

In this weeks' Readers' Mailbag I will be dealing with a personal question, one that I get a good bit (twice this week!). Here is how it came to me from one blog-member

QUESTION:

You should once write an article on time management. Unless you sleep only 2 hours a day, I can't imagine how you manage to publish lengthy posts, answer all comment questions every day, read lectures at the university (including all the academic responsibilities there: quizzes, exams etc.), read books/papers (both scholarly and others) and of course write them! And that's only the academic part of your life. That's both amazing and mysterious!

RESPONSE:

I have to admit, I have a lot of bad personality traits (just ask my wife!), but I have a couple of good ones too, at least ones that help me in my life. For example, I'm an unusually good sleeper! (8 hours a night, at least, and all of it solid.) And without great effort I enjoy the many simple pleasures in my life (quality time with family and friends; good food; good wine; nineteenth century novels; sports; the steam room!). And I'm unusually efficient with my time and can get a whole lot done quickly. Lucky me!!

I'm not an expert at all on time management, but my sense is that it is a trait that is as much (or more) acquired through personal circumstances as something that can be "taught." Certainly no one gave me any instructions - although I do remember reading Cheaper by the Dozen as a teenager and being impressed by an "efficiency expert" who taught his kids how to do things without wasting time and effort (including such things as how to towel off quickly and with no wasted motion after bathing!).

My efficiency self-training began in college, and it was the result of nothing so much as personal pride. My parents were willing to help me pay for college, but I refused their help and wanted to pay the college bills myself. That meant having to work longer than usual hours. I landed a terrific job in Chicago at the Drake Hotel, as a bellman, pulling in good tips. So I worked 20 hours a week doing that, making enough (barely) to get through my first three years.

At the same time, I became obsessed with getting good grades. In high school I was a good but not a great student - nowhere near the top of my class. But I was and always had been highly competitive, and I treated college grades as a competition. So how does one work a 20-hour job, have a social life (that I was not going to give up), and get high grades in a grueling academic schedule (I often took overloads)? I learned how to work long hours and to be highly focused in my studies.

That continued for years of school. College took me five years. My first school was a three-year degree program at Moody Bible Institute. I then went to Wheaton for my final two years. During the second year my schedule was even more hectic. I was married by that time; was working as a youth pastor in a church 30 hours a week; was commuting from Oak Lawn to Wheaton for my classes; and was studying like crazy to get the grades.

It continued through my three-years masters degree and then into PhD, which took four years. In my second year of the PhD I was pastoring the Princeton Baptist Church, taking a

full load of classes, serving as a teaching assistant for Bruce Metzger, and preparing to take my PhD exams, all in the same semester. Yikes.

For the PhD exams. I had three exams to take: History of the NT and Early Christianity; New Testament Theology; and Old Testament Theology. For each exam I had a bibliography of books and articles (some of them in German and French) that I had to master. The exams would be based on what could be found in this secondary literature (and, of course, a mastery of the primary texts themselves). At the beginning of my studying process, I figured out - literally - how many hours I would have over the next six months to study for the exams (which hours would be "free" from other obligations, like attending class, writing papers, serving as a teaching assistant, grading exams, preaching sermons, doing church work, uh, seeing the family, and so on). I then calculated how much time I could spend on each book and article on each of my three lists. I plotted it all out and made a chart. And I did it - reading and taking notes on this article for one and half hours, that book for six hours, and so on . That was my life for six months!

And so, basically, in order to survive, put food on the table, get the grades that I needed to have any chance of getting the career I wanted as a tenure-track professor, I had to figure out how to squeeze in time to earn money and how to accomplish my academic goals, with a 24-hour day.

It forced me to learn how to be unusually focused and efficient with my time. It simply wouldn't have happened some other way. I was almost completely self-taught on the matter. So I'm not sure how I would be any good at telling someone else how to do it.

The result of all those years is that it now is simply how I live my life. The blog is a good example. I can write a thousand word post in about twenty minutes on most days. It takes about five minutes to edit it, and about five more to load it up on the blog and on Facebook. It then takes about half an hour to get through all the comments, answering all the queries, posting them, etc. So the blog, on a good day, takes an hour. Then I can get on to the next thing.

The very serious downside to my ability to focus is that I am so highly concentrated that it is almost like being in a trance. If Sarah comes in to ask me about the dog or to see if I want to go for a walk or anything, it's like I have to wake up and come out of a different dimension even to take in her question (with my eyes glazed over and widening as I try to figure out this new thing that has forced itself onto my attention). It's probably very unpleasant for her! But it's just the way I am.

So, I'm afraid the short story is that I don't have too many tips for time management, other than to stay focused on the one task at hand and do it as quickly as humanly possible to get on to the next one.

That works *especially* well for me if I know that the next one involves pleasure. Which is the case right now, as I am typing these words. As soon as I finish this blog-duty, I'm lighting a fire and reading the Sunday papers! Fantastic!

If you belong to the blog, you can read posts every time — not just one on occasion. So why not join? The money all goes to charity. You win; the blog wins; charities win — we all win! So join!



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