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Think Zen thoughts when on U.S. trains



Commentator Charles Handy reflects on his experience with the second-rate U.S. rail system when he tried to take a trip on the train. Second in a series.

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London Business School founder and Claremont Graduate University's Drucker School of Business Professor, Charles Handy. (Mediafax)

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TEXT OF COMMENTARY

KAI RYSSDAL: Commentator Charles Handy has made the study of business management his professional life, 45 years of observing behavior and fitting those pieces into the larger economic puzzle. Today he's back with the second of a series of essays he'll be doing for us this spring, in which a simple train trip provides the metaphor.

CHARLES HANDY: We are currently living in Los Angeles, but are planning a weekend in San Francisco. "We should go by train," I said. "I hear that the Coast Starlight goes right up the West Coast, hugging the shoreline. It should be a wonderful ride." "Yes," our American friends said, "I believe it is," but we could not meet anyone who'd actually done it. Why? Because it takes 11 hours.

At first we thought they were joking. After all, to travel from London to Edinburgh, roughly the same distance, takes only four hours, and now you can go from London to Paris in just over two hours. You would expect America to have the best, the fastest, the sleekest trains, rather than yielding pride of place to the Japanese, the French and, yes, even the British. Of course many of the journeys here are far too long for a train to make sense, but in Europe today, any journey of 500 hundred miles or less, city center to city center, is quicker by train than by plane, and much more pleasurable.

Then I paused. Why was I so obsessed by time? If I was going to London by air, I would consider 11 hours to be normal. Why should it be different because it was San Francisco? Why, I ask myself, are we always in such a hurry? Why do eager parents want to accelerate their children's education when life is so much longer now? In business we let the short-term pressures obscure the promise of the longer term. We forget that in nature a full ripening takes time. Push it too hard and you lose too much of the flavor.

So, I said on reflection, we'll take the train. It will be a day well spent. Alas, when we went to book our tickets they told us that a mudslide had closed the track. There was to be no train that weekend. So do events conspire against our best intentions.

KAI RYSSDAL: Charles Handy is the Distinguished Drucker Fellow at the Drucker School of Management at Claremont Graduate University. His new book is called "Myself and Other More Important Matters."