

Chapter 3



YOU WILL NEVER GET
EVERYTHING
DONE

There is a solution to the problem described in Chapter 1. And it's not time management courses or books. Instead, it comes with the realization of a simple but profoundly important fact.

You will never get everything done.

Let me say that again. You . . . will . . . never . . . get . . . everything . . . done.

You will never clear this mental (or written) list that you carry around with you. You will never make the first pile disappear. You must throw overboard, now and for all time, the notion that it is possible to do everything that needs to be done, to clear everything on the list. It simply is never going to happen.

Once you realize – and really internalize – the truth of this statement, a couple of very interesting things happen.

■ Liberation

You recognize, for example, that it's okay to leave work with things not done. There's no need to feel guilty about it. Not only is it okay, it's inevitable. It would be a miracle if you *did* get everything done. And it is liberation too in the more important sense of freeing up time. If you're not going to do everything then every time you decide not to do something, that time becomes available for something else. "Why should I invest my precious time in this?" is going to become one of your most asked questions.

■ Responsibility

In some ways, it's the easiest thing in the world to slug away at a list of things in the vain hope of trying to clear it. But now, if you're not going to clear it, you've got some major decisions to make. If you're not going to clear it, then what are you going to choose to do? Because now that's exactly what the problem becomes – which things are you going to invest your time in? Which

things are you going to disregard? And how are you going to make those choices?

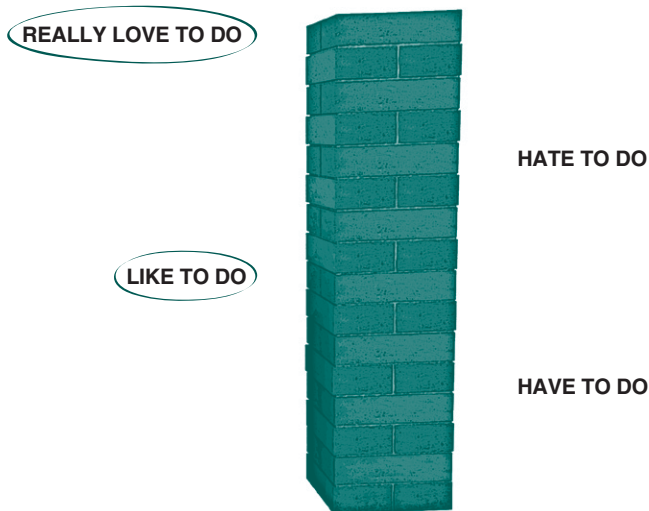
"Beware the barrenness of a busy life."

- SOCRATES

Let's go back to our picture of the two piles of stuff from Chapter 2. How can you make the first pile "fit into" the second pile?

Well, here's what most people do. They try to "clear the pile". Very quickly they find that this doesn't work – which, of course, it can't.

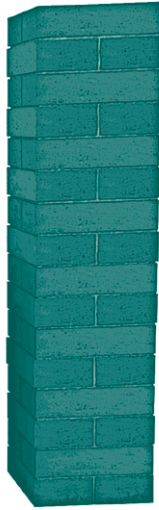
So then they stop doing the:



And end up just doing this:

REALLY LOVE TO DO

LIKE TO DO



HATE TO DO

HAVE TO DO

At this point they no longer have a work/life balance. They work continuous long hours and whatever home life they have is taken up with "noise" – the basic cooking, cleaning, shopping and general maintenance that keep our personal lives rolling along.

But then it gets worse than that. They continue trying to clear the pile, working even longer and longer hours and, in the process, destroying whatever precious hours of personal life they have remaining. But this is never going to work. As we have said before, you cannot clear the pile. It is a pointless, unwinnable game.

If you accept this idea, then logically you then have to accept that some things are *never going to be done*. Not delayed, not deprioritized, not left till later, not rescheduled, not done some day when you have time – but *never done at all*. Dropped. Ditched. Jettisoned. Made to go away. Forever.

Rather than trying to clear the pile – a pointless exercise anyway – we’re going to do a much, much smarter thing. *We’re always going to be doing the most important things.*

And how do we do that? Well, there’s only one way.

[You must learn to do less.]

If you can do this then the right stuff will get done. And by “the right stuff”, I mean that unique combination of things from each of the four categories:

- have to do
- like to do
- hate to do (but have to do anyway)
- really love to do

that’s right for you.

I would probably be prepared to bet my house that this is the first time anybody has suggested anything like this to you – that there is, in fact, an essential skill that you are missing. Because if you think about it, right from the time you started school and maybe even earlier, you have been programmed to do exactly the opposite of this. People have told you to do stuff and you have done it.

Remember that first day in school. Your mum took you to the school, handed you over to the teacher and s(he) gave you bricks or plasticine or a colouring book and told you to do stuff with it. And being the well-balanced child that you were, you didn't tell them to bugger off, you did stuff. Then on through primary school and secondary/high school, you got assignments, homework, projects, continuous assessment, people getting you to do stuff. If you did some kind of third level education, the same thing – assignments, tutorials, end of term papers, projects, dissertations, theses. And maybe you had part-time jobs while you were in school or college and people told you to do stuff there and you did – wash glasses, wait tables and so on.

And then you began your first “real” job and what did you get? Job descriptions, objectives, key results areas, key performance indicators – always people telling you to do stuff. And basically – right up to the day they're going to haul you out feet first – that's probably the way you saw it being. People would be telling you do stuff and you would respond by saying, “How can I pack this in to an already overcrowded life?”

But if you can learn the skill of simply doing less – and it is a skill, just like using a computer or project management or chairing a meeting – you can not just tinker with the problem of too much to do and not enough time to do it. You can solve it.

THE GOALKEEPER THAT STANDS STILL

Economist, Ofer Azar, knows all about doing less. Recently he and some colleagues in Israel published a study on goalkeepers^o. They watched hours of archival footage and noticed that goalkeepers save substantially more penalty kicks when they stay in the centre of the goal than when they jump to the left or right. Yet paradoxically, in 93.7% of penalty situations, keepers chose to jump rather than stay in the centre.

In fact, analysis of 286 penalty kicks taken in elite matches around the world showed that keepers saved 33.3% of penalties when they stayed in the centre, compared with just 12.6% of kicks when they jumped right and 14.2% when they jumped left.

Or to put it another way, doing nothing would have achieved a far better result than doing something.

But notice too how hard it is to do nothing. Imagine if you were that goalkeeper and you stood stock still while the penalty taker rocketed the ball into the top corner. Imagine the abuse that would be heaped upon you by your teammates and by the fans. Imagine the embarrassment and guilt you would feel. Imagine trying to explain in an after match press conference that the reason you stood still was that, statistically, you were doing the best thing. It's like we would rather do something – anything – and be seen to fail rather than do nothing, even though we know it might be the better thing to do.

The book that you hold in your hand is called *The Power Of Doing Less*.

How can there be power in doing less? When we think of the word “power” we perhaps think of powerful people – the people who now or through history have shaped the world by the things they have done. Their lives have been characterized by action; their lives are known or remembered for their achievements – good or bad – but certainly things *done*. How could there be power in *not* doing things?

Well here’s one for starters. There’s a generally accepted view that when a new CEO joins an organization, what they *do* in the proverbial “first 100 days” will determine their ultimate success. (More generally, it’s also become a bit of a staple of TV news channels to examine what new political leaders or governments have done in *their* first 100 days.) But if you’re a CEO, this article from the *Harvard Business Review*, “Five Myths of a CEO’s First 100 Days”⁷ might give you pause for thought. The article says that perhaps a lot less doing and a lot more thinking might be a far more productive way to go.

Or think of a blogger pressuring himself to write a new blog post every day or so because isn’t this what the social media experts say we should do? The same blogger might be far better off posting one decent article a week rather than cluttering up his life (and ours) with second-rate pap.

We’re all guilty of doing this “busy” thing. Compulsively checking emails is a classic example. What on earth is the point in that? It’s not like it’s going to make the messages arrive any quicker.

HOW WORLD WAR I MIGHT HAVE BEEN AVOIDED BY DOING LESS

On 29 June 1914 a Serbian terrorist assassinated the heir to the Austrian throne and the resulting sequence of events triggered World War I. There were numerous points in this train of events where things could have gone differently and war been avoided completely. One of these points occurred in late July.

After the assassination, Austria wanted to attack Serbia to teach it a lesson. Russia was Serbia's ally and it wanted to support Serbia. However, by this the Russians meant *diplomatic* support (and certainly not military intervention).

In these circumstances, all the Russians would have had to do would have been to sit tight and do nothing. The Austrians, unsure of the Russian's intentions, would have backed down and war would have been avoided.

As the historian A J P Taylor puts it⁸ ". . . It never occurred to them [the Russians] that merely *by doing nothing* [my italics], they could prevent Austria acting against [i.e. attacking] Serbia . . . *The most difficult thing in a crisis is to wait upon events*" [my italics again].

"Besides the noble art of getting things done, there is the noble art of leaving things undone. The wisdom of life consists in the elimination of non-essentials."

- LYN YUTANG, Chinese writer

All of us lead busy lives. Maybe we fall into bed at night exhausted after the day with a feeling that we got lots done. Perhaps we *are* getting lots done.

But is it the stuff that really matters?

Or is it just *stuff*?

And does it matter which stuff, provided we are getting stuff done – working our way through this seemingly endless list of things that we have to do?

Well, of course it *does* matter.

So that if you're maybe feeling lost and a victim of the times and of circumstances, you have power.

You have power, if you will only take it and use it.

That power is to do less.

This book has a simple message. Whether in work or in your personal life, there is too much to do. The list is too long and will never be cleared – not even if you had several lifetimes to clear it.

Do Less – Let Go Of The Notion That You Will Get Everything Done

It's time to accept that you're simply not going to do certain things – many things, in fact.

Say it to yourself now. "I'm not going to do many things."

Repeat it a few times. "I'm not going to do many things." "I'm not going to do many things." "I'm not going to do many things."

Say it out loud. "I'm not going to do many things."

Do this now. Stand up. Picture, a pace or two in front of you, a doorway and a closed door. On this side of it is where you are now, the world of endlessly busy. The weather is grey over here, the landscape dully urban. A hamster runs round on a wheel. The hamster is you.

Now put your arm out – go on, do it – and push the door slightly. It swings ajar a little with no great difficulty. Looking through it you can see sunlight, green fields. You can hear laughter and smell nice smells – the sea, freshly cut grass, perfume.

This side of the doorway is where you are now. The Land of How-Can-I-Fit-This-In-To-An-Already-Overcrowded-Life? Step forward and step through the doorway. Come on – really – do it. Take the handful of steps needed to do it. Pass between the doorposts, under the lintel and step on into the other side. This is the Land of Why-Should-I-Invest-My-Precious-Time-In-This?

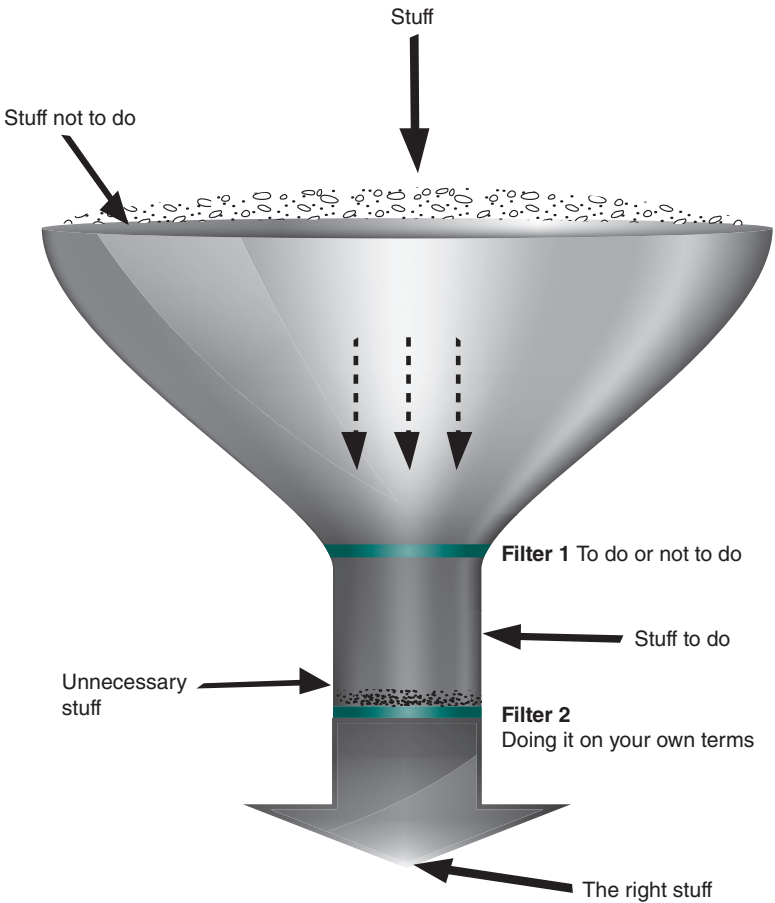
That wasn't too difficult, was it?

"To comprehend a man's life, it is necessary to know not merely what he does but also what he purposely leaves undone. There is a limit to the work that can be got out of a human body or a human brain, and he is a wise man who wastes no energy on pursuits for which he is not fitted; and he is still wiser who, from among the things that he can do well, chooses and absolutely follows the best."

- JOHN HALL GLADSTONE, 19th Century British chemist

Here's another picture I want you to imagine. You're sitting in your seat slumped across your desk. Why are you slumped across your desk? Well, imagine your desk as being inside and at the bottom of, a giant silo or cylinder. What happens then is that people throw stuff in the top of the silo. Let's start at work.

Your boss throws stuff – requests to do things, projects, "this'll only take a minute" and so on. Your team, colleagues, peers throw stuff. Other departments throw stuff. Moving outside work to home, your wife/husband/girlfriend/boyfriend/partner/flatmates/housemates throw stuff. Your family throws stuff. The community in which you live and the government throw stuff. Other people throw stuff and last of all, you throw stuff yourself. All of this stuff comes raining down on your back. No wonder



you're slumped! It's a wonder any of us can get up in the morning.

But it's possible to have a different picture.

Instead of your desk being at the bottom of a silo, think of it as being at the bottom of a funnel.

The funnel has two filters in it. Exactly the same volume of stuff from exactly the same sources gets thrown in the top of the funnel. But this time it's filtered. Some things get stopped by the first filter so that only a smaller number get through. Some things get stopped by the second filter so that only a manageable number – the right stuff – get through. You're not slumped any more now. You're sitting up and you've got a smiley face ☺ because now you've got a life. Now the right stuff is being done. Imagine how happy you would be in those circumstances.

So obviously, we need to talk about what the filters are and we do that in Chapters 5 and 6. But first we need to talk about what constitutes "the right stuff".

And this time, just to finish off the chapter, we have a couple of "Do Less" challenges for you. Try these on two separate days.

Do Less – Decline Everything For Half A Day

Back to work again and your task is to decline everything for half a day. So for instance, you could decide to decline everything that everybody asks you to do all morning (i.e. up to lunchtime) or all afternoon (up to the time you go home).

In this exercise it's acceptable, for instance, to say all morning, "Can it wait until the afternoon?" Or to say, all afternoon, "Would it do tomorrow?"

While this doesn't get rid of the thing completely it does delay it. In addition, there's always the possibility that priorities will change and that you won't have to do it. (Or they might just forget about it! Nice.)

Do Less – Play The Declining Game For A Whole Day

Today, you want to make a game of declining things. Do this by declining – for a whole day – every second request that comes your way. You can use the techniques you've developed so far or try some new ones. How might you come up with some new techniques? Well, you can dream them up for yourself or ask other people. Ask your work colleagues at coffee break or lunch. Ask friends and family if they have good ways of saying no to things.

And what are you going to do if the greatest of all bosses is heading in your direction and it's time to say "no" nicely. Chicken out or go for it? As with all this stuff, it's your choice.

“Doing more things faster is no substitute for doing the right things.”

[– STEPHEN COVEY, Motivational author
and speaker]