

Time Management: The Road to a Calmer Life

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Adapted from Jonathan Margolis's article *Do you really have time to read this?*, in *How to Spend It?* (Feb. 2002) -- the Guardian [UK] Weekend supplement

Ladies and Gentlemen:

As someone who wakes up every morning with a bolt of adrenaline, starts making mental lists of what needs doing that day, and frequently tiptoes out of bed for a bleary but lucrative couple of early hours at the computer, I was drawn recently to a *Reader's Digest* article entitled *How To Wake Up Refreshed*. Filled with succinct advice from leading sleep researchers, it would have taken less than five minutes to read, and it might well have improved my life a lot. I got two paragraphs into it, however, before a familiar anxiety gripped me: "I don't have time to be reading this. Maybe I'll get around to it some other time." And with that, the magazine joined one of my towering piles of stuff to attend to "some other time". I wouldn't be surprised if I died, possibly of old age, before I got around to reading that article.

This could, of course, be down to nothing more than my being an impatient person -- too impatient to lie in bed, too impatient to read, certainly too impatient for pastimes. I do, after all, get inordinately irritable with people who only start to get their money out when the supermarket cashier asks for it, and then fiddle about with it for 30 seconds. And as for people who stroll hand in hand along busy city pavements taking their own sweet time...! There is no suitable abuse!

Note the "busy city pavements". Busy, of course, is the point, not "impatient". Impatience is emotional and irrational. Being busy is a state justified by higher motives. I'm too busy to be held up by meandering pedestrians, too industrious to waste time with hobbies. I have an almost morbid fear of not having sufficient time to do the important stuff. We all do. Across society, we share a feeling that there's always something more pressing we should be doing and a sense of guilt that we're not doing it. There's a crisis of busy-ness. And it's not just busy people who feel they have overwhelmingly busy lives. According to research by the Henley Centre for Forecasting, even the unemployed and the retired consider their lives to be "over-full".

The technology supposed to liberate us, has paradoxically made life busier still. Indeed, electric lighting has been the prime culprit in vanquishing sleep and making us feel more pressed than ever — we sleep nearly two hours less per night than a century ago. In London, taxis get the most customers during the night, because that is the busiest time of the day. A cabbie is never without a fare in the small hours. Some of their main clients, city law firms who work all night to suit different time zones and who like to get takeaway meals taxied in, call it a day just before public transport has started.

All around us, labour saving devices just enhance the panicky feeling of having more to do than we can cope with. We pop a ready prepared meal into the microwave, saving hours of shopping, preparation and cooking; yet when we stand there for the couple of minutes it takes to heat it up, we feel like we're ageing on the spot. The internet is the ultimate convenience that can compact days, even months of research into a few minutes. But waiting a few seconds to log onto it can make you want to consume your own head with frustration. And almost nobody reads instructions, whether for a microwave or a computer. It's just a couple of boring hours, that might save hundreds, but it seems like still more pressure.

James Gleick has written a brilliant book on time pressure in modern life called **Faster: The Acceleration of Just About Everything**. In it, he discusses our obsession with shaving ever smaller slivers of time from already minimal tasks. He writes of attempts made to whittle away the blank seconds between tracks on CDs and the time between TV advertisements, and how we'll punch 88 seconds' cooking time into the microwave to slice a nanosecond off the extra time required to key in 90. According to Gleick, engineers have coined the term *door dwell* for those people who get impatient about lift doors not closing quickly enough.

Luckily, perhaps, we can usually fill in those tedious moments of door dwell by doing something else. We're already multitasking the whole time: everybody in nearly every culture now makes their phone calls walking along the street. Technology's next trick will be to put us all on the internet the whole time, so that e-mails as well as phone calls will hit us in real time.

This In-Touch-All-The-Time syndrome spans both our working and social lives. The ubiquitous and cheap text message has put everyone in the world permanently in touch with everyone they know. And because you're in touch, you have to be responsible for other people's needs the entire time. So to add still further to the stress, we all have to be portable mini-Samaritans, whether in the supermarket, overseas, or on the beach.

Even leisure has become a huge pressure. I've always envied people who spend weeks having fun in something called quarantine. I look forward to some lengthy, relatively harmless and painless illness, for which my medical insurance will nevertheless pay thousands to give me a few months to read all the unread books that decorate my living room. Perhaps then I could also watch one of the great films showing on the numerous channels of cable which I never have the time even to surf.

Attempts to escape this pervasive, corrosive busy-ness are also futile because being busy is highly addictive. We don't even allow ourselves time off for illness, if we can help it. The very concept of convalescence, that between-illness-and-wellness stage where you have time to get back on your feet and out from under the weather, is obsolete. Illness itself is obsolete. We simply don't have the time to schedule it into our lives.

Given that we're all now turned into the White Rabbit from **Alice in Wonderland**, obsessed with time and running late before we've even got out of bed, is there a compromise that could be reached? Is there a way to be efficient and productive, yet avoid the distracted inadequacy of the person who is busy doing nothing, who is working to try and find lots of things not to do?

All expert advice agrees that relaxation is the key, so long as you really do relax. In her book **Sensual Home**, Ilse Crawford advocates recreation in its true sense. "Time to be slow," she writes, "time to dream, time to read. One of the biggest luxuries in modern life is unscheduled, uncommitted time. Defend it fiercely and value it. It's not wasted. Your brain needs it to come up with new ideas."

But it's equally important to manage time as a valuable resource spent performing tasks. Our habit of not reading instructions to the things we buy is a small, but central thing in how we actually need to focus to be better at being busy. According to one of Britain's leading life coaches, Mark Forster, "regular focused attention is the key to nearly every problem and challenge in life". Forster advocates mental strength training. In other words, deciding daily on a task, either work or leisure, which you are going to complete the following day, and then doing it. Do this initially at a level you are confident of achieving and then daily up the difficulty.

For Forster, procrastination is one of the most stressful factors in our lives. Most people fail to do things, not because of lack of time, but because of disinclination. "Avoiding a subject," Forster writes, "does not get rid of the stress associated with it, but increases it. The result is that bad time

managers are always living with a considerable amount of generalised anxiety. Busy-ness is often an escape from dealing with more important and challenging matters.

Forster points out that time spent working doesn't always mean better work. When the French limited their working week to 35 hours, it had the effect of increasing France's industrial competitiveness. Forster suggests we make time for "depth" activities, such as yoga and meditation, to anchor us to our lives. And to expand what we do in our reduced working hours, he strongly recommends a proper lunch and coffee breaks.

Parkinson's Law, that work expands to fill the time available for its completion, is indeed true. Work does multiply itself. And so rationing the amount of time you spend on one thing, and reducing your total working hours, will make you more effective. People who work long hours tend to be working in a very unfocused way on too many things.

The secret is to structure your day so that it has definite stopping points. Then you will achieve more. These days we have so much choice and so much communication, that most of us tend to bite off more than we can chew. The secret to a calmer life is to realise that just because something is available, you don't have to choose it.

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