

The Mindful Life

By Michael Wiederman, Ph.D.

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MINDing theMIND

Can We Really Waste Time?
or
In Praise of NOT Multi-Tasking

Time is money—or so we've heard. This old adage may help explain why we seem to treat time as a commodity. We talk about *saving* time, *wasting* time, *investing* time, and *spending* time. But are these accurate ways of thinking about time?

Let's consider a tangible commodity such as money. As a result of investing, saving, spending, or wasting money we have more or less money than we had before. The amount of money we have stays the same until we perform some action, such as spending. So far, so good. The problem is that none of these concepts accurately reflect what we can do with time.

Time passes regardless of what we do or don't do. The clock keeps on ticking, oblivious to our actions or existence. So no matter how much we "spend" time or "save" time, we always have exactly the same amount—the present moment. Concepts such as spending time or saving time simply reflect our judgments about what we were doing while a certain period of time passed. If we "saved" time, we simply got something done in less time than we thought it would take. If we "wasted" time, we simply engaged in some activity that we (or someone else) did not consider appropriately productive.

What's the harm in thinking about time as a commodity? Other than simply being inaccurate, treating time as a commodity creates stress, anxiety, and regret. Instead of experiencing time as it unfolds, we pass judgment on whether what we're doing at that point is something that is productive or something that we find desirable. For example, suppose we have to attend a meeting at work, and afterward we conclude that the meeting was "a waste of time." Of course what we mean is that we could have been more productive had we engaged in some other activity during that same period. But if the meeting was mandatory, it doesn't make sense to complain about it having been a waste of time any more than it makes sense to complain about mandatory expenses, such as income tax or property tax.

Because of the "time as a commodity" mentality, we often strive to get more done in a shorter period of time. So, we envy people who are good at "multi-tasking." But there are unnoticed costs associated with multi-tasking. To accomplish more, our attention is divided among topics and tasks. As a result, we're often less aware of what we're doing, or what is going on around us. When we notice less, we remember less, and it feels like time is flying by without leaving much of an impact. So when it feels like one day melds into the next, and we rarely remember what we've done, perhaps we're doing too much.

Since time passes at the same rate regardless of who we are or which day it is, perhaps we should start thinking about time differently—less as a commodity and more as a concept we have all agreed to use as members of a shared culture. The concept of time becomes attached to the activities we conduct, but those activities are not time itself. So, technically, there is no such thing as wasting time, or saving time, or even spending time. Time is not something we can control in these ways. Perhaps the important questions to ask include, “Am I doing what I want to be doing right now.” Many times the answer will be “no.” Unfortunately there are things that have to be done, even though we’d rather not. In those cases, perhaps the most important question is, “Since I have to do this activity, how can I stay focused on it so that I’m truly experiencing this particular period of time in my life?” It’s going to pass at the same rate whether you fully experience it or not.

MIND *Morsels*

*The price one pays for pursuing any profession, or calling,
is an intimate knowledge of its ugly side.*

– James Baldwin

Of course this observation is also true for other experiences, such as relationships. Being on the “inside” of a profession, or institution, or relationship exposes us to its ugly sides. There’s nothing wrong with that—and it’s inevitable. But when we’re on the “outside,” it can often appear that the other profession or relationship has fewer problems than does our own. It’s when we compare our own experience (which includes intimate knowledge of the ugly sides) with what we imagine other people experience (which tends to only include our perceptions of what is positive) that we’re primed for disappointment with our own lives. Sometimes it takes conscious effort to remind ourselves that *every* profession or relationship has ugly sides, even if they’re not apparent to us as outsiders.

*Education is the ability to listen to almost anything
without losing your temper or self-confidence.*

– Robert Frost

How many people do we know who are so open minded as this (besides ourselves, of course)? So why is it difficult for many people to be open minded enough to tolerate views that are very different from their own? One answer may be that, as children, when adults disagreed with us, often it was experienced as being wrong. To young children, adult disapproval may feel like being unlovable. So, even now, an opposing view by another adult, especially someone we respect, can arouse a defensive stance, although

rationally we realize that we shouldn't care so much what others think. The kind of open mindedness Robert Frost describes requires a comfortable confidence that others can disagree with us, and we can even be wrong, but that doesn't mean we're unlovable.

Failure is an event, never a person.

– William D. Brown

There is very recent research indicating just how important our views are about intelligence and success. People who believe intelligence is inborn, tend to avoid trying new things, especially when early attempts result in failure. After all, it must be that I'm simply not good at that task, and why keep demonstrating that fact to the world? People who believe intelligence is like a muscle—that it get stronger with use—are much more likely to try new things and keep trying when initial attempts are unsuccessful. After all, how else am I going to become more intelligent? Which view do you hold?

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