

# Mastering Time

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## The oppression of heat and time

It was a [sweltering](#)<sup>1</sup> 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 pleaded to being a [hapless](#) 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 that 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 prosecution

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](#).

Sol chimed in, “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 me, 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 “Punctuality”.

## Develop 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.”

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<sup>1</sup>Coloured links take you to the meanings of a number of unfamiliar words and phrases. This way, as you read this blog, not only can you conquer procrastination, but you can also expand your vocabulary. I hope that, [by and by](#), you will *yourself* seek out the meanings of unfamiliar words and phrases, without assistance or prodding.

The good professor told me that I had two options when faced with a task. One was to enjoy performing it. 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 better by abandoning my PhD degree, and shepherding sheep, if that was what gave me the greatest joy and exhilaration. It is a clichéd phrase, but *‘Do what you love, and love what you do’*, works like magic.

## Shed the need for approval

Professor Karavitis added poignantly, “Others do not care who you are, what you are, what you do, or how you fare. You wrongly think—like the **Ptolemaic astronomers**—that you are the center of everyone’s universe. Nothing could be further from the truth.

“Each person is deeply involved in thinking about his or her *own* life. The approval or disapproval of others is as short-lived as their memories. Do not live your life to satisfy others. Rather, strive to live in harmony with your innermost self. That is the sure road to contentment and peace with yourself.

“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. There is no other way to success, even as **there is no royal road to Geometry**. *Shed the need for approval.*”

## Start early and start well

Having metaphorically yeasted the dough of my mind, Professor Karavitis—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 your cake well. Start early, start well, secure in 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

Stavros said that 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 result took shape, form and function worked seamlessly to marry strength with beauty. *“Do it once and do it well,”* was his mantra.<sup>2</sup>

## Done and dusted: out of mind

“Professor Karavitis was unsentimental about his own accomplishments, which were staggering, given that when he became a full professor, he was half the average age of his peers,” Sol resumed his narration. “One day, I picked up enough courage to ask him why he did not celebrate his considerable academic accomplishments. He seemed almost diffident about his own capabilities.”

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<sup>2</sup>This means doing it so well that you do not have to “repair” your work *after* it is completed. All good work must be checked or revised before being concluded. The “once” here includes this checking or revision as well. Quality has to be assured. 😊

The answer that Professor Karavitis 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 lasts a paltry 15 minutes, if even that.

“Sports stars, film actors, politicians, criminals, influencers, and such like are the modern glitterati, who bask in the glare of public attention and thrive on 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. *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 enlightening dose. No chance of that. Stavros was unassuming and genial. He treated me more like 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 Karavitis, 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, you may go right in.”

Sol said, “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 Karavitis 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 deliver 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 Professor Karavitis was the Opening Keynote Speaker at a conference that was taking place the following Monday at the university. And it was a prestigious professional conference.

“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 Karavitis for more than twenty years. In all that time, I have never seen him allow one event to interfere with another. *He has compartmentalized his mind.*

“So, he is well aware that he has this important keynote address on Monday morning. But he has no anxiety about it. He set aside ample time, weeks ago, to research, prepare, revise, 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.”

“The aphorism ‘Done and dusted: out of mind,’ echoed in my memory again. Professor Karavitis was indeed one who practised what he preached. A mentor for the ages, whom we can all beneficially emulate,” concluded Sol.

### Closing thoughts

As Sol wound up his enriching tale, I resolved not to fall into the trap of procrastination ever again.

1. First, I should prime my mind to enjoy the task.
2. Then, I should shed the need for approval from others.
3. Next, I would allocate adequate time to prepare for it, well ahead of the deadline.
4. Then I would do it once, and do it well.
5. 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 beaming smile of the **cognoscenti**.

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