

Wilderness House Literary Review 9/2

Peter J. Donaldson

Procrastination is Not a Sin

I am slow to make decisions, slow to write reports, slow to respond to email, slow to do chores. More efficient folks deal quickly with what comes their way. I examine things, cogitate, and lay them aside to deal with later. My obligations pile up and slow me down. I wait for the next item while avoiding most of what I've collected on my to-do list.

My procrastination has driven some of my colleagues and subordinates at work nuts. One once gave me a Dave Carpenter cartoon that pictured a man sitting at a desk with an empty in-box and an overflowing out-box. Another man, presumably the first's supervisor, looked at the desk and said, "Your lack of procrastination is causing some morale problems with the rest of the staff." When he delivered the cartoon my colleague said, "You have exactly the opposite problem." I framed the drawing and kept it on my desk thinking it might help solve my dilly-dallying; it didn't.

My procrastination has also had an impact on my family. Several years ago, my adult son tried to persuade me to fund his stay at a tennis camp by arguing that I failed to teach him enough middle class sports. He's correct. His sports are tennis and skiing; if not for an athletic and caring uncle, my son would be less skilled than he is. It takes a village. My son wasn't the only family member affected by my dawdling. My other children—two girls—also missed their share of middle class sports.

I procrastinate for the same reasons many others do. I am anxious about making decisions and put off doing so. Better to do nothing than to do something wrong. Over the years I have developed some bad habits that reinforce my inclination to wait to get started. I am unable to begin a big job without completing several smaller, warm up jobs first. Doing the most important task on my to-do list first eludes me. As economist Nava Ashraf points out, the attention needed to get things done is "a scarce resource that is easily depleted." Spend attention on the simple tasks and there's less left for important undertakings.

Self help books describe procrastination's roots in the fear of—pick one—failure, success, separation, or attachment. In other words, who knows why some of us procrastinate while others don't. The books are full of dire stories of the ruined lives that flow from putting off doing things. One example: "Because of his continual delays, Henry has lost two jobs and is in danger of losing a third." In my experience, such sad tales exaggerate the impact of procrastination. Most of procrastinators fare better than the misfits of the self help books.

Procrastination is not a fatal flaw. Some procrastinators finish very little, but I and many others accomplish a fair amount. My task completion rate (TRC), the ratio of the completed items on my personal and professional to do lists to all the items—completed or not—on those lists, is at least average, maybe somewhat better. Being slow to start doesn't mean not finishing. Over the years, I have completed lots of important tasks in a more or less timely fashion. In the aggregate, these have led to a professional career with accolades enough to satisfy without causing a swelled head.

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For a long time, I was troubled by my procrastination and promised that I would reform. Redress was elusive. I was guilty but unreformed. I am soon to retire and have been fretting about what I could have accomplished if I had been a bit more disciplined. I changed my mind when a colleague gave me an essay on “structured procrastination” by Stanford Professor John Perry (www.structuredprocrastination.com). Perry argues that “... the procrastinator can be motivated to do difficult, timely and important tasks, as long as these tasks are a way of not doing something more important.” Right now, for example, I am avoiding a troublesome personnel problem by writing this essay. Perry cites his own considerable professional accomplishments to illustrate how procrastination does not have to be a significant disadvantage. Following the professor, I’ve decided that my procrastination, while not a praiseworthy virtue, is not a sin.

I have grown less concerned about my bad habit. But I am still trying to become more efficient. I remain on the lookout for a new list making technique or a more sophisticated tickler system that I hope will cure me. I keep trying to do first things first. But I also take more pleasure in what I have accomplished rather than fret about what I failed to do or did late. I have grown more confident that as in the past, I’ll make enough decisions, write enough reports, respond to enough email, and do enough chores to be productive and respectable. But my personnel problems may be slow to be resolved.