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Filling Your Days With The Things You Care About

“There just aren’t enough hours in the day.” Actually, there are; you just have to define your priorities and use you time wisely. In the current age of information and communication overload, however, you may find that some of the activities you engage in are hindering your effectiveness.

My sister Nancy is a behavioral psychologist who works with clients in therapy to determine, among other things, how they spend their days. “It’s a significant clue to whatever type of dysfunctioning they may be experiencing,” she reports. Tell me how you spend your time, and I’ll tell you what your troubles are.

A wheel stuck in the mud, spinning fast, certainly represents rapid motion. Yet the car is not moving. Are your days filled with activity but not the experiences and accomplishments you’d like to enjoy?

When you examine the broad canvas of your life, interesting surprises often surface. What you say is important to you isn’t on your schedule. What you say you dislike is where you expend your energies.

Busy or not, everyone has 168 hours a week. I checked. One way or another, everyone fills them. Consider the cumulative amount of years you spend doing various activities. Any activity consuming 30 minutes of your day, consumes two solid years of your life. During a work life of 48 years (from ages 22 and 70), an activity that you engage in for an average of 30 minutes each day consumes one complete year of your life: $(1/2 \text{ hr in } 24 \text{ hours}) = (1/2 \text{ yr in } 24 \text{ years}) = (1 \text{ yr in } 48 \text{ years})$.

The realization that what you do for only 30 minutes on a daily basis costs you one solid year in the course of your adult life is simple yet profound. Obviously, there are some things you would not or could not give up, and it is silly to apply this arithmetic to activities such as personal hygiene. Nevertheless, you have a new perspective for viewing what you do that can aid you in eliminating activities that do not support you. It also underscores the importance of taking control -- looking for new ways of accomplishment and questioning your routines.

Reading the paper each morning need not be abandoned. Watching the eleven o’clock news every night is okay if it’s your continuing choice. Recognize that you are making a decision that could affect your breathing space.

Looking Beyond

Elliott feels anxious when he doesn’t keep up with the latest news. While driving, he frequently tunes to the all-news radio station. He doesn’t read the paper daily, but he always scans the front page. After work, he catches the evening news or the late night report.

Elliott is caught in a trap. He is experiencing anxiety associated with the fallacy of keeping posted. It is of no consequence to Elliott to hear daily reports on a Midwest mayor being investigated for corruption, or a Third World leader clinging to power, or the four alarm fire last night in the next town.

Still, as the years pass, Elliott consumes thousands of hours in his life ingesting such information and being buffeted by the other mega-realities, while not accomplishing what he wants, and continually feeling as if he has no breathing space.

If, like Elliott, time-pressure has been a lingering issue for you, look beyond routine, ritual, and victimization to ownership and responsibility for what is occurring in your life:

- * Ritual is routine behavior that is comfortable but outmoded and unrewarding -- such as opening all the mail you receive.
- * Victimization is believing that circumstances or others cause your lack of breathing space. It's continuing to act powerless rather than take responsibility. (My boss, spouse, father, mother, kid, in-law, neighbor, landlord, advisor, clergy, President, governor, newspaper/magazine columnist, or the devil makes me do it...)
- * Ownership is laying claim and accepting full responsibility for what occurs in your life. It's sad, but every season some high school or college athlete gives up all his breathing space and dies during a physical workout that proves to be too strenuous. Yet, what coach wants any of his players to die?

Are you dying a little more each season laboring under an illusion? What's missing are the coach and players, or managers and their staffs getting together and discussing the boundaries of the relationship, including expectations, reasonable work loads, and limitations.

What Are You Busy About?

Can you imagine Mahatma Gandhi or Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. getting up in the morning and lamenting about all the things they wanted to accomplish that day or week? Indeed, can you envision anyone of major accomplishment attempting to proceed in life following someone else's priorities?

Can you picture anyone of lasting accomplishment engaging in personally hazardous sleep patterns, talking faster, or buying speed-listening tapes? A few years back, when TV commercials with John Moschitta (the speed talker) aired, I know of people who recoiled in their seats. It was that stressful to listen. Playing games with your body or flooding your senses is the prescription for trouble, not accomplishment, and certainly not breathing space.

If you can look beyond your own routines, your rituals, and your feelings of victimization, your quest becomes one of taking several days and deciding what's important to you. This is intensely personal and can be genuinely rewarding.

The happiest people I know identify and keep identifying what matters to them and then allocate their efforts accordingly. If employed by others and assigned what to do, they are fortunate to be able to make their assignments among their priorities.

These happy souls are able to break free from collective, cultural images of success and be guided by their own choices. Great leaders in society fit this mold. All else eventually leads to some form of internal conflict.

Sheila is frequently under pressure and many days "stressed out" before noon. She believes her condition is due to her job and factors beyond her control. For Sheila, every day is a battle against the clock.

Mitch is locked in his own time and income trap. He is afraid to change jobs and stays rooted to a company that undervalues his contribution. So he complains at home, works harder, and becomes a corporate eunuch. Like Sheila and Mitch, many people will endure years and years with little breathing space, but will not sit down and decide what merits action and attention, and what does not.

Others cling to old world notions of attempting to stay on top of everything. If you are experiencing any of the following, you are in a malfunctioning mode:

- Constantly shortchanging the most important tasks
- Attempting to do everything yourself
- Feeling closed in, cramped for space
- Having piles stack up
- Having too many interruptions to concentrate
- Always being late

Malfunctions can be short or long-term in duration. Everyone experiences recurring short malfunctions. Short often becomes long -- a hazardous situation.

What Is Important To You

Do you identify something as important to you and then give it no energy? Do other lesser items get much more of your attention? If so, chances are you haven't identified what's important to you -- you only have lingering notions. For example:

- * Bill says he values seeing his parents often, but he only makes the 36-mile round trip twice a year.
- * Carolyn says enjoying the weekends is important to her, but she's worked 12 Saturdays in a row.

Making and reaffirming choices about what is important and how you would like to allocate your resources is crucial. You need to make your choices away from the rabble, and to acknowledge the fixed components of your existence:

- Youth, young adulthood, and middle age are finite.
- Your productive work life is finite.
- Change is guaranteed.
- Life is finite; death is guaranteed.

The choices confronting most individuals often come down to the same few issues: career advancement versus a happy home life; income goals versus income needs; and social, peer or employment induced priorities versus individual wants or needs.

Potential Priority Headings

- Personal: health, welfare, finances, autonomy, intellect, interests, recreation, love, sexual fulfillment
- Family: health, welfare, lifestyle, children's education, recreation, enrichment, reverence
- Friends, Relatives: health, welfare
- Neighborhood, Community, Region: appearance, prosperity, schools, roads, institutions
- Country, Fellow Citizens, Government: security, quality of life, freedoms, pursuit of happiness, opportunity, justice, standing
- Fellow human beings: freedom, education, security, welfare, nourishment
- Planet: ecological system, resources, animal and plant life, vitality

The things most meaningful to you in life are, by definition, your priorities. Priorities are broad elements of life, and they often become misplaced somewhere within your daily high-wire balancing act.

In this society and in this era, it is wise to have only a few priorities. If you have too many, you're not likely to respect each of them. At some point, too many priorities become paradoxical -- only a few concerns can be of priority.

In establishing your priorities, I suggest the following:

- List everything that is important or that you wish to accomplish. Initially over-pick, go crazy. Here are some examples of priorities you might choose:

- "Providing for the education of my children."

- "Achieving financial independence."

- "Maintaining my loving, happy marriage."

- "Working for world peace."

- Go back and assess your list. Eliminate the nice but, on second inspection, not so important items
- Combine any items that are similar in nature. Having too many priorities leads to frustration and despair, similar to what you've got now.
- Rewrite, redefine, or restructure any of your choices. If you're not sure of an item, feel free to delete it.
- Put your list away for another day, then review it again.
- Delete, combine, or rethink any of the items remaining. If something seems less important, drop it. You can't afford the responsibility of more priorities than you can support.
- Complete your list, for now -- priorities can change.

Your priorities may change radically as years pass. They are always based on deeply felt needs or desires, usually representing challenging but ultimately rewarding choices.

Your Priority Card

For maximum benefit, I suggest writing your priorities on small business-size cards. Keep one in your wallet, one in your appointment book, and one in your car.

Read your priority list as often as you can. Reading your priority list frequently contributes to your sensation of breathing space -- it's invigorating when you're actively supporting what you've chosen as important.

It isn't overkill to review a list of your life's priorities every day; in fact, it is a superior approach to controlling your life.



*Jeff Davidson is a professional speaker who offers simple advice that makes profound differences in people's lives. Check out his bio at <http://www.financialspeakers.com>. He is the author of *The Joy of Simple Living* (Rodale), *The Complete Idiot's Guide to Managing Your Time* (Alpha), and *Breathing Space* (MasterMedia). His books can be ordered at <http://www.ffbookstore.com>. Additional information about Jeff is available at <http://www.financialspeakers.com>.*