

BETWEEN THE EXTREMES: LEARNING TO SPEND TIME WISELY

The phrase “spending time” isn’t a metaphor. Each of us is allotted 24 hours per day, which we have no choice but to expend. We can neither stockpile time, nor buy back hours already spent. In his book, *What To Do Between Birth and Death*, author Charles Spezzano offers the following observation about time:

You don’t really pay for things with money. You pay for them with time. ‘In five years, I’ll have put enough away to buy that vacation house we want. Then I’ll slow down.’ That means the house will cost you five years — 1/12 of your adult life. Translate the dollar value of the house, car or anything else into time, and then see if it’s still worth it. Sometimes you can’t do what you want and have what you want at once because each requires a different expenditure of time.

We construct our lives on the basis of how we invest time. Thus, the question, “Am I living wisely?” can be answered by looking at how we consume the minutes in our day. With regards to time, wisdom, as in many other arenas, comes by moderating between extremes.

1) Between Unthinking and Overthinking

Important decisions deserve time spent in research and deliberation. However, as Eva Young said, “To think too long about doing a thing often becomes its undoing.” Eventually, we must exercise judgment and take action despite uncertainty and incomplete information. Leaders must avoid the extreme of paralysis-by-analysis.

Yet, leaders must also avoid the opposite extreme of thoughtless action. In the words of Henry David Thoreau, “It’s not enough to be busy, so are the ants. The question is, “What are we busy about?” In spending time unreflectively, our lives veer off course, taking us away from our deepest values.

2) Between Idleness and Hyperactivity

In the writings of America’s founders, particularly those of Benjamin Franklin and Thomas Jefferson, exhortations abound to make the most of time. As Jefferson wrote, “Determine never to be idle. No person will have occasion to complain of the want of time who never loses any. It is wonderful how much can be done if we are always doing.” Such sayings weren’t empty slogans for these men. By stewarding their time effectively, Franklin and Jefferson were able to make an astonishing number of influential contributions to society—as writers, politicians, and inventors.

The motivational mantra, “carpe diem” or “seize the day,” has merit but can be carried to an unhealthy extreme. For example, American workers chose not to use 67 *billion* dollars worth of vacation time in 2010! Meanwhile, most people know a spouse, colleague, or friend burdened down by job-related stress.

The attempt to maximize every single moment of the day can degenerate into a life-sucking obsession. A relentless quest for optimization and efficiency kills spontaneity and serves as a recipe for burnout. To be suitable and sustainable, a person's drive to succeed must recognize boundaries and be balanced by periods of rest and relaxation.

3) Between Tasks and Relationships

Balancing time spent on tasks and time spent with people can be tricky. In general, we tend to overemphasize tasks at the expense of relationships. Early in life, we chase after career accomplishments only later to realize that life's greatest treasures are our loved ones.

Yet great leaders, while prizing people, also get things done. Job-related relationships have the purpose of accomplishing *something*: leaders don't connect merely for the sake of connection. One rule of thumb for valuing relationships while achieving results is to *spend your greatest amount of time with the smallest number of people*. Guard against spreading yourself thin with superficial social acquaintances, and instead choose to cultivate trust and influence in the few relationships that matter most to you