

CLARIFY TIME

Perfectionism is just fear in fancy shoes and a mink coat.

ELIZABETH GILBERT

I had just finished speaking to a crowded room of entrepreneurs and was making my way off the stage when a striking brunette cut in front of my path. I looked at her and smiled, and she gave me a quick, nervous smile back. “I loved your keynote,” she said, “and I love the idea of this priority-centered life in work and at home, but is it really possible?” I looked her in the eye and asked her the question I’ve asked a thousand women before her: “What do you think is holding you back from living your best life?” And without hesitation, she responded, “Time.”

What she didn’t realize at that moment was that I already knew her answer. It’s almost always the same. *Time*. Again and again I find that people believe they need more time in order to live the life they really want. But they are wrong.

We cannot gain more time. We all have the same 168 hours in our week—there’s no changing that. Productivity isn’t a magical Time-Turner around Hermione’s neck. We simply cannot give someone more time. What

we can do, though, is change our mindset on how we spend our time and where we focus our energy.

We wield the power over time, not the other way around.

To do this, though, we have to begin to challenge the idea of #allthethings. We don't need to do more. We just need to rethink busy and work toward true productivity: spending our time on what matters most—the people, the tasks, our purpose—those priorities we discovered in section 1.

When we have this mindset, when our eyes are fully open, the possibilities become endless.

WE WANT TO BE EFFICIENT, DON'T WE?

We need to change the way we think about being productive. We believe that we need to be efficient, to try to get as many tasks done in as little time as possible. We cram our day full with one task after the other in a mad dash to win the day. You know what I'm talking about. We've all seen the clickbait articles promising you can write a year's worth of blog content in three days or fooling you into believing you can write a book in a week.

Hurry, hurry, rush, rush. No time for lunch. No time to stop. Quickly moving from one task to the next with the goal of checking off as many tasks from our list as we can in as little time as possible. Being efficient.

Are we stopping to ask ourselves, though, if those tasks need to be done at all? Are those things we are hurrying to do really important? Or are we just mindlessly rushing through our to-do list, pinballing from one item to the next, exhausting ourselves? This is why we slip into bed and feel as though we didn't do enough or get enough done, that we weren't good enough even when we skipped lunch and did five tasks at the same time. *Enough.*

We are so busy working to be efficient that we don't have the time to catch our breath and ask ourselves the most important question of all: *Why?* Why are these tasks on our list? Why do they need to be done? Why are we killing ourselves to do it all?

Productivity isn't about being efficient—it's not about filling our day with tasks to quickly check off. It's about being *effective* and asking yourself if those tasks need to be done at all. I want to remind you: productivity is not getting more done—it's focusing on what matters most.

Dishwashers are efficient; refrigerators are efficient. They are working hard with the least amount of resources and effort. And that is possible because they are machines—machines designed to do one thing over and over again: dishwashers clean plates, and refrigerators keep things cool.

Unfortunately, when people focus on being efficient, the resource we target is time. We fail to realize that *being efficient is about getting things done; being effective is getting what's important done.* There's a big difference.

EFFICIENT

DEADLINE FOCUSED

THINKING OF THE PRESENT

DOING MORE IN LESS TIME

EFFECTIVE

GOAL FOCUSED

THINKING OF THE FUTURE

DOING MORE QUALITY WORK

Here is an example of what I mean: At 10:00 a.m., you ask an assistant to send out a project by 4:00 p.m. The *efficient* assistant rushes to get it done, her mind fixed on the time. She works through lunch and sends it out by the time you requested. It's not proofread or fact-checked, but she's met her deadline.

The *effective* assistant takes the assignment and creates a plan. She breaks down the steps to accomplish the task and prioritizes the work so everything is done to the best of her ability. She realizes the 4:00 p.m. deadline can't be achieved and meets with you to adjust the goals. Together you decide it's better to send it out at 4:30 p.m. so it can be beautifully designed, proofread, and fact-checked. The project goes out and is exactly the type of quality work you want to reflect you.

Remember, efficiency is doing a lot of work; effectiveness is doing the *important* work. Quality wins every time. And yes, we want to use less energy and time, but not at the expense of quality. Sometimes we are so caught up in deadlines, we don't realize that the processes we believe make us faster are working against us. I call these the three myths of productivity.

MYTH 1: I'M AN EXCELLENT MULTITASKER

We take a lot of pride in our multitasking abilities, don't we? We mention it casually in job interviews, dropping it in the conversation like a beautiful shiny star. We mention it because it's a badge of honor, evidence of our ninja-like productivity prowess.

I used to feel that way, too, until I took the time to understand *why* multitasking was actually working against me.

A lot of what we call multitasking is really switch-tasking: simultaneously performing two tasks at the same time, switching from one task to another and performing two or more tasks in rapid succession. The problem is, our brains are not designed to work that way; each section is designed to do one task at a time—like a lightbulb turning on and off.

The executive system of your brain sits above your eyes and works like a conductor of an orchestra, switching the sections on and off. For example, if you are watching TV and someone is having a conversation in the room, the conductor may direct the brain to prioritize the pictures on the screen and turn down the conversation.

This switching quickly from one task to the next is causing our brains to work harder than necessary, and this cognitive cost adds up. *Scientists have discovered that when we multitask, our productivity actually decreases by as much as 40 percent.* Yes, decreases. That's about sixteen hours we lose every week when we multitask.

It's not just the time that suffers either. In a University of London study, researchers found that while people multitasked, their IQs dropped to levels similar to what we might find in someone who skipped a night of sleep or smoked marijuana. Yes, you read that right. When we multitask, we are not working smarter, we are working—well, you get the idea.

I know what you are thinking. You are thinking it might be true for some people but not for you. And, yes, a very small number of people excel at doing two or more things at once—but it's only a mere 2 percent of the population. These people are referred to as “supertaskers.”

The irony is that when people learn these rare exceptions exist, they run with that fact as evidence that they, too, are the exception. But “they are not,” David Strayer, the head researcher at the University of Utah, bluntly stated. “The ninety-eight percent of us, we deceive ourselves. And we tend to overrate our ability to multitask.” In fact, when Strayer took his research a step further, he uncovered another strong relationship—an inverse one. The better someone believed she was at multitasking, the worse her abilities were.

Why do we feel obligated to multitask? We think it makes us faster, but we know from those studies I just shared that not only is multitasking taking us longer, but it's also causing the quality of our work to suffer. We are doing our work half as well and taking twice as long—all while stressing ourselves out. That doesn't seem effective, does it?

When I posed this question to some of the students in my course, one woman admitted:

If I am being honest, I think I multitask and get things done for a few reasons. I am very committed to seeing things through. . . . I don't want people to question my work, so maybe part of it is a need to prove I can do it all (and well) . . . proving my worth. Also, if I am focusing on “all the things,” I don't have to dig deeper and get to the messy, vulnerable stuff.

I love the honesty she shared. I want to ask you if you think this is true for you. Do you pile more onto yourself, stressing yourself out, because you feel you have to prove your worth? Is it to keep yourself busy?

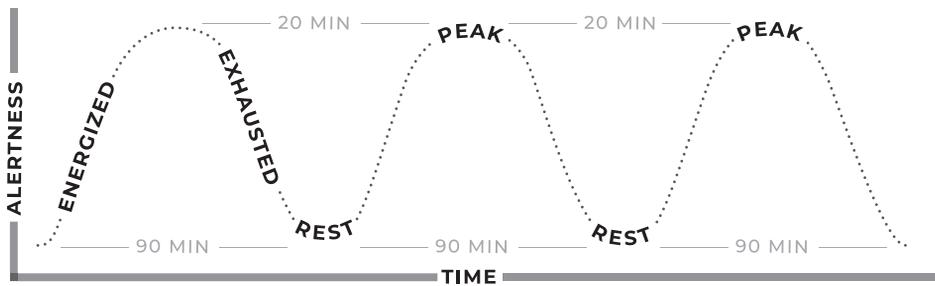
We want people to think we are good enough—that we deserve the praise, the job, all the good. Why do we feel the need to prove it?

MYTH 2: I DON'T HAVE TIME TO TAKE A BREAK

One common technique we use is to muscle through projects even when we feel tired or sluggish. We are so busy racing the clock that we don't realize our brains need time to rest.

The entire universe is dictated by rhythms: the rising and setting of the sun, the ebb and flow of the tides, the movement between seasons. All organisms, including humans, follow rhythms whether we realize it or not.

You've probably heard of your circadian rhythm, which is the 24-hour internal clock all living beings use to regulate eating and sleeping. That's what tells us to be awake for 16 hours and then asleep for 8 hours. Within the circadian rhythm, though, lives our ultradian rhythm, a shorter biological cycle of 90 to 120 minutes that repeats throughout the day.



During the first part of the ultradian rhythm, our alertness and brain-wave activity increase, making us feel energized and focused. After about 90 minutes, though, our brains begin to crave rest and renewal. Our brain requires about 20 minutes between each cycle to recover. In other words, the time we use to unplug is a key part of our day—not a frivolous break. We need to understand that periods of rest are not a reward for great work but are a requirement for great work to happen.

As Zen priest and Buddhist teacher Joan Halifax shared, “There is the in-breath and there is the out-breath, and it’s easy to believe that we must exhale all the time without ever inhaling. But the inhale is absolutely essential if you want to continue to exhale.”

PERIODS OF REST
ARE NOT A *reward* FOR GREAT WORK
BUT ARE A REQUIREMENT FOR
GREAT WORK *to happen*

We cannot work solidly for long blocks of time—our bodies simply don't work that way. And if we are insisting on blocking off a solid three- or four-hour power session, we really aren't doing more work; we are just wearing our brains out.

We don't typically think of work like this—as “on” or “off”—because we feel the need to push ourselves to work harder and longer. But that actually doesn't add to our productivity. In most cases, working more hours is detrimental to the work we create.

Stanford researchers discovered that your productivity actually drops dramatically once you hit the 50-hour mark in your workweek. Workers who put in 70 hours produce nothing more with those extra 20 hours. They are simply spinning their wheels, working longer but accomplishing less. It's not about the time you put in; it's the quality of that time.

While the studies I shared are new, the concept isn't. In 1914 Henry Ford took the industry-shaking steps of doubling his workers' wages and cutting shifts from nine hours to eight. He had dozens of years of research to back up his radical steps, but he still received criticism from the industry—until they all saw how this increased Ford's output (and then began implementing the steps themselves).

Even people who love to work (and I count myself among them) are not performing at high levels once they get to a certain point. Once we understand and begin to work within our natural rhythms, we'll find we work more effectively, creating higher quality with less effort.

Patty, a member of my Facebook group, shared this breakthrough:

I am a night owl and always feel more productive at night. (Definitely NOT a morning person.) I try to fall asleep at 10, and I just keep tossing and turning and checking my phone. But lately, instead of fighting it completely, I've started taking advantage of my natural rhythm, while also attempting to get my 7 hours of sleep. I started a night cleaning routine and get much more done in 2 hours at night than I get done all day.

My son is an early riser, so I placed breakfast in an accessible spot in the fridge so he can dress and feed himself when he's hungry in the

morning, and I get to wake up refreshed and not rushed. . . . I feel that going with my rhythm and not fighting it has been eye-opening!

Using some Squirrel Strategy and working within our natural rhythms helps us be more effective.

MYTH 3: TECHNOLOGY IS ALWAYS BETTER

One common misconception is the belief that technology is necessary to do everything better, but it's simply not true. Technology is faster and sleeker, but it may surprise you to learn that writing down your ideas and plans on paper is more effective.

Bear with me as we don our lab coats for a minute and take a look at how our brains work. When we pick up a pen, our brain reacts differently than when we are tapping away on a keyboard. Writing triggers the reticular activating system (RAS), which signals our brain to pay attention.

As I mentioned in chapter 4, our brains are constantly bombarded with data. Our RAS is the filter that evaluates what information comes through. It's what wakes us up in the middle of a deep sleep when our babies cry or allows us to hear our own name in a crowded room. It tells our brains where to focus.

Writing triggers your RAS to tell the brain to stay alert—the information is important and needs to be saved where it can be accessed in the future. Typing, on the other hand, does not engage your RAS, so notes and plans tapped into a keyboard are more easily forgotten.

A joint study between Princeton and UCLA discovered that people who took notes with pens performed twice as well on tests as those using laptops. Knowing the laptop users had taken twice as many notes as those who had taken notes by hand, researchers had assumed computer users would be the clear victors. Taking notes on a computer *is* much more efficient, but it's not as effective. And that's the difference.

Don't get me wrong. Technology does need to play a key role in our days. I know it does in mine—even though I'm an advocate of paper planning. Technology is integral for team projects and communication, but we

often feel obligated to use it for *all* of our work. We worry that using paper may make us look antiquated, but unplugging can really help our brains see problems in a different light.

Not only does paper engage your brain differently, but because it is more open-ended and flexible, it allows you to reframe thoughts and mold ideas in a way that ingrains the information. This flexibility pushes your brain to actually process and reframe data, deepening the brain's understanding.

Rachel* was going through a stressful time in her marriage. She and her husband just couldn't seem to figure out why their relationship was struggling. Rachel had been using one of my paper planners, and in desperation, one afternoon she flipped through the pages to see if she could find some clues as to why her marriage had started to flounder.

As I went through [my planner] it became very clear to me why we were having marriage problems. You know you get so immersed in your day-to-day life you sometimes forget what happened six months ago. But because I was able to look back . . . that gave the telltale signs of how much stress we were under and the impact it had on our relationship. . . . As I looked over my year and remembered the two [family] deaths, taking on the estate, plus our current business, plus everything else . . . the last sixteen months have been . . . insane. . . . Because I was able to look back at everything and uncover all the culprits, my husband and I were able to talk about this at length, and [I feel] a huge sense of relief.

Writing on paper deepens the relationship between the information and your brain, and it creates the ability for you to see your bread crumbs to help uncover patterns. It allows you to see the bigger picture, which can

* Name has been changed.

sometimes feel abstract—it helps you uncover what’s important, which is where you really want to spend your time.

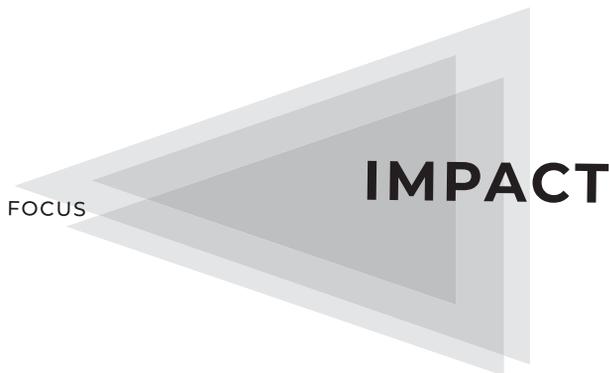
WHERE SHOULD WE SPEND OUR TIME?

Effectiveness comes down to priorities. It’s the red thread you’ll see again and again woven throughout this book. Instead of focusing on trying to do everything, which leaves you feeling like you are herding cats, laser in on the important. The Pareto Principle will help you do that.

The Pareto Principle was introduced in the late 1700s by Vilfredo Pareto, who discovered that 20 percent of our efforts produce 80 percent of our results. The principle applies to all areas—most things in life are not evenly distributed. It’s not just a theory. For centuries this principle has been proven time and time again in all areas of life. You’ve probably heard it called the 80/20 rule:

- 20 percent of a meeting gives you 80 percent of the information
- 20 percent of your wardrobe is what you wear 80 percent of the time
- 20 percent of the people on your team do 80 percent of the work

In other words, all things are not equal and therefore should not be treated as equal.



The ratio isn't perfect—it's not always right on the money at a perfect 80/20 split. Warren Buffett attributes 90 percent of his wealth to ten of the companies he invested in. Again and again it's been proven that when you focus on less, you actually achieve more. *It's focused time that creates the greatest impact.* It's not doing more—it's doing what's most important. (Sound familiar?)

If it's been proven that the majority of our success will come from the minority of our tasks, why are we trying to do everything? Shouldn't we be giving the important tasks the larger portion of our time? If we focus on the top 20 percent of our customers and clients, we'll see our sales rise. That's not to say we ignore the other 80 percent, but the top 20 should be getting the lion's share of our attention.

Instead, we often allow the minutia to take over our day . . . the irritable client who definitely doesn't account for 80 percent of our business but wants an hour-long phone call every other day, or the projects that drag out endlessly with no finish line in sight. We have to limit the time we give these items so we can focus on the truly important.

TIME IS LIKE A BOWL OF ICE CREAM

We've all heard the saying "Life is like a box of chocolates," but did you know time is like a bowl of ice cream? I'll tell you what I mean. If you head to your kitchen right now and grab a small bowl and fill it with ice cream, odds are you'll enjoy every single bite. But what if, while rummaging through your cupboard, you find a bigger bowl and fill *this* bowl with ice cream? Will you eat a few bites and put it away? Or will you eat until your spoon scrapes the bottom of the bowl, grabbing those last few melted bits of your Cherry Garcia?

Yep. Me too. No matter which bowl I choose, I will end up eating the amount of ice cream that fills it. My idea of how much ice cream I need expands to the size of the bowl I have. Time works in exactly the same way.

It's called Parkinson's Law, and it's the concept that "work expands so as to fill the time available for its completion." Let me translate this into

regular English. This law states that if we give ourselves a week to complete a two-hour task, that task will increase in complexity and fill that week. While the two-hour task itself doesn't need the extra time, it's actually the stress and tension of having to get it done that fills the space.

Since the majority of that time is not necessary for the project itself, we can flip it on its head. If we do the opposite—if we *shorten* the time allowed for a task—we can use this law to our advantage to intensify our focus and make life easier . . . almost as easy as eating a bowl of ice cream. (Almost.)

Now we're not talking about magic here—if you give yourself a minute to complete a four-hour task, the task does not become so simple you can actually complete it in a minute. But you can try giving yourself half the time you think it would take to complete a task and see if you can actually complete it in that time.

The key to this mental trick is to treat this half-time deadline as a real and crucial deadline. Here's what life coach and author Marie Forleo had to say about this trick: "When you're up against a wall to complete a task, your genius gets focused like a laser beam."

Forleo shared an insightful example: Let's say you're making an introduction video for your website. You would probably give yourself a couple of weeks to complete it, right? Imagine, though, if Oprah called you and said, "Hey! We just had a cancellation and want to talk to you. In order to book you, though, my producers need to see your introduction video within the hour."

Would you give yourself weeks to make the short introduction video for Oprah? No, you'd bump it to the top of your list. I'm guessing you would clear your schedule to get on her show—you know, prioritize it. It would get done. We have the ability to do the work, but we often allow these tasks to drag out, stealing time from our day.

BUT WHAT WILL OTHERS THINK?

We get caught up in trying to do it all because we are trying to be perfect—to live the perfect life—to avoid the judgment of others. I think the hardest

part about perfectionism is often the external pressure; there's so much perceived pressure from others to do things exactly right. We push ourselves to not make any mistakes because *perfectionism is rooted in the fear of failure*.

So we lean into our stories, our beliefs, making sure “we always” or “we never.” We set impossibly high standards for ourselves, and when we don't reach those standards, we relentlessly criticize ourselves for failing.

We make light of it, though. We coyly say we're a bit of a perfectionist when asked about flaws in a job interview, or we laugh and say we just have a certain way we want things done—our way. But perfectionism in our lives can be debilitating.

Too often our work and our environment push us to this notion of “good perfectionism”—an oxymoron that is confused with striving for excellence or setting high personal standards (both of which are entirely different from perfectionism).

Perfectionism keeps us from being effective and pushes us to be efficient if for nothing more than appearances. Many experts believe that most people who suffer from perfectionistic tendencies are not born that way—in many cases we are trained by others' expectations and stories so that we take perfection onto ourselves to help protect us from failure. We don't realize that *without failure we wouldn't be as successful as we are*. Our shortcomings and mistakes are all part of our path.

The good news is, if perfectionism is more of a mindset, then we can adjust our expectations. We can begin to realize when we are in that headspace and redirect. We can adjust our way of thinking about what it means to be good enough. We can focus on what is truly important without the weight of others' judgment resting heavily on our shoulders.

Don't take others' burdens onto yourself. We seem to want to throw that weight on our backs, but doing so only slows our pace. We have to walk away from this idea of focusing on everyone else's happiness at the expense of our own. When we let go of the pressure of this Pinterest-crazed world, we allow ourselves the freedom to move forward onto the path our North Star is guiding us toward.

I cannot give you the gift of more time. If we allow ourselves to be honest, we know that even with more time we would continue packing our day full, like our overfilled bowl of ice cream, leaving us feeling bloated. We don't need to keep striving to do more; we need to prioritize the time we have so we can spend it on what matters most. That is what I want for us.

I know this might feel difficult—almost impossible—right now, but together we'll unpack a system to help in the next chapter.



LET ME HELP

I have a free download I'd love to share with you. It will help you track your time and begin to understand your unique ultradian rhythm. I'll guide you through the process with a video, making it even easier. You can get free access to this bonus feature at joyofmissingout.com/chapter5.