY SLOW?

Toward a human-scaled life

There is a deep satisfaction to be found in the slow and the sensory – sipping tea, lingering in a cottony book, enjoying long meals with friends. To me, these are examples of a human-scaled life. In architecture, a human-scaled space is one that relates to the proportion of the human body. An archway 2x the height of a person is a sensible idea, but one that is 100x their height is almost grotesque. How we experience space is often related to our comfort inside the volume. Imagining a powder room the size of an athletic field would likely make one feel uneasy.

Similarly, the digital tools at our disposal since the advent of the internet have ballooned the scale of our lives exponentially. The internet has reordered human scale. It permits us to window shop around the globe from our sofas, order meals via contactless delivery, spend a full workday on Zoom, and make friends on social media. While I appreciate the advancements brought by the internet, I yearn for what it *felt* like before. The scale of the internet is unfathomably oversized and simultaneously demanding of our attention. I have come to realize just how lousy (i.e. disembodied) I often feel using it. As a punk act of rebellion, I've made some changes of late, in how I live. I share a few of them with you here as a starting point in an ongoing quest at Olivia Joffrey Studio to pursue beauty, connectedness and sensuality – and ultimately, a more human-scaled life.



ONE

WALKING OUTSIDE

It's absurd to think that we humans need be reminded of our pedestrian nature. However, the ubiquity of the car and the way cities are built (I speak as a car-loving American) has rendered many of us deprived of or at least deficient in this basic human activity. For me, a daily walk is simultaneously meditation, entertainment, and exercise in unison. I recently moved from a semi-rural neighborhood where there were no sidewalks to the heart of our 200 year old coastal California town where sidewalks line each street. What a pivotal rediscovery of self it has been to walk to work again! In my young adult life, I used to relish my 40-minute walk to work in London and San Francisco. I feel younger when I am walking.

Walking has changed my relationship to the neighborhood: I see houses & gardens up-close, I take note of details like old sandstone hitching posts, weave shortcuts through alleys with old pomegranate and fig trees waiting to be plucked. I have found that a peaceful walk in the morning, with my phone on mute (or without it) creates a lovely interstitial space between sleep and full-throttle awakeness. Walking connects our bodies, minds, and environment in one fell swoop: it is literally and figuratively grounding. I've found that a daily walk, sans device, can awaken my senses and set the day on a positive course.

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TWO

WRITING BY HAND

Civilization was built via handwritten communication. For me there is something in the act of writing by hand that feels as natural as walking. To my fellow Gen X comrades: did we not learn thinking and handwriting in unison? Perhaps this is not the case for younger generations who grew up thumb-pecking texts instead of passing obscene scribbled notes. There is a distinct possibility in contemporary youth culture that you could be best friends or maybe even fall in love with someone, and never know their handwriting. This shift in human behavior away from handwriting seems to me a great detriment to intimacy.

Keeping a journal is a beautiful way to reconnect with your handwriting regularly. The act of writing is a cathartic one: expelling an idea or emotion out from of one's mind and onto paper is an act of mental decluttering. There is also the tactile identity of handwriting – the signature of self. Two letter Gs typed in iMessage may look the same, but not so for the handwritten equivalent. Bringing a pen to paper either in a journal for ten minutes or in a short letter to a friend, soothes my nerves before entering my digitally-driven life. Before reminders start popping up on my phone and texts begin to roll in, at least there will have been a sacred morning dance between hand, ink and paper reminding me that I am in my body. And that I am not, after all, my phone.



THREE

FIRE

Much has been written of late about the benefits of candles and their hygge properties as practiced in the Nordics primarily via the writings of Danish author and researcher Meik Wiking (Happiness Research Institute.) I live in California, however, and we are not in the least deprived of sunlight or Vitamin D like the Danes; no candle-lighting soporific is called for here. But anecdotally at least, candles work psychological magic in sunny places too. I have been including a small sandalwood candle on the tray that I bring back to bed with morning coffee. It's had a subtle and distinct impact on my mornings since I started the practice. Something about the candle is too pure to allow a person to nonchalantly fall into the vortex of Gmail. The candle serves as a talisman of centuries past, of the elements, and I'd argue, our humanity. The candle seems to suggest that the coffee be savored sans distraction, maybe even whispering to you to note the morning light that falls on the wall, the birdsong, the cat's twitchy tail. The candle keeps me honest.

Another manifestation of fire that I've found enriches my life is using my fireplace. I recently retrofitted a perfectly good gas fireplace, in order to restore it back to a wood-burning one. A backward move, some might say. For me, the full sensory experience can only be felt with a true flame: the scent, the colors, the aliveness of fire is unmatched. Just as the candle serves as a talisman of our ancestors, so does fire. In apartments and houses sans fireplace, an outdoor metal fire pit or grill can be an affordable and equally enriching tool. A fire is like a clock: it burns on a schedule dictated by its fuel. You can choose to stop the clock (extinguish the flame) or let it run its gorgeous slow course.

A cellphone feels incongruous with the simple, primal seduction of a crackling fire.



FOUR

MUSIC

Music is a spectacular tool for slow living. Haven't we all experienced a time when music has shifted, drifted us off to sleep, amplified an emotion, or offered an escape from a harsh reality? I would argue that maintaining a music ritual is a critical tool in developing a human-scaled life. Maybe it's the music in your car on the way to work, or your private movie soundtrack on headphones as you run. It doesn't matter whether it's via Spotify, YouTube, a record player, 8-track or your piano. Music is one of the extraordinary art forms us humans are responsible for, offering soulful, medicinal, aesthetic, and educational qualities.

I require music to feel fulfilled. Especially at home. There is a poignant, vital quality to a home where there is music floating through the rooms, not unlike a home where good smelling things are being cooked. The trick in our contemporary world is to do less while listening to music. To maybe limit your extra-musical activities to just one other thing: like enjoying a glass of wine, or sharing a conversation, or cleaning. Our propensity to be seduced by our devices is the Achilles Heel of slow living. Sure, you can be on Instagram, while texting, while checking work email, while cooking dinner and listening to The Pixies but not if the goal is slow living. Music requires a little white space. The editing of activities you do around your music time has a profound impact on how you hear and feel it.



FIVE

COMMUNE AT THE TABLE

Some of the happiest memories of both my childhood and adult life have taken place around a table of good company. Across cultures, the Pandemic lockdowns taught us just how much we value communing at a table with our peeps. By depriving us of this most basic pleasure, we realized collectively how desperately we need it. Like most of these tools for slow living, gathering around a table for food and conversation is an ancient human practice. Connecting to your tribe, savoring the flavors in the food prepared (and for the fortunate, with wine and candles) is one of the simplest acts of beauty we can implement every day.

As a culture we would all benefit from resisting the impulse to eat on the go, in our cars, at our computer terminals, as if the humans connecting part of the equation were not critically nourishing too.

I remember reading that Sofia Coppola, when filming *Marie Antoinette* in France at Versailles, was mandated by the French film workers unions to provide a two-hour lunch break; the workers sat at a table together (with linens, and presumably wine) and broke bread together every day of the shoot. Sure, it was probably hard on the movie budget, but hot damn that is some admirable slow living.



SIX

COOKING

Not everyone enjoys cooking. But I have found that cooking at home – even simple things like grilling sourdough in a cast iron pan – is an exceptionally soulful tool for slow living. I am not a natural planner by nature. And this is supremely evident in my cooking style: I like to buy pretty produce and then improvise in the moment. But as the mother of three children, this often bombs catastrophically. Of late I have started planning meals a few days ahead of time which allows for a more serene experience for me in the kitchen and tastier one for the kids on their plates. When the menu is set a day ahead, I find that I am able to appreciate the act of cooking and enjoy the experience more. I also derive an unreasonable amount of pleasure in a table set with attractive napkins and a little greenery. Taking care with these details can contribute to a beautiful, slow life.



SEVEN

SOAP

Now here's a revolutionary tip: ditch your liquid hand soaps and switch to a high-quality bar soap. I made a transition to bar soap in our bathrooms and in the kitchen this past year. Already familiar with bar soaps from my 1980s childhood (when did liquid soaps come dominate the soap landscape anyway?), I felt a familiarity with a bar of soap's weight in my hand and the charm of its cozy soap dish on the sink. What I also found, however, is that using a bar of soap is a much more sensual experience, not to mention less taxing on the environment (no single-use plastic vessel.) A soap bar slides in your hands and makes a froth in a way that somehow isn't as cool or as decadent when it's dispensed from a plastic nozzle. Rolling a bar of soap in your hands feels like slow living because it connects you to your body in a different way: you are actually holding the soap. It slows me down every time.



EIGHT

GETTING DRESSED

One of the things that moved me to create a caftan line is the romantic idea that getting dressed should be a simple, pleasurable experience. One of feeling in your body and enjoying it rather than stressed about how things fit or feeling forced to conform your body to the object's silhouette. I like clothes that caress the skin.

I remember playing dress up as a little girl and the sensation of slipping into long silk dresses of my mother's – soft and aching with stories. Being a grown up seemed impossibly sophisticated and unreachable. Then I *became* a grown woman, and the majority of us are so busy we just wear athleisure. I try to design clothes that express a certain ease: that skim a woman's curves rather than grip them aggressively. Caftans are by nature loose. When getting dressed, I have been trying to savor the daily human-scaled ritual of it as a sort of tea ceremony with myself: first lotion, then undergarments, dress, tie espadrilles at ankle, slip on jewelry.

There is a serenity in it that is a delightful, slow thing to look forward to each day (and the same can be said for undressing...!)



NINE

BATHING

I recently became aware of a fabulous now-shuttered magazine that shaped the graphic design and publishing sphere in the 1980s: it was called *Wet* and its subject matter was bathing, bath design and the sensual nature of this most critical and ancient ritual. Now that sounds like a manifesto in slow! Yes, yes, I know showers can be reviving and restorative. But for me, showers are “Let’s grab lunch” and having a bath is Babette’s Feast. One is literally submerged in water in a tub. Aside from thinking or singing, there is not a lot of multitasking that a tub soak accommodates. Perhaps I am naïve, but anything you can do while soaking in a tub seems likely to be a type of nourishment. If I make time for a bath, I know I have made one more step toward a commitment to slow living. And if it’s an evening bath, I know it will directly impact the sleep that lies ahead in a positive way. Just as it does for children.



TEN

HOLDING HANDS

I recently began a ritual of an early morning walk with my 7-year-old. She is an early riser like me; initially, I attempted to subdue her crack-of-dawn energy and keep her quiet (so as not to awaken her sisters.) But then I had an epiphany: she and I could craft a ritual from our wee morning hours together. We could have a micro-adventure. So we started taking neighborhood walks before breakfast. Once this pattern became ingrained, I came to realize that my favorite part of our walk was the holding of her tawny little hand. What a tender, lovely thing to hold your child's hand! Given the necessity of driving in our (American) city, I was never able to hold her hand on the commute to school. Often, this hand-holding is the most exquisite thing that happens to me all day.

If anything is truly human-scaled, it's holding hands. Thus far, one cannot hold the hand of the internet. Trusting the hand of a loved one is among the first things we learn as babies. One of the most poignant memories I have is of holding my father's big hand in the back seat of our 1973 Buick Electra – a beast of a car that my mother referred to as Das Boot. There, in the back seat, me about age 9 freckled and gangly, Daddy about age 56 but a shell of his former tall, swarthy self, due to a cruel early case of Alzheimer's disease. Holding mine, his hand felt as massive as a ping pong paddle. Within a year, he wouldn't know who I was anymore, and subsequently died only a few after that. The sensation of holding his hand that day, however, has stayed with me: the heavy, safe, masculine hand of my father. This shard of a moment, hand in hand with him, while infinitely comforting -- required my attention to register properly in my brain. I wonder, if I'd had a phone in my pocket, would I have absorbed this ephemeral moment that has become so sacred to me?

IN CONCLUSION

I don't have anything against tech. It's a cornerstone of my business and like everyone, my contemporary life. What I seek to build into my own days, in my children's days, and in the those of all the people I care about, is a sense that we are in control. *We* get to decide what kind of life we want: a life of savoring, or a life of distraction.

Please consider this an informal, exploratory dialogue open to revision. What are your tools for slow living? How can we find solutions to this as a community? I can be reached at studio@oliviajoffrey.com with any ideas, stories, or feedback on the subject matter of human-scaled, slow living. I look forward to addressing this challenge with you.



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