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Why Procrastinate?

EVERYONE in these days suffers under the feeling of being pressed for time. We do not seem to catch up with things as we used to do. We are afraid to sit down with only our thoughts for company, because those thoughts inevitably turn on something we should be doing.

Much of this feeling is due to procrastination, the habit of needlessly putting off things to which we should attend. The putting off is in turn caused by inertia and lack of planning.

This is a serious problem, because procrastination does more than almost any other habit to deprive us of satisfaction, success and happiness. It does not solve any problem when we toss it into the tray marked "pending."

More than two centuries ago Edward Young, disappointed in law, politics and in his thirty-five year rectorship of a small church, wrote the often-quoted line "Procrastination is the thief of time." In fact, procrastination is much more. It is the thief of our self-respect. It nags at us and spoils our fun. It deprives us of the fullest realization of our ambitions and hopes.

In business, a man who hesitates is lost. He seeks, quite rightly, to bring to bear on his decisions the mature judgment that is the outcome of thought directed toward solving a problem, but there is a deadline beyond which he must not prolong his deliberation. He must make decisions, and not postpone them, or his opportunity for profit and fulfilment disappear.

In our other life, the cultural part, procrastination is equally damaging. There is usually no want of desire on the part of most persons to arrive at the results of self-culture, but there is great temptation not to pay the necessary cost of it in time and work.

Even our leisure is eaten into by procrastination. So many people complain that they have no time for leisure. They are constantly driven. Life for them is a

steady grind or a mad dream. These are people who do not organize their time and energy. They are of the sort that find themselves nervously unfit to deal with immediate things, to stand the pressure of an urgent job.

It is amusingly true that few of us really enjoy the sensation of putting things off. Our consciences prevent us from taking pleasure out of postponing our chores.

Menace to success

Business men who are today at the heights of success are invariably men who were judicious enough to exert themselves at the proper time twenty or thirty years ago. They did not put off any of the things that were necessary to their advancement. Having their eye on tomorrow's opportunities they got today's business out of the way today. As Samuel Smiles said pungently in his *Self Help*: Men who are habitually behind in their work are as habitually behind success. You do not see listless or languid men at the top of the executive tree.

Many men may credit their success in life to looking just a little way ahead and so bringing the future up to the present. They say to themselves: "If I do that now . . ." instead of "If I find myself compelled to do that sometime . . .".

Young people particularly need to beware of putting off. Dante described the vice in this way: "Hesitating I remain at war 'twixt will and will not in my thoughts." Eventually, perhaps sooner than we think, it is too late. In maturity, the procrastinating man finds himself one of the many ordinary, dispensable, workers, while his boyhood chum who busied himself sits at the mahogany desk.

When things are deferred till the last minute, and nothing prepared beforehand, every step finds an impediment. It becomes harder to do things. We are pushed into blundering through on hasty judgments.

Herein is a paradox. By trying to take things easy we do not make things easy. It is possible to spend more energy in figuring out ways to escape a task than is necessary to accomplish it. Our available energy is lowered by inward conflict between "do it now" and "put it off". We lose our poise, because we are always catching up, always in a hurry to do today what we should have done yesterday, always off balance.

Not only is procrastination a deadly blight on a man's life, but it is a nuisance to all his companions. Everybody with whom the procrastinator has to do in family, factory or office is thrown from time to time into a state of fever. Everyone else has to work harder to take up the slack he leaves.

Habit comes slyly

The habit of putting off has a way of creeping upon us insidiously. What does it matter, we think, if we don't write that letter today or telephone that prospect for business, or make that dental appointment? Tomorrow is always another day, we say blithely but childishly.

Darwin put off publication of his theories from day to day and finally from year to year, despite the urging of his friends, until he was scooped by a fellow-scientist half a world away. And people today, even in the most enlightened countries, are killing themselves by putting off such simple, though vital, things as seeing their doctors.

It is a salutary exercise to consider the successes we almost enjoyed but which escaped us because we put off decision or action. By doing things as they come along we entertain our great opportunities. But if we say to opportunity: "I am young; there is plenty of time", then opportunity passes us by and we find that, as Francis Bacon remarked in one of his essays, "opportunity has a bald noodle behind, there is nothing to grasp."

None of us needs to look beyond himself for examples. We postponed writing that report on Wednesday, found ourselves loaded with pressing jobs on Thursday and Friday, and now we have to work over the weekend without secretarial help and with no one to provide answers to unexpected questions. We put off visiting our ailing friend on our way East, saying that we could take time for the visit on our return journey, but by then it was too late. We put off our household or garden chores, perhaps trifling away our time in idle chat, and find ourselves overwhelmed by visitors or urgent duties.

The penalties of procrastination are heavy. Many a man has discovered after his house burned down that he had let his insurance lapse the previous month.

Many a salesman has found business going to rivals because he put off deciding how to approach difficult prospects.

What causes procrastination?

It is all very well to admit that procrastination is a bad thing, but if we are to do anything effective toward its cure we must know something of what causes it.

It may be the product of indolence, a vice which rewards everyone scurvily. Indolence may be the weak link in the chain of a business man's character. It may show itself in the dawdling of the workman, in the listlessness of the housewife, in the sloth of the pan-handler. All these people are putting off something. They are reluctant to tackle a job, or are baffled by small difficulties, or are engrossed in spinning out some activity unnecessarily.

Procrastination may, in some instances, be attributed to ill health. Energy to tackle jobs and get them out of the way is the product of physical health and a purpose.

A child who cannot find his clothes in the morning may be unknowingly rebelling against school, and postponing his having to go there. A man who explodes in the midst of a business conference may be motivated by an inward irritation that follows a sense of putting off something that should have been given immediate attention.

If you are a chronic procrastinator it may be that your parents did more for you than they should have done. Perhaps they "picked up" after you, and did the things you left undone. You learned that by putting off duties nothing serious happened: someone else did the work.

But today you find that your habit leads to unending ills. You are actually putting off living to some fictional future date. You are making yourself unhappy because in deferring your life to the future you are missing the present and its golden opportunities for rich living. You are putting off until tomorrow not only duties and jobs but happiness and achievement.

Samuel Johnson called tomorrow "that fatal mistress of the young, the lazy, the coward and the fool."

Unpleasant things

The truth is that we are most inclined to postpone doing things that seem at the time to be unpleasant, distasteful or difficult. When we have something like that to do, we putter around with little things, trying to keep busy so that we have an excuse that will ease our consciences. Dreading and postponing a task may be more tiring than doing it, and apprehension over delayed unpleasantnesses may so preoccupy us that other things cannot be done effectively.

None of us escapes his quota of difficult or disagreeable tasks, and it would be well to learn from the experience of others rather than from our own that they do not fade away by being ignored. Eventually, we have to roll up our sleeves and wade into them. In the meantime, we suffer.

Dr. Ernest Jones, F.R.C.P., gives us Hamlet as an example in his book *Hamlet and Oedipus* (Doubleday Anchor, 1954.) The reasons that Hamlet gives for his hesitancy will not stand serious consideration. Says Dr. Jones: "One moment he pretends he is too cowardly to perform the deed, at another he questions the truthfulness of the ghost, at another — when the opportunity presents itself in its naked form — he thinks the time is unsuited, it would be better to wait till the King was at some evil act and then to kill him, and so on. They have each of them, it is true, a certain plausibility".

It is very different with the man who, honest with himself, has mastered the habit of putting off. He has no unpleasant jobs hanging fire. He has realized the menace of procrastination and makes sure that it never touches him. He knows that it is the vote you don't cast that brings the wrong men into office, the kindness you think of but do not do that swells family unhappiness into misunderstandings, the phone call you don't make that loses the order, the lunch for which you are late that blights your prospects of a new job.

Waiting for inspiration

An excuse sometimes made by writers, composers, business executives and other people engaged in creative work is that they are waiting for inspiration. But inspiration is a guest who does not visit the lazy or the procrastinator as often as he does the busy and diligent. Most writers find that the best way to win inspiration is to insert a blank sheet of paper in their typewriters.

Sir Arthur Sullivan, composer of the Gilbert and Sullivan operas, oratorios and a score of other sorts of music, said this: "One day work is hard and another day it is easy, but if I had waited for inspiration I should have done nothing."

Many offices have people in them who sharpen pencils instead of getting down to solving the puzzles in a job. Other people shroud their actions in a maze of red tape, giving as the excuse for delay that they must consider the problem carefully from every angle and think of all the possibilities.

On the whole, it is wiser to make decisions promptly and crisply than to linger over them waiting for a flash of inspiration. In a competitive society it may be staying much too late to wait till precisely the proper time.

To put off a decision while gathering or awaiting pertinent information is not procrastination, but be sure that what is awaited is pertinent and necessary. All great leaders have deliberated with caution but acted with decision and promptness.

By debating every problem, awaiting the divine spark that will shine upon the right decision, we show ourselves to be timid and distrustful of our own judgments. The Hamlets among us must learn that it is better to make a wrong decision than none at all. At least an error teaches a lesson that need never be repeated. To stand indecisively midway between our duty and our task is calamitous.

Duty is not merely to do the thing we ought to do, but to do it when we should, whether we feel like it or not. When we make ourselves responsible for doing a job, making a plan, or directing others, we are duty and honour bound to do it at the time promised or expected.

This brings up the matter of punctuality. Immature people excuse themselves for lateness by saying that they have no sense of time, without stopping to think that if this were so they would be ahead of time as often as they are behind time.

There may be some who regard the catching of a train as a form of sport, and like to give the train a chance to get away, but people who take life at all seriously will consider it more sensible to start early than to hurry on the way. They will realize, too, that when meeting people instead of catching trains they are ill-bred who come late.

A word should be said to the person who is the victim of another's procrastination. Dr. Helen Brandon, a psychological counsellor, made constructive use of her time. In one year, she says, she spent some 120 hours a month waiting on something or somebody. "During this time I thought of 1000 article-ideas, worked on the case histories of more than 100 people, and spent at least one-third of the time relaxing in one way or another."

Time and efficiency

Time enters into efficiency in every activity. The essence of efficiency is economy of energy, space and time. It was wittily said by Lord Chesterfield of the old Duke of Newcastle: "His Grace loses an hour in the morning, and is looking for it all the rest of the day."

The well-organized life leaves time for everything, for planning, doing, and following through. Time does not boss this sort of life like a taskmaster with a whip. Time is not used up in regretting, or in trying to live

life retroactively, or in explaining why something needed has not been done.

Some persons are more afflicted by procrastination than others, but everyone has at least a tinge of it. There is no use in shrugging our shoulders and saying: "That's the way I am", or in trying to forget our weakness. The biographies of successful people are crammed with the stories of overcoming weaknesses.

Perhaps the most valuable result of education, whether junior or adult, is to make us do the things we have to do when they ought to be done. Yet to cure the evil of procrastination it is not necessary to learn anything new in the way of information. Just relate what you already know to your daily problem.

Begin in small ways. Make it a rule to be orderly and systematic in dealing with your mail: lay aside only such letters as really need further thought, and then take them up immediately after the routine mail has been disposed of. Make out a complete and honest statement of what you wish to do this day, this week, this year, and determine what obstacles are standing in your way. Odds are a hundred to one that you will find your time-and-energy schedule full of holes through which time is leaking: now that you have uncovered them, you have a chance to plug them.

Your effort may mean the making of a new pattern of life, as you acquire skill in distinguishing between the better and the worse way of doing things. Why be a slave to conventional ways? Why must the mail be disposed of before you tackle the important business of the day? Why must routine housework be done before you turn to some major project?

Try scheduling your time. Jot down the various jobs you must do or would like to do. Estimate the time needed for each. Number them in order of their importance to you. Then wade into them.

In *The Vision of Mirza*, time was a tide stretching from mist to mist, without limits. But our everyday time is not like that at all; it is the space between getting up in the morning and going to bed at night. Into this space we must fit our various projects and the episodes of routine living. Weak men will drift through the hours; strong men will steer from this point to that.

Whether you have a luxurious amount of free time, or are pinched for white space on your daily time chart, you will be happiest when you make sure of getting the best value for every minute. The way to avoid the feeling of marking time, of beating with futility at an unseen barrier, is to schedule your time.

This involves concentration on the job at hand so as to get it done, but it also necessitates looking ahead.

Baden Powell had a game for his Boy Scouts called "Near and Far". A party of Scouts walking along a road would be halted at intervals and turned around. The boys were asked what they had noted at their feet and on the horizon. Seeing near and far is an essential part of planning our use of time.

Some people find it comforting and inspiring to look back, at the end of a day, at what they have accomplished, both in big things and little. A day which seems to have gone awry, with our plans broken up by unforeseen events, may appear to casual thinking a lost day, but when we count the items we find solace.

Overcoming inertia

Professional people tell us that all the world seeks rest. Water seeks its level and all forms of energy tend to run down to less strenuous activities. They call this entropy.

Human beings, like things in nature, suffer from inertia. It takes more effort to start than to keep going, and it is easier to stop than to continue. Even worse, we find it possible to delude ourselves: we frame plans and make decisions and then allow ourselves to think of them as being completed.

Decision is of little account unless it is followed by action, and there is no recipe for getting things done so good as the one to start doing them. Doing nothing is negative action, but it has positive consequences: discouragement, irritation, disappointment, and even ill health and mental upset.

So don't look too long at a job before starting it. Even if progress seems slight and futile, the act of starting and proceeding a little way is a mighty force inspiring us to continue toward successful completion. Initiative is a pallid thing unless it is kept going.

Every man working toward success in professional, business or technical life will seek to find his weak points so that he may strengthen them. If his weak point is procrastination, he may have to work at it with some determination, because it has taken him a long time to achieve the proficiency in it he has now and he cannot expect to get over the habit in a week.

Don't let us defend our procrastination or find excuses for it. Churchill said with regard to the failure of planners in another area: "If you simply take up the attitude of defending it there will be no hope of improvement."

By constructive thought and action, energetically applied to the elimination of procrastination from our lives, we may make the coming year much longer than the past year in terms of things done, happiness realized and vividness of life enjoyed.