



THE PROCRASTINATOR'S GUIDE TO PROGRESS

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Welcome

How you spend your time and attention is an ever-moving target.

And doing your best creative work goes far beyond white-knuckle focus or ripping your internet cable out of the wall. Doing work that matters takes integrity, clarity, accountability, and even joy.

For more than a decade, I have been teaching and learning about diligence and focus. I've spoken about these topics at conferences, taught them to my design team during my time as a creative director, and now that I work from home running a small network of websites, I continue to implement them in my own life every day.

The Procrastinator's Guide to Progress includes thirteen short sections on some of the areas I have found to be the most helpful in my own endeavors to .

Over 10,000 people have read this book. I hope it proves to be as helpful to you as it has to them. If you want to pass it along to a friend, please feel free.

And, as always, thanks for reading.

— Shawn Blanc

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The Procrastinator's Guide to Progress

Shawn Blanc

My Grandmother's Advice

"Don't put off to tomorrow what you can do today."

That was her advice to me. To all of us. She knew tomorrow would always have enough craziness of its own.

However, all through high school and college I lived the opposite of my grandmother's advice.

My actions said: *Why do now what I can put off until the very last minute?*

There was one college course in particular... I remember we were given our final assignment on the first day of class. We had the entire semester to work on it. Like a fool, I waited until the very last few days of the semester before I began working. I had to miss several classes, I stayed up late, and worked for nearly 48 hours straight to get my paper finished.

Then, at about 2:30 in the morning — with just 6 hours left until my final assignment was due — I drove to Kinko's to have my final paper printed and bound. Only to find a dozen of my classmates were also there, and I had to wait in line.

When you're putting a project off (deferring it with no clear plan of attack other than "I'll get to it later"), your brain won't let it go. And thus you're operating at a sub-optimal capacity because you've got this weight of the undone project and its undefined plan of attack. Not to mention, procrastination left unchecked will gain momentum.

You know this. I know this. Yet still we procrastinate. Why?

My grandparents started a business well after they should have been retired. My grandfather — who lived to be 100 years old — told me that he tried to break a sweat every day.

When you've got a work ethic that's bone-deep like that, having a bias toward action is just part of everyday life.

Over the past 15 years since I've been a freelance designer, traveling musician, a marketing and creative director, marketing consultant, published author, and I now work for myself running a small network of websites. In all of these areas, distractions, frustrations, and ambiguity have been plentiful. But I've left each season of life with a feeling of joy and accomplishment.

In the pages that follow, I'm going to share with you some of the ideas and methods I've learned for making meaningful progress on projects that matter.

Why Do We Procrastinate?

All sorts of reasons. Here are a few:

- We lack motivation.
- There are other things we'd rather be doing.
- We don't know what the first step to get started is.
- We're afraid.
- We're easily distracted.
- We think we lack the resources to start / complete the task.
- The project feels overwhelming.
- We're stubborn.
- We have a history of procrastinating, so it's just the way we operate.

Surely the most common reason to procrastinate is a lack of motivation. If we were motivated (or, instead of "motivated", use the word "excited") to accomplish a task, then we'd be doing it instead of avoiding it.

Oftentimes it takes that looming deadline or some other external force to motivate us to finally take care of the task. Or, if it's a task with no deadline, we may find ourselves putting it off for months, if not years. "I'll get to it someday," we tell ourselves.

Meanwhile, there are other things we have no trouble staying motivated to do. Such as making time to eat, sleep, be with our family, read a book, watch a movie, go to the mall, go to our job, play video games, etc. And oftentimes it is these other tasks and hobbies that we turn to when we are procrastinating. For example, instead of cleaning out the garage like we've been meaning to, we watch a movie. Or instead of working on the next chapter of our book, we play a video game.

How then do we beat procrastination? Is the answer to only ever work on projects we're excited about? If you were making a living from your passion, would you never deal with procrastination again? *Nope.*

The adrenaline we get from fresh motivation only lasts for so long. It's awesome while it lasts, but it comes and goes. Don't blame your tendency to procrastinate and your lack of motivation on external circumstances.

This month (February 2015) marks the four-year anniversary of when I quit my job to write for a living. And just a couple days ago I was asked if I ever get tired of writing. My answer was that yes, I often get tired of writing.

When I come to the keyboard to begin writing, a million potential distractions stand at my doorstep. There are many days when I'd rather give in to one of the distractions instead of doing my writing. But I choose not to. I write when I'm tired. I write when I'm uninspired. I write when the weather outside is beautiful. I write when I'm not even sure what to write about.

I have an appointment with my keyboard every day. Every time I cancel that appointment, it becomes that much easier to cancel it again. And then again. And that, my friends, is a slippery slope.

One big myth about creativity is that it cannot be harnessed. That creative folks should float around aimlessly, waiting for the muse to show up. While I'm all about being able to capture inspiration and ideas whenever and wherever they strike, I'm not about to let my creative life rest on the whims of the muse.

It is silly to think a creative person should live without routine, discipline, or accountability.

Here's some advice from well-known painter and photographer, Chuck Close:

The advice I like to give young artists, or really anybody who'll listen to me, is not to wait around for inspiration. Inspiration is for amateurs; the rest of us just show up and get to work. If you wait around for the clouds to part and a bolt of lightning to strike you in the brain, you are not going to make an awful lot of work. All the best ideas come out of the process; they come out of the work itself. Things occur to you. If you're sitting around trying to dream up a great art idea, you can sit there a long time before anything happens. But if you just get to work, something will occur to

you and something else will occur to you and something else that you reject will push you in another direction. Inspiration is absolutely unnecessary and somehow deceptive. You feel like you need this great idea before you can get down to work, and I find that's almost never the case.

Sure, inspiration often comes when we least expect it, and so by all means, let us allow exceptions to our schedules. But sitting around being idle, waiting for inspiration is a good way to get nothing done. And worse, it is also a way to let the creative juices get stagnant.

My all-time favorite Benjamin Franklin quote is: *"Little strokes fell great oaks."*

Everyone longs for major victories and big breakthroughs in their work. But those would never happen if it weren't for the incremental progress we make every single day by staying committed and showing up.

In a blog post about his writing process, Seth Godin concluded with the sentiment that there is no "right way" to write. He says: *"The process advice that makes sense to me is to write. Constantly. At length. Often."*

And, to quote Ray Bradbury: *"Quantity produces quality. If you only write a few things, you're doomed."*

Procrastination robs us of this. It keeps us from showing up every day. It tells us that instead of showing up every day, we can just cram at the last minute. It tells us that there is always tomorrow. It lies to us, saying that just because we're ignoring this task again and again doesn't mean we've quit.

The only difference between a quitter and an habitual procrastinator is that the latter is lying to herself.

Therefore, procrastination is one of the greatest enemies to producing meaningful work. Because not only does procrastination keep us from doing the work, but in so doing, it also robs us from the process of sitting down every day to be creative. It's in

the day-to-day mundane and difficult work of showing up that our ideas take shape and take flight. It's in that place that our skills are forged bit by bit.

The path to success (both in our career and in accomplishing our life goals) is rarely glamorous. It's usually mundane and repetitive. Underachievers will waste their time daydreaming about when their big break will come while they procrastinate doing work they don't see as important.

Meanwhile, true achievers will do the work, day in and day out, with vision and strategy. I once read that successful people don't work harder than unsuccessful people; they work much, much harder.

Procrastination Robs Us From Doing Our Best Creative Work

I think we can all agree that fear is the biggest enemy to creativity.

We're born creative, but we learn to be afraid. After we've been hurt, wounded, scolded, rejected - we learn what pain feels like and we become afraid. We don't want to do something that could cause the pain again.

Courage isn't the absence of fear, it's the ability to carry on even though we're afraid.

I've hurt my shoulder badly twice over the years I've been a snowboarder. Once I tore my AC ligament that holds my collar bone down, and a few years later I broke my collar bone and had to have a metal plate put in to get the bone to set properly. But I still go snowboarding, even though I'm afraid of hurting myself again.

The same goes for creating something. We feel like frauds, we're afraid nobody will care about what we do, or that they'll reject it completely and call us bad names. And so we avoid making anything. Or, maybe we make something but it's vanilla. It lacks character and personality. It's our fear that keeps us from making anything of value.

There are many ways to overcome fear. Surely one of the best is to build up our courage. And we build up our courage by being courageous. By doing something in the midst of our fear - and the more we do that, the less afraid we are.

The very first time I went snowboarding after injuring my shoulder, I was timid. I took it slow. And slowly over time I got more and more courageous again.

The same goes for making. The more we show up and do the work, the more strength and courage we build up within to continue showing up to do the work.

There are four things vital to your success which you build by showing up every day to do your creative work:

1. Courage
2. Momentum
3. Your skill set
4. Your audience

Showing up consistently is the single most important aspect of a creative profession. Don't wait for inspiration, don't wait for the mood to strike, don't fiddle with your tools. Just do it.

What is the best way to describe whatever it is we're doing when we're not doing what we're supposed to be doing? Procrastination.

Procrastination is at direct odds with doing our best creative work.

- It robs us from gaining momentum in our projects.
- It lies to us, saying that we should work only when inspiration strikes.
- It has no intention of helping us hone our skills.
- It keeps us from doing our best creative work.
- It causes us to project a reputation of inconsistency, thus hindering our ability to build an audience.

So...

If fear is what keeps us from doing work that matters, procrastination is what keeps us from reaching our potential.

As we'll get to in a bit, there are many ways to beat procrastination. But if I had to boil it all down to just one piece of advice — the first step toward beating procrastination in terms of doing something else instead of making and creating — I would say this:

Show up every day.

As in, carve out 30–60 minutes in your day. Every day. Make an appointment with yourself for when you're going to create. Be it writing, playing music, painting, drawing, photography, or whatever it is you're trying to create for the world.

Make that appointment and keep it. And when you're there, put your phone on Do Not Disturb mode. Get earplugs or headphones. Go somewhere you won't be distracted. Whatever it takes so you can spend the whole of your time making.

Procrastination Left Unchecked Gains Momentum

The longer you put something off the easier it becomes to keep putting off. And that unchecked procrastination bleeds over into the other areas of our life.

People who are disciplined with their finances are usually disciplined with their time and diet as well. Having structure and focus in one area of life gives clarity and momentum to bring structure to the other areas as well.

Conversely, when we are unstructured and lacking discipline in one area, that lack of discipline will bleed over to other areas of our life.

Which is why procrastination is far more lethal than we think. By procrastinating, we are lying to ourselves. We say we'll do something, but when the time comes, we don't. We put it off.

Breaking your own commitment to yourself causes your subconscious to distrust your conscious. Our personal integrity is eroded just a little bit every time we defer a task, snooze the alarm, or cancel an appointment. Thus, making it increasingly more difficult to follow through with your self-assigned goals, plans, and tasks.

Making consistent progress on our goals is as easy (and difficult) as eating healthy, exercising, and living within our means. Anybody can do it, but most people don't.

Regaining Personal Integrity

Here is an excerpt from a book I read years ago that changed my life. The book is by Peter J. Daniels, titled *How to Be Motivated All the Time*.

This is from the chapter on Deep Personal Integrity (emphasis mine):

If you are having difficulty in staying motivated all the time, examine closely your personal integrity. Root out past and present commitments you have made and ask yourself the question, "Would I treat another person with the same level of integrity I display toward myself?" My guess is that we treat other people with much more commitment and integrity!

One of the major reasons we do not remain motivated all the time is we do not retain integrity towards ourselves in the same measure as we do towards others. **Highly motivated people are those who keep commitments to others, but who also keep commitments to themselves.** That is why they always look and sound so confident and why they achieve and keep on achieving.

We are good at justifying in the moment when we don't want to do something.

When you make a commitment to yourself you decide on a change of attitude. In effect you announce to your whole being that you are going to do something which requires total attention and help. But if you renege on your commitment, in effect you prevent all your conscious and subconscious faculties from completing the task and render them useless. What happens then is, that next time you become excited about the possibilities of a project and make a commitment, your subconscious responses will be slightly slower and less enthusiastic than before. It is as if they remember the previous broken commitments, consider the new project may not be fulfilled and decide that full effort is not required.

If you continually break commitments you almost bind yourself totally from completing anything because there is no track record of success in your subconscious.

If it helps, make less commitments to yourself but follow through completely on even the most frivolous. It's not so stupid to start by placing your shoes in exactly the same position each night without fail. Do this irrespective of what time you get home or how you feel from one day to the next. As crazy as this seems it will actually increase your sense of integrity. You will prove to yourself that you can keep a long-term commitment at the most menial level.

THE INTEGRITY SNOWBALL

There is a good, common practice when it comes to debt elimination called The Debt Snowball. The goal of The Debt Snowball is to pay off all your credit card and consumer debt as quickly as possible. In some cases this could take several months if not several years, and so it can be easy to lose momentum along the process.

Many people think they should try to pay off the credit cards which have the highest interest rate first. But there is a better way.

To do The Debt Snowball, you put your credit cards in order of balance: with the card holding the smallest balance first and the one with the highest balance last. Then, while still paying the monthly minimum payment on each card, take all extra money you can and pay off that first card (the one with the smallest balance) as fast as possible.

Congratulations! You've now eliminated one of the cards you owe money on. Feels great, doesn't it?

Now, take the money you were using to pay off that card and roll it over to the next card until that one is paid off.

As you can see, the momentum builds as you pay off each card. You feel good about the small victories, and you feel less stress as you have less cards you owe money on.

This method of The Debt Snowball is a great picture for how we can rebuild our personal integrity in terms of being able to follow through with our commitments.

Just like many people think the best way to pay off their credit cards is to start with the ones that have the highest interest rate, so too do we think that if we are going to make a change in our life it should be a big change in a substantial area of life.

We want to eat healthier, begin exercising daily, create a comprehensive financial budget for our household, write a novel, start a business, etc. These are all wonderful goals. But for many people, these goals will never be realized. Not just because they're prone to distraction and procrastination, but because they have a history of not being able to see their commitments through to the end.

And so, in the same way that the Debt Snowball has you starting with the credit card with the lowest balance, why not regain your personal integrity and develop a habit of commitment by starting small and simple. In the quoted passage above, Peter Daniels suggests placing your shoes in exactly the same spot each night without fail. Do that for a month as a simple way to prove to yourself that you can make and keep a commitment.

It can be frustrating to "start small" with our goals. But making small commitments and keeping them is how we build the momentum we need to be people who keep our commitments. It's a way to rebuild our personal integrity. And in so doing, we'll see much greater results over the long run.

The Tyranny Of Choice

If you've ever been to the toothpaste aisle, you're no stranger to the paradox of choice. Or, as I recently heard it put: the tyranny of choice.

Just a quick search on Target.com for "toothpaste" nets me 217 results. 217. For toothpaste.

3D white anti-cavity, regular cavity protection, whitening, gentle whitening, Pro-health, extreme clean... Gosh, I don't know. Do I want white teeth, clean teeth, or cavity free teeth? Can't I have all of the above?

When we're presented with too many choices, oftentimes we just choose none. Because we can't decide between the multitude of options.

Consider these two scenarios:

1. A friend calls you up, says she has two tickets to go see a movie, and asks if you want to go. Your only decision is yes or no.
2. Or, suppose that same friend calls you up and simply asks if you want to go hang out. Assuming you say yes, now you have to decide what to do. Go see a movie, go bowling, go to a museum, go out to eat (fast food or sit down), etc. The options are endless...

Last week my wife surprised me. In the morning before I began my work day she told me that she had booked a babysitter and made reservations at a restaurant. The only choice I had to make was if I wanted to go or not — of course I did. And did I care where we were going? No, not at all. The decision had been made for me and it was simple to accept it and enjoy the night out.

I got to go on a date, and all I had to do was show up. How easy is that? Oftentimes the easiest, laziest thing we can do is just accept the choice that's been made for us. Which is why if you're waiting until it's time to begin work before you

make a choice about what to work on, the choice is much harder. Instead, make the choice for yourself ahead of time and capitalize on your own laziness. Why not!?

Try this:

1. Today, at the end of your day, write down the one thing you need to get done tomorrow. Not necessarily an “urgent” task with a deadline, but rather an important one. A task you need to accomplish in order to keep making progress on a project.
2. Now, decide when you’re going to do that task. Preferably, it will be the first thing you work on tomorrow.

See? Now your current self is making the choice for your future self. Right now, when you can think clearly and make an unbiased decision about tomorrow, is the perfect time to make a decision about the first thing you’re going to do.

If your biggest challenge to focus is the tyranny of choice, then make the choice ahead of time. Then, stay true to your choice.

If you have trouble keeping your own commitments, and following through with your own choices, then re-read the previous chapter on getting back your own personal integrity.

Honesty, Clarity, And Action

There is a temptation to look at our heroes and attempt emulate their success by following their same path.

Alas, we cannot follow in the footsteps of our heroes because the path has changed since they first took it. More than that, their personalities are different than ours. So too their circumstances — perhaps they were single with no kids when they started their company, or perhaps they were 65 when they got started.

However, there are mindsets and lifestyle commitments that we can emulate. What were the underlying principles that led them to be consistent, focused, and successful?

I think we could sum it up thusly:

A commitment to honesty and clarity with a bias toward action.

1. **A Commitment to Honesty and Clarity.** This means we don't shy away from the truth of who we want to be, where we are, where we want to go, what capacity we hold, what we want to build, and how we will build it. Don't shy away from being honest with yourself and finding clarity about your vision, values, goals, and resources.
2. **A Bias Toward Action:** This is doing the work. Showing up every day. Focusing on what's important but not necessarily urgent. Getting things done.

If you're familiar with Stephen Covey's 7 Habits, you'll see that this sums up the first three habits, but especially so the 2nd — the habit of beginning with the end in mind is all about the balance between leadership and management.

Covey writes about how things are created twice: first there is the idea and then there is the manifestation of that idea. First we build with our imagination, then we build with our hands. Both stages of "creating" are vital because we need both clarity and action.

Too much focus on ideas and we'll never do the work. But too much focus on staying busy and we may find ourselves spinning our wheels without making progress or creating anything of value.

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It is true that our heroes have possibly forgotten the exact path they took (because it was 10 or 20 years ago for them), or that the landscape is different now than it was then, or just the fact that we and our heroes are altogether different people with different life circumstances, etc.

When we glean from those whom we look up to, the goal is not to peek at their to-do list and agenda. Rather, we should glean from their values, their approach to problem solving, and their work ethic.

I believe we'll find a common denominator amongst so many of the successful people we look up to. Those who create incredible businesses, who are prolific in their art, who serve others have a commitment to honesty and clarity, and they have a bias toward action.

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Through my own development, I've read about many value systems and methodologies when it comes to having a life vision and being a person of action. From David Allen's Getting Things Done methodology, to Stephen Covey's 7 Habits, to Peter Daniels' keys for personal motivation, to Tony Robbins' 5 questions and Marc Benioff's V2MOM method, to George Leonard's keys to mastery, J.D. Meier's Agile system, and more. Each of these methodologies offer something unique and valuable. But none of them are "the only one". There is no secret system that works for all people in all circumstances. However, there is a common denominator.

By spending time learning, practicing, and teaching these different systems, I've tried to connect any dots I felt were missing.

When I learn about these systems and methodologies, I can really geek out over the details. I love to dive deep into the structure, clarity, bullet-point lists, and workflow charts of these various productivity systems. There are values and priorities from multiple systems that have influence my own “flavor” of productivity. But in my day-to-day life, I like having a simple concept or idea to keep in the front of mind as I try to stay steady in the pursuit of doing my best creative work.

That simple concept is this:

Have a commitment to honesty and clarity with a bias toward action.

You’d be hard pressed to find a successful musician, athlete, programmer, designer, writer, singer, project manager, or business owner who didn’t have a goal in mind and who didn’t show up every day to practice and work hard.

The Daily Plumb Line

As I wrote about in the previous chapter on Honesty, Clarity, and Action, there are two sides to the coin of forward progress: leadership and management.

Leadership equates to vision, values, goals, ideas.

Management is all about doing the work and getting things done. And we need both.

We get there by having a commitment to honesty and clarity with a bias toward action.

A lot of productivity-centric writing revolves around the management stuff. In part, because for a lot of us, ideas seem to be so prevalent but action is not. Everyone has more ideas than time, yet we also seem to have more time than focus.

In this chapter, I want to talk about making sure the work we are doing fits in to the category of “important.”

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Recently, I was talking with a new friend about our jobs. We had just met the week prior, and so we were talking more about what we do for a living. He is a self-employed rental property manager, and he was telling me about how he feels stretched thin at times because most of the time all he does is respond to urgent tasks. He feels as if he's never making any progress on important work because it usually doesn't have a deadline.

I shared with my friend this excellent quote by Henri Nouwen:

“If I were to let my life be taken over by what is urgent, I might very well never get around to what is essential.”

Urgent tasks will always find us. Which is why we have to be proactive about making time for the important tasks.

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There are two ways to make sure the work you're doing on a consistent basis is of the important kind.

1. **Know your Most Important Tasks:** If your day is prone to getting the best of you, it's often wise to identify 1-3 tasks that are the most important to get done today. That way, when something urgent or distracting shows up, you've got a concrete map for what you need to get done today that will result in making progress on meaningful work.

But there's also a level higher than the Most Important Tasks themselves. And that's knowing the overarching goals (or values) for how you want to be spending your time and what you want to be doing. Which is why it's important to...

2. **Define your Most Important Goals:** In this context, I am using the term "Goals" as being a level above Tasks. You could also use the term "values" or "habits" or "practices".

My daily goals help me define the things I want to spend my time doing as it relates to my work, family, and personal life. My daily goals aren't so granular that they define what my actual actions items are, but they are also specific enough that it's easy to know if I'm accomplishing them.

YOUR MOST IMPORTANT GOALS

These are the higher-level values for how you want to be spending your time. If you know what they are, then they can become the plumb lines that help you gauge if you're spending your time well or not.

It can be easy to get caught up in the moment — to become distracted by something interesting or exciting or urgent — and to not even realize that we're actually just wasting our time.

Sometimes when I sit down to work I will feel overwhelmed at all the plates I know I have spinning. I'll feel unsure about what my next action step should be. This is not an ideal state to be in, but it happens. It's not the end of the world, and there are ways out.

For the days when I feel as if I have nothing figured out, at least I have clarity about what my Most Important Goals are. Because the goals don't change from day to day. Therefore, I can still make meaningful progress on my projects and have a productive day, even if I'm not firing on all cylinders.

Because one thing I can do for certain is to make sure that my next action is something that falls in line with my Most Important Goals. This way, when I'm feeling overwhelmed or prone to distraction, I have options other than to just zone out and check Twitter.

And thus, my day is almost guaranteed to be productive at least on some level.

* * *

Let me share with you what my Most Important Goals are.

MY DAILY WORK GOALS

1. Push the needle forward on at least one of my current projects. In short, a bias toward action. This mostly looks like spending time writing every day. It also includes answering important emails. This usually does not include "fiddling" with my to-do list, scrolling through Twitter, or watching cat videos on YouTube.
2. Encourage and serve my team. Making sure the people I work with have the clarity, resources, and autonomy they need to do their best work; encouraging them when they do well, and correcting and honoring them when it's clear they could do better.
3. Spend time away from my desk. Reading, exercising, meeting and talking with friends or peers in the industry, running errands, etc.

MY DAILY PERSONAL GOALS

1. Have personal time to study the Bible.
2. Have down time to think and let my mind rest. Oftentimes when I'm feeling restless, or find myself bouncing around between inboxes, I just stop and decide that it's time for a break. I get up and go walk around for a bit. Or I lay down on my couch and listen to what my mind and imagination have to say.
3. Learn something. For me, this mostly looks like reading a book, listening to a podcast, and/or watching a TED talk.

MY DAILY FAMILY GOALS

1. Give my boys my full attention. My wife and I have two boys under 3. And since I work from home, we usually have all three meals together as a family. Also, every evening I make a point to play trains with them, play catch, or build a fort in the living room.
2. Encourage and serve my wife. My wife, Anna, is incredible. Being a mom is the hardest job in the world, and she does it with grace every single day. I do my best to remind her every day how much I love her and how wonderful she is as well as to help her with the boys and other household responsibilities.

* * *

DON'T QUIT

My 8 goals are important. They should not be delegated to weekly or "just whenever" tasks. If several days go by and I haven't spent time in one of these daily goals, then I know I'm on the wrong path and need to get back on track.

Every single day I want to show up and do meaningful work. Every day I want to tell my kids and wife how much I love them. Every day I want to encourage my peers and teammates at how awesome they are. Every day I need personal time of quiet to think.

Though my goals are in different areas of my life (work, personal, family) they influence each other and overlap. When I allow myself time to think and rest, I make more significant progress on my work. When I make progress, I feel better about ending my work day to go be with my family. When I've spent quality time with my wife and kids, I am emotionally healthier which aids in the creative work I do.

If you're not making progress on meaningful work because you're too tired at the end of the day, that's okay. But don't give in.

Don't assume you'll be too tired at the end of the day, every day, for the rest of your life.

What is a goal you can set that will give you one thing you can do today to make things just a little bit better for you tomorrow?

Breathing Room For Your Day

I love how David Allen says that you can't actually manage time. If you start with 5 minutes, there's no way to manage it well enough that it will turn into 6 minutes. What you can do is manage how you *spend* your time. Which is more like time stewardship — because you alone are responsible for taking care of the time you have in the day.

And this is why breathing room in our schedule is so important. It gives us the breathing room and the wherewithal to steward our time and manage ourselves in how we spend it.

In his book, *Margin*, Richard Swenson states that there are four main areas of life that we most need margin in. They are our emotional energy, our physical energy, our finances, and our schedule. And I would add one more area to that list: We also need margin in our mental energy — our thoughts, and with it, creative energy.

You can't pit any of these against one another when looking for one that is more or less important. They overlap and intertwine with one another so much that when we have margin in one area, it helps open the door to margin in the other areas. And, conversely, when we lack margin in one area, it puts a strain on the others.

WHEN WE LACK MARGIN IN OUR SCHEDULE

When there is margin in our life, it brings with it a sense of contentment, simplicity, balance, and rest.

Consider this with your current schedule... do you feel content, balanced, and rested?

- Is your schedule simple enough that you control it? (Or does it control you?)
- At the end of the day, when you look back at how you spent your time, do you feel content? Or do you feel frustrated at all the things you didn't and all the fires you had to react to and put out?

- At the end of your day, do you feel that your day was balanced? Were you Meaningfully Productive? Did you spend your time on things that matter most to you in more than just one area of your life? Is there an area of your life that dominates your schedule and causes other areas of your life to get out of balance?
- At the start of your day, do you feel rested and prepared to do awesome things? Or do you feel behind before you even begin?

Your answers to these questions can help you determine if there is any margin in your schedule. But my hunch is that you don't need much self-assessment to know if your schedule has breathing room or not.

WHEN WE HAVE MARGIN IN OUR SCHEDULE

Imagine waking up in the morning and being able to spend time doing what you want to do.

Perhaps it's going to the gym or going on a walk. Having time in quiet to read, think, and/or journal. Being able to make a healthy breakfast and still have time to prepare for work and begin your day doing the things that are most important.

Margin in your schedule means your day has breathing room.

And that breathing room means two things: (1) that you can set aside time for doing the things that are most important; and (2) that there is space to account for the unexpected. That's what Margin is all about: it's space left over.

Conversely, when our schedule lacks any breathing room, it's like waking up just minutes before having to rush out the door. Grabbing a Pop-Tart without even having the time to put it in the toaster. Then, getting to work and spending 8 or more hours putting out fires and responding to multiple urgent issues.

The difference between a schedule with and without margin is far more than just one of getting up earlier. It's an internal choice. The choice to take ownership of our time and attention.

The person with margin has taken ownership of their time and has slowly established a routine that allows for health and breathing room. The other person is, honestly, a bit out of control.

OUT OF CONTROL

My friend Dan Mall began replacing the phrase “I don’t have time” with “it’s not a priority” for his internal dialog:

Recently, I’ve tried to stop saying, “I don’t have time.” It insinuates that I’m a helpless victim to the all-powerful stream of hours that mightily passes me by. It’s easy to adopt an “Oh well” attitude to what you’re giving up. It authorizes my apathy.

Instead, I’ve replaced it with the phrase, “That’s not a priority.” Suddenly, I’ve taken control of my own decisions. I’ve taken responsibility for what I do and don’t do. I’ve added clarity, condemnation, and encouragement, all in 4 short words.

How many people do you know who “don’t have time,” who are “so busy?” Everyone, right? We’re all so busy. None of us have any time. That’s part of the excuse we give to our procrastination — we put things off because there’s no time to get to them.

Not having time and being “busy” has become the standard answer we give when people ask us how we’re doing. It’s become a badge of honor, even.

I used to think that the busier I was, the more important I was.

I thought that the more people who wanted me to do stuff for them, the more meetings I was invited to, the more projects I was in charge of — all of it was proof that I was important. Each additional commitment was another badge on my uniform to display to those around just how important and responsible I was.

But there’s a difference between having a full schedule and being busy. My schedule is still very much full. But it’s full with all the things I am choosing to do. Such as three meals a day with my family. Time in the evening to read. Time in the morning to write.

A whole day of the week where I build trains with my boys and don't even look at email. A date with my wife every single week.

HOW TO RESTORE MARGIN TO OUR SCHEDULE

There are so many ways you can restore (and maintain) breathing room in your schedule. Here are a few suggestions:

Give yourself permission to have some breathing room

This is what the book *Fringe Hours* is all about. You need margin in your schedule; it's okay to make that happen. Give yourself permission to create some breathing room and to spend your time doing the things that are most important to you.

Automate, delegate, and eliminate

Are you spending time doing things that aren't important or could be done by someone else? Cut those tasks out or delegate them to someone else.

Cut out baseline noise

When you got up this morning, did you check your phone right away? Email, social network timeline, news feed? Did that help you start your day? Do you even remember what you read?

Minimum and maximum time blocks

Give yourself a minimum amount of time to spend on important things and a maximum amount of time to spend on less-important things. For me, this looks like a minimum of two hours writing and a maximum of 30 minutes doing email. I have a minimum time I spend with my family each day and a maximum time to watch Netflix each week. A minimum amount of time spent reading and a maximum amount of time spent on Social Networks.

Schedule your most important tasks

If you know what is most important for you to do each day, then schedule it.

Single tasking

I'm terrible at this one, but trying to recover. If you look at my computer, there are about 9,000 open windows and browser tabs. In an ideal state, there would be just one open window — the one I'm using to write this text right now.

Single tasking goes beyond just focusing on one software app at a time, it also goes for other activities. For example: don't check your email when playing ball with your kids. If you're scheduling your most important tasks, then it's safe to assume you've planned when you're going to do all the things that are meaningful to you. So, trust your commitments to yourself and single-task the activity you're doing right now. (This also helps create margin for your mental energy, which we'll get to in a couple of days.)

YOUR DAILY PLUMB LINES

One of the quickest ways to take ownership of your schedule is to know what your most important work is. What are the areas of your life that you want to spend time on?

Set a minimum and a maximum time allowance for different things. Because urgent tasks will always find us we have to be proactive about making time for the important tasks and then protecting that time.

Urgent issues always come up. If they don't align with your vision and values, then you can feel comfortable saying no. Like Dan Mall says, "it's not a priority."

As you know from the previous chapter, I have a few areas of my life that I want to spend time developing every single day.

It can be easy to get distracted by something interesting, exciting, or urgent and to not even realize that I'm actually just wasting my time.

Sometimes when I sit down to work, I will feel overwhelmed at all the plates I know I have spinning. I'll feel unsure about what my next action step should be. This is not an ideal state to be in, but it happens. It's not the end of the world, and there are ways out.

For the days when I feel as if I have nothing figured out, at least I have clarity about what my Most Important Goals are because the goals don't change from day to day. Therefore, I can still make meaningful progress on my projects and have a productive day, even if I'm not firing on all cylinders.

Because one thing I can do for certain is to make sure that my next action is something that falls in line with one of my aforementioned Daily Plumb Lines. This way, when I'm feeling overwhelmed or prone to distraction, I have options other than to just zone out and check Twitter.

Moreover, by having these Plumb Lines, it gives me permission to say "no" to much more than distractions. It also gives me permission to say no to opportunities that would encroach on the breathing room in my schedule.

BREATHE

It's not easy to restore and maintain breathing room in our schedule. Especially at the beginning, when some of us may need time to transition out of a few current commitments and establish a new routine.

I mentioned some suggestions above, so if any of those sound awesome to you, then go for it.

If you're not sure where to start, perhaps start by saying no to the next incoming opportunity that doesn't excite you and line up with what's most important to you. Secondly, take a few minutes and do an audit on how you're spending your free time. When you get home from work, what does your average evening look like? For most Americans, they're watching more than 5 hours of television every day. Perhaps all you need in order to buy back a bit of margin in your schedule is to sell some of that Netflix time.

When you have margin in your schedule, it's liberating.

You have the time to get enough sleep, go on a date, have breakfast with your kids, invest in your own mental, spiritual, and physical health, and do your most important work each day.

And best of all, when there is margin in your schedule, you can be available to help and serve. You can respond to the needs of others without it disrupting your whole life.

The Urgent Vs The Essential

Below is a chart you may be familiar with. It's Stephen Covey's matrix of urgency and importance from his book, *First Things First*.

	URGENT	NOT URGENT
IMPORTANT	Kitchen Fire Crying baby Project Deadlines Some Messages 1	Learning Progress Rest Planning 2
NOT IMPORTANT	Most Messages Distractions Interruptions 3	Social Media Busy Work Time Wasters 4

Quadrant 1: the urgent and important items. These will always find us. By nature, they are urgent because they are calling upon us for action. These most certainly need our attention. Not only is it important that we tend to them, but they are time sensitive.

Quadrant 3: those things which are urgent but are not important. This quadrant can (and will) consume most of our time if we are not careful. When the things in this quadrant call upon us, it's what I call the tyranny of the urgent. It's important to someone else, and they want it to be important to us as well. Or it appears important to us due to its urgency, but in reality it is just a distraction.

Quadrant 4: those things which are neither urgent nor important. Watch out! There is nothing inherently wrong with trivial, busy work or spending time on social media, but we should be conscious of how much time we spend here. The items in this quadrant are often what we turn to when we are tired, bored, or seeking a distraction. Every day, the average American spends 2 hours on social media and 5 hours watching TV (!).

Quadrant 2: those things which are important but are not urgent. This is where our most important work lives, and we would do well to spend as much of our time here as possible. Unfortunately, this is the quadrant we so often neglect the most. By definition, the items in this quadrant are passive and usually they do not reap a short-term gain. Here we find the hard but valuable work, and yet there are no external sources of urgency giving us motivation to spend our time on these important tasks. We must create space in our day to make progress here on our own.

To quote Henri Nouwen again: *"If I were to let my life be taken over by what is urgent, I might very well never get around to what is essential."*

Celebrate Progress

How would you define a successful creative career?

Let's define success as having the ability to do creative work we're proud of and to keep doing that work.

However, there is more to it than creative freedom and financial stability. Something else is also critical to our long-term journey of doing our best creative work.

We need a healthy inner work life.

Our emotional and motivated state is just as important (if not more important) as our finances, tools, work environment, and overall creative freedom.

Teresa Amabile is a professor at Harvard Business School. In 2012 she gave [an excellent talk](#) at the 99U conference. In that talk she shares about how our inner work life is what lays the foundation for being our most productive and our most creative.

When our emotional and motivated state — our inner work life — is strong and positive then we are most likely to be at our best in terms of creativity and productivity.

What drives our inner work life? Well, a lot of things. But one of the most important is making progress on meaningful work.

When we see we are making progress — even small victories — then our emotional and motivated state is strengthened. We are happier and more motivated at work and are therefore more likely to be productive and creative.

Consider the converse. When we feel like cogs in a machine then we see our time as being spent just doing meaningless busy work and not contributing to anything worthwhile. And so we slowly lose our desire to be productive and efficient. We don't care about coming up with creative solutions or fresh ideas. We just do what's required of us in order to get our paycheck so we can go home to our television.

This is one reason why having an annual review for yourself (and your team / company) can be so beneficial. It reminds everyone of the goals accomplished and the projects completed. It shows that the oftentimes mundane and difficult work we do every day is actually adding up to something of value.

Coming back to Teresa Amabile, she calls this the Progress Principle. In short, making progress on meaningful work is critical to being happy, motivated, productive, and creative in our work.

And so, if progress is so important, why do we seem to celebrate only the big victories and only once or twice per year?

One of the greatest ways to recognize our progress is to celebrate all victories — big and small. And one of the best ways to celebrate and chronicle the small victories is with our own daily journal.

We often forget about our small wins after a few days or weeks. Or they quickly get buried under our never ending to-do lists. Or, if we don't recognize and celebrate them, then they stop being "small wins" and start just being "what we should be doing anyway".

By cataloging and celebrating our small wins each day then we can be reminded that we are making meaningful progress. And, in truth, it's the small wins which all add up to actually complete the big projects and big goals. As Benjamin Franklin said, it's little strokes that fell great oaks. And so, to celebrate a big victory is actually to celebrate the summation of a thousand small victories.

Listening To Our Procrastination

So far, we've spent most of our time talking about identifying procrastination, how it can rob us of doing our best creative work, and how habitual procrastination can spread to other areas of our lives.

But procrastination can also be a good thing, because it can serve as a signal.

If there is a task or project which you are continually putting off, take a moment to consider why.

- Why doesn't this task excite you?
- Why are you avoiding it?
- Why is it on your to-do list in the first place?

When you find yourself constantly putting off a particular task (or type of task), consider if it's something you can simply remove. Does this task *have* to be done? If no, then delete it. If it must be done, ask yourself if *you* have to be the one who does it — just because it was assigned to you doesn't necessarily mean you have to live with it.

It may be that the reason you're putting the task off is because it doesn't fit in with your own values and goals, or because you know it's not important.

Perhaps it's time to talk to yourself, your boss, manager, or spouse about that task.

How To Overcome Procrastination

Here are some ways to help overcome procrastination. Perhaps you're a habitual procrastinator. Perhaps there's just that one project you've been putting off. Or maybe it's just various things here and there, and you want to get better at completing your tasks in a timely and disciplined manner.

If so, consider one or more of these different approaches to help overcome procrastination. Some of these are targeted at personal growth and overcoming a prevailing habit of procrastination in our lives. Some of these are just quick tips to help you get back on focus in a pinch.

SET AN APPOINTMENT

Do you know when you're next going to work on your project? You don't find time, you make it. Set a daily or weekly appointment with yourself. Tell your spouse about it. Now, that is the time slot when you'll work on that project. Honor that appointment just as much as you would if it were with someone else.

PLAN FIRST, ACT LATER

Do you already have a time set aside for when you show up to do the work but often find that you lack inspiration when that time comes? When you sit down to work, do you first have to think of what the next action step is? This can be discouraging.

Consider having a separate time for planning from the time when you are doing the work on a project. Come up with the ideas and action steps elsewhere and then when you sit down to do the work, you've already identified what you need to do.

If you're waiting until it's time to begin work before you make a choice about what to working on, the choice is much harder. Instead, make the choice for yourself ahead of time.

To review from the earlier section on The Tyranny of Choice, try this:

1. Today, at the end of your day, write down the one thing you need to get done tomorrow. Not necessarily an "urgent" task with a deadline, but rather an important ones. A task you need to accomplish in order to keep making progress on a project.
2. Now, decide when you're going to do that task. Preferably, it will be the first thing you work on tomorrow.

This is your current self making the choice for your future self. Right now, when you can think clearly and make an unbiased decision about tomorrow, is the perfect time to make a decision about the first thing you're going to do.

ACCOUNTABILITY

Having accountability goes a long way in helping us keep our commitments. There are several forms of accountability:

- An externally-applied deadline. Such as a client milestone, a send-to-print date, or a homework due date. Having deadlines where other people are expecting something from us will at least get us to stop procrastinating at the last minute, because we're accountable to the deadline.
- Put yourself into a position of leadership or responsibility where others are looking to you to get the job done. For example, get a few of your friends together and start a Saturday morning "running club". Now you have to be there because you're the one who is organizing it.

- Get an accountability partnership. Talk to a friend or two and share them what you're working on and the challenges you're facing. Meet with them once a week so they can ask you about the progress you're making.
- Make a public commitment on your social network and/or blog. Tell everyone what you're working on, what the timeframe is for the project, and post updates about the progress.

GET AROUND A GOOD COMMUNITY

Laziness is contagious. Negativity is poisonous. If you're around people who are negative and/or who aren't driven the way you want to be, then find new people to get around.

And it's not just that some people are lazy (though some are). Not everyone has a strong desire to be focused and diligent with their life like you do. And so their general attitude for how they spend their time (usually it has a bias toward entertainment) will most certainly rub off on you and it may not be for the best.

Surround yourself with people who have a bias toward action. People who aren't afraid to take risks. People who are learners. Who aren't standing still in life. Because productivity and action are also contagious.

It's not always easy to find a good community. But I promise you there are people out there who share your values, goals, and work ethic. See if there are any local meet-up groups in your city that you can attend. Begin going to relevant conferences once or twice per year and make new friends. Find an online community forum that centers around your niche. Or, begin building your own community.

SET THE INITIAL BAR OF QUALITY LOW

Give yourself permission to produce a crappy first draft or to have a bunch of horrible ideas right off the bat. This is one of my most important "tricks" — I allow my first draft to be the child's draft. The point is to show up and write. And then I know I can edit and

iterate on my article later. But if I wait to write until I can say it just perfectly, I'll never get it done.

TAKE A BREAK

If you're in your work day and just feeling a bit overwhelmed or distracted, try taking a break. On more than one occasion I've found myself not getting any meaningful work done because I'm not committing to the task at hand (I'm "multitasking" a couple of tasks all at once). Or I'm just full-on distracted.

Sometimes I'll find myself in a random cycle of checking my various inboxes. I realize I'm going back and forth between Twitter, email, RSS, Instagram, back to Twitter, then to email, etc. I'm not doing anything productive whatsoever — I'm just zoning out looking and waiting for something new to come along. It's a complete waste of time.

What's worse is that it can be hard to snap out of it and get back to doing something productive. So when I realize that I'm going back and forth between inboxes not actually doing anything I've learned a little trick on how to snap out of it.

- I get up from my desk and go walk around for a few minutes. I get a drink of water, move my legs, breath.
- When I come back to my desk I pick one task that I know I can do quickly. It doesn't even have to be something super-productive or even work-related. One great thing to try is taking 60 seconds to journal (I use the Day One app for this) and simply log the progress you've made on any projects so far today.
- Once I've gotten that first small task done, I pick another. Then another. And now the momentum is building and I'm back on focus.

DELEGATE OR DELETE

If there is a task or project you've been continually putting off, try to delegate if you can. Or, if it's something you don't have to do, consider just dropping it altogether. If it's important, it will re-surface. And it's better to be honest with yourself (and others) that you're not going to get to the project than it is to keep putting it off.

MENTAL SELF CARE

Or, in the terms of Stephen Covey, sharpen the saw. Doing our best creative work on a consistent basis requires mental health.

An athlete who is training to run a marathon does far more than just show up at the race track. She eats well, gets a good night sleep, and equips herself with the proper running attire.

Not only does our physical health keep our mind sharp, but there are also things we can do to exercise our mind. Such as resting, learning, reading, journaling, writing down ideas every day, spending time with friends and family, repairing wounded relationships.

CLEAN YOUR WORKSPACE WHEN YOU'RE DONE

That way, when it's next time to do the work, there are no distractions or road blocks standing in your way. You have a tidy workspace and you know what you need to work on.

MAKE A LIFESTYLE CHANGE

Eliminate the most common distraction sinks from your life. Say to yourself: "I don't play video games." Or, "I don't go to the movies." Or, "I'm not on Facebook." Or, "I don't check Twitter or email before lunch." Now stick with it, even if it's just for a season of life.

Trying to write a book? Go dark on Twitter for 3 weeks and use that space to make time to write 1,000 words every day. Then, after the 3 weeks you'll have your 21,000-word rough draft, not to mention a whole lot more to say on Twitter when you come back.

ACT FAST ON YOUR IDEAS

Seize that initial wave of motivation and momentum. Don't spend too much time fiddling with or "managing" your plan once you've got something rough in the works.

Ideas deteriorate over time; act on them and begin iterating as fast as you can. Set milestones which can be accomplished in a week's time or less, and work toward that goal riding the adrenaline for 5 - 7 days. Then, set the next milestone and repeat.

DO IT NOW

If it's a small or quick task that you can complete in a few minutes or less, just do it now.

TRACK YOUR SMALL WINS EVERY DAY

As discussed in the previous chapter about celebrating progress, by recognizing and logging the daily progress you're making on your work, you're able to see the small victories you achieve every day.

You realize that you are making progress on meaningful work. This increases your morale and momentum, and contributes to having a healthy inner work life. Which, in turn, gives you a boost in your ability to be more productive and creative.

The Moving Target

These ideas and tools can give you the power to overcome your procrastination. Start with one and integrate it into your work. Once it becomes firmly established, celebrate your progress. Then introduce another tool into your work.

Do not despise setting small goals and incremental progress.

Show up every day to build momentum and personal integrity.

Celebrate your progress.

Seek honesty and clarity, and keep your bias toward action.

Remember, how we spend our time and attention is an ever-moving target. There is no recipe or formula for doing our best creative work — it's a journey.

The Power Of A Focused Life...

You want to get a clear head amidst the craziness. You're ready to thrive in the midst of the tensions of life.

Awesome! The good news is that **you don't have to solve the tensions of life before you can create something of value.**

Meaningful productivity means consistently giving your time and attention to the things which are most important. That's a choice you can choose each day, not a state of being you have to strive toward.

You *can* do work that matters. You *can* build momentum in your personal integrity. You can establish habits that stick, bring a healthy balance between your work and personal life, and re-define what you think of when you say "productivity."

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I have read my share of productivity books, blogs, and hacks, but nothing I have read comes close to your work in terms of helpfulness, depth, and significance.

TRACY BANKS // ATTORNEY & LAW SCHOOL PROFESSOR



I had the privilege of field testing this course a few months ago and absolutely loved it! If you need focus in your life and want to know how to get to the next place ... this is what you need. I look forward to revisiting this course in the years to come.

HAVILAH CUNNINGTON // AUTHOR, SPEAKER, MOM



Quite frankly stunned by the obvious effort Shawn put into every nook and cranny of thefocuscourse.com — walking the talk so hard.

JONATHAN CHRISTOPHER // WORDPRESS DEVELOPER & DAD



Through The Focus Course, I began to see that focus is about more than just fancy software — it's a mindset. Before this course I knew nothing about that mindset, but having gone through it I feel like I have the tools to continue working toward achieving the focus I want in every part of my life.

BEN BROOKS // WRITER, PHOTOGRAPHER, & COO @ MARTIANCRAFT

ABOUT YOUR HUMBLE AUTHOR



I live in Kansas City with my lovely wife of 12 years, Anna, and our three wild sons: Noah, Giovanni, and Benson.

I'm a creative-director-turned-full-time-writer who works from home publishing websites, books, and courses to help you do your best creative work.

In addition to [The Focus Course](#) and all that surrounds it, I've also published a book and interview series, *[Delight is in the Details](#)*.

Thank you for reading.

— Shawn

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