

# Making Time

by Jay Cross, July 1998

Think back to when you were five or six years old. Waits were interminable. ("How soon will we get there, Mom?") A day seemed to last forever. Life was in slo-mo. You had time to explore, time to play, time to dawdle, and time to sniff the roses.



## ● Pedal to the metal

Today life is on fast forward.  
Events race by. There's never enough time to get everything done. Things fall off the table. And as we get older, the days roll by ever-faster. Life is frantic.

*Tempus fugit.*  
(Time flies.)

## ● Slowing down the clock

Many years ago, in my reckless youth, I was zooming along the *autoroute* southeast of Paris on my motorbike and crashed full-force into the back of an illegally parked Citroën van. Instant slow motion! I snapped from daydreaming to full attention. By the time I hit the ground, I'd heard a loud smack, smelt exhaust, seen my motorbike cartwheeling through the air, felt I was flying, thought "Oh, shit", and sensed the wind inflating my t-shirt. Time oozed along.

Why? Because I was living totally in the present, much as I had when I was a child. I was fully aware. The intensity

about the past or of the future. This was now, now, now. I was so focused that sensations of my immediate situation flooded my consciousness. So much was going on in my head that the passage of time had to slow to accommodate it all.

### **Perception is reality.**

When I say "time stood still," I mean I *sensed* that time stood still. People around me didn't notice a change of pace. My watch kept ticking.

Subjective time, "felt time," is all that counts. Whether the atomic clock gains or loses a few seconds doesn't concern me.

We each have a time machine in our heads. We can choose how much to live in the past, to live in the future, and to live in the now. People who look five years into the future are usually cooking up thoughts with more impact than those who are pondering tomorrow afternoon. Historians dig deeper than people trying to remember if they took their medication last night. The further you look, the more you see.

### **Past**

Memories of times past give us the continuity and context to understand our existence but if we spend too much time there, we do not progress. Driving well-trod roads invites falling into ruts.

"Time is dead as long as it is being clicked off by little wheels; only when the clock stops does time come to life."  
William Faulkner

"It is not true that life is one damn thing after another -- it is one damn thing over and over."  
Edna St. Vincent Millay

What we call "the past" is really our *memories* of the past, a reflection in the fun-house mirrors of our individual minds. One can waste time editing endless re-runs of events gone by. Because replaying these internal movies holds few surprises, we experience so little change that time just slips away.

### **The Future**

Cultivating a vision of the future enables us to make wise choices, but people who spend too much time there are dreamers.

Our imaginations are too limited to construct a future as rich as real life. We construct our futures of ideas, not experiences, robbing them of the sensory tapestry of the now. Since these ideas spring from within us, they rarely leave our comfort zone. As with the past, an unremarkable landscape offers few markers of the passage of time so the minutes seem to slip through our fingers.

### **The Problem with the Present**

People don't live in the now because they're too busy with the past and future to make time for it. Young children and the family dog always live in the present but that doesn't mean it's easy to do. We're so attuned to the noise of life that we've grown comfortable missing its signal.

Brain static.



**Consciousness is a drunken monkey,** hopping from one thought to the next, disturbing our concentration, and jangling our senses.



To live in the present, we must neutralize our monkeys.

**Sit still and think of nothing for five seconds.**



[Click for 5-second timer](#)

**Do it now.**

Ha! The monkey interrupted, didn't he? You couldn't clear your mind.

Offing the monkey is not easy but once you do it, you'll be able to slow the pace of time, cut stress, dispense with trivia, and improve your ability to concentrate.

Kill the monkey, live in the now, enjoy life.



### **This isn't "Time Management"**


Time managers pack more into each time slice; we are enlarging the pie. Each has its place.

Time management teaches routines to speed things up, not slow them down. We, on the other hand, seek to make more "quality time" available.

Managing time =  
efficiency

Making time =  
effectiveness



Time Management  
suggestions 

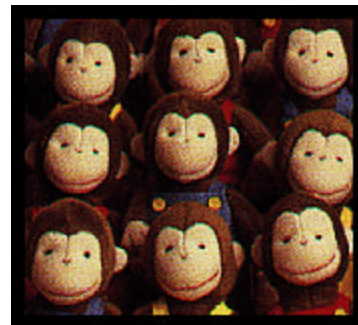
### **Getting to Now**

Ready to dive into the present?

### **Find yourself a cocoon.**

The monkey keeps you from experiencing the present by interrupting your concentration with a stream of thoughts and fantasies. He will try to hi-jack your consciousness whenever you are distracted. Phone call, dripping faucet, flashing light, peculiar odor -- the sotted chimp will use any of these as pretext to fill your head with nonsense.

So find yourself a quiet, comfortable, soothing place to while away some time without outside interference. Go there.



### **I Got Rhythm (Who could ask for anything more?)**

"Breathing in and out consciously helps you become your best--calm, fresh, solid,

Take off your watch. We are resetting our internal clocks to Subjective Standard Time.

The slow in and out of our breathing marks the natural pace of life. After all, 99.9999% of our minds' evolution took place long before clocks and calendars. Nothing runs at 400 Mhz on the savannah.

Pay attention to your breathing. When you breathe in, think "in" and when you exhale, think "out." Do this for a minute or two. Close your eyes. Concentrate only on your breathing, in and out. When the monkey tries to creep in, pay him no attention. In and out. Relax. Deep breath in, slow exhale out.

### **Be here now.**

The present moment, the Now, is always here, but most of us have erected high walls of ego, symbols, beliefs, habits, and other obstructions that block the view. You can't will yourself into the present, because there is no will there. You can't concentrate if you're trying to observe yourself concentrating. You can't give up the notion of past and future if you're worrying about how long you've been looking for the present.

You don't need mysticism, a guru, yoga, chants, the lotus position, or religion to get in sync with the future. In fact, you can't get there by trying. You can only get there by not trying.

The important thing is to begin. Now.

present moment as the best moment of your life."

Thich Nhat Hahn

"Enlightenment is to be detached from both past and future and to live in the eternal Now. For in truth neither past nor future have any existence apart from this Now; by themselves they are illusions. Life exists only at this very moment, and in this moment it is infinite and eternal."  
Alan Watts



Empty head. Just do nothing.

Now do it again. Let go. Fall back into the calm of no thoughts.

You're aware of what's around you but you're not **of** it. You're just you. Now is now. What is is. In/out.

## **Mastery**

Your first experience of the Now may only last a few seconds. No problem. Once you've gone there, you can always go back. It's like learning to ride a bicycle. If you think you can do it, you're right.

Don't try too hard. (You might start blocking your way with that wall of ego and the concepts that held you back in the first place.) Be content to progress little by little. You'll hit plateaus but also breakthroughs.



"Everything flows."  
Heraclitus

## **Maintenance**

When too many things are going on at once in my life, I'll turn to a pleasant image to slow myself down and take comfort in the moment. Find yourself a touchstone or mantra to help you jump into the now whenever you want.

You can stay on the path, reclaiming more and more quality time, by affirming what you're accomplishing. "I'm slowing the clock. I'm taking in more. I enjoy doing this." In idle moments, check your breathing. When you're in a cocoon place, bliss out for



"Open your eyes and enjoy the sunshine, the beautiful sky, and the wonderful children all around you."  
Thick Nhat Hahn

detached.

With a little practice under my belt, I tune into the present while walking in the forest. The pacifist, Viet-Nameese monk Thick Nhat Hahn, is a wonderful guide to "walking meditation." He counsels us all to be astonished by the wonders of the world around us. Pleasant moment, wonderful moment.

## Overcoming Overload in the Information Age

by Jay Cross, July 1998

Do you ever have enough time to grapple with all the information coming your way? You're awash in a sea of phone calls, email, junk mail, reports, magazines, Post-It notes, and unfulfilled obligations. As more information gushes out at you from more sources, you find it impossible to keep up. You're in over your head and having a tough time treading water.

Before reading any further, tell me, do you think it's possible for you to take control of the information spewing at you? If not, **stop reading now**. You're under no obligation to read any article to the end. Whenever you don't see a worthwhile payback from the information you're reading or listening to, turn your attention elsewhere. This is life, not school.

These techniques help me tame information overload.

**Select your sources with care**



"If you think you can do a thing,  
or think you can't do a thing,  
you're right"  
Henry Ford

decide whether it's worth your while. Filter brutally. Life's too short. A few minutes up front will save you hours a day.

1. If it's unworthy of your time, throw it away. Don't waste time with repetitive, second class, or trashy media. Garbage in = garbage out. (You are what you read.)
2. If it's worthy and short, perhaps an email, take action and be done with it. Don't obsess over stacks of paper.
3. If it's worthwhile and long, stuff it in your "Media Time" file.

### Media Time

You're most receptive to information when you're not distracted by jangling phones, loquacious colleagues, and the frenetic pace of business. Set aside an hour a day solely for reading and learning. Cut off the phone, hang out the "Do Not Disturb" sign, and adopt a reflective, contemplative mindset. Dismiss day-to-day cares and use this time for your most important reading and reflection.

"[Avoid] preoccupation and disordered occupation -- the compulsive worry, the nervous escape from thought to thought, the scratching and hair-fluffing, the short circuit of distraction." Robert Grudin, *The Art of Living*

### Read aggressively.

Be it an email, a voicemail message, or a trade journal, always **read with a purpose in mind**. Assess what you're after, and do your best to wring it out of the material. When you read, read.

If you're reading **to stay informed, speed read**: read first and last paragraphs, first sentence of most paragraphs, and then scan the graphics. Then race through the text, spending as little time as you can to extract the information you're looking for. Read just enough & no more.

If you're reading or watching **for pleasure**, stop if you're not having a really good time. Do something else. Don't watch insipid television programs or read dull daily newspapers solely out of habit.

If you're reading **to learn**, highlight passages you want to remember. Write in the margins. When you finish a useful block of information, summarize it in writing or in your head to fix it in your mind. Connect the new information to things you already know. Put it to use to cement it into your memory.

### Magazines

Just because a magazine arrives every month doesn't mean you need to read it. Same for the daily paper. Especially true for free trade magazines. Make a list of the periodicals you receive and drop those what lack luster. When you pick up a magazine, scan the table of contents to gauge what you're going to look at. Rip out the pages and stuff them into a reading file to peruse on airplanes and commutes.



Some say this is the biggest waste of time in your **day**.

### Email

Choose an email program that filters incoming email and puts spam in the trash. Process your email often. If you ever get hundreds and hundreds of messages behind, simply delete them all and blame a computer glitch. Use form letters (form emails?) in response to recurring business situations.

Programs. Eudora is a good email program. I recently switched to Microsoft Outlook 98. Either will sort your email into categories.

### Computer

Give your files names that reflect their contents. Set up directories that help you

I keep all my text files in a directory named **\$Files** (the \$ puts it at the top of the list). It

keep track of phone numbers and reminders. Establish a back-up routine and stick to it. Store your back-up off site. Look over the shoulder of an experienced user to discover shortcuts.

named  
**Correspondence,  
Career, Work in  
Progress, Archive,  
Personal, Financial,**  
etc.

### **World Wide Web**

Keep a current list of bookmarks (AKA "favorites"). Sort them in usable categories. Learn how to do Boolean searches to find what you're looking for rapidly. Set up a personal links page containing your most frequently visited sites. Don't know HTML? Create pages in MS Word and choose "Save as HTML".

### **Television**

Channel-surfing to see what's on is like going to the supermarket without a list -- when you're hungry. You end up with stuff you shouldn't. Check the t.v. schedule in the paper or on the net to choose programming that interests you. (This cut my viewing to a couple of hours a week.) Thinking of watching a movie? See what Siskel and Ebert had to say.

[Ebert](#) 

[MovieLink](#) 

### **Books & journals**

Read reviews to introduce yourself to new subjects. Book reviews from the [New York Times](#), [Business Week](#), and [Amazon](#) often tell me enough that I don't care to read the book. In college, you were supposed to read the original, not Cliff's Notes. You're not in college any more. Cultivate sources you trust and use meta-information when you can get it.

**Go with the process, Luke**

Periodically review your process for receiving and dealing with information. Root out bad habits, and affirm good ones. Re-evaluate your return on time invested. Are you putting in enough time crunching information? Too much? Are you efficient?

Stop chopping down trees long enough to sharpen your axe.

