

# Oliver Burkeman

TIME MANAGEMENT

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The whole challenge of building a meaningful life is, at its core, a challenge of time management.

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COURSE NOTES 2.0

# The Lessons

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Most of our troubles with time come from trying to avoid confronting the truth of the fact that our time is finite.

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# About This Course

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## HELLO, I'M OLIVER BURKEMAN

This is a course about time management – but one with an important difference. It's designed with the understanding that 'time management', properly understood, isn't merely a narrow question of exactly how to structure your to-do list, or how to get through your work tasks more quickly. The whole challenge of building a meaningful life is, at its core, a challenge of time management. Getting more efficient in your working practices, so as to more rapidly accomplish your goals, is definitely one component of that – but to have any real effect, it needs to be embedded in a broader approach. Another big difference is that far too many philosophies of time management, in my opinion, fail to face up to the hard fact that our time is limited, and that there's only so much any of us can do in a day. This course is designed to help you make the best choices for a life of meaningful productivity, creativity, and rich relationships, rather than encouraging you to pretend that it's possible to get everything done.



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## HOW TO USE THESE COURSE NOTES

These notes are designed to be a companion to the course, but there are no rules for how to use them. That's important to emphasise, I think, because quite a few of us who want to make better use of our time are prone to thinking like dutiful schoolchildren, who want to take notes on everything, study all the material, get it exactly right, and so on. That was certainly the case with me. But in fact one key to making better use of your finite time is to learn to let go of this tendency, at least a little bit – to be willing to follow your gut, and to accept the fact that there just isn't time to study and absorb every little bit of information that feels as though it might be useful.

So use these notes as a reminder of the course material; don't feel obliged to read every bit, or to do every exercise – but if you *do* decide to do an exercise, do it wholeheartedly, and right away.

In the end, what makes the real difference in our efforts to live calmer and more meaningfully productive lives is not the specific productivity techniques offered by me, or by anyone else, but a shift of perspective, away from attempting to achieve an impossible quantity of things, or an impossible degree of control, and toward taking real, imperfect action on things that count. So if a technique or a method here resonates with you, take note of that resonance, and consider implementing the technique. But if another technique leaves you cold, pass over it – there is probably a reason it doesn't chime with you. Once you take on board the perspective shift explored in this course, you might prefer to devise your own productivity and time management techniques instead. That's even better!

I hope you enjoy this course as much as I enjoyed putting it together. And I hope it inspires you to take meaningful action on some things that matter to you – and to cut yourself plenty of slack on all the ones you don't manage to find time for.

## WHAT YOU WILL NEED

- A willingness to rethink your most basic ideas about time.
  - A readiness to cut yourself some slack, and a realistic understanding that you can't do an impossible amount.
  - Any to-do lists or other time management documents that you're currently using to organise yourself.
  - A notebook, journal, stack of sticky notes or digital device: don't try to take comprehensive notes, but if a phrase or idea resonates deeply with you, note it down.
  - Optionally, a kitchen timer (or the timer on your phone, if you promise not to start scrolling through your phone).
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# 01. Introduction

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I think most of us are obsessed, in one way or another, with time – even if we don't necessarily realise it. For one thing, we're all born *into time*. We're thrown into it, whether we like it or not. It follows that **a huge proportion of the problems that we experience in modern life are actually problems of time**. There are the obvious ones, like busyness, feeling overwhelmed and having too much to do – but also less obvious ones, like distraction, procrastination and indecision about big life choices. So many things are ultimately questions of how we make the most of our limited time on the planet.

When I was asked to do this course, I jumped at the opportunity, because it's a chance to bring together lots of the work that I've done on this fascinating topic. Throughout what follows, I'll show you a number of ways of shifting your perspective about time, and a whole host of techniques and methods that you can use to really embed those perspective shifts in your life. These can help lead you to a much less adversarial and much more peaceful, productive and fulfilling relationship with time. At the core of these perspective shifts is the idea of **embracing your limits** – not living in denial of the reality of your limited time, energy and attention, but facing the truth, so that you can both get more of the meaningful things done, and enjoy life more while you're doing them.

Some of my suggestions will be at odds with many ideas you come across in the world of self-help advice. In fact, a lot of time management is actually really counterproductive. Simply put, it's a waste of time: it tells us that the way to deal with our time is always just to find ways to fit more things into the time available – and, as I'll discuss, I think that just makes life much more stressful, while also leading to you spending less time on the most important things.

I've written several books on this topic – above all, my book *Four Thousand Weeks: Time Management for Mortals*, which is about how to make the most of your finite time. I also wrote a column for *The Guardian* newspaper for many years, which involved experimenting with all sorts of productivity techniques and philosophies of time management. That gave me a really interesting perspective, in large part because I got to discover all the things that *didn't* work. But I have another qualification to teach this course, one that I think is even more important: I've always been someone who's struggled with this topic myself. In a sense, my work has given me the opportunity and the motivation to experiment with all sorts of different approaches, to find out what works, and what doesn't, so that you don't have to.

In this course then, I want to do two things. First to lead you through a series of shifts in perspective on time that will help you enter a different mindset on topics such as how to make decisions; how to deal with procrastination; distraction; structuring your day, and how to think about to-do lists, projects, and goals. At the same time, I want to offer you a menu of possible ways of implementing this in your life.

What's really important to convey at the start of this is that it isn't a prescriptive system. It isn't a question of following a twenty-three-step process for changing your life. I don't think that kind of thing ever works. We are so different to each other that with schemes like that, all you ever end up doing is trying to force things. It's like trying to fit a square peg into a round hole. Why should *my* specific system for time management work in *your* life? Instead, what I'm hoping to lead you through is really best understood as a menu, as a whole lot of different options for how to see your time differently.

To give you a set of tools that you can keep in your mental back pocket to use whenever they seem appropriate. They all share an underlying philosophy, and it's well worth understanding that philosophy. But when it comes to implementing that philosophy in your life, I want you to feel free to pick and choose from the techniques and approaches I discuss, or indeed to create others that better suit your situation.

What I hope you'll have by the end of this course is a different understanding of your finite time. An understanding that doesn't associate it with stress and with desperately trying to cram more and more things in. My hope is that you'll feel that you have permission to let go of the attempt to do everything, to organise everything, to stay completely on top of everything – and instead to really let yourself focus your time and energy on a handful of things that truly count. So let's get stuck into it.

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## 02. Facing Your Finitude

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There's really only one place to begin: with just how short a human life is. You and I, if we're lucky, are going to get about four thousand weeks, if we live to be eighty. That is a tiny amount of time, when you think about it. I'll be honest, when I first made that calculation in my head it completely freaked me out. But I was not alone. Philosophers all through the centuries have focused on the brevity of life as the defining problem that we face as humans. What this means is that anything you're doing to try to build a meaningful life is, by definition, concerned with time management. Life is a matter of time management.

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**Life is a matter of time management.**

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### HOW TIME FEELS

What do you think about when you hear the phrase ‘time management’? For most people it conjures ideas up about trying to get through your to-do list faster. Or at any rate, they think only of work. But I think this conception of time management is a shallow one. After all, what is life – if we only have a few thousand weeks – if it isn’t the challenge of managing time well?

To begin thinking about this more deeply, it’s a good starting point to ask how time feels for most people today. How does it feel for you? I think you’ll probably agree that there’s a sense, at least for many of us, that there’s too much to do. A sense of being overwhelmed.

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We feel busier than we’ve ever felt. And ironically, if you do well in your career or your life, you can only expect to get busier, which doesn’t make much sense, when you start to think about it. One of my favourite studies suggests that we don’t even know the full extent of the modern busyness epidemic, because the really, really busy people are far too busy to take part in surveys about how busy they are.

And of course this means that managing our time really matters. If our lives weren’t so brief then all these tasks could wait for some later time; and decisions wouldn’t feel so weighty, either. The big decisions about what career path to pursue, who to marry or where to live, for example, would have much less stress associated with them. If you had thousands of years to live you could try multiple career paths and live in many different places. It’s only because of the finite nature of the time we have that these decisions are so stressful.

### THE PROBLEM WITH PRODUCTIVITY

All of this would be bad enough. But many of us find that when we then try to deal with this situation – perhaps through buying books on time management and productivity and trying to implement better time management systems, for example – it actually makes things worse. Becoming quicker at ticking things off your to-do list doesn’t make you less stressed. What actually happens is that you find that you have even more to do than before: you become this machine for doing a lot of stuff. And it’s great to get a lot done – but it doesn’t ultimately generate peace of mind, if the point at which everything is finally finished still feels as far away as it ever did.

Consequently, **a lot of people end up in this situation of constantly living for the future**. We nominate some kind of future milestone and decide that when we get there, that's when life will be meaningful, peaceful and happy. It's a little easier to say this when you're in your twenties, and most of your life almost certainly is indeed still ahead of you; but if you're saying it when you're in your forties – that life is really going to get going a few decades from now – well, I can tell you from experience, it gets harder and harder to believe. The tragedy, ultimately, would be to get to the end of your life always thinking that the real moment of truth was still due to come. And this is a very tricky problem, in that it seems to get worse the more we focus on trying to use time well.

#### CONFRONTING THE TRUTH OF OUR FINITE TIME

**Most of our troubles with time come from trying to avoid confronting the truth of the fact that our time is finite.** They come from trying to do everything, to become a person who effectively is *not* finite – from trying to be God, you might say, even though the unavoidable truth is that we're limited humans. The key idea running through all of my thoughts about time management and building a meaningful life is that what you actually have to do is to turn towards limitation. You have to face this initially scary fact that there will always be more than you can do. And then you have to unravel that mistake that we make about seeing time as something to be 'gotten through' and instead bring your focus back into the present.

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To help bring into focus our ideas about time today, let me share with you a useful analogy. There was an American anthropologist called Edward Hall who likened the experience of time for modern people to a conveyor belt that's constantly passing us by. It has on it large containers, which are months or weeks, and small containers, which are hours and minutes. Hall described how we feel like we've got to deal with the containers as they pass us by, through filling them with useful activities or handling whatever the problem is that each

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one represents. However, problems arise, because the belt is always passing us by. We can't stop it and just give one thing our attention. **We're constantly trying to keep up with the passage of time – and this is a really stressful way to live.** The vast majority of conventional time management and productivity advice focuses on how to fit more things onto the conveyor belt, or how to run even faster, to try to keep up with it. This has a few minor uses – but is ultimately only ever going to leave you feeling more rushed, hassled, and stressed.

## TAKEAWAYS

- In order to create a more meaningful life, we must first come to terms with its finite nature.
- This means rejecting conventional productivity advice and aiming to adopt a perspective shift instead. The perspective shift is much more important than the specific techniques used.
- With a willingness to view time in a new way, this course will help you make the most of your time, and curate an existence that is ultimately less stressful, and more meaningful.

## EXERCISE

Somewhere relatively quiet and undisturbed, set a timer for five minutes and reflect deeply on how time feels to you these days. If you feel overwhelmed by life, let yourself feel those feelings fully. Are you aware of any ways in which the struggle to use time well feels *impossible*? Can you envisage the mindset you would prefer to have as you move through your days?

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# 03. The Limit-Embracing Life & The Historical Perspective

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Now it's time to get down to the most fundamental level of how we relate to our time, because **if you can bring into awareness what you're unconsciously doing day in, day out when it comes to time, you can begin revolutionising your own approach.** I think a really good way to bring that out into the open is to make a historical comparison: to ask what time would have felt like to people in the preindustrial era. Specifically, medieval peasants.

## LET'S GO BACK IN TIME...

Obviously, to be a medieval peasant in England was, in almost every respect, absolutely terrible. For example, you would not have anywhere near four thousand weeks of life expectancy! But there is very good evidence from historical literature to suggest that one kind of problem you wouldn't have had problems with was time. You wouldn't have felt hurried. You wouldn't have felt hounded by time. You wouldn't have felt like it was your job to try to 'get the most out of' your time. All these things that cause us different kinds of mental anguish, and that lead to busyness, procrastination and the slew of other time-related problems we have, wouldn't have been present in the first place. And the reason for this is that we, as modern people, think about time as something separate from us – while pre-industrial people didn't.

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## OUR MODERN RELATIONSHIP WITH TIME

You have a relationship with time. We all do. Usually, it's a pretty adversarial relationship: we feel as though we're fighting to try to win the war against time, or we feel like time is hounding us, or something similar. But this idea that time is something separate from us, something we have to get control of or else be controlled by, is actually a really strange, modern notion which dates from the era of industrialisation. For a medieval peasant in England, time was just the medium in which their lives unfolded. Time was just the thing that they lived in, like fish in water. It wasn't separate from them. They didn't think of it as some kind of yardstick, running alongside their lives, with which they had to try to keep up.

Anthropologists call this way of life 'task orientation', as opposed to our modern approach of time orientation. In task orientation, the schedule that you follow through the day isn't imposed onto life by you, or by your employer; it's just given by whatever it is you have to do. You milk the cows when it's time to milk the cows. You harvest the crops when it's harvest-time. You rise with the sun and go to bed at day's end. This kind of rhythm would have generated a kind of peace for those who lived it, despite their many other problems. We, however, live a life that is oriented around the idea of time as something separate, which makes the way we live very different. While we can't go back to the time of medieval peasants – and we wouldn't want to – it's nonetheless useful to consider the difference here in order to remember that the whole basic way that we think about time isn't set in stone. It's not natural. And we can set it aside, at least sometimes. We can step away from the clock.

## THE INVENTION OF CLOCK TIME

These days, some of us seem really good at just knowing roughly what time it is, even without looking at a watch. Although it's a fun party trick, it suggests that we are so governed by this clock notion of time that it has entered into our unconscious and taken root there. And it's really worth remembering that it didn't always used to be like that. For most people during most of the medieval period, there were no clocks: there was just morning, afternoon, evening, night, and all the moments in between.

**Clock time is undoubtedly essential: we couldn't run modern society without clock time. But you don't need to buy into it entirely.** You don't need to feel like the clock runs your life. Keep in mind that there is this much more expansive and peaceful way of thinking about time lying immediately behind it.

## CONFessions OF A PRODUCTIVITY GEEK

All of us in the modern world are under the influence of this idea that time is a resource. You've always got to be thinking about how to maximize it. In some of the lessons that follow, we're going to explore how that attempt to maximize your time so obsessively often has the opposite effect. How, in fact, it leads to you not making the most of the time that you have.

One of my main qualifications for talking about this is that I spent many years as what I and others call a 'productivity geek'. When people ask me what a productivity geek is I liken it to how some people are really passionate about mountain climbing, poetry or fashion design: being a productivity geek is the same, except what we're really passionate about is crossing things off our to-do lists efficiently. So it's quite a bit sadder, really.

I spent many years of my younger adult life thinking that, if I could just find the right set of techniques, and enough self-discipline, I would be able to become the master of my time. Of course, I never got there – but I often felt like I was just about to.

## FREEDOM FROM TIME

When it comes down to it, what a lot of us are looking for unconsciously when we decide to try to get a handle on our time, to get more organised and efficient, is basically freedom from time. We want to get out from this force that governs our lives, the moments that make up our lives. But you can't get out from your life. You are in your life. You can't get away from time; it just keeps moving forward regardless, until the day when your time runs out. If your approach to trying to find peace of mind involves denying that reality, then you're doomed to fail. What I think we can hope for is not freedom from time but a deep sense of freedom in time. Meaning that you acknowledge how limited the things are that you'll be able to do in the time you have – but you don't experience that as some kind of torment. You experience it as your birthright as a human: to be here, for not very many weeks, and to do a small handful of the potential list of meaningful things that there are to do. You can learn to see it as an exciting opportunity you've been given.

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## TAKEAWAYS

- By thinking about how people experienced time in the medieval age, we can re-evaluate our modern relationship to it.
- Time is not solely a resource, a thing to be mastered, or a thing to escape, it is the very medium of our existence.
- Nothing beats boots on the ground.
- Instead of fruitlessly seeking freedom from time, peace of mind and meaningful productivity are to be found by cultivating practices that let us experience freedom within time.

## EXERCISE

Set a timer for five minutes and spend that time writing about a moment in your life when you felt as if 'time had stopped', and you weren't troubled by the ticking clock. What sights, sounds or smells do you associate with it? Can you begin to consider that this experience was just as real as the normal experience of fighting against time on a busy day?

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# 04. The Efficiency Trap & How To Escape It

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The main way that most of us instinctively go about trying to deal with the feeling of being overwhelmed, and of being too busy, is to try to fit more in. But that not only doesn't work as a way of getting more of the meaningful things done, or achieving peace of mind – it in fact makes things much worse and drags us into this situation that I call the efficiency trap.

The really big, fundamental problem with this approach is that we live in a world of infinite inputs. In other words, there is effectively no limit to the number of tasks that could fill up your to-do list. And if what you do when you have an infinite supply is try to get through it at a faster pace – well, you're never going to get to the end of it, because it's infinite and you're still finite.

## THE NEVER-ENDING INBOX

The efficiency trap is even sneakier, however, because it's not just that you never get to the end – **it's that the process of trying to get more and more done in the same amount of time actually attracts more things to do into your life.** You may have experienced this if you've ever decided that it's finally time to get on top of your email. I did this – and indeed, I briefly got to the wonderful semi-mythical state of 'inbox zero'. But what I discovered very quickly is that if you get really good at answering emails quickly, all that happens is that you get many more emails, because you reply to more people, and they reply to your replies, and you have to reply to those replies, and so on and so on. Meanwhile, you get a reputation for being very responsive on email, so more people consider it worth their while to email you – and, before you know it, the very act of trying to get through all this stuff faster has invited more of it into your life.

## CLEARING THE DECKS

Back when I worked on the staff of a daily newspaper, I would consistently find that the better I got at getting things done, what actually happened was that I was getting better at doing the least important things. I would tell myself that the important tasks needed lots of time and focus, and that they required that all these other little things that were nagging at my attention be dealt with first. I call this mindset 'clearing the decks'. The problem is you end up always clearing the decks, to make time for focus and meaningful activity later on, yet the decks are never clear, and that time never arrives. I think **it's an incredibly important shift in how you deal with your daily time to give up clearing the decks**, and to realise that instead what you need to do is focus on the things that you care about, while knowing that the decks are not clear, and learning to tolerate the anxiety that can be generated by that fact. For example, you could try dedicating the first hour of every workday to your most important project, rather than checking your email: that way, you're moving ahead on what counts before getting embroiled in some futile effort to clear the decks first.

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## THE ART OF CREATIVE NEGLECT

The principle that I hope you can see emerging here is that the true art of time management is not finding new ways to cram more and more things into your day but learning the art of creative neglect. By this, I mean understanding that most things are going to get neglected anyway – because you’re finite – so it’s a question of deciding, wisely and consciously, what to focus on and what to set aside for now.

Just because an activity, relationship, ambition or obligation feels important doesn’t mean that there’s a magical guarantee that there will be a way to find time for it. You hear an awful lot of time management advice about the importance of saying no. And it’s true, you’ve got to say no. But secretly, I think a lot of us still imagine that what that means is just saying no to the things that are tedious, and that we didn’t want to do in the first place. Actually, it means **being willing to say no to things that really do feel like they matter**. It’s that willingness to step into the state of being a finite human, where there are more things that matter than you’ll ever have time to do, so you’ll have to say no to some ‘good’ things as well as some tedious ones. That is the true art of time management.

## FIXED-VOLUME PRODUCTIVITY

Another way you can implement this insight about finitude is what I think of as fixed volume productivity, which draws on the ideas of the author and podcaster Cal Newport. The classic case of fixed-volume productivity would be this: when you’re planning your day, **you first decide how much time there is available, and then you decide on the most important things to do in that time, given the limited time available**. So perhaps you’re determined to leave

at 6pm. Or perhaps you know you can only do four hours of really focused creative work in a given day. Whatever the limit is, you get clear on that, first. Then, you decide what are the most important tasks to focus on in that time.

What most of us instinctively do is the opposite. We wake up in the morning and ask: what are all the things I need to get done today? We then make a list that has no relationship to the question of how much time we actually have. Then what happens is we maybe try to get a few of the easy tasks out of the way first... and before we know it, it’s the end of the day. And the list is quite possibly longer than the one you began with. Fixed-volume productivity is an approach that means you take quantities of time first, and then you decide what matters the most to fit into them. In other words, you *start* with the assumption that most things won’t get done – and this provides you with the permission to focus on getting a few things done.

It’s important to remember, throughout this journey, to cut yourself some slack. If you are being asked to do an impossible amount with your day, or you’re asking that of yourself, then... well, it’s impossible. Even if the stakes are really high and terrible things would happen to you if you didn’t do an impossible amount, you’re still not going to be able to do an impossible amount! That’s what the word ‘impossible’ means – and facing that truth can only help you find peace of mind in whatever situation you’re in.

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## TAKEAWAYS

- In a world of infinite inputs, there is effectively no limit to the number of tasks that could fill up your to-do list.
- Thus merely trying to fit more of them in just leads to having more to do than ever before.
- The solution? Stop clearing the decks and realise that an impossible amount of work is just that: impossible. Start with the available time, and fit the most important tasks in first.

## EXERCISE

Today – or tomorrow, if you’re reading this in the evening, but no later than that – experiment either with not clearing the decks or using fixed-volume productivity. For example, when the workday begins, try working on an important project for 30 minutes before turning to your email, and learning to tolerate any anxiety that arises. Or set a fixed time for the end of your work, if you have that autonomy, and treat it as sacrosanct, then make your decisions through the day on the basis of that fixed endpoint.

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**It’s that the process of trying to get more and more done in the same amount of time actually attracts more things to do into your life.**



# 05. This Is It, This Is Now

Often, we end up living for the future as if what we're doing right now is just a dress rehearsal. This problem is actually made worse by a lot of time management techniques, because they focus so relentlessly on achieving future goals that it has the effect of devaluing the present. The writer Steve Taylor has a passage in one of his books where he talks about visiting the British Museum when the Rosetta Stone, a celebrated ancient Egyptian artefact, was on display.

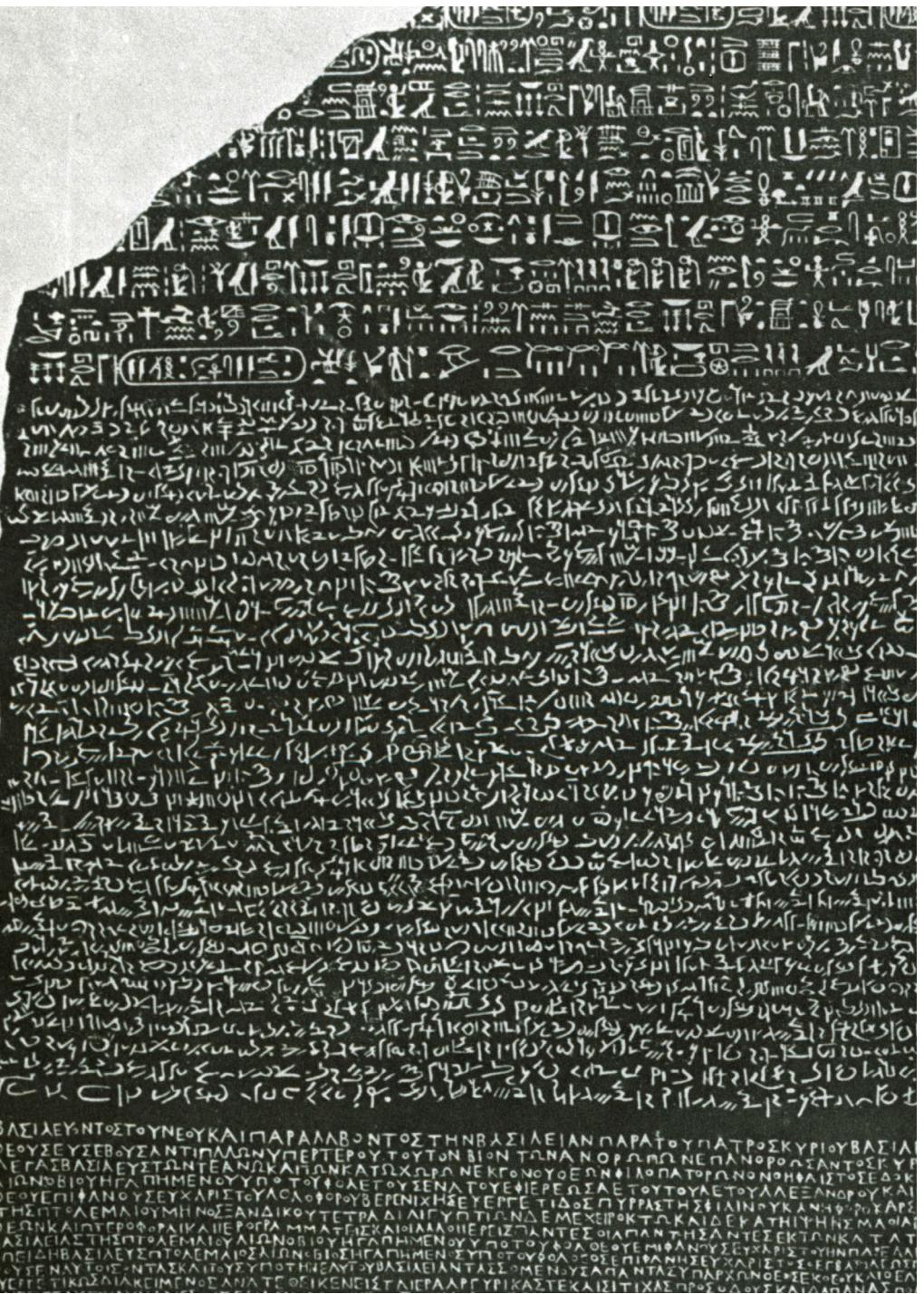
When looking at all the tourists who were busy taking videos or photographs of the Rosetta Stone on their phones, he realised that, as a result, they were not having the experience right then – because they were so focused on what they wanted to be able to do later – which was to reminisce about their visit to the British Museum, or show other people their photos.

## THE FUTURE MINDSET

This is actually just one manifestation of the way in which **we tend to live our lives with this notion that the real moment of truth is coming sometime later**.

John Maynard Keynes, the economist, has a wonderful line in a speech that he gave where he got to the bottom of this. He described the person in this mindset as 'the purposive man', and the purposive man, he said, 'does not love his cat but only the cat's kittens, nor in truth the kittens, but only the kittens' kittens, and so on forward forever till the end of cat-dom.' What he's saying, I think, is that when you're in this mindset of believing that all that really matters is where you're going, as opposed to where you are, you end up missing out on life. He saw this as avoiding the truth of mortality, because **if you think that the real point of your life is always in the future, then you don't have to face up to the fact that actually, at some point, the future is going to end for you**.

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What this means is that if you're going to live a life that you consider meaningful – if you're going to do the things that you know you really want to do, or nurture the relationships that really matter to you, at some point you will have to do that in a present moment: *now*.

I think for me this really came home when I became a father. Parenthood often makes certain truths about how little control you have over your time come to the forefront. For me, it also revealed how tempting it is to treat the projects of our lives, including the project of parenting, exclusively as a matter of preparing for the future. If you are a new parent, in the back of your mind you're always thinking about how much your child should do this or that – use screens, eat broccoli, be read to – in order to create the most successful adult later on. The whole focus, in other words, is not on the moment of actual interaction with your real live one year old; it's exclusively with this hypothetical future sixteen-year-old who doesn't exist at this moment.

#### THE CAUSAL CATASTROPHE

The essayist Adam Gopnik calls this the causal catastrophe: this notion that we're so fixated on whether something we're doing right now is going to lead to good results in the future that we forget about whether it's actually a good way to spend the present moment. This all comes back to the question of time management because, very often, the more that you focus on using time well, the worse this problem gets, because what you're actually asking is if you're using your time well for your *future* goals. So it's essential to remember that life unfolds in a sequence of present moments – and that at some point you're going to have to be present for those moments and find value in them if you're going to get to the end of your life and not regret the way that you spent your time.

There's a wonderful quotation from the spiritual teacher Alan Watts about the futility of this way of living. He writes,

*'Take education. What a hoax! As a child you're sent to nursery school, in nursery school they say you're getting ready to go on to kindergarten, and then first grade is coming up and second grade and third grade. In high school they tell you you're getting ready for college, and in college you're getting ready to go out into the business world. People are like donkeys running after carrots that are hanging in front of their faces from sticks attached to their own collars. They're never here, they never get there, they are never alive.'*

#### THE PROBLEM WITH LIVING IN THE MOMENT

Now of course there's a risk here, which is that you might decide that as a result of all this you were going to become very present in the moment, and then you go through life self-consciously asking yourself if you're being sufficiently present in the moment – and as a result of that, you won't actually be very present in the moment. Instead, I'm suggesting that you come to consciously understand that we always are only in the moment anyway. All your worries about the future arise in the moment. Any regrets you might have about the past arise in the moment. Your plans and your goal setting for the future – much as these may have a role to play in good time management – again, they're arising purely in the moment. Remembering and reflecting on this can help return us to the real experience of our lives, which is always now.

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## TAKEAWAYS

- Living solely for the future leads us to not properly experience the here and now.
- If you're going to live a life that you consider meaningful and do the things that you know you really want to, at some point you'll have to do them in a present moment. So why not now?
- You can't force yourself to be in the moment constantly – but if you begin to shift your perspective to one of understanding that life only ever happens in the present moment, you'll develop a more positive relationship with life and time.

## EXERCISE

Nominate some action that you regularly take, or a place you regularly go, as a prompt to bring yourself back to the present moment. You could resolve to do this every time you brush your teeth, for example, or every time you enter or leave your car, or every time you walk through a doorway. Don't worry if you forget plenty of times – that's kind of the point, after all! Just resume the practice when you remember to do so.

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# 06. Too Many Rocks

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If you really want to make sense of the challenge of using your finite time as well as you can, you need to understand a story that you'll find in almost every time management book.

The story – in the standard version that I'm familiar with – involves a professor who comes to the lecture theatre one day to meet his students. He has with him a collection of big rocks, some sand and a large glass jar. The big rocks are meant to symbolise the big priorities in the students' lives; for example, one could be a specific project that they're working on for college, one could be staying fit, and so on. The sand is meant to symbolise all the other little tasks and chores that fill up a day. The challenge that the professor issues to the students is to get all the big rocks and all the sand into the jar – which symbolises the finite amount of time that they have, in any given day, or month, or indeed over their whole lives. The students then try to fit all the rocks and the sand into the jar in exactly the wrong way. First, they try to put the sand in only to find that they don't have room for all the rocks. The right way to do it, the professor explains, is to take the big rocks – the ones that symbolise the really important projects in their life – and put them into the jar first. Then, you can pour the sand in and it fits between the rocks. In other words: when it comes to making time for all the other little things in your life, symbolised by the sand, you'll find that they fit neatly into the time between, but the really important thing is to make time for the big rocks first.

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## IT'S A RIGGED GAME

But there's a problem with this story. The whole thing is a scam. The professor has set up the experiment in such a way as to reach the conclusion that he wants to reach. He has only brought into the classroom exactly the number of big rocks he knows can be made to fit into the jar. In other words, he's assuming that there'll be enough space for all those things that really matter to the students. This story annoys me – because this isn't remotely close to our situation in the modern world when it comes to time. It's not that we don't know how to organise our days, with the result that we're always prioritising the small stuff and not making enough room for the big rocks. It's that **there are far too many big rocks**. **There are all these other things that feel like they matter, that we are just never going to make time for**. In fact, there's no limit to the number of things that can feel like they matter. And most of those rocks are never getting anywhere near that jar.

## THERE'S NO LIMIT TO THE NUMBER OF ROCKS

The point here is that you can't solve the problem of prioritising, and making time for the right things, just by re-ordering how you do things. The problem is that you have to decide which of those things that feel like they matter you're going to prioritise, and which ones you're simply going to have to accept that you will never make time for – even though they would be good uses of *your time*. Because there's no limit to the number of work projects you might have, the number of ambitions, the number of places you might want to travel to, the number of friendships you might want to pursue, and so on. We assume that if something really matters, there must be some magic way to make time for it. But that doesn't follow at all. **In the end, the real art of good time management is figuring out which things to neglect**, and which few of your big rocks you're actually going to be able to fit into your jar.

## TAKEAWAYS

- The rocks in the jar story is deceptive, because it reinforces the assumption that there must be a way to make time for everything that matters. In fact, there's no reason whatsoever to believe that.
- By accepting that you can't fit all the rocks you like into the jar, you can begin to prioritise what you'd actually like to do with your days, and in your lifetime, while coming to terms with the fact that this will inevitably involve not doing all sorts of things that would have been worthwhile.

## EXERCISE

Write out a list of your current 'big rocks' at work and life in general. If you could only choose to focus on five of them, which would they be? Don't expect the others to feel dispensable – because they won't. To take this exercise further, nominate at least one of the projects that didn't make it into the top five, and resolve to give it no time or attention for at least the next week (or month, depending on what it is). Feel the feelings associated with that decision. But stick to it.

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# 07. Being A Better Procrastinator

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I put it off for as long as I could... but it's finally time to talk about procrastination. In many ways it's the big one. It's something that anyone with a concern for using their time well runs up against.

But I think we need to reconsider procrastination quite significantly if we're really going to take account of the fact that we are finite human beings with limited control over our time. If we can only do a very small proportion of all the things that matter, then actually, **procrastination is something you're doing all the time anyway**. At any given moment, pretty much by definition, you are not making progress on the vast majority of things that you could be making progress on – even if you're doing really well on one or two of them. So, in that sense procrastination, as the writer Gregg Krech has said, is not something that you need to try to eradicate, it's something that you need to get better at. You need to be able to take wiser decisions about what you're going to focus on and what you're going to neglect.

## 3 WAYS TO BECOME A BETTER PROCRASTINATOR

### 1. PAY YOURSELF FIRST

You might be familiar with the idea of paying yourself first from personal finances. This is the advice that you should take a chunk of your wages or salary, every time you get paid, and immediately put it into savings or investments. You pay yourself first. Then what's left over you use for all your regular expenses. If you do it the other way – if you pay yourself last – you'll likely find that in fact you lived up to your means, so that there's nothing left to save. The creativity coach Jessica Abel points out that exactly the same thing applies to time. There just isn't going to be this time in the future when you've

got all the other things out of the way first and you finally get to focus on the things that matter the most. You have to pay yourself first with time, too, which means **taking some time, right now or today or this week, to work on a project or nurture a relationship that really matters to you**, even though there may be many other things tugging at your attention.

### 2. LIMIT YOUR WORK-IN-PROGRESS

This is the idea that, when you structure your work, you should set a very strict limit for the number of projects that you're addressing at any given time. For example, if you have fifteen projects that all need progress to be made on them, it's really tempting to try to make a little bit of progress on all of them during the same day. We like this, because it makes us feel like we've got a finger in every pie, we're taking care of business, moving everything forward. In fact, what actually happens when you try to do all these tasks in parallel is that the moment you get to a difficult bit of one task, you just bounce off on to another one. And so, far from making progress on lots of projects, it's all too easy to end up making progress on none of them.

If you limit your work in progress to a couple of projects at a time instead, you're likely to have much more success getting some of them completed.

One concrete way to implement this idea is the two 'to do' list technique. Instead of having one to do list, you have two. One is called an open list, and onto that goes everything that's on your plate, even if the end result is a list that's hundreds of items long. Very stressful! Except that you don't actually have to do the things on this list. The second list you can think of as a closed

list. It should have a fixed number of slots on it, say five. What you then do is to feed tasks from the long list over to the short list. Once all five slots are filled, the rule is that you can't add another task to the short list until you've freed up a slot by completing one of them. Through this method, instead of trying to do everything all at once, you'll get more tasks completed. And in the process of deciding which tasks to move from the open list to the closed list, you'll find yourself prompted to make the best decisions possible about which tasks matter the most.

### 3. BEWARE THE ALLURE OF MIDDLING PRIORITIES

The third strategy is to beware the allure of middling priorities. These are the most dangerous kind of goal. They're not the kind of goals that are compelling enough to have been given one of the top slots on your to-do list – but they're also not the kind of goals that are unimportant enough for you not to think of them as important goals at all. They are the goals that are compelling enough to lure you to spend time on them, and yet not important enough to be deserving of your incredibly limited time. By avoiding them as far as you can, you'll have more success. A story attributed (probably wrongly) to Warren Buffett suggests the following strategy: make a list of your top 25 life goals, in descending order; focus your energies on the top five – and avoid the next 20 like the plague, because they're the middling priorities that are most likely to pull you off course.

### GOOD vs. BAD PROCRASTINATION

If we're going to talk about procrastination, though, we need to talk not only about wise procrastination – where you are making difficult decisions about what to spend your time on – but also about the bad kind of procrastination. This is the kind with which you might be more readily familiar

– the kind where you just don't get going on things that really matter to you, and you're not sure why.

To return to a central theme of this course: one of the fundamental reasons that we engage in this behaviour is precisely because we're not willing to confront our limitations. In other words, we often fall in love with an image of how we want things to be, and because we're so in love with this perfectionistic fantasy, we hate the idea of actually making it real. Because we know that when we make it real it's not going to quite measure up to the perfectionistic fantasy. That's why we often procrastinate the things that are most important to us. **We're in love with fantasies of the future in a way that often stops us from bringing things into reality in the present.** You have such a perfect fantasy of how great your novel or screenplay or a relationship or a vacation or a new house could be, that you end up not bringing it into reality, because that would entail accepting imperfection.

Addressing this entails a shift of perspective. What you need to try to remember is that there's no way that anything you bring into reality will ever rival your perfectionistic fantasies of it. So, if you're worried that if you were to begin writing your novel it wouldn't be as good as you were imagining... you'd be right. You don't need to worry about that, not because it's not going to happen, but precisely because it's completely inevitable. You definitely won't write the novel that you fantasised about! But, if you can really internalise that idea, it's incredibly freeing – because then you can start actually writing the novel, because you're no longer tormented and held back by this notion that it has to be perfect.

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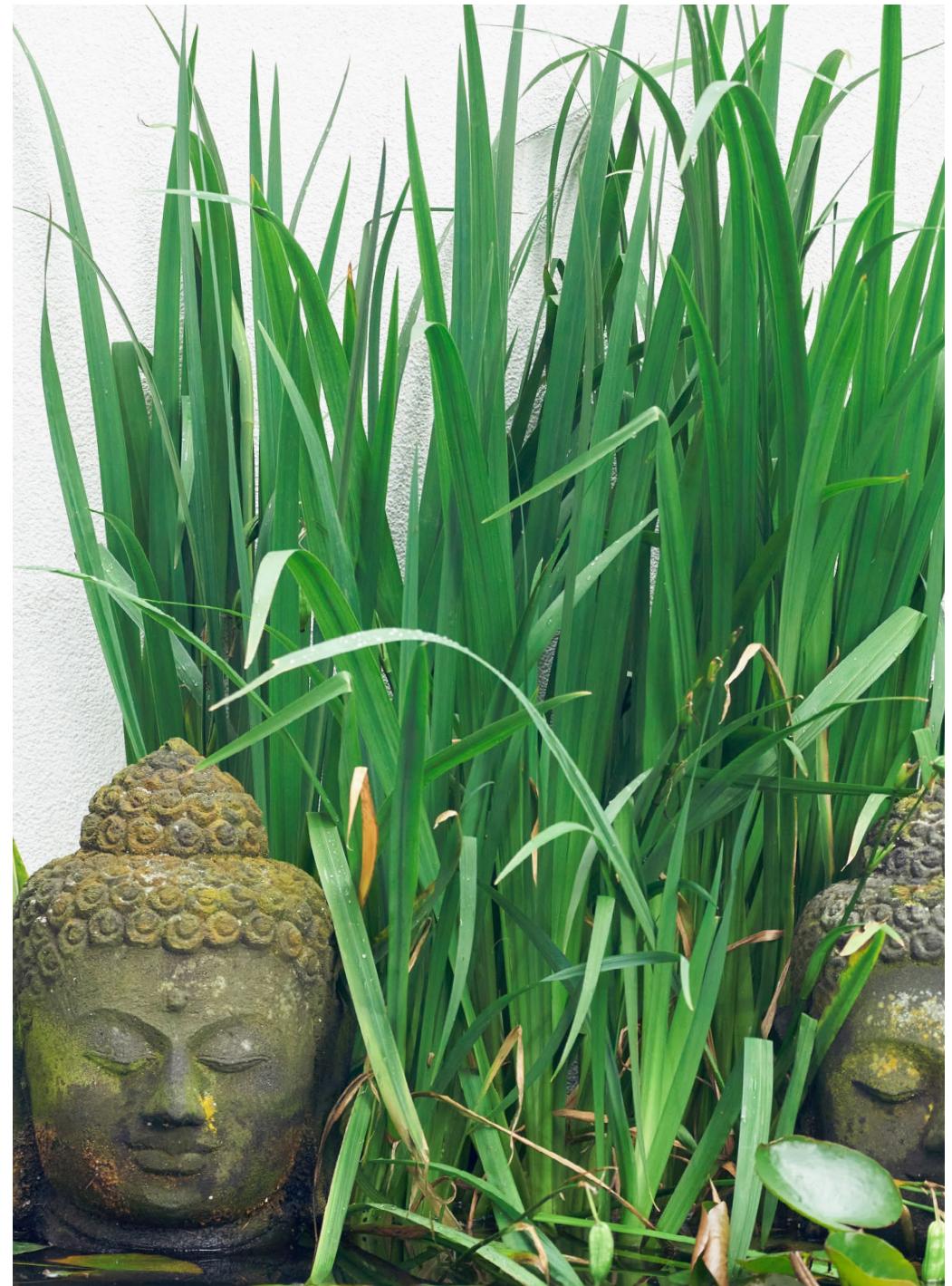
## TAKEAWAYS

- Procrastination is something we are always doing anyway, as we can only ever do a proportion of things that matter.
- If you practise paying yourself first, limiting your work in progress and being wary of the allure of middling priorities, you can become a 'better procrastinator'.
- Bad procrastination is often caused by perfectionism, but coming to terms with reality and not holding yourself to an impossible standard can help you crack on with important tasks.

## EXERCISE

Decide one way in which you could regularly 'pay yourself first' in life, whether it's a question of doing a half-hour on a creative project before work, say, or structuring your weekends to put relaxation ahead of chores. Don't worry about not being able to give a lot of time to whatever you choose. The crucial point is just the order of activities. If you feel you can only pay yourself first for five minutes this week – do that. And do it first.

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# 08. An Inconvenient Life

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In this lesson, I want to discuss how the quest for making life more convenient can lead us astray in our use of our finite time – and why it might actually be a really good idea to consciously try to include certain seemingly inconvenient things in your life. One of the things that you find, if you head off down a conventional route of time management, is that you're going to be given lots of advice on how to try to deal with certain tedious things in your life by making them take less time, or perhaps by eliminating them completely. This is part of a broader move towards ever greater convenience in society, which is a big part of what has made Silicon Valley so successful – because the crucial thing that a Silicon Valley startup does is to identify what entrepreneurs call a *pain point*. Somewhere in our daily lives we experience the discomfort of having to do something annoying – and then the startup gives itself a role and a selling point by promising to eliminate that pain point. For example, ride hailing apps are a way of eliminating the pain point of having to find a local taxi company and then call them. Contactless payment using your phone is a way of making it simpler, so you don't have to root around in your bag to find cash – and so on. But there is a real downside to these – a psychological downside, and a social downside.

## THE COST OF CONVENIENCE

The truth is that very frequently, when we smooth life out in this way, making it more convenient, **we end up inadvertently smoothing out things that we actually valued**. For example, communities exist, and neighbours feel friendly towards each other, thanks to a thousand instances every day of people doing things such as walking to a shop and having a conversation, or going into

a takeaway to pick up food instead of doing it all through an app, and so on. Interacting with people in ways that really matter, forming bonds of loyalty with your local taxi company – all these things that might sound a little bit irrelevant but that are often far more important and rewarding than choosing the effortless thing in the moment. It's partly that society benefits. But it's also that we benefit as individuals: we've evolved to benefit from human contact, and from putting effort into things, and the more that we pursue an exclusively convenient life, the more we find ourselves lonely and unhappy. Even just walking to the shop or calling someone on the phone can make an appreciable difference to your mood if, say, you're otherwise working from home in a solitary fashion.

## MORE CONVENIENCE = LESS PATIENCE

The other problem that you run into here is that as certain parts of life become more and more convenient, certain *other* parts of life become more and more frustrating, even enraging, because they remain inconvenient. For example, now that you don't have to line up in a queue to do all sorts of things, because you can just do them online, then when you *do* have to line up in a queue – to go to the post office for something that you can't do online, for example, or to vote, – well, it's five times more enraging than it otherwise would be.

What this all adds up to is this idea that although we always want to smooth out life, in fact, psychologically speaking, putting in the effort to do things less conveniently can very often be incredibly rewarding. It can make you really feel like you did something valuable with your day – and it can lead to you actually doing more valuable things with your day.



## EMBRACE SOMETHING INCONVENIENT

The crucial thing here is to think about the ways in which you pursue convenience in your own life – and to ask yourself whether there are certain ways in which it might make sense to not pursue it. Whether it might actually make a lot more sense, say, rather than ordering food in, and watching the movie on a streaming service, to go out to the cinema, or cook the food yourself.

A really useful reflective exercise, which I'd encourage you to try, is to think back through the last few days and think about what services or technologies you made use of primarily to *avoid the feeling of effort* that would have been associated with doing it the other way. Ask yourself whether there's one particular kind of app or service, for example, where you could practise for the next two weeks doing things the other way. Could you make trips to the place from which you're usually getting things sent? Could you talk to people, in contexts where you might avoid talking to them? Could you use your voice where you might otherwise have just dashed off a written message?

See what happens when you bring this deliberate inconvenience back into your life – because some of **those things we think of as rough bits of life – the bits we want to smooth out – are actually the things that really make life worth living.**



## TAKEAWAYS

- By trying to save time, by smoothing life, we run the risk of losing things we actually valued.
- Now that life hinges around convenience, things that still take time can cause us tremendous additional impatience.
- By sometimes embracing inconvenience, we can become more mindful of how we spend our time, and end up spending more of our time on what really matters to us.

## EXERCISE

Following the guidelines above, nominate and practise one area of 'chosen inconvenience' in your life for the next two weeks.

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# 09. The Art Of Taking Decisions & The Joy Of Missing Out

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Decision making: it's a subject that plagues many of us, and leads us either to waste our time in indecision, or to make decisions about how to use our time that we later regret. I want to encourage you, in this lesson, to reframe your whole perspective on what a decision is – and, as a result, to help you approach decision making differently in your day-to-day life.

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**But every single time you decide to dedicate an hour to one thing, by definition, you're not dedicating it to an infinite number of other things.**

Because we've only got a certain amount of time, and we can only be in one place at once, in a certain sense, we're taking decisions all the time, whether we like it or not. Not always consciously, of course – but every single time you decide to dedicate an hour to one thing, by definition, you're not dedicating it to an infinite number of other things. Every time you decide to enter a relationship with one person, you're not entering an alternative relationship with lots of other people instead. And so on: this replicates all the way through life. What I want to

encourage you to do is to see that decisions are being made all the time – which is a fact that can greatly reduce the stress of those specific decisions that you're aware of having to make.

## BE A DECISION SEEKER

Because we're always making decisions unconsciously anyway, we can benefit hugely from being more conscious about them. **A strategy that can make a big difference is to think of decisions not just as things that occasionally come your way, so you have to take them, but as things to go looking for.** I'll give an example to explain what I mean by that. If you find yourself stuck in a rut, not feeling motivated to use your time in the way that you want and not making progress on projects that are very dear to your heart, one really good idea is to go looking for some decision that you could take. In other words: do something that's going cut off alternative pathways. (The etymology of the word decide is fascinating: the second part, 'cide', means to cut off. It's very closely related to words like homicide and suicide. Deciding means cutting off alternatives.)

What that means is taking a decision on some aspect of the project that you're working on that makes it hard to go back to the situation before that decision. It absolutely doesn't need to be a big decision; it just needs to be relatively irreversible, which is something very different. If you're facing a very difficult question in your life – like whether to leave the job that you're in, say – a small irreversible decision you could take might be reaching out to a friend to ask them to have coffee with you to discuss the question. Why is that irreversible? Because you're shifting this dilemma from a purely private one that you hadn't yet released



into the world, or admitted to anybody else, and you're publicising it to someone, so you're moving forward: there's no going back to the time it was a secret. You're shutting off all the alternative avenues of life in which you never mentioned it to anyone, and things cannot help but change.

### THE JOY OF IRREVERSIBLE DECISIONS

As the coach Steve Chandler points out, deciding isn't something that takes any time. It shouldn't be confused with 'trying to decide' or weighing the options, which are very often things we use as displacement activities in order to avoid making a decision. **Deciding is something you can do in a single moment – and then you are in a new reality.** It doesn't need to be a huge decision. The really important distinction to make here is between irreversible decisions and reversible ones. When you can, make an irreversible decision, no matter how modestly sized. People who still have their options open, the people who haven't quite fully committed to a decision, are often unconsciously tormented by the idea that maybe they should have chosen a different option. But once you've bought the home or left the job or asked the person on a date, there's no going back, even if the result isn't what you hoped for. The joy of making a decision is that it alters your reality – and you find that in that new reality, all you want to do is move forward and make the best of the new situation you're in.



### TAKEAWAYS

- We are always unconsciously deciding things, so consciously making decisions is a way to better control how you spend your time.
- Taking irreversible decisions, especially small ones can help motivate us to work on projects, as well as making us less stressed.
- By practising conscious decision making you put yourself in a new reality where you are no longer plagued by the painstaking act of deciding.

### EXERCISE

Identify some project or endeavour on which you feel stuck. Identify one relatively hard-to-reverse decision you could make about it. It could be small – as small as choosing a platform for a website you want to build, or sending a text to a friend you want to get back in touch with. But then *actually do it*. Now. Not later!

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# 10. Rivers vs. Buckets: *The Menu Principle*

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In this lesson, I want to talk about a metaphor that's really useful for clarifying your actions, and finding some calm, when you feel like you're overburdened by items on your to-do list. It's the metaphor that I call the *menu principle*. As an example, let's start with the idea of a to-read pile. Many people have a literal stack of books on their bedside table, or bookmarked articles on their browser, or in some other form, a whole lot of things they keep meaning to get around to reading. People very often feel burdened by this kind of list of things that they feel they need to get through – and the problem's only getting worse, because there's ever more information, ever more books, ever more podcasts, etcetera.

I think it's really useful to remember, in this kind of context, that if you treat that pile effectively as a list – in other words, as something you've got to *get through* – then you're going to be in an unwinnable battle, because, as I've been explaining in other lessons, we live in a world of effectively infinite inputs. There will be no end to the number of books you'd like to read, or the number of articles that feel like they might be important to your professional life, and so on. And technology is getting better and better at finding and filtering all that content so that the ones that reach us are the ones we *really* feel like we need to read. It makes a lot more sense to see that to-read pile – or that list of anything else – as a menu: something that you pick from rather than trying to get through.

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## THE BEAUTY OF A MENU

I used to live in New York City, and anyone who's familiar with New York diners will know about those extremely large fake leather-bound menus that they give you there. They have every permutation of egg dishes, waffles, sandwiches and burgers that you could possibly imagine – it's a huge book of meal possibilities, basically. There's an amazing feeling of abundance when you read through these menus – look at all the things I could choose to eat! But nobody, as far as I can tell, has ever been handed one and then felt bad because they're not going to be able to make their way through every item. That would be completely absurd! Obviously, the pleasure of a menu like that is precisely that you get to pick one or two, maybe three things, from that list of 400. And most of us feel completely unconflicted about that. Nobody minds – when the context is a diner. But now, take that principle when it comes to something like your to-read pile. Ask what would happen if you treated it in the same way as a menu – as something that you got to pick from, such that you didn't define yourself as a failure if you didn't get all the way through, because that would be absurd.

## IMPORTANT LISTS ARE MENUS TOO

But when you stop to think about it, in a world of infinite inputs, *any* to-do lists that you might have in your mind or on a piece of paper are actually just menus too. In other words, this idea doesn't only apply to to-read piles and things that feel, in some sense, optional. No: even that list of things you tell yourself you *absolutely have to do* is really only a menu to pick from, if there are more things on it than you're actually able to do. If there are 20 things you feel you

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Trying to decide, or weighing the options, are very often things we use as displacement activities in order to avoid making a decision.

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have to do today, but the truth is that you've only got time for five of them, then you're picking dishes from a menu, whether you like it or not. Which means that you might as well pay attention to which dishes you *feel like* picking, because then you can harness that enthusiasm to get things done. At some point in the process, maybe you'll have to pick something you don't love doing, just as in some restaurants you might have to pick the least worst option, or the healthy option you know is best for you in the long term. Even so, you're no longer in the mindset that you have to crank through a list of things, whether you like it or not, or that you have to somehow manage to do an impossible amount. No: as finite creatures in a world of infinite inputs, we are always, by definition, selecting from menus.

If you treat a list as something you've got to get to the end of, you might get a little boost of happiness from ticking a couple of items off, but the real goal is always to get to the end, which is never going to happen – and so you're constantly postponing the source of happiness into the future. **If you treat a list as a menu instead, the pleasure, the gratification, the satisfaction can also come from choosing to do one of those things right now.**

#### LIVEN UP YOUR LISTS

In practical terms, one tactic I really love is to deliberately include on your list things that are fun, that you really relish the opportunity of doing. That will help lend your list the quality of being a menu – and the really interesting thing about that is you'll often find that you will nonetheless pick some of the more difficult, challenging things that need doing. You won't just find yourself only ever picking the easy tasks. Because you'll reconnect to the question of what is *meaningful* for you – and you'll discover that quite often you are keen to complete some less-than-fun tasks, because they are part of some project or activity that truly matters to you.

#### KEEP A DONE LIST

There's a second list tactic I always recommend, and that is the idea of keeping a done list. It's very easy, in this mindset of lists as things we have to get through, to focus entirely on the things that have yet to be done, and as a result to never feel like you're quite doing enough. Keeping a done list – a list of each task you complete, over the course of a day – can be a really good antidote to that problem. Instead of going through the day burdened by a feeling of 'productivity debt' – that you won't quite have justified your existence on the planet unless you do more, and then more, and then even more – **keeping a done list helps you notice what you've done, as if you're adding to your productivity account, rather than just struggling to get out of debt.**

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## TAKEAWAYS

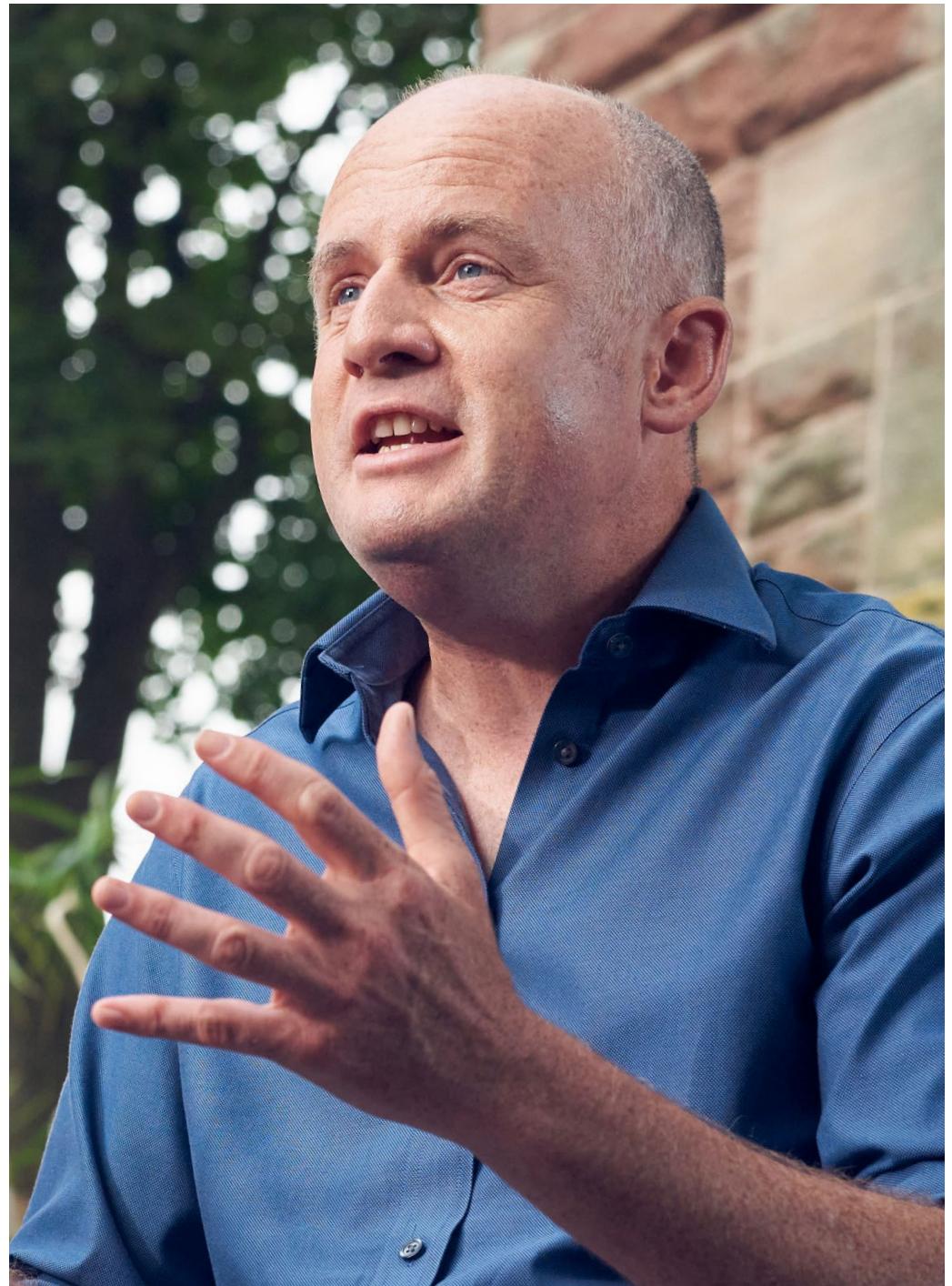
- Seeing lists as menus can help you change your perspective.
- Menus are lists we get to pick from rather than lists we have to get through, and when you reflect upon it, all lists are menus. As finite humans, we're always choosing to do a small proportion of the things we theoretically could do.
- Keeping a done list and adding fun items to your lists are good tactics you can employ.

## EXERCISE

In a notebook, a digital file, or just on a scrap of paper, practise keeping a done list, starting now (you can include the completion of this lesson as one of the things you've done). See how it makes you feel, and continue the practice if it makes a positive difference.

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# 11. The Truth About Distraction

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We need to talk about distraction – because no plan for your time or your life means anything if, when it comes to the crunch, your attention is pulled away by other things, so you end up doing other things entirely, things that don't count. Distraction is an almost universal problem: I don't know of anybody, really, who doesn't find that almost exactly at the moment that they think they want to be focusing on something important, something less important takes over and proves more appealing instead.

## THE ATTENTION ECONOMY

Where people's minds first go, when they think about distraction today, is obviously to social media, the internet in general, and phones. This incredible ready access we have to an almost infinite source of distraction in our pockets, whenever we feel the need for it. I think many people still don't appreciate just what a challenge it is to live in a world that has this component to it – the attention economy. **Because what has happened is that our distractibility has actually become a commodity.** It's become something that is a source of profit to some very large corporations. So, as the saying goes, when you're not paying for a product, like a social media platform, that's good evidence that in fact you are the product. What's being sold is your attention – it's being harvested, by showing you things that compel your attention, and it's then being sold on to advertisers who advertise on those platforms.

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## THE VALUE OF ATTENTION

The technology critic Tristan Harris says that every time you open your phone to look at a social media app, there are a thousand people on the other side of the screen, paid high salaries to try to keep you there, regardless of whether that's actually what you wanted to do with your time. All of which is to say that I think we face, in the modern world, an extraordinary challenge when it comes to distraction, to these assaults on our finite time. And it's a challenge that's worth taking incredibly seriously.

The other thing that's worth mentioning here is that attention is an extraordinarily important thing in our lives. **At the end of your life, all the different things to which you paid attention through your life will have been your life.** We really are paying with our lives when we pay attention to things – and I think that's why it's really important to take seriously the question of stewarding our attention, and being able to apply it to the things we want to apply it to.

## DISTRACTION IS AN INSIDE JOB

But this is where things get a bit tricky, because everything that I've said so far makes it sound like the threats to our attention come exclusively from the outside. The social media platforms are stealing your attention. Actually, that's not quite an accurate account of what happens. What really happens, when you're working on something difficult, isn't usually that you're loving the experience and then social media somehow drags you away. Rather, it's that

the thing you're working on – the thing that matters to you – feels sufficiently unpleasant that actually you give in willingly. You love the idea of running off to social media to discover which celebrities are feuding with each other – because it's just so much more relaxing and less unpleasant to experience than actually sticking with the stuff that matters.

#### YOU'RE PUTTING OFF THE THINGS YOU CARE ABOUT THE MOST

The truth is that there is this strange phenomenon whereby we don't necessarily always like the experience of doing the things that matter to us the most. Those are specifically the things that, when you start to do them, you suddenly feel like you don't want to do them, and would rather succumb to distraction instead. And I don't think that's a coincidence. I think it's because these experiences of doing meaningful things bring us up against our limitations. So if you sit down, say, to try to write a short story – or to have a difficult conversation with a spouse, or read a challenging book, or learn a new skill – you don't necessarily know whether it's going to come out well. You're going off into the unknown, by definition. It's a scary place, and it might bring up uncomfortable emotions. It's much easier to not do that! It would also be much easier to scroll through your phone, because then the stakes are low, you're not going to feel too vulnerable, it doesn't really matter.

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## DISTRACTION FEELS COMFORTABLE

It's incredibly rewarding to actually do these difficult, meaningful things. That's the only place, really, that real rewards in life are going to come from – but for the reasons we've discussed, it's often not going to feel entirely pleasant. In the moment, it's often going to be much more pleasant to head off into distraction instead. And the distractions of the internet are some of the most appealing because you have this sense, in cyberspace, of limitlessness. You can find out what you like. You can present yourself how you like. You can mentally travel to any place in the world. You feel unlimited – whereas precisely the challenge of the activities that matter to us is that they remind us of how limited we are.

The effective way to deal with distraction in the long term, then, is to become familiar with those feelings of discomfort. To understand that, actually, if what you want to do is to achieve meaningful, impressive things with your finite time, all you need to do is get a little bit better at staying with those feelings. One down to earth way of doing this, which you can start with at just five minutes a day, is what the meditation teacher Shinzen Young calls 'Do Nothing meditation'. This is related to the style of meditation with which a lot of people are familiar, where you follow your breath for a few minutes – but it involves trying to do nothing at all with that five-minute period: setting a timer and just sitting. Whenever you catch yourself doing anything, just let go of that, and come back to where you are, and to doing nothing. You will fail, again and again! It's guaranteed that you'll fail because you can't really 'do nothing'. But the gesture and the practice of letting go of doing any of the things that you find yourself doing, over and over again, is an incredibly powerful way of training yourself to be present with whatever emotions are arising in a moment, even if they are uncomfortable ones.

Shinzen Young credits his understanding of the power of staying present with unpleasant sensations and emotions to an initiation ritual that he underwent in order to become a Buddhist monk: in Japan, outdoors in winter, he was required to douse his naked body with ice-cold water three times a day. At first, he sought mentally to 'escape' the experience, by thinking of other things, but he discovered that, in fact, the more of his attention he could bring to the sensations he was experiencing, the less suffering he underwent. By riding out the initial discomfort, he attained a profoundly absorbed state of presence.

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**It's really important to take seriously the question of stewarding our attention, and being able to apply it to the things we want to apply it to.**

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If you practice Do Nothing meditation you may find, perhaps quite swiftly, that this gives you an ability to stay with the minor discomforts that are just going to arise whenever you apply yourself to things that matter – and thus you'll find yourself more ready to stay focused on the things that you really do want to do with your finite time.

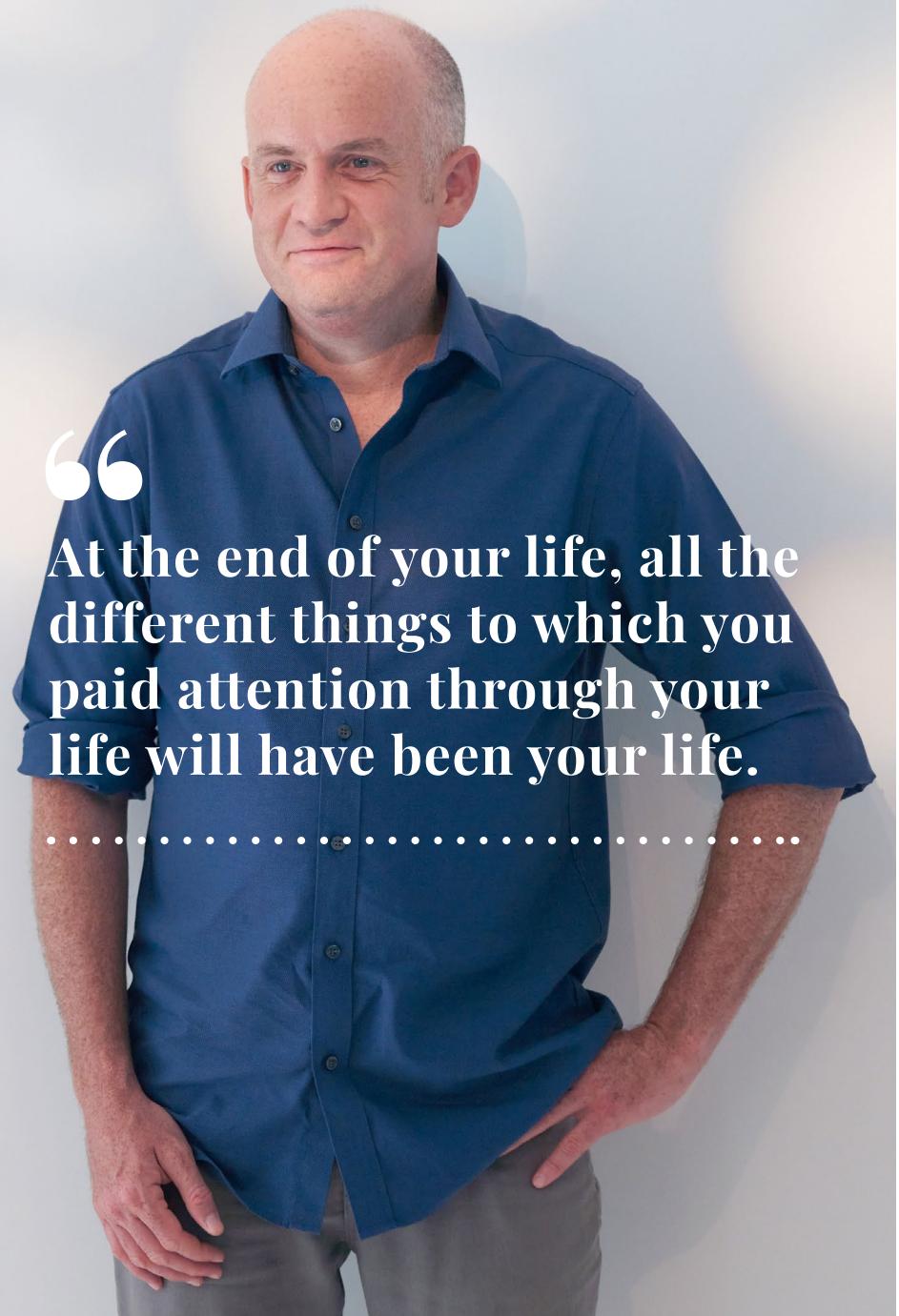
## TAKEAWAYS

- The attention economy means that our distractibility has actually become a commodity.
- But distraction is also an inside job, which requires internal solutions.
- The effective way to deal with distraction in the long term is to become familiar with the feelings of discomfort provoked by meaningful work and activities, but to not let them control you. One way to get better at this is to do a few minutes a day of 'Do Nothing meditation'.

## EXERCISE

Spend at least a few minutes, using a timer, doing 'Do Nothing meditation' as described above. Don't worry about establishing a daily practice yet. Just do it a single time.

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**At the end of your life, all the different things to which you paid attention through your life will have been your life.**

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## 12. The Awkwardness Principle

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In the first part of this course, we focused mainly on the fact that we have such a finite quantity of time, and how to make sure that you use that finite time to focus on the projects, the people, and the activities that matter to you the most. In the next half, we're going to be focusing more on the fact that we have such limited control over our time – and that if we're going to use our time well, we're always going to be doing so in conditions of great uncertainty about the future.

But for a moment, by way of an interlude here, I just want to focus on the general issue of personal transformation – of making changes to your life and your daily practices – and to talk specifically about an important idea that I think of as the awkwardness principle.

### LEAN INTO THE CRINGE

One thing that struck me very early on, when I was writing my newspaper column about self-help culture and personal development, **was that there was an awful lot in there that made me want to cringe**. I would be advised to keep a gratitude journal, or to engage in certain kinds of visualisation exercises, or such like, and a part of me would just absolutely hate the notion. What I gradually learned was that actually the very techniques that felt awkward to me were often the ones that I needed the most. Eventually, I realised I had to lean into the cringe. Those awkward feelings weren't a sign that I should avoid the practice in question; instead, they were signals that showed that a technique or an approach had touched something vulnerable in me. That cringe reaction was a defence mechanism – evidence, in fact, that I was onto something useful.

**Personal change and positive growth feel awkward by definition.** This is because whenever you're making any kind of personal change, everything in your life and the way your mind has operated up to that point is going to rebel. Of course it is: it has all been developing, for years, in order to serve the old way of doing things. One part of you wants to change, but the other parts don't, because they have evolved to make life work – or just about work, anyway – following the old rules. So if you experience that awkwardness and you conclude that this feeling must mean you're on the wrong track, then you're going to find yourself time and again *not* making the positive changes that you could make in your life. It's not a message that something's wrong – it's a sign that you're growing, that you're at your edge and that you're going into new territory.

There's a caveat here, which is that this advice is not the same as saying you should ignore your deepest intuitions. If a relationship or a career path or a new practice or anything else feels very wrong to you, in your gut, you should definitely listen to that feeling: your gut can tell you all sorts of things your conscious mind might not yet have realised. But if it just feels awkward and unfamiliar, if it just feels like putting on a new pair of shoes that haven't yet adapted themselves to your feet – that's a very different thing, and very possibly a positive sign.



## THE REVERSE GOLDEN RULE

Lots of people have a tendency to be quite hard on themselves and to demand massive changes from themselves, and then to treat themselves judgmentally if the change that happens doesn't measure up to their demands. To decide, for example, that if they don't make a complete fresh start and start approaching their time and their work and their whole life completely differently at once, then they're a failure. **I think it's worth pausing and recognising that this way of treating yourself is something that you would never do to a friend of yours.**

You would never say that a friend was a total failure if they'd made a small positive change to their lives but not yet managed to make a completely transformative fresh start. You would encourage them! You would understand that a small change is absolutely invaluable.

One philosopher calls this the *reverse golden rule*. In other words: not that you should treat other people as you'd like to be treated, but that you shouldn't treat yourself in ways that you wouldn't treat other people, including when it comes to making changes in how you manage and use your finite time.

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You shouldn't treat yourself in ways that you wouldn't treat other people.

## TAKEAWAYS

- Often, a cringe reaction is a defence mechanism against change – and actually evidence that you're onto something useful.
- Personal change and positive growth feel awkward by definition. So don't be put off by feelings of awkwardness. Embrace it.
- Apply the reverse golden rule and don't be harder on yourself than you would be on a friend.

# 13. You Never Really Have Time

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We have very little control over our time. Even when it comes to the scant amount of it we do get, when you stop and think about it, it's not really clear that we get any time at all. Do you have the *next three hours*? When you say something like, 'I've got three hours to complete this project', or 'I've got a week's holiday before I have to do any work', what we mean in that situation is actually that we expect that time. It means we've got good reason to believe that we'll get those three hours, or that our week will be uninterrupted. In fact, you only ever get one *moment* of time. It's not like physical possessions or money. You don't have four thousand weeks of life like you have a hundred pounds in the bank. You only expect that you'll have it.

## THINKING BACKWARDS ABOUT TIME

This might sound like a bit of a theoretical point – but it matters because an awful lot of the ways in which we approach time are premised on this notion that we're going to achieve a certain kind of *control* over it – a kind of control that in fact we can't ever achieve. A really interesting thought experiment here is to go through your own life, thinking backwards. Look at everything that brought you to where you are today, including anything in your life that you really value, like perhaps an intimate relationship, or something you love about your family or home or work. Take the time to think about how it all came to be. Working your way backwards through the causal chain that brought you there. It's almost guaranteed that essentially none of that involved you controlling your fate. It didn't involve you controlling your time. It was randomness. It was coincidence. You ran into someone at a party, or you happened to read about a line of work, or your parents moved to a neighbourhood where you met your mentor, and so on and so on. You lacked control, and yet good things happened nonetheless.

A lot of finding peace of mind, when it comes to our time, is just gradually developing the trust in fact that the future might unfold rather similarly to how the past has unfolded: in other words, that it went pretty well, despite you not having the control you might imagine that you need.

## THAT FACT THAT WE GET TO BE HERE IS EXTRAORDINARY IN ITSELF

There's a second aspect to our lack of control over time which I think is really interesting. It's the notion that the really extraordinary thing about our moments on the Earth is not so much exactly *what* we do with them, but the very fact that they're there at all. We're often focused on how we don't want to be doing whatever it is that we're doing, how we'd like to build a life in which we did much more of one kind of thing and much less of another. But there is something remarkable about the fact that you are here to have any experiences at all. The odds were certainly heavily stacked against you ever being born! I've certainly found this very useful in the context of things like waiting in queues or being woken by a screaming baby at two o'clock in the morning when I'd rather be asleep. Sure: the content of my time at that moment isn't necessarily what I'd have chosen. But the fact that I get to have an experience at all is somewhat amazing.

## THE PERILS OF HABIT BUILDING

We hear so much these days about the importance of building good habits: people are obsessed with this idea and, consequently, they embark on schemes where they decide that every day for the next six months, they're going to do this or that – run, swim, meditate, write in a gratitude journal... a list of healthy positive behaviours that they want to inculcate. I'm not quite going to go as far

in this lesson as telling you that you shouldn't try to develop good habits. But there's a hazard here, which is that trying to change the kind of person you are often actually gets in the way of simply doing more those desired activities. Let me explain.

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## Trying to change the kind of person you are often actually gets in the way of simply doing more those desired activities.

Writing is a good example here. People get it into their heads that they really want to build a writing habit, and then they think to themselves: OK, well, I'd like to write for an hour every day. And then maybe they do it for a couple of days, but then something gets in the way, so they don't do it on the third day. Then they conclude that they're no good at building a writing habit, and it ends up being six months before they turn back to writing. Or else they think to themselves: I really want to do this for half an hour every day, but things are busy right now – so I'm going to postpone this big life change until I can expect to have more time. In both cases, I hope you can see how the attempt to build a habit has gotten in the way of what they could have done – which is just to do one session of writing when a spare hour arose. They've used the intimidating pressure of ‘building a habit’ to put them off simply doing the thing.

### DO IT, TODAY

I think if you're reading this, and taking this course, there's a good chance that you're the kind of person who takes seriously the idea of building good habits. Making changes to your life. Transforming from a certain kind of person to a different kind of person. And this motivation is a good thing, for sure! But it means that the pitfall of letting ‘habit building’ get in the way is one to which you're especially vulnerable. So here's a real challenge. Could you take one activity that you know you truly care about, but that you're not currently giving any time to: is there some fitness practise, some psychological meditative practice, or a relationship that you know you want to be nurturing, that you're not giving time to – and could you *actually do that activity*, for, let's say, half an hour, today? Could you actually do it? I don't mean doing it as the first instance of a sequence of hundreds and hundreds of instances of it, stretching off into the future. In other words, I don't mean starting a new habit; that's exactly the opposite of what I mean. I mean just literally doing that thing once, right away.

Because of course, the irony is the only way to become the kind of person who does such things regularly, and who has developed those kinds of habits, is at some point to actually do the thing once. And then to see, later on, if you're willing to actually do the thing again and again and again. So I'd urge you to find one thing that you know would be a meaningful part of your life, but that you're not currently doing – and just do it once, today.

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## TAKEAWAYS

- We think we need more control over time than we have.
- But if you consider the nature of time, you'll see that this sort of control is impossible – we only ever get one moment at a time – and if you look back at your life to date, you'll see that you never really needed this kind of control.
- Give up the idea of control, and just try and do one instance of the thing you'd like to do, without the pressure of making it a 'life-changing' habit.

## EXERCISE

Identify one practice you've been hoping to develop as a habit. Then just do one instance of that thing sometime today (or tomorrow, if you're reading this late at night). Don't worry about the details: if you want to go running, go running, rather than developing a complex running programme. Don't worry if you can't see how you'll ever manage to do it on a regular basis.

**The challenge today is to do it once, anyway.**

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# 14. Patience Is A Superpower

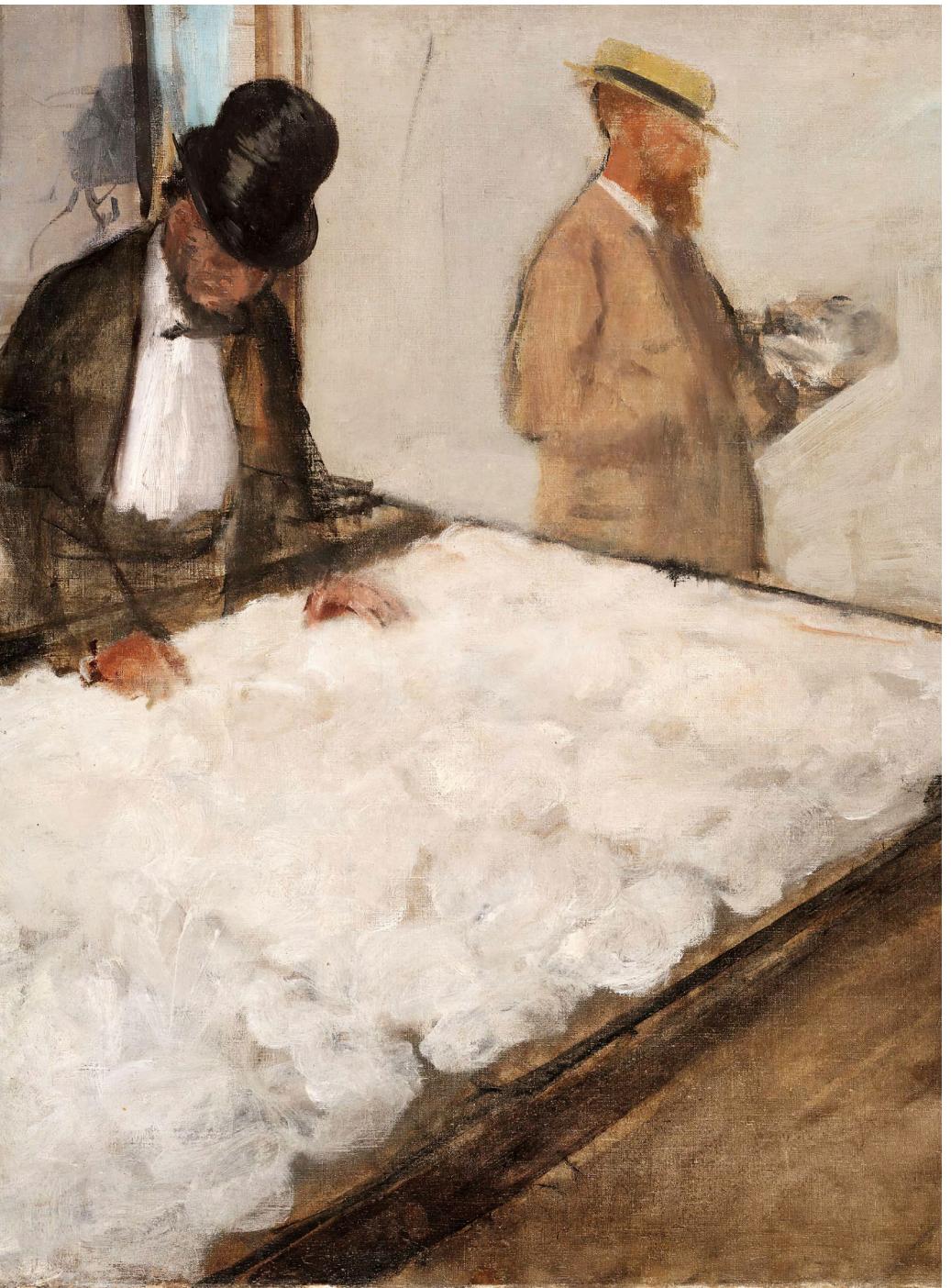
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In this lesson, I want to talk about patience. It's not the kind of topic that people necessarily want to talk about; it's an unpleasant idea for many of us, that we should be more patient – but it's not just great for mental wellbeing to learn to be more patient; it's also a really powerful way to get things done. So many of us are overwhelmed. So many of us have too much to do – and a very natural response to that is to try to make the world go faster. But it doesn't work; and in fact we often benefit far more from learning to let things take the time they take. **You can often get to a solution more quickly by being willing to go more slowly.**

## LEARNING THE ART OF PATIENCE

I first learned about this way of thinking from an art historian at Harvard University, whose name is Jennifer Roberts. She has all her incoming Art History students do this exercise: to find a painting, or a sculpture in a museum, go and look at it for three hours straight. Most people, when they hear this – including Jennifer Roberts's incoming Art History students – are totally appalled. And I did this. I went to Harvard to interview her, and I sat in the Harvard art museum and looked at a painting by Edgar Degas, *Cotton Merchants in New Orleans*, for three hours.

And, of course, what happens is that this fairly swiftly became deeply intolerable – because I wanted to control the pace at which my life unfolded, and I was unable to do that! It was painful. And then, after a while, once I rode out that discomfort – because I had no choice but to ride out the discomfort – an hour or so into this process, I literally began to see things in that painting that I hadn't seen before. I'm not talking metaphorically, here. I mean literally:



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objects, lines, shadows and even people who I had simply not fully seen for the first fifty minutes of this exercise. Now, obviously this is an example that's focused on art appreciation – but it can also be applied to all other areas of life. There are a whole lot of challenges in work, in relationships, in all walks of life where a willingness to just wait – rather than diving in impatiently and trying to fix the situation – is really helpful.

I want to leave you, in this lesson, with three specific tips for implementing the superpower of patience in your own life, and the first of these I refer to as developing a taste for problems...

#### DEVELOPING A TASTE FOR PROBLEMS

We all encounter problems in our lives and in our work, of course, but for most of us, we not only grapple with the problem itself – we're sort of indignant that we have to grapple with problems at all. We're impatient for the stage in our lives when we don't have to deal with problems at all. In fact, in almost every professional context, the reason you're employed, or the reason you're making money from that line of work, is because of your ability to solve each of these problems. What we do in our lives – what gives meaning to almost everything we do – is our capacity to solve these problems. A patient approach to that enables you to find a lot of absorption and interest in those problems, and develop a taste for them. Of course, some problems are especially awful, and one obviously wants to be free of them, or ideally never to experience them in the first place. But it's enormously empowering to let go of the idea that one is ever going to get to the stage in life where one doesn't have problems at all.

#### RADICAL INCREMENTALISM

The second tactic here is the idea of radical incrementalism – the idea that very often, in all sorts of areas, the way to make the most progress is to be willing to make just a very small amount of progress in any given session of work. This could be a question of your fitness goals, or it could be the core of your daily professional work; it's very relevant to my work as a writer, for example, because the more I can bring myself to just do a small amount, but to do it repeatedly, the more I can make fast progress – as opposed to the idea of trying to keep going for hours and hours. And it's important to stress that what I'm talking about here isn't just setting a short amount of time as a *minimum* but as a *maximum*, too. In other words, if you want to sustainably get better at, say, playing the piano, try practising for ten minutes a day at first and *making yourself stop* when the time is up, instead of keeping going just because you feel like you could. In doing this, you'll be actively entraining the 'muscle' of patience, and you'll find yourself more willing to keep returning to the practise on subsequent days.

The psychologist Robert Boice, who studied the habits of academic writers, found powerful evidence that this willingness to make only small daily progress was what led to the greatest productivity over the long haul. Writers who made writing only a modest part of their daily schedules – sometimes writing for just a few minutes, if they were just starting out, and never for more than about four hours a day – found it easy and enticing to keep returning to the work, which never became an intimidating and thus procrastination-inducing project. Many well-known writers, from Virginia Woolf to Martin Amis, have used similarly modest schedules to reach prolific success.

## THE HELINSKI BUS STATION THEORY

Finally, I want to share with you an idea that's come to be known as the Helsinki Bus Station Theory, which comes from Finnish-American photographer Arno Minkkinen. This is especially relevant to anyone who is interested in creative work, who's trying to get better at any kind of creative practice.

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What we do in our lives, what gives meaning to almost everything we do, is our capacity to solve these problems.

If you look at a map of the bus routes in Helsinki, Minkkinen liked to explain, they all start at the central terminus, and then for a long time, in the centre of the city they follow the same stops before later on, when they start branching out to take different routes. He told his photography students to think about each year of their career as one stop on a bus ride on one of these bus routes. At the first step in your career, you accumulate a bunch of photographs, and take it to a gallery. They then might say that your work is too derivative or too similar to another famous photographer. It turned out, metaphorically speaking, that that photographer's bus was following the same route as the student – stopping at all the same spots.

What people do then too often, Minkkinen would say, is that they get off the bus and they go back to the central bus station. They get on a different bus route, and they start taking a different kind of photograph, and they develop a whole portfolio of that kind of photograph. And then the same thing happens again. So Minkkinen asks his students what they think the answer is. How do you develop *originality* in your creative career, if every time you set off on a creative 'bus route', you find yourself at the same stops as those who've come before you? And the answer, he says, is 'stay on the fucking bus'. What he means is you have to be willing to go through those stages of unoriginality to find your angle. After following the same stops through the city, as the bus routes of Helsinki get to the outskirts of the city, they begin to branch off in many unique directions – but you would never know that if you were judging things by the earlier stops alone. It's only if you're patient enough to hang on during those earlier stops that you get to the more unique and interesting ones further along the journey.

I hope I've given you a taste of the ways in which developing patience, being willing to let things take the time they take, can actually be the path to greater productivity, fulfilment, and enjoyment. Personally, I would actually recommend that you go and find a work of art or a sculpture, and spend three hours looking at it, just to go through that experience! But even if you don't do that, cultivating patience – even when it entails discomfort – is a skill that can immediately reward you in terms both of your productivity and your peace of mind.

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## TAKEAWAYS

- Things take the time they take, it's not something you can do all that much to change – so there's power in being willing to go along with that, instead of always trying to hurry things onto your schedule.
- Patience is a superpower – because you can often get to a solution more quickly by being willing to go more slowly.
- Developing a taste for problems, practising radical incrementalism and just 'staying on the bus' can help you develop patience, and reap its rewards.

## EXERCISE

Find a painting or a sculpture in a gallery near you and look at it for at least half an hour. Three hours, preferably, as described above! The critical thing is that it ought to be for longer than feels reasonable to you. (Some galleries will provide collapsible seats...)

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# 15. Putting Planning In Its Place

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Let's talk about planning. Now, this is obviously a central part of how most people want to address the challenge of time management: come up with a plan! It could be a plan for the day, for the week, or the year. But... you need a plan, and presumably a detailed one.

Except that what we're doing a lot of the time, when we engage in planning, is something more emotional: we're trying to achieve a sense of confidence about the future. But it's a level of confidence that in fact we as humans cannot attain about the future – because you can't ever really be sure about how the next few hours, let alone the next weeks or months are going to go. We live in denial of the truth that anything could happen, at any moment. **Very often, planning is an attempt to reach out into the future from the present and bring things under our control, so we can feel calmer about it.**

Now, there's certainly nothing wrong with trying to keep track of where you're going, nor with trying to be ambitious about where you want to get. But a lot of the time, as the Buddhist teacher Joseph Goldstein has said, we forget that a *plan* is just a thought. A plan is something that you come up with in the present moment, as a statement of intent about where you want to be. And that's fine! But what it isn't is some sort of magic tool for forcing into reality your preferences about how things should go.

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## THE PROBLEM WITH PLANNING

What always ends up happening, when we focus too much energy or emotion on planning, is one of two things. Either the plan doesn't work, or the plan does work – and both of them cause a problem. If the plan doesn't work, you experience stress and frustration because life hasn't gone the way you wanted. On the other hand, sometimes plans work perfectly – and then you find yourself spending your life plodding through the plan in a way that feels oppressive and boring and lifeless.

It often makes me feel better to have a plan in place, and that's fine. But don't mistake that for a way of causing the future to go a certain way. To successfully navigate through reality, we need a much more flexible approach than most kinds of planning methodologies allow for.

I think the reason I've always been a bit of a compulsive planner is that I come from a family of compulsive planners. Yet what you find, if you're somebody who's always trying to plan for the future, is that you never actually get to the peace of mind that you're chasing! Because even if you really brilliantly plan the whole of the next month, and even if it goes according to plan, you then realise there's just another month after that, and another month after that. Even if things go perfectly, there's no rest.

It's actually much more powerful, if you want to do creative work, to hold plans very loosely and to use them as navigational aids. If you feel really excited to work on one element of a project, for example, and not right now on the other three, it's a real shame if you've designed a system of planning that says you've



got to work on the other three that day. What you want to be able to do instead is to surf those moods, and use the energy that comes from what you want to do, even if it doesn't fit closely with a plan.

At the end of the day, there's something really liberating about the fact that you only ever get the next moment to deal with anyway. You can make these plans – but actually, the only moment that you ever have to do anything with is this one. Carl Jung, the great Swiss psychologist, said that the foolproof way to build a meaningful life is not to try to find out what rules to follow, or what religion to follow, or what plan you should make for your life – but just to do what he called 'the next most necessary thing' in each moment.

**And it's incredibly freeing, because you realise that you don't have to take responsibility for your life. You just have to take responsibility for the very next moment of your life.**

There's a Dutch Zen monk called Paul Loomans who has a wonderful technique. What he suggests doing, at the start of each day, is to make a list of the things that it's important for you to get done. Bring them into your consciousness, get a piece of paper, write those things down, maybe envisage yourself completing those tasks... but then fold that list and put it away. Don't keep it as a companion going through your day, making you feel bad, directing you to do certain things rather than other things, no matter what emotional state you might be in. No! Put it away, and instead trust that your intuition will help you recall the most important things when it counts. Planning is helpful – but it doesn't help to use a plan as something to try to force reality into a conceptual box. Reality will always resist being forced into a conceptual box. **And in the end, all you can ever do is the next most necessary thing.**

## TAKEAWAYS

- **What we're doing a lot of the time, when we engage in planning, is trying to achieve a sense of confidence about the future that in fact humans can't ever attain.**
- **It's actually much more powerful, if you want to do your work creatively, to hold plans very loosely and to use them as navigational aids.**
- **In the end, all you can ever do is the next most necessary thing.**

## EXERCISE

Tomorrow morning, use Paul Loomans's list technique: get a piece of paper, write down the things you'd like to accomplish today, go through each one in turn, briefly and gently visualising the process of completing them – and then fold up the list and put it away. Go about your day being guided by your intuition rather than the list.

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# 16. Becoming News Resilient & Living Amidst Uncertainty

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We've been speaking in a lot of this course about uncertainty in general, and how to go about making the most of your time in conditions where you can't know what's coming in the future. But in recent years, for many people, the issue of what's going on in the wider world – in the news headlines – has started to feel much more immediate and relevant. The anxiety and turmoil generated by events in the wider world has become a real challenge in terms of managing your time, keeping focused on what counts, and, when appropriate, responding to what's going on in the world at large.

## BECOMING A GOOD NEWS CONSUMER

**What this means for us as individuals trying to manage our time well and live happy lives is that we need to develop certain skills as news consumers.** In the last few years, many more people have begun, metaphorically speaking, to live *inside* the news, as if the news they encounter on social media was somehow more real than their real lives.

One of the things that's interesting to reflect on, when it comes to anxiety-inducing news stories, is that there is evidence that for many, many decades, that people have always believed themselves to be living in uniquely uncertain times. So it's really important for us to remember, in this era, that people have felt like this before. The attention economy would love us to believe that things have never been more uncertain, and that the stakes have never been higher. But there is no reason automatically to assume that this is the case. I want to outline three tactics that I think are really useful here.

## 3 WAYS OF BECOMING MORE NEWS RESILIENT

### VISIT THE NEWS – OCCASIONALLY

The first is about the basic approach I suggest taking towards the news, if this feels like an issue for you. You'll hear people telling you that you should just cut off from the news completely. Personally, I'm not an advocate of that particular approach to news consumption, though. The news sometimes does really matter! I think what you need to do instead is to switch to this idea that the news is something that you visit occasionally – you dip into it from your real life, rather than living in it. Maybe you have a specific time of day when you connect to the news, and then you walk away from it when that time is up. Or maybe you have a specific device on which you check the news. Limiting news consumption to specific physical places can also be really useful: if the news really does stress you out, make sure it doesn't come into your home. Only check it when you're out and about, or perhaps in a specific location outside the home.

The specific issue of anxiety-inducing news headlines may not be an issue for you, of course. But if there's any source of information in your life that it's bad for your mental health to marinate in, there are all these ways in which you can 'switch the default'. You can make it so that your general position is that you're not in that world, and then that you go into it occasionally when you need to.

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The point to understand is that there are certain ways in which your actions can have an effect, and certain ways in which they're not going to.

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#### CONSOLIDATE YOUR CARING

A second tactic is the idea of consolidating your caring. Anyone who really cares about the wider world often feels like they ought to be doing lots of things: donating to charities, volunteering and generally engaging with all the different issues that we read about and that trigger our compassion. The problem is that there are just too many of these causes for anybody to sanely respond to all of them.

I really like the advice of the writer David Cain who suggests that if you are someone with whom this resonates, consider consciously selecting one, two or three issues that are going to be 'your issues' – and give yourself permission to switch off from the others. Cain says: imagine you have a fixed amount of compassion. Because in a sense, you do. So embrace that finitude, and make more conscious decisions about where to most effectively apply it.

#### SELF-EFFICACY

The problem with the way we interact with the news today is that it puts us into a position where we're constantly engaged with big national and international stories. In other words, it places us directly into precisely the context in which we can't really have any individual effect. In that sort of situation, we lack what psychologists call a sense of self-efficacy. It's incredibly important to people's psychological wellbeing that they have a sense of self-efficacy; it's almost a form of torture to feel like you keep trying to have some kind of effect and yet nothing happens; it's like you're a ghost, like you don't exist. It's an incredibly distressing place to be in. And yet it is precisely this kind of dysfunctional situation that we are thrown into with regard to the news. Social media and the internet in general make us feel as though we're involved, and yet we can have almost no individual impact at the global level.

#### It's important to remember that taking action is the antidote to anxiety.

The point to understand is that there are certain ways in which your actions can have an effect, and certain ways in which they're not going to. Sitting on a social media platform railing angrily about a global situation *feels* like it ought to have some effect on that situation. But it never will, and you'll be left with that lack of self-efficacy. Actually signing up to volunteer for some organisation in your neighbourhood, or making a donation to an organisation where your money will make a difference? That's different. That will give you the sense of efficacy. And it's extraordinary how quickly that has an empowering effect and motivates you to do more.

So if this is an issue for you – if the news feels oppressive at times, and induces anxiety in a way that's inhibiting you from you using your time meaningfully – **take the issue seriously, and find some way in which you can actually make a concrete difference.**

## TAKEAWAYS

- If the news presents a challenge to your time management or your focus, you need to develop certain skills as a news consumer.
- To become more ‘news-resilient’, visit the news occasionally; develop a sense of self efficacy; and consolidate your caring.
- Focus on taking action: do something concrete, such as volunteering or giving money, in a context where you can really make a difference to a news issue that you care about.

## EXERCISE

Devise the protocol you’re going to use to control your news consumption. Will it be only at certain hours of the day, on certain days of the week, on certain devices, or at certain places? Don’t make the rules too complicated; you’ll be much more likely to follow them if they’re simple and easy to remember.

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# 17. Timewasting For Beginners: *Hobbies & The Radicalism Of Rest*

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Leisure sometimes feels like a topic that doesn't belong when we're talking about making the best use of time – because we feel we want to be focused on moving our projects forward and getting things done. And yet in fact if there's no space in a life for things that are fun, relaxing and restorative, then something's gone wrong with how you're using your time. Because what's the point in any of this if it isn't enjoyable?

## **REST FOR REST'S SAKE**

You tend to hear a lot these days about the importance of rest, but it's almost always in the context of resting so that you can do more work; in other words, it's an instrumental justification for rest. It's really interesting to look at this in a historical context, because if you go right back to the beginnings of philosophy to the work of Aristotle, his idea was that leisure is in fact the highest goal, an end in itself. **For him, leisure was the whole point of life, because it's the only thing that we do for itself alone.**

And so a trap that we fall into, if we're interested in trying to make the most of our time, can be that we focus on 'making the most' of our leisure time too. We then find that what we're doing with our time off is trying to develop a range of new skills, to reach a certain level of performance in a sport, or to read all the classics of literature, say... when actually this sort of instrumental approach ends up leaving us unduly focused on the future, treating leisure as just another job, another set of things we have to do. This helps make sense of the fact that surveys have consistently found that we actually have more leisure time available today than we did three or four decades ago – even though it feels, to almost

everybody, like we have less. Part of the reason for that is that we have come to treat our leisure time as something we really have to get the most out of and be productive about, so it doesn't feel like leisure.

## **IDLENESS IS GOOD**

Finding relaxation in leisure actually starts by being willing to have our leisure time not be constructive – to be willing to do things that feel like pure idleness, that feel like wasting time. We have to learn to waste time, in a certain sense, in order to not always be so relentlessly focused on the future. Often the kind of people who want to improve their lives – and take a course like this one – find that it's actually really hard to rest. It feels a bit unpleasant. It doesn't feel good, in that first moment when you slow down. The solution? You have to be willing to have the first moments of rest not feel that great in order to get through to the place beyond that, where it's going to feel truly nourishing and enjoyable.

And by the way, you shouldn't feel bad about finding it difficult to rest. The idea of a sabbath day exists, to a large extent, precisely because religious traditions recognised that relaxing was difficult, and needed the social pressure of a single agreed day. (The Jewish tradition also features many detailed rules about what you're not allowed to do – again, seemingly in recognition of the fact that if we don't have the rules, the first thing many of us will do is to look for ways to do more work!) Assuming you don't already belong to such a tradition, it can be useful to experiment with your own rules: not using digital devices for one day per week is a popular one. Simple is best: that way, you're less likely to forget and slide back to your ordinary behaviours.

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#### IN DEFENCE OF THE HUMBLE HOBBY

In terms of how to do this in a practical way, I want to make an argument for the benefits of having a hobby. It almost seems a little embarrassing, sometimes, to admit that you have a hobby. We tend to roll our eyes at people who enjoy stamp collecting or engaging in certain kinds of artistic pursuits that don't seem like they're really 'going anywhere'. This is a symptom of the culture we live in, but I think this attitude towards hobbies is completely wrong. Consider the example of Rod Stewart. I was completely astonished to discover, a few years ago, that he is obsessed with his giant model railway set. Now, this is a hobby that is clearly totally at odds with his image as a rocker. **It was a semi-secret for a large proportion of his career, until model railway enthusiasts got wind of it, and started interviewing him for their specialist magazines – but it's a really interesting example of something somebody's clearly doing just because he loves it. It's got no benefits to his career, it doesn't make him richer, it doesn't build his brand. He must just really enjoy model trains.**

Why do I think this is an inspiring example that you should learn from? Because it's an example of something that the philosopher Kieran Setiya calls an *atelic activity*. **This is an activity that you don't do because of its end point, but for itself alone.** One of my favourite atelic activities is hiking. You don't really go hiking for the fitness benefits, and you certainly don't hike in order to get anywhere, because you always end up back where you started. **You do it just because the doing of it is so enjoyable.**

#### IT'S GOOD TO BE BAD

**Indeed it's beneficial and fulfilling to do something that you're actually not very good at.** There's a real lack of pressure if there's something in your life where you're not always trying to accomplish things to a certain standard. For me this is playing the piano very badly, preferably when nobody's listening. It's an activity I find deeply relaxing and enriching precisely because I'm not trying to reach a certain standard. For me, writing, which is my professional work, is very different: I find writing really fulfilling, but I'm always wondering if I'm doing it well, and this sometimes gets in the way of enjoyment. Nobody's ever going to pay me a penny to play the piano, because I'm just not good enough at it and never will be – and so having that in my life is a really great source of pleasure and ultimately a very meaningful use of a portion of my finite time.

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## TAKEAWAYS

- Resting, stopping, and relaxing aren't always going to feel great right away, especially if you're the kind of ambitious person who's wired for productivity. So don't expect it to.
- The activities that we might end up doing with our leisure time, if they're going to be truly restful, are probably going to look a lot like idleness to the outside world.
- One particular way to try to suffuse your life with the spirit of rest is to make sure that you have space in it for a hobby, *something you're doing for itself alone*, not in order to try to get anywhere or to make money.

## EXERCISE

Take a real break, today. Even if it's only for five minutes. And even if it feels extremely uncomfortable, which it probably will! Do something that has no possible benefit for your future life, or for anyone else. Next step: choose a hobby, if you don't already have one, and start giving it regular space in your schedule...

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# 18. Synchrony & Time With Others

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The topic of time management can very easily end up seeming like an individual pursuit. But we live, constantly, with other people. **So considering this challenge in the real setting of coordinating and synchronising with other people is vital.**

We seem to have this idea that the ideal state would be to have total control over our individual time – it's as if the fantasy that we're pursuing, when we get into ideas of time management and productivity, is that we are the individual sovereigns of our time, aspiring to total control over how each of our hours unfold. But when people actually get the opportunity to do this in their lives... well, things end up going wrong.

## THE DOWNSIDE OF BEING A DIGITAL NOMAD

You might have heard of the concept of the digital nomad, a lifestyle choice that in the last decade or two has become very popular, thanks to the internet and affordable international travel. A digital nomad is someone who can run their professional life – their self-employed business, perhaps – from their computer, wherever they are, on a beach in Guatemala, or a mountain in the Alps. I'm not saying this is a bad thing to do with your life, exactly. But the problem that digital nomads will tell you they encounter, all the time, is *loneliness*. They set out to do exactly what they wanted with their time, whenever they wanted – and they found that, through getting that freedom, they'd actually fallen out of synchronisation with other people.

Now obviously most of us aren't digital nomads. **But this example illustrates something really interesting that does apply to all of us, which is that we have a tendency to think of our time as something over which we want sole control, yet in fact almost all the things that are worth doing in life – whether we're**

**talking about family life, raising children, building businesses, pursuing creative practices or changing the world – require us to coordinate our time with other people.**

## BUDGET GOOD vs. NETWORK GOOD

The technical language for this in economics can be explained through the phrases 'budget good' and 'network good'. The more of a budget good you have, the better. For example, money is a budget good. We mistakenly think of time as a budget good, when actually it's a network good. A good example of a network good is a telephone: a telephone gets its value not simply because you have one, but because lots of other people have one, too. And time works like that as well: **we need to have our time be coordinated with other people's time, otherwise it's not much use.**

So, in fact, whenever we make a change in our lives that gives us more freedom, that enables us to determine to a greater degree how we are using our time, the downside to this is that we may fall out of sync with the rest of the world, and find that we can't necessarily have the fulfilling lives that we'd hoped to create.

## OUT OF SYNC IN MODERN TIMES

It's often really hard even just to meet up with a friend for a drink, because we are all operating on different schedules – but it didn't used to be this way. If you look back in history at more traditional societies, there was much more rhythmic coordination of time. In fact, it's really only the last decade or so that technology has completely eroded these rhythms. In the past, you could only work when you were at work, because offices were open at certain times, and closed the rest

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of the time. It's still a relatively recent development that some people have the option of bringing their work home with them. **And technology has caused the boundaries between work and time off to smear, so that you can do work at any time of day – which means you're never fully free from it.**

#### WHAT CAN WE LEARN FROM SWEDISH LUNCH BREAKS

In Sweden I had the chance to attend a ritual that's very common in many Swedish workplaces called the fika, which is basically a coffee break – although Swedish people take it rather more seriously than that. **What's unique about the fika is that everybody in a given workplace is encouraged to take that break at the same time, and to gather collectively.** People in the Swedish corporate world report amazing benefits to this – not just in well-being, but also as an opportunity for senior members of the organisation to get a better sense of what's going on at other parts of the organisation. None of this would happen if their workplace was so focused on individual freedom that everyone was taking their coffee break whenever they wanted – or, what more usually ends up happening in those workplaces, which is that people never get round to taking a coffee break at all, and just keep on working through.

It's not just synchronised coffee breaks that boost Scandinavian happiness, either. Research from Sweden has also demonstrated that people there benefit from the fact that their holidays are more likely to take place at the same time than in some other countries. It's not just that holidays make people happier, but that holidays make us more happy if they're taken at the same time as other people – perhaps because it makes it easier to visit friends, or because you don't need to worry about work piling up in your absence.

#### MAKE TIME FOR GROUP ACTIVITIES

I want to end this lesson with a few thoughts about how you can take advantage of the collective benefits of working in synchrony with other people. The first of these is the time-honoured advice to *sign up for extracurricular groups that meet regularly*, like for example sports groups or amateur singing. It sounds really simple – but in fact the very act of signing up is itself a certain surrendering of freedom: you'll all be meeting at a specific time, each week, and it won't be up to you to change the time on a whim. **It's a really powerful way to bring your life a little bit more into sync with other people – and you will benefit not just from the activity that you're doing at that time, but from the very fact that you're doing it with a whole lot of other people who have made a similar shared commitment to be there.**

**The second thing you can do is to loosen your grip on your schedule a little bit, to be more willing to have your day determined by other people's rhythms and to not be completely obsessed with trying to shut out interruptions. Instead, once you've been interrupted, give the source of the interruption your full attention – even if you then do your best to return to a state of solitary focus afterwards.**

Ultimately, it's absolutely essential to a meaningful experience of our finite time on the planet to understand that it isn't just about each one of us individually, but about how our time gets shared with each other.

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## TAKEAWAYS

- We believe that the ideal state of life would be total control over our individual time, but that's a mistake.
- Almost all things that are worth doing in life, from family life and raising children to building businesses or changing the world, require us to coordinate our time with other people.
- To practise this, join clubs or organisations that meet on a schedule you don't get to control; and practise loosening your grip on your schedule.

## EXERCISE

Sign up for something: a club, an event, a meeting, a religious service. If it doesn't have a sign-up procedure, put it in your calendar and make arrangements as necessary to be able to attend. Don't worry about choosing the 'right' thing, right now; the much more important point is to make one commitment and stick to it.

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# 19. Cosmic Insignificance Therapy

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In this lesson, I want to try to persuade you that each of us is almost completely insignificant in the scheme of history – but that this isn't the incredibly depressing fact it might seem, but actually a very useful and liberating thing to remember, when it comes to figuring out how to make the most of your time.

Let's start with a thought experiment that comes from the philosopher Bryan Magee. He pointed out that when we look back at human history, we tend to think about the various periods of history advancing very, very slowly: the times of antiquity, followed much later by the Middle Ages, the Renaissance, and so on. But in fact, if you look at it in a slightly different way, all of human history has unfolded in the blink of an eye. Think about it this way: somewhere today, somebody is turning one hundred years old. If we went back in time to the day on which that person was born, somebody else that day was turning a hundred as well. Go back to the day they were born – and so on. If you think about it this way, you can envisage a chain of end to end hundred-year lives of real people, reaching back and back through history. Well, it turns out that it only takes 35 of those end-to-end lifetimes to get us back to the Golden Age of the Egyptian pharaohs! It takes 20 to get us approximately to the time when Jesus was alive. It takes five or six of them to get to the time when Henry the Eighth was on the throne of England: we're only separated from the time of Henry the Eighth by five or six lifetimes! It's nothing. **If you look at it in this way, the whole of human history has unfolded in the blink of an eye.**

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## WHY YOU DON'T NEED TO PUT A DENT IN THE UNIVERSE

If you take Bryan Magee's point that human history, from this perspective, has been a very brief thing – well, then, an individual human life is nothing when you set it against the backdrop of cosmic time. Think about how often, when it comes making the most of your time, you hear the advice that we need to change the world – to 'put a dent in the universe', to quote Steve Jobs. Many people end up feeling that in order to have used their time well, they need to have done something amazing, something astounding, that is going to resonate down the centuries. They want to leave a legacy that people are going to care about hundreds and hundreds of years from now. And yet given how insignificant an individual human life is in the scheme of things, that's clearly a ridiculous standard to which to hold our life. **If you decide that what you do with your time is only meaningful if it's going to be remembered hundreds or thousands of years from now, that's an enormous and unhelpful amount of pressure to put on your life.**

Something that the ancient Stoic philosophers of Greece and Rome realised – and that I invite you to explore now – is that there's actually something very stress-reducing about this message. If you feel like you're facing an incredibly momentous decision, the realisation that a few hundred years from now it's not going to make any difference is a huge weight lifted from your shoulders. It enables you to take more bolder and more confident choices when it comes to what you do with your time, when you really know and remember that it doesn't necessarily matter that much in the very long term. That history moves on.



## IT'S NOT ALL ABOUT YOU

We all have what psychologists call an egocentricity bias, which means that we tend to instinctively put our place and time in history right at the centre of everything. This is where what I call 'cosmic insignificance therapy' can really make a difference. It's very difficult to stay completely wrapped up and enmeshed in your worries when you have a perspective that enables you to see that they don't hugely matter in the scheme of things. This can enable us to take more courageous risks in the way that we use our time.

Some people want to respond: well, but if we're so insignificant in the scheme of things, why do anything? Why does anything matter? But what we need to understand here is that holding your life to a standard of meaning that demands that it matters for centuries to come is an arbitrary and unhelpful standard of meaning. I'd like to encourage you to relax your standards for what counts as a meaningful life – and as a result, to be freed up to take bold choices, try things, enjoy things, because it doesn't matter quite as much as you might have assumed. Additionally, you might see that there are all sorts of things you're already doing with your time that truly matter, that truly count – even if they're not all that enormously significant in the scheme of things.



## TAKEAWAYS

- Each of us is almost completely insignificant in the scheme of history – but to understand this can be useful and liberating.
- If you decide that the things that you do with your time are only meaningful if they're going to be remembered hundreds of years from now, you put an enormous amount of pressure on yourself.
- However, if you relax your standards for what counts as a meaningful life, you'll become freer to take bold choices and try things, with the knowledge that it doesn't matter quite as much as you might have assumed if things don't work out.

## EXERCISE

To get a calming and empowering dose of perspective, try the 'zooming-out' exercise derived from the ancient Stoics of Greece and Rome. You can either close your eyes and visualise it in your mind's eye – or use Google Earth to make the process especially vivid. Start with your current location, the building or outdoor space where you're reading this, then zoom out to the level of the street, to the surrounding area, out to the level of the nation, the continent, then to the globe, and to the planet as a whole, suspended silently in space... The process is a startling reminder of how tiny each of us is, in the scheme of things, and it can also help to connect you to a deep sense of stillness beneath the activity of daily life. Return yourself to daily life, if you like, by mentally zooming back down to your surroundings.

# 20. Everyone Is Winging It

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One huge impediment for many people, when it comes to making the most of their time, is impostor syndrome: the feeling that you don't know what you're doing, that you're a bit of a fraud – and that everyone else around you knows what they're doing far better than you do. Sometimes this manifests in low self-esteem, and sometimes it manifests in what looks like really high self-esteem, due to people being desperate to prove that they're not as inadequate as they secretly fear. If any of that resonates with you, the message I'd like to communicate here is not that you aren't an imposter. **It's that everyone is an imposter.**

The truth, from everyone's experience, and also from psychological research, is that we are all winging it, all the time. And when you internalise that message, it's incredibly liberating: it enables you to move forward with the projects that you care about most in your life, rather than waiting for a fictional time in the future when you're finally going to feel ready and fully qualified to do them.

## EVERYONE HAS SELF DOUBT

It's really important to remember that, while it might feel like you're the only person who has this internal monologue of self-doubt, that's not the case. You can only hear *your* internal monologue, but almost everyone else has one as well. It's just that you're not party to it! The mistake we make, as the old saying goes, is to 'compare our insides to everyone else's outsides'; we mistake other people's outer confidence for inner confidence that often isn't there at all – and we likewise assume that because we're not feeling confident on the inside, we must be appearing incompetent on the outside. **It's an error to wait until you feel completely ready, when it comes to using your time well.**

To put things off is just another manifestation of a theme that's been running throughout this course, which is the desire for control over time. **The liberating truth is that the only difference between you and the people who have already launched their big, ambitious projects is that they were willing to move forward in this condition of winging it, without knowing what would happen next, rather than waiting for a different kind of feeling.** It requires trust in yourself, but it's immensely freeing in the end, because it means that you stop postponing the life that really matters.

## ADOPT A 'BEGINNER'S MIND'

It really helps to be honest with yourself about the fact that you don't know exactly what you're doing, rather than trying to persuade yourself that you do. In the Zen Buddhist tradition, there's an idea called *beginner's mind*, and as a famous proverb in that tradition goes: 'In the beginner's mind there are many possibilities, in the expert's mind there are few.' The point is that when you're really honest with yourself about how little you know, that makes you receptive to learning, receptive to new ideas. It makes you receptive to taking advice, gleaning insights from other people and doing original things. If you're too confident that you know what you're doing, there's a narrowing of focus that makes you less creative.

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## TAKEAWAYS

- Impostor syndrome can be a huge impediment to ambitious and meaningful use of time, but realising that everyone is an impostor can liberate you.
- It's an error to wait until you feel ready, because to put things off is just another manifestation of the desire for control over time.
- If you adopt a 'beginner's mind', it makes you receptive to taking advice, gleaning insights from other people, and doing more original things.

## EXERCISES

As a reflective exercise I'd invite you to ask of your own life where you might be holding back until you feel like you know what you're doing. Then ask: what you might be able to begin doing, today, once you realised that the moment at which you felt like you know what you're doing was never going to arrive?

Find a place to sit where people will be passing you by. Discretely, and briefly (and non-confrontationally!) study people as they pass by, and imagine what's going on inside their heads. Can you look past their confident exteriors to intuit some of the doubt inside? What does it feel like to look on a busy street as being full of people as insecure as you sometimes feel yourself?



## **21. How To Choose What Matters**

So, the ultimate question: what are the things that we should spend our time on, in order to live a meaningful and fulfilling life? I get asked this a lot, and I'm going to explain, first of all, why I always try and dodge it. But then, secondly, how I think we can each go about answering it for ourselves.

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As the celebrated poet Rilke said, the point isn’t so much to come up with solid answers to these questions; it’s to live the questions.

The reason I try to evade the question is that clearly, at the end of the day, if you're not doing things that matter to you, in some sense of the word, then all other time management advice is pointless. I hope the main effect of this course will have been to help you clear up certain mistakes about how we relate to time, certain ways we distract ourselves with stress or anxiety or procrastination or digital distraction, so that when we've been released from those, we'll be free to think about what matters to us personally and more able to pursue those things. So it isn't really a matter of me giving you a list of the things you ought to care about.

But that's not quite all I have to say about the matter. I think the really key tactic here, when it comes to actually making all of this concrete, is not advice from me or from anybody else about the things that you ought to be doing with your life, it's questions that you can ask yourself. As the celebrated poet Rilke said, the point isn't so much to come up with solid answers to these questions; it's to live the questions. The point is just to keep these questions current in your life, and to navigate according to the thoughts and feelings they evoke in you.

I'm going to share with you three questions that have been really powerful for me, and for other people. It's worth reflecting on the answers – again, not expecting to have incredibly clear answers straight away, but keeping the questions in your mind.

## 1. WHERE SHOULD YOU CHOOSE DISCOMFORT?

The first of these questions is: where in your life are you currently making choices in the service of comfort, when what's called for is actually a little discomfort? You'll be familiar, of course, with the idea that you should not remain in your comfort zone. Every self-help guru and personal development expert talks about this. I think there's a subtler way of approaching this question, which is not 'do as many things that make you as uncomfortable as possible'! It's asking instead where your choices in life are actually being determined by choosing to do the easiest thing, when you know that you could actually tolerate the discomfort that would come from doing the more important thing. This might be something to do with procrastination; failing to have started something that you know you want to start; failing to have committed more deeply to a relationship that you want to commit to; failing to make progress in learning a skill, and so on. There'll be something where you know deep down, on an intuitive level, that it's really just a question of being willing to experience a little bit more discomfort.

## 2. HAVE YOU YET TO ACCEPT WHO YOU ARE?

The second question is a really powerful one: in what ways, in your life, have you yet to accept *that you are the person you are*, rather than the person you think you should be? This is a question that goes right to the deepest levels of our psychology. It's very easy for many people to spend years thinking that at some point, some outside authority is going to tell them that they've succeeded. But that is not the case. So this is your reminder that if there is a thing that you feel like you're here to do in your work, or outside your work, there's really no reason to carry on not doing it. It doesn't serve anybody else for you to suppress the person that you know, in your heart of hearts, is who you are.

## 3. DOES THIS ENLARGE OR DIMINISH ME?

Finally, the third question, one which I found tremendously useful when it comes to making good decisions about how to use my finite time. It's a question that comes from the Jungian psychotherapist James Hollis, who suggests that we ask, at important junctures in our lives, whether the choice we're thinking of making *enlarges* or *diminishes* us. This is an alternative to asking the question 'Will this make me happy?' which is what we instinctively want to ask ourselves. There's a lot of research to show that we are incredibly bad judges of what's going to make us happy. We mess this up all the time. We're convinced that certain kinds of possessions and certain kinds of life changes would bring us total happiness, then we find out that they don't. Additionally, frequently, things that are worth doing – that make us feel fulfilled – don't necessarily make us feel happy at all in the short term.

**So this question – does it enlarge me or diminish me?** – is really useful for many people, as Hollis points out, because it connects to an intuitive level in our psyches. You know the answer to that question, usually, in your gut. You know whether you are on a path that is helping you grow, that's leading to interesting new experiences, that's helping you mature and become more integrated as a person – or whether it's one that's gradually causing your soul to shrivel.

**What's so interesting is that this question helps you distinguish between certain kinds of difficulties that you encounter in life. It helps you distinguish between the kind of difficulties that are part of the path, the kind of difficulties you ought to push through, and the kind of difficulties that are warning signs that you're in a bad career or a bad relationship and should make plans to leave it.**

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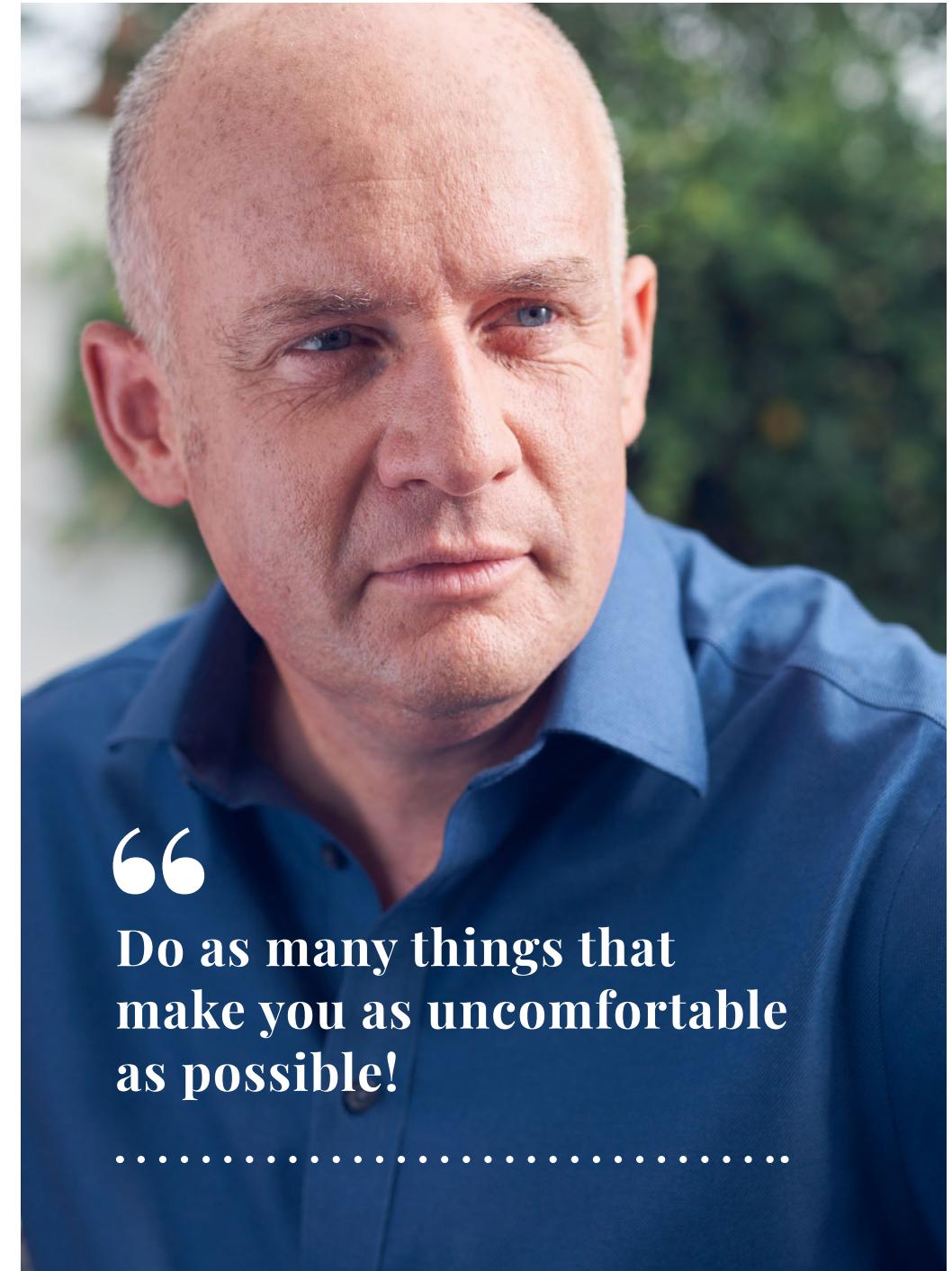
## TAKEAWAYS

- At the end of the day, if you're not doing things that matter to you, in some sense of the word, then all other time management advice is pointless.
- It's key to ask where your choices in life are actually being determined by choosing to do the easiest thing, when you know that, in fact, you could tolerate the discomfort that would come from doing the more important thing.
- To spend your time well, you must be yourself. It doesn't serve anybody else for you to suppress the person that you know, in your heart of hearts, is who you are.
- Actively asking yourself the question 'does it enlarge me or diminish me?' can be really useful when making tough choices.

## EXERCISE

Pick one of the questions above and spend 10 minutes writing any thoughts that it triggers in a notebook or journal. Remember, you're not trying to 'answer' the question, so a useful strategy is to just keep your pen moving (or your fingers typing) until time's up, no matter what words are coming out. This exercise embodies a general stance that you can develop in lots of other contexts, too – not 'trying to find an answer' so much as giving yourself the space and permission to explore your reactions to the question. Which turns out often to be a more efficient path to a solution in any case...

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**Do as many things that make you as uncomfortable as possible!**

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## 22. Conclusion: *Starting From Sanity*

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Over this course we've explored how to make the most of your finite time on the planet, and I wanted to close with some final thoughts about taking this perspective out into the world. I'm talking here primarily about *mindset* – but perhaps not in the way that you might assume. **What really matters here is being okay with the fact that changing how you manage your time is a lifelong journey. It isn't a shift of perspective that you can expect to plug into your mind, reorganise your to-do lists, and then never falter from for the rest of your life.** In fact, to expect that is part of the same kind of desire for perfectionism and omnipotence and limitlessness that I've been pushing back against, criticising all the way through this course. **What you need to do is to understand instead that meaningfully using your time will always be a matter of just imperfectly taking one action after another.**

### STARTING FROM SANITY

'Starting from sanity' is the phrase I use to encapsulate the notion that if you want to have a healthier relationship with time, it's never going to work if what you do is to set up a goal for having that saner relationship, sometime in the future. That kind of attitude is just going to cause you to be constantly postponing the meaning of life into the future. Instead, you have to just decide right here and now, that you're going to have a more realistic, sane and peaceful attitude to time – and then move forward with this new perspective into the world, into your overfilled inbox, into your overwhelming to-do list, and all the rest of it. Don't try to tame those things *first*. Adopt a stance of sanity first, and interact with those things from that standpoint.

### YOU'RE READY NOW

I think there's a tendency, especially with courses, that you get to the end of the hours that you've invested in them, and then you make a plan to take all the information that you've learned and start a new big project of putting it into practice. So you end the course not so much in a state of having done something so much as having given yourself a whole new big list of *things to do*. Again, that falls into the trap we've discussed where it actually becomes an obstacle to changing your life, because it becomes a whole new project. **The message that I'd seek to leave you with here is that if you've got to this point in this course, you're already ready to have a different relationship with time.** Just come into the present moment right here and now, and decide that right after this lesson ends, you're going to do one thing that you've been meaning to get around to – to actually spend a portion of your finite hours in some way that you consider meaningful.

I spoke earlier in the course about the experience that I had on a park bench in Prospect Park in Brooklyn, where I was desperately trying to figure out how I could make the time for all the things that I felt I had to do. I had a dawning realisation that it was impossible – and that I was trying to do more things than a person *could* do in the time I had. Whereupon I experienced a feeling of amazing liberation. You don't need to try to do the impossible, because it's impossible; instead, you can make the decision to do a few important things, in a way that actually is possible. This embodies the truth that starting from sanity and from a peaceful relationship with time does entail accepting a certain kind of defeat.

## ALLOW YOURSELF TO BE DEFEATED

This stance involves letting go of a certain unattainable thing that you always thought you had to achieve, which was this ability to be all things to all people, to be on top of absolutely everything, to fulfil every possible ambition that could spring to your mind, to fulfil every obligation that you feel from other people. So it does involve a kind of defeat.

But once you can surrender, even just a little bit, that's actually when you become empowered. In other words, you get to stop trying to fight an impossible fight. You get to stop trying to reach an impossible kind of total mastery of time that was never on the cards for any human being to begin with – and instead you get to roll up your sleeves and get stuck into what is actually possible to do, to build a truly meaningful, energised and fulfilling life.

## TAKEAWAYS

- Spending your time well is always a matter of just imperfectly taking one action after another.
- If you want to change your relationship with time you have to decide, right here and now, that you're going to have a more sane and peaceful attitude to time, rather than putting that off to the future.
- If you've got to this point in this course, you're already ready to have a different relationship with time. So start today.



# Conclusion Coda: *It's Worse Than You Think (& That's Good News)*

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I truly hope you find the ideas, the shifts of perspective and techniques that we've been exploring together in this course to be useful. As you take them back out into your life, I want to leave you with a thought that has been very powerful for me, a really classic example of the kind of insight which I love – that is, one which sounds, on the surface, potentially depressing, but as soon as you think about it more deeply, is revealed as wonderfully liberating.

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**There will always be more things that you could do than time in which to do them.**

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It's this: when it comes to the challenges and difficulties we experience with time, the situation is really a lot worse than we think it is! If you can truly internalise how bad things are, you'll see why that's actually the stepping-stone to a productive and fulfilling life. Let me explain. We tend to go through our lives thinking that the problem of having an incredibly long to-do list, for example, is really a serious problem; trying to get everything done feels like it would be really difficult. In fact, it's worse than you think! It's not really difficult – it's completely impossible! There will always be more things that you could do than time in which to do them.

Similarly, we tend to fret and worry about wanting to know how our lives are going to unfold. We think that getting a real sense of control over the future is incredibly challenging, that it requires us to feel anxious about it all the time, to make plans all the time. But in fact it's worse than you think: it's not incredibly challenging; it's impossible! We cannot have the kind of control and certainty about the future that so many of us crave. And in that shift from things being really difficult to things being impossible, there's a moment when a burden is lifted from our shoulders. When we see that, there's no longer any reason to distract ourselves with this impossible struggle to get on top of everything, to move forward on every single task, chore and obligation. You can instead focus on using your time to do a handful of things that really matter to you.

## PUTTING DOWN THE IMPOSSIBLE BURDEN

There's a Zen master called Hōun Jiyū-Kennett who said that her approach to teaching students was not to lighten the burden of the student, but to make the burden so heavy that he or she would put it down. I've always loved that idea, because to me it conveys this whole idea very well. The problem we have is in thinking that there ought to be some kind of solution to the fact that we are finite human beings, with very limited control over the limited time we have. But there's no solution to that situation, because that's just what it is to be human. If you can internalise that, and apply a few of the techniques I've suggested in this course, this will help you step more fully into the expression of being a finite human – and to use your limited time on the planet to do a handful of things that truly count.

## TAKEAWAYS

- Unexpectedly, the path to psychological freedom often lies not in trying to make our situation seem easier than it is, but understanding instead that it's worse than we realised.
- If you feel that getting on top of everything, or feeling certain about the future, is really hard, you'll put a lot of effort into trying to get there. But if you see that it's impossible, you'll invest your energies in more constructive things instead.
- Being a finite human isn't a problem in need of a solution. It's just how things are. Embracing it is the path to a deeply meaningful, joyful and accomplished life.



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# Appendix: Reading List

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## BOOKS BY OLIVER BURKEMAN

*The Antidote: Happiness for People Who Can't Stand Positive Thinking*

*Four Thousand Weeks: Time Management for Mortals*

## BOOKS BY OTHER AUTHORS

Jessica Abel  
*Growing Gills: How to Find Creative Focus When You're Drowning in Your Daily Life*

David Allen  
*Getting Things Done: The Art of Stress-Free Productivity*

Jason Gregory  
*Effortless Living: Wu-wei and the Spontaneous State of Natural Harmony*

James Hollis  
*Finding Meaning in the Second Half of Life*

Anne Lamott  
*Bird by Bird: Some Instructions on Writing and Life*

*Time Surfing: The Zen Approach to Keeping Time on Your Side*  
Paul Loomans

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Greg McKeown  
*Essentialism: The Disciplined Pursuit of Less*

Cal Newport  
*Deep Work: Rules for Focused Success in a Distracted World*

Jenny Odell  
*How to Do Nothing: Resisting the Attention Economy*

Dean Rickles  
*Life is Short: An Appropriately Brief Guide to Making it More Meaningful*

Kieran Setiya  
*Midlife: A Philosophical Guide*

Joan Tollifson  
*Death: The End of Self-Improvement*

Shinzen Young  
*The Science of Enlightenment: How Meditation Works*

**NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLER**

# Four Thousand Weeks

PICADOR

"Provocative and appealing . . . An enjoyable, insightful, and occasionally profound book, one well worth your extremely limited time."  
—The Wall Street Journal

# Time Management for Mortals



**Oliver Burkeman**

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