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1. *Today's Superpower Is Doing One Thing at a Time*

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***Today's Superpower Is Doing One Thing at a Time***

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# Body

A few months ago, I was teetering on the brink of feeling overwhelmed by life's responsibilities, afflicted by the ambient anxiety that seems to be an intrinsic part of life in the 2020s. In an effort to maintain -- or maybe restore -- my sanity, I embarked on a personal endurance challenge.

Other people, at similar moments, begin competing in grueling triathlons, or head off on intensive meditation retreats. Me? I decided to give up listening to podcasts or music while running, or driving, or loading the dishwasher, or doing almost anything else. To just focus, in other words, on what it was I was actually doing, one activity at a time.

It was surprisingly hard. Once you've finished mocking me for treating such a trifling alteration to my habits like a grand existential struggle, I have one request: Try it. Identify the small tricks you use to avoid being fully present with whatever you're doing, and put them aside for a week or two.

You may discover, as I did, that you were unwittingly addicted to not doing one thing at a time. You might even come to agree with me that restoring our capacity to live sequentially -- that is, focusing on one thing after another, in turn, and enduring the confrontation with our human limitations that this inherently entails -- may be among the most crucial skills for thriving in the uncertain, crisis-prone future we all face.

It's not that the urge to multitask is anything new. ''One thinks with a watch in one's hand,'' Nietzsche complained as early as 1887, ''even as one eats one's midday meal while reading the latest news of the stock market.'' We've also long known that multitasking doesn't really work. You've probably read -- perhaps while half-watching TV -- articles explaining the research findings that multitasking isn't really even possible; mainly, we're just switching our attention rapidly between different foci without realizing it, incurring cognitive costs each time we do so. One study of drivers found only 2.5 percent of people showed no performance decrease when attempting two tasks at once. The rest of us just end up doing everything worse.

Yet the pressure to multitask can still often seem like something imposed on us from outside. Burdened by so many demands at work, you can feel as though you've no choice but to split your attention among them. Meanwhile, should you feel some responsibility to address the troubles of the wider world as well, then the causes for alarm -- the climate, the fate of democracy, the threats from artificial intelligence and the risk of nuclear war, to name just a few -- are so numerous as to make multitasking look like every citizen's duty.

Technological advances turn the screw further. Those of us not raised as ''digital natives'' can remember a time when we didn't have the option of using social media to distract ourselves from unpleasant tasks, and when the limits imposed by our tools -- the speed of snail mail, for example, or the time it took to visit a library to conduct

research -- meant we felt less pressure from bosses or customers to somehow transcend the limits imposed by our finite attention spans.

But philosophers and spiritual teachers have long understood that the urge to avoid giving ourselves fully to any single activity goes deeper, to the core of our struggles as finite human beings.

The Hindu mystic Patanjali, for example, saw doing one thing at a time as a core yogic discipline, suggesting that it didn't come easily to people 2,000 years ago, either. We rail against what the Christian productivity writer Jordan Raynor calls our ''unipresence'' -- our inability to be in more than one place at a time, in contrast to the omnipresence attributed to God -- and against the shortness of our time on earth, which averages little more than four thousand weeks. All this finitude feels unpleasantly constraining, because it means there will always be many more things we could do than we ever will do -- and that the choice to spend a portion of our time on any one thing automatically entails the sacrifice of countless other things we might have done with it.

This explains the attraction of multitasking: It offers the false promise that we might somehow slip the bonds of our finitude. We tell ourselves that with sufficient self-discipline, plus the right time-management tricks, we might finally ''get on top of everything'' and feel good about ourselves at last. This utopia never arrives, of course, though it often feels as if it might be just around the corner.

The uncomfortable truth is that the only way to find sanity in an overwhelming world -- and to have any concrete effect on that world -- is to surrender such efforts to escape the human condition, and drop back down into the reality of our limitations. Distracting yourself from challenging tasks by, say, listening to podcasts doesn't actually make them more bearable over the long term; instead, it makes them less enjoyable, by reinforcing your belief that they're the sort of activities you can tolerate only by distracting yourself -- while at the same time all but ensuring that you'll neither accomplish the task in question nor digest the contents of the podcast as well as you otherwise might.

At work, the way to get more tasks done is to learn to let most of them wait while you focus on one. ''This is the 'secret' of those people who 'do so many things' and apparently so many difficult things,'' wrote the management guru Peter Drucker in his book ''The Effective Executive.'' ''They do only one at a time.'' Making a difference in one domain requires giving yourself permission not to care equally about all the others.

There will always be too much to do, no matter what you do. But the ironic upside of this seemingly dispiriting fact is that you needn't beat yourself up for failing to do it all, nor keep pressuring yourself to find ways to get on top of it all by means of increasingly extreme multitasking.

Instead, you can pour your finite time, energy and attention into a handful of things that truly count. You'll enjoy things more, into the bargain. My gratifying new ability to ''be here now'' while running or driving or cooking dinner isn't the result of having developed any great spiritual prowess. Rather, it's a matter of realizing I could only ever be here now anyway -- so I might as well give up the stressful struggle to pretend otherwise.

***Oliver Burkeman*** is the author of ''Four Thousand Weeks: Time Management for Mortals.''

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