

# Intentional Living

How to find the time to do anything (not everything!)

TEXT BY CHRISTINE MACLEAN ILLUSTRATION BY BONNIE DAIN OCTOBER 13, 2004

ONE QUESTION SURVEY

My favorite way to find time is to (Choose one)

- Sleep less
- Turn off technology
- Outsource
- Limit my social life
- Let unimportant things go

Here's my vote

REACT TO THIS STORY

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You've been asking for an easy way to share these articles with friends since Day One. To which we reply, "Uncle!"

Show me the way

Not long ago, I discovered that my then seven-year-old daughter had not been washing her hair with soap in the shower. When I questioned her, she said, "My conscience told me to use soap, but then I thought, 'Hey, I'm saving time! And what could be wrong about that?'"

My daughter has figured out that saying yes to one thing means saying no to another. In order to have time to do something she valued--play her evening game of Stratego with her father--she was foregoing clean hair, which she doesn't care much about. Maybe it wasn't the best choice, but at least she was intentional about it. That's more than many of us can say for ourselves.

There are many reasons we can't find the time to do what we want, whether it's taking up mountain climbing, tutoring children, or simply getting eight hours of sleep. Psychologists suggest that we are afraid of failure or success, or that we feel undeserving of time spent just on ourselves, or that it's easier to say we want to learn to dance (for example) but lack the time than it is to admit to ourselves or a dance-happy spouse that we really don't want to do it after all.

Philip Goldberg, author of *Get Out of Your Own Way*, says we fall back on the "no time" excuse because we're "attracted to the outcome and not the process, which is often arduous. We're pleasure-seeking animals and we have difficulty with anything that requires even minor sacrifices."

Sometimes what we perceive to be a lack of time is actually a lack of direction. It's hard to know what's worth spending time on unless we know what we want out of life. For that, Goldberg recommends quieting the mind through meditation, prayer, or a walk in the woods. "You're going to be obsessing about this stuff anyway," he says. "If you can

quiet your mind enough [to think through these larger questions], it's more efficient."

### **Time management tough love**

On a purely practical level, however, the reason we can't find time for that one thing we've always wanted to do is that we don't set aside time for it, says Julie Morgenstern, a time management expert and author of the best-selling *Organizing from the Inside Out*.

"People are constantly planning to do what they've always wanted to do when there is extra time, and there will never, ever, ever be extra time," she says. "In today's world, when every moment is flooded with five thousand options about what you could do, and should do, and what others want you to do, there is no such thing as free time."

For those who are intent on carving out time but are unsure of how to begin, Morgenstern offers her favorite time management tips.

**Choose the time that offers the highest probability of success.** Look hard at your calendar or weekly routine and pick a time that's least likely to compete with another obligation--first thing Sunday morning, for example--then "throw a net around it." Treat that block of time as inviolable, or at least treat it with the same respect you'd give a doctor appointment. If your phone rings during this newly found time, tell whomever it is that you'll call them back later. Even better, let the machine pick up.

**Keep an activity log.** People who manage time well always ask three questions: What do I need to do? How long will it take? When will I do it? The reason we end up with mammoth to-do lists (with items that all need to be done by Friday) is that we don't ask ourselves the second and third questions.

"Logging how much time things take for two weeks will transform you," says Morgenstern, "because if you know and acknowledge in advance how long something will take, then you can make wise decisions about where to spend your time." Without the hard data that a log provides, it's easy to delude ourselves about how much we can accomplish--and to get discouraged when we never get to the thing we most want to do.

**Buy time.** Use your activity log to identify one thing that can be outsourced. Look for something that you hate, aren't very good at, and takes too much time--yard work, housecleaning, errands--then buy yourself the time that task takes by hiring someone else to do it.

**Just say no.** While this is Time Management 101, it's difficult to master because we get a certain pleasure out of helping other people. "But it's only *one* of life's pleasures," Morgenstern explains, "and it shouldn't monopolize your time, because you'll end up feeling depleted." In general, there are two or three people in each of our lives that don't hesitate to spend our time to accomplish their objectives. Identify who they are and learn to say no to them.

It is possible to do this gracefully. Stall. Say, "Let me check

my calendar and get back to you." This gives you time to make a conscious, rather than knee-jerk, decision. Suggest another resource. When you say, "I can't do it, but have you thought about Jane Smith?" it's a win-win situation, because you're helping the person get what he needs without actually doing the work yourself. Finally, use the language of business: "Given my other commitments, I don't think I could give this the time it deserves."

**Control technology.** The average American spends more than nine years watching TV. Television was the first thing to go when Diane Smith\*, a mother who always dreamed of being a doctor, tackled medical school at age 40. Smith (who wrings every minute from her day by doing things like keeping a stack of study note cards on the back of her toilet) still tapes a few shows she swears she can't live without. But then, she says, "when I'm finally able to watch them, half the time I don't care anymore and I end up using the time to do something else." So shut the TV off already and do the thing you love.

While you're at it, disconnect from the Internet and turn off your cell phone. Morgenstern says new technologies have made it harder for people to control their own curiosity--"Who's calling me?"--and easier to procrastinate. "When you are about to do something that is difficult, you check your e-mail first," she says, because that's easier. "Just because you can doesn't mean you should. You have to fight your own Pavlovian impulses."

#### **Next? Resist the urge to waver**

Once you wrest control of a block of time, the trick is to use it to do your heart's desire rather than to catch up on another task. One way to do that is to take a related class. Paying money for an activity legitimizes it and helps you move it up on your list of priorities. Or find a friend who shares your longing to paint, for example, and get together to work and to critique each other's work. Agree that by the next time you meet, you'll each have another painting to show, and hold each other accountable.

There isn't time to do everything. And, no matter how badly we want it to, time does not expand to fit our to-do lists. Unless you're okay with only helping others accomplish their goals and never accomplishing your own, it's important to be intentional about where you spend your time.

"You have to ask yourself, if I say yes to this person or activity, who and what will I say no to?" says Morgenstern. "If you don't make choices, they'll be made for you and you won't get to do what you want to do. It takes courage."

*\*Name was changed in the interest of privacy*

Christine MacLean is the editor of Jugglezine. It took her 20 years to find--*make*--the time to write fiction, and she still backslides regularly.

REACT TO THIS STORY

Your message

Name (required) E-mail (required)  
Title Company

Reactions, which may be edited for length, will appear within a few days. Please be respectful of others. Please be brief. Bonus points for making your point \*and\* making us smile.

Forcing you to leave your e-mail address makes you nervous, right? It's the editor's fault. She wants to be able to contact you if she needs clarification on your reaction.

Send

### Reactions to "Intentional Living"

I've read books on time management, discussed the subject with many adult friends, been to seminars that my workplace offered; this piece of writing with excerpts from Morgenstern (and others) exposed me to info I hadn't yet considered, and the suggestions are straight-out and sensible. I am going to make an honest effort to remember and implement what I've read. I especially feel the time log is going to be an eye opener for me. Thank you.

Bonnie Bushaw  
Librarian Aide Part Time B, Herrick District Library

Yes. I used to shine my copperbottomed Revereware. When my sister visited a few years back, she was appalled at the darkened copper. I thought she was crazy! YOU shine it! I'm going to go play with my horse!

Mary Fling  
Secretary-Treasurer, Camp Communications

Every one of us needs to take a "BIG" picture attitude. When feeling overwhelmed, stop and ask yourself, What things that I "need" to do will affect the world? What will change the lives of people around me? You will notice that not much ends up on that list. The world keeps turning even if we don't iron all the clothes, bathe the dog, clean out the refridge. Simply put we need to "triage" our lives and then the important things will get done.

Tina  
Techwriter, Avalon

After being diagnosed with breast cancer last month, I have had to deal with this issue. Immediately, my focus has changed. My daughter and my health have come to the front of my decision making. I am now driven to give us the quality time and make my position as the facility interior designer a simple job. My time management will be to make more time to help with homework and create giggle time. I forgot how fragile our time on this earth is--my legacy is my family, not

my occupation. And housework can wait! (hmmm...wonder if there are any mother-daughter belly dancing classes available....)

Kim Marie Golan  
Facility Interior Designer, CEFCU

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I shouldn't be taking time to write this:) but there is another aspect to intentional living and that is, it's a discovery process, leading to shaping even minor chores and activities to reflect who we really are, rather than who we think we're supposed to be. And, if we don't know exactly who we are (who does?), living intentionally helps us find out. Would we rather weed the garden or cook dinner... even the simplest tasks are clues. Great article, very encouraging and good links! p.s. I think taking a minute or two to say thanks, and you have made a difference in my day, are always worth the time.

patti edmon  
Owner, EdmonDesign

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I have come to expect quality information from this resource. I am seldom too busy to read it. The subject is always a merciful one. What a kindness for us, your potential client. Heaven knows, we get beat on with enough conventional advertising. Yours is human and caring. Thank you.

Leslie Reilly,ASID  
President, Leslie Reilly Studio

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Suggestion: Access your work computer from home. Drive during non-stressful traffic hours. This could add 1-2 hours to your day, if your office has flexible start/stop times.

Thomas Moraitis  
Creative Director, Citrix

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Thank you for another insightful article. Of course I am reading this one of my "want to dos" at 11:00 at night and very tired.

Assigning a specific block of time for the "I wants" is the only way to make them happen. It is sticking to that commitment that is the most difficult part of the task.

liz hildebrandt

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Mary Richards, are you living my life? Maybe one of the hardest things for me is realizing that the choices I make are the choices that are real for me at this time in my life--that idealizing the life I "ought" to be living in spite of the realities of my current situation will only get me in trouble. It's the letting go of the things that are not at the top of my list that stops me cold.

Thanks for the article, Christine!

Edith Pierce

I'm a retired architect who is always busy. I seldom find time to watercolor and go to the opera--two activities I love dearly. Your article has suggested a way I can deal with myself. Thank you.

weldon skirvin  
owner, w.j.skirvin, architect

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Looking back, it has felt for years as if I was barely keeping up, but I see a fair number of "ME" choices in all of that.

I chose to be involved as a Girl Scout Leader (even though I say I did it so my girls could be scouts!). I chose to volunteer at church. I chose to go help clean up the school and to help with youth soccer. I chose to attend my children's games and spend evenings playing board games.

If I just reflect a little, maybe I did get to do the things I wanted.

I still turn off the TV in favor of that book I want to read. I still choose to take classes at the university. I still choose to volunteer where I do.

Perhaps it is best to pause and to reflect on all the things I do do for myself before I complain again that there is never time for me.

Mary Richards

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