

Mastering Time

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The weight of heat and time

It was a sweltering summer afternoon, when, heavy with perspiration, and the burden of an unfinished task, I was about to nod off to an alluring but unscheduled siesta, when who should saunter over, but my redoubtable friend, the one and only Solus “Sol” Simkin.

Finding a sympathetic ear in Sol, I unburdened myself. There was this report, due tomorrow, and the weather today was humid and stultifying. With the lethargy of the listless, and the resistance of the unwilling, I felt no desire to touch the report with a barge pole. I was helpless victim of my circumstances.

Sol shot me a quick question. “How long ago were you told to prepare the report?”

“O! that was three months ago,” I said, feeling a little sheepish.

“And in the ninety days you had to prepare it, you felt that you should tackle the report only on the eighty-ninth day?” Sol quizzed me like a lawyer for the opposition.

I threw up my hands in despair and said that each time I thought about the report, I felt a distinct sadness, akin to grief itself. A wave of melancholia washed over me every time I contemplated the report, so much so that I avoided it like the plague.

“Then, I need to instruct you about the foolproof technique of Professor Stavros Karavitis. He had a wonderful way to knock out the blues from any task, and what is more, he always had time for m, even if his schedule was full. Do you want to hear about his well-known technique for achieving mastery over time?”

“Why not?” I responded. Anything to draw me away from report writing, and distract me from the sweaty humidity of this afternoon, was most welcome. Thus began my rehabilitation from the Land of the Procrastinators, into the fair realm of “Always On Time”.

Developing kinship with your tasks

“I worked closely with Professor Karavitis for six years, first as a doctoral candidate, and later as a researcher,” continued Sol. “The first thing he made me understand was that *I could not succeed at what I did not enjoy*. I had to develop a kinship with my tasks, rather than view them as punishments sent my way by a vengeful Fate.”

The good professor told me that I had two options when faced with a task. One was to enjoy the task. The other was to walk away, and go and do something else, that better captured my interest and enthusiasm. If I did not like doing doctoral research—with all its vicissitudes—I would fare much abandoning my PhD degree, and shepherding sheep, if that gave me greater joy and exhilaration.

He added poignantly, “Others do not care what you are, what you do, or how you fare. You think—like the Ptolemaic astronomers—that you are the center of everyone’s universe. The moment you stop thinking ‘What will others think of me’, you have opened for yourself the doors to true freedom.’ Enjoy that freedom and do what you cherish. It is a cliched phrase, but” “Do what you love, and love what you do’ works like magic. There is no other way to success, even as there is no royal road to Geometry. *Shed the need for approval from others.*”

Preparing well in advance

Having metaphorically yeasted the dough of my mind, Professor Kravitis—he actually insisted that I should call him Stavros—said the next step was to start early, and start well.

“Never leave anything to the last minute,” he said. “No one likes a half-baked cake. So, bake well. Start early, start well, and start secure with your own inner, sublime reassurance that you are going to do a fine job. And hang on to that redeeming thought until you finish.”

Do it once and do it well

He said anything worth doing should be done well. Re-engineering a poor design was for feeble minds. The masterminds always imagined clearly, and unhurriedly, until they were convinced that their designs were sound. When the design took shape, form and function worked seamlessly to marry strength with beauty.

“Do it once and do it well,” was his mantra.

Done and dusted: out of mind

Stavros was unsentimental about his own accomplishments which were staggering, given that when he became a full professor, he was half the age of his peers.

Sol said “One day, I picked up enough resolve to ask him why he did not more often celebrate his considerable academic accomplishments. He seemed almost diffident about his own capabilities”

The answer that Professor Kravitis gave me was supremely insightful. He said, “Once a task is done and dusted, forget about it. Even if what you did is worth a Nobel Prize, the fame that attends upon you is a paltry 15 minutes, if even that.

Sports stars, film actors, politicians, criminals, and such like are the modern glitterati who bask in the glare of public attention and adulation. Why seek fame from your work. Your own quiet, inner satisfaction that you have done your very best is the greatest reward you can ever earn. Remember that you are competing only with yourself. The world does not care. Nor should you care for the World’s approval, unless you are part of the glitterati. *Done and dusted; out of mind.* That is the way to work and live.”

Sol's personal experience

Sol continued, “Do not for a moment think that this concentrated wisdom was all delivered to me in a single dose. No chance of that. Stavros was unassuming and genial. He treated me more as a friend than as a student. I do not know why, but I suspect that he saw me imbibing and putting into practice the sage truths that he imparted. I believe that I absorbed the quiet wisdom that flowed from him by osmosis rather than from overtly didactic efforts.”

“And what was most impressive was that he practised what he preached. One Friday afternoon, in the early days of my research, I diffidently approached Ms Juanita Peres, the secretary of Professor Kravitis, to ask if he could spare me a half hour, as I had been stuck with some experiments and needed to bounce ideas off him, to better set my bearings for future work.” I was totally engrossed by Sol's tale by now, and my lethargy had been replaced by keen interest.

“Of course, you can see Stavros now,” Juanita said with confidence. “He does not have any scheduled meeting this afternoon. So, right in you may go.”

I entered the professor's room and had a good forty minutes of academic to-and-fro that opened windows in my mind. I had a clear picture of what I should be doing, why, and how, as my work approached the “real research” part of my PhD programme. And again, Professor Kravitis made it seem that I was the one who came up with all those brilliant insights. Paraphrasing Socrates, and without any pretentiousness, he simply said, “Those ideas are yours. I was simply the midwife who helped birth them. And I was flattered by the total attention he gave me during our meeting.”

After that inspiring session, I asked Juanita a very pertinent question. I knew that the good professor was the Organizing Chair of a major conference that was taking place the following Monday at the university. It was a professional conference of great prestige.

I myself could not have thought about anything else that Friday afternoon, had I been tasked to deliver the opening keynote address for the conference the following Monday morning. So, I asked Juanita how Stavros managed to give me his whole time and attention for those forty minutes, when in sixty hours or so, he had to deliver an important keynote address. What Juanita told me next both shocked and educated me in one go.

She said, “I have known Professor Kravitis for more than twenty years. In all that time, I have ever seen him allow one event to interfere with another. *He has compartmentalized his mind.* So, he is well aware that he has this profound keynote address on Monday morning. But he has no anxiety about it. He set aside ample time, weeks ago, to research, prepare, and rehearse delivering the paper. Once that was done, he has forgotten about it. It does not evoke any worry in him because he has bequeathed adequate time and preparation to it. The result is his best effort. And that leaves him free to attend to everything else that intervenes between then and Monday next.”

“Done and dusted; out of mind,” echoed in my mind again. Professor Kravitis was indeed one who practised what he preached. A mentor for the ages, whom we can all beneficially emulate.

Closing thoughts

As Sol concluded his enriching tale, I resolved not to fall into the trap of procrastination ever again. First, I would prime my mind to enjoy the task. Next, I would allocate adequate time to prepare for it well, ahead of the deadline. Then I would do it once and do it well. And finally when it was done and dusted, I would dismiss it from my mind.

“Whew! What a teaching!” I said solemnly to Sol. He smiled the smile of the cognoscenti.

Acknowledgements

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