



Quiet Moments

WHY DO WE SO OFTEN SEEM TO BE RUSHING

OUR WAY THROUGH LIFE? CAROLINE BUIJS LOOKS

FOR WAYS TO MAKE TIME WORK FOR YOU.

The other day, I was at the schoolyard gesturing wildly to my daughter to hurry up. She had twenty minutes to get to her singing lesson, and we needed to pass by the bike repair shop on the way to get her light fixed. It wouldn't be possible after the lesson, as she had to go straight on to a party. By the time the party finished, it would be dark outside, which brings us back to the bicycle light.

At the bike shop, I ran into a friend of my sister's, who I knew was mourning a recent death. All I could say was, "Sorry, I have to rush, we're in a big hurry. My condolences." As I cycled onward, I had to bite my lip very hard not to burst into tears. It suddenly hit

me that this was really not the way I wanted to live my life, rushing my daughter and not having time to spend with someone who needs it.

LITTLE BREAKS

Why do we so often feel like time is scarce? Is it simply because we are trying to do too many things in our days? In a survey conducted by the Netherlands Institute for Social Research in 2011, four out of ten respondents said they feel rushed one or more days per week. "The danger of feeling like you're in a hurry," says psychologist Max Wildschut in his book *Stop, denk, doe* (*Stop, think, do*), "is that it creates a sense

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Throughout most of our history, we haven't had clocks. Previously, you'd make an appointment with someone by saying, "I'll see you at sundown," for example

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of urgency, the result of which is sitting still for a moment and thinking quietly are no longer instinctive, logical choices.”

Wanting to do too much in too little time is not the only reason we feel like we’re in a

YOUR OWN RHYTHM

In her book 'Ritme: Op zoek naar een terugkerende tijd' ('Rhythm: In search of a recurring time'), philosopher and Thinker Laureate of the Netherlands Marli Huijer writes, "Since the 1960s, our collective rhythms have slowly been transitioning into more flexible, individual times so that there's no longer a shared rhythm of sleeping, working and being there for each other." Without realizing it, we expect everyone to be available any time and any place: to pick up their phone for example, or to quickly finish an urgent job for someone. Saying no is becoming more difficult, but this is eating away at social conventions such as small talk with colleagues or reading the newspaper at breakfast. Dare to stick to your own rhythm of life, Huijer says, and you will be able to live in less of a hurry.

hurry. We're also strict with ourselves, thinking things like, 'Come on don't whine, you can do one more little job, chop, chop,' for example. And it doesn't make it any easier that 'being busy as a bee' initially makes you feel useful, and good about yourself. But still, never taking a moment off during the day, eating your lunch at your desk and even checking your e-mail while you are on the toilet (guilty!) are all detrimental to feeling like you have oodles of time. No matter how much fun your smartphone is, it is far too tempting to use it to fill up those supposedly 'empty' moments. Like when you're standing in line for something, moments when you're waiting for food to cook while preparing dinner or during a movie intermission. But instead of checking the latest news reports, you could be looking at the contents of the shopping cart next to you and imagining what kind of life that person leads. Or instead of checking your bank account online, you could do a three-minute meditation as you wait for the rice to cook. And rather than posting a photograph of your cinema ticket on Instagram, you could just sit and think about the movie a bit.

Because little breaks are particularly important for your reflecting and archiving brain, as coach and trainer Theo Compennolle writes in his book *BrainChains*. According to him, our conscious, slow, easily tired, >





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vulnerable but sophisticated human reflecting brain needs to be well taken care of, otherwise our unconscious, inexhaustible, very fast, robust, primitive and animalistic reflex brain will end up making too many bad important decisions. Compernelle also believes that always being online causes chronic and continual background stress.

ACCELERATION

Here’s another reason why time always seems in short supply: as you get older, time seems to pass quicker. You already begin overestimating time at the age of 24. No wonder you sometimes run out of it. In his book *Why Life Speeds Up As You Get Older*, Douwe Draaisma, author and historian of psychology, features a beautiful quote from French biologist and surgeon Alexis Carrel (1873-1944): “Objective time, clock time, passes at an even rate, like a river through a valley. At the beginning of his life, man still runs briskly along the bank, more quickly than the river. At around midday, his speed is somewhat slower and he keeps pace with the river. Towards the evening, as he tires, the river flows faster and he falls behind. In the end, he stands still and goes to lie down beside a river that continues along its course at the same imperturbable rate at which it has been flowing all along.”

Is it possible to do things differently? How do we stop ourselves from feeling rushed, how can we not have the feeling that time is scarce? It may sound obvious, but more and more research is now showing it really is crucial: Go offline frequently, incorporate moments of reflection into your life and take breaks. This gives your reflective brain time to recover and “your archiving brain a chance to file the billions of bits and bytes of information,” writes Compernelle.

YOUR OWN TIME

But maybe the very best way to regain some sense of control over your own time is prioritizing what you find important in life. Then you know what you want to spend your time on.

In his book *First Things First*, time management expert Stephen Covey says there are a few guidelines that can help you get a clear picture of what is important to you. Start with three or four things that you consider the most important in your life, both from your private life and from your work life. For example, spending time with your loved ones, your family, your friends; enjoying the work you do; being in nature often. Then think about which goals you’d like to achieve in the long term. For example, learning something new (for work or for yourself); doing something for society. Next,



think about the most important relationships in your life (and what you could do to improve them, perhaps). And finally, think of what you would do if you only had half a year left to live.

JAR OF STONES

Now that you know what is important to you, you can take the next step and weave these insights into your daily life. Covey has a great metaphor to illustrate this: imagine time as a large jar that you can fill with stones. When you fill the pot with large stones first (the things you find most important), then with pebbles, then sand and finally with water, you will be surprised at how much fits in. But if you don’t put the large stones in first, you’ll never be able to fit them in on top of the other, smaller stuff. In other words, put your priorities on your schedule first and after that, the things you find less important.

I tried this for a week and enjoyed working like that. I used a fineliner pen to draw different types of stones in my diary (you don’t have to, but I always like drawing stuff) and then, on each stone, I wrote what I wanted to do (and had to do). First, I wrote down what I’d like: A nice long lunch with my daughter; a morning without any plans, to just potter about and see what I feel like doing, with my phone switched off. I also drew nice stones for work time and kept the

work within those lines—so no more checking work e-mails on the toilet in the evening. Because I had written down times for the things that mattered most to me and stuck to that, it suddenly became easier to do the chores that weren’t my first priority but that had to happen anyway—like taking the bike to the repair shop. ●

READ MORE

- * 'BrainChains: Your thinking brain explained in simple terms', Theo Compernelle (Compuplications, 2014)
- * 'First Things First', Stephen Covey (Free Press, 1996)
- * 'Why Life Speeds Up As You Get Older: How Memory Shapes our Past', Douwe Draaisma (Cambridge University Press, 2012)

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