



S..L..O..W.. C..I..T..I..E..S..

Tom Bender * North Coast Citizen * 10 January 2008

Slow cities, slow food, slow people. What would that do for our community?

In English, 'slow' can mean stupid or inefficient. But in Italian, where all this started, it has the positive meaning of living well, indulging the senses, having time to talk and live, do things right, and just be. The richness of satisfaction.

I was first introduced to slow food a few years ago when Hank Tallman put together a "Slow Food" dinner at Pine Grove. No Big Macs, of course. And not slow food service. Just several courses of real good local food, given time to savor. And set up loose enough so everyone can move around, talk with folks, enjoy the time spent enjoying the food. Not racing to get on to the next "something".

I ran into it again on a regional Italian airlines over the Swiss Alps. Wow! Not plastic airline food, but specialties of the region of Italy that we were flying into where our son, Skye, was working. Yum! Like being introduced to salal berries, salmon, and mushrooms here! Then Paul Barthelemy mentioned Slow Cities to me one day, saying he was wanting to visit them in Italy. What are those Italians doing, anyhow????

Slow Cities is a group of now more than 100 towns working since 1999 to improve the quality of life of their citizens. They wanted to figure out and share how a community can nurture the quality of life of its inhabitants, and to create an identity of their own that is visible outside and profoundly felt inside.

The cities share ideas of mindful living, good eating quality of hospitality, services, facilities and the urban fabric itself. They implement environmental policies designed to maintain and enrich the ecological characteristics of their surrounding area and urban fabric. They develop infrastructural policies for improvement, not the occupation, of the land, and promote the use of technologies to improve the quality of the environment and the urban fabric.

They encourage production and use of local food using organic techniques, rooted in local culture and tradition. They promote the qualities of hospitality, within the community and to visitors, that bring real connectedness between people and between people and a specific place. Sound familiar?

A Slow City is the perfect place to get away from it all. Locals linger over coffee at sidewalk tables, gossiping with friends or watching the world drift by. A haven from the high-speed frenzy of the global economy. Laid-back is officially law of the land in a Slow City.

Slow Cities aim to reinvent every aspect of urban life, by putting pleasure before profit, human beings before head office, slowness before speed. They deal with cutting noise and traffic; increasing green spaces, car-free zones and pedestrian walkways; backing farmers who produce local delicacies and the shops and restaurants that sell them; and preserving local aesthetic traditions.

Often cars are banned, as well as supermarkets and lurid neon signs. Small family-run businesses are granted the best commercial real estate. In schools, children are served organic fruit and vegetables grown by local producers.

To guard against the evils of overwork, shops may be obliged to close two days a week. Residents seem pleased with life in a Slow City. They like the new trees being planted, the pedestrian precincts, the thriving farmers' markets.

Even the young are responding to the call for calm. At the local pool hall, pop music is turned down in deference to the Slow ethos. The young customers are starting to look beyond the high-octane lifestyle promoted by MTV.

A Slow City pays off economically. In Italy, shops selling organic sausages and handmade chocolates, along with regular food festivals, draw hundreds of tourists. On weekends, cities can be clogged with stalls run by specialty cheese or other food-makers from across Europe. Unemployment is down. Local shops now sell a wider array of local goodies -- roasted peppers, white truffles, fresh pasta, peppery olive oil, local wines.

People are moving to small towns in search of slowness and quality of life. The Slow vision seems to offer a real alternative. And the concept is spreading – from slow food to slow cities, slow travel, slow schools, slow books, slow living and slow money. (See www.slowmovement.com)

Slow travel is the opportunity to become part of local life and to connect to a place and its people. Slow travel is also about connection to culture. Living with a family, not a motel, gives opportunities to talk to people and discover the world from their perspective. Exploring on foot and by bike can connect with local and traditional ways of doing things you'd otherwise miss. You can become involved in local activities, volunteer for a local organization, study local crafts, volunteer at a local school.

Are we a Slow City? Would it be good to be more of one, and be proud of it? The snail is their logo (you know, a slug with a hard-hat.) Maybe its just learning the value of the life we live.