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## Dispatches from productivity purgatory

I began as an attending urologist 15 years ago, in August 2010. Life's busyness ramped up suddenly with new consults, new workflows, ongoing CME, a place on the teaching calendar, and some new research expectations. Add in a 21-month-old, a new-old house, and a life outside work — time was tight and the task list was sizzling. My response was dignified, comprehensive, and courageous: a water-tight productivity system with plenty of room for leisure and life. The basics, so you too can clock in and lock in:

- Universal capture: get thoughts and obligations out of your head and onto a list
- Daily processing + weekly planning: deadlines and events on your calendar; a verb on every to-do; prioritize on the urgent/important quadrant in deep work blocks; cement leisure time
- Limit work-in-progress: level-up cognitive engagement and ship meaningful work
- Manage energy, not just time: light work during the lulls; big thinking when you're at full power
- Kill distractions: notifications and email off; phone in another room; Bose cans with lofi beats

Regrettably, none of this actually happened. I am a scholar of productivity porn, but my actual "system" is a collage of hacks, neither courageous nor dignified. My to-do list (currently a "kanban" system called Trello + a sneeze of sticky notes + two gridded note pads + 13.7K unread emails) is good intention's mausoleum.

### II

Entering study mode for my boards in January 2008, unpleasant work and unbound time had me scurrying for distraction and structure, and I stumbled upon David Allen's *Getting Things Done* (GTD), the gateway drug built on the axiom "the mind is for having ideas, not holding them" through a system much like the points

above.<sup>1</sup> I was buying index cards and downloading Remember the Milk, Things, and Omnifocus, mere days away from OS perfection. Always mere days away.

I am the mayor of Prochaska's third Stage of Change: preparation.<sup>2</sup> I'm past contemplation and ever gearing for action. A system tweak, the right notebook, weekly calendar crafted just so. I've discovered a hidden stage between preparation and action, and I ride it like Laird Hamilton: I'm \*utterly convinced\* that next week is my week for action, my brain \*knows\* the prep is already done and I will fall effortlessly into productivity, exercise, eating Greek yogurt and not three mini Coffee Crisps. It is, however, a trap door, not a launchpad.

I found myself in what I now see as a "productivity life cycle," to which my bookshelf will attest. After fussing about a bulletproof method and finding it imperfect, I blamed *procrastination* and dove into books to uncover the missing hack to hypnotize myself into zero-delay action. I did not stop procrastinating.

The next epiphany: the real culprit is *focus*! I read *Deep Work* and *Indistractable* and *Atomic Habits* and *Flow* and the lot, and bought a timer for "pomodoro" sessions in order to batch tasks and carve out uninterrupted time (!!!) for the big rocks. I gleaned many pearls, and my best work self is in those sequestered moments, though I have never made this stick. Three hours of delicious forward progress is a muscle I haven't developed, though I remain a believer and Cal Newport acolyte.

Eventually, hopefully peacefully, one comes around to futility or *finitude*. Each task performed equals others that will never happen. 4000 Weeks is my favourite here, though the bookshelf is building.<sup>3</sup> I'm feeling the inevitability, and seeing a place of peace, here, but like most of us, I am still subject to high afferent and stockpiled tasks, so I look wistfully at a few tweaks to the system to make it just so...

## III

I have a condition called procrastination. You've experienced it too, of course, but I'm here to one-up you and psychoanalyze myself; perhaps you'll see yourself here. The real issue is the second-order effects of self-reproach and disservice to others with whom you might share your time. Scrambling at a deadline is a grim feeling, but punting on leisure and family time, slinking out of work after a hopeless office half-day, and glancing at that cool dead project languishing on a list is wrenching stuff. Walking to work and feeling the *certainty* about a day slaying endpoints dissipate into the slide to collapse the day into emails, milling about, and reelmaxxing on the 'gram is exasperating.

I have made procrastination an art. Remember when you were cranking through that grant? I was sorting my Gmail by attachment size. Fussing about the analysis for that paper so you could get it back to the co-authors? I was harassing you in your office. Grinding it out, weaving together a key policy for your team, at work, during the workday? I was watching people get trapped in caves on YouTube.

I haven't latched on to the abiding theory that procrastination equals not wanting to do the work. I'm all for lying on a couch with my phone any time, but most of the work I have to do, at least the projects and non-email work, is interesting and fulfilling. Yet here's a man, lying on the couch, detonating a reasonable bedtime and then cramming frenzied work into the least healthy corners of his week.

Where I see myself as a procrastinator is in a general impulsivity and easily-reprogrammed executive function. I have a very low threshold for collapse of whatever attention- and goal-maintenance structures I'm deploying when some low-cognitive-investment opportunity arises. Any distraction is a derailment, and an easy slide down the slope of activation energy to return to real work.

My least pleasant thought is procrastination arising as lowering the stakes on the quality of output. You pride yourself on quality output at the task level, but what would it mean to reveal your *best possible body of work*, rather than retaining some sense of reserve or potential? I'm not so sure I believe in this, or that it trumps attention management, aversion, or discounting future for present demands, but my Trello graveyard persists.

## IV

Hyperbole aside, I admit zooming out reveals a picture inconsistent with task paralysis. After all, I made time to read all those books! It's healthy to reflect on what

goes right, and most have a (literal) paper trail of jobs well done. For me, the greatest predictor is external accountability: people and deadlines. I have never been able to abide false deadlines I've created, but for others I feel fealty to come through (maybe a few days late here and there ;). This is classic in goal setting, in which one finds an accountability partner to keep them reminded of their intentions.

Second is adhering to universal capture. Much as my phone is a siren, it is a place to dictate ideas into notes as they occur. A wee pad and pen will do this too. Having a place where the to-dos live is a necessary (but oh boy, not sufficient) condition to complete them. That list remains a place of potential and a reminder of good intentions

And I confess there are occasions (how I wish I could bottle and then invoke them at will!) where I do find a moment's time and attention, ideally immediately upon accepting a task. Just a few minutes to brain-dump thoughts, think on a flow or scaffold, mind-map, or pull reference material opens a channel in your mental RAM that keeps the project in play subconsciously. Your capture device is then ready when relevant ideas bubble up. This idea of a slow simmer is a salve; when beating up on myself after a lost afternoon, I know some morsel of my mind is on task.

Blocking a bit of time when energy is high is golden. Unfortunately, that seems to be 05:45–07:00 weekdays for me, but that window of attention, coffee, and lofi beats is essential to organizing and staying afloat, and you probably have such a window. One day, mere days away, I'll convert it to Important Work rather than email and clinic prep, but it's a nice time.

It is 22:00 on July 3, and this editorial is due tomorrow. I cancelled plans tonight. You may recognize yourself here. Zoom out to see what you *have* done, take a moment to scribble about that thing you should be working on, and go relax (on purpose).

## REFERENCES

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