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Honor the Mundane

If a man is called to be a street sweeper, he should sweep streets even as Michelangelo painted, or Beethoven composed music, or Shakespeare wrote poetry. He should sweep streets so well that all the hosts of heaven and earth will pause to say, 'Here lived a great street sweeper who did his job well.'

—MARTIN LUTHER KING JR., civil rights activist

It happens every day: the mundane, boring, humdrum and ordinary tasks that don't belong in the life of a successful person like you. Shouldn't your rise to success mean you never have to pay another bill or take out the garbage? Think again, you're human and everyone has to put in his or her time groveling in the ordinary. In fact, I think it's an essential part of keeping life real and should be celebrated.

Don't get me wrong, I'm not suggesting hanging onto tasks that someone else or some nifty software can do just so you can cross them off your list. But there will always be tasks that can't be outsourced, automated or dumped, and someone (like you) has to do

them. Try looking at those tasks as more than an unwanted irritation. Instead they could be a time to be mindful and even grateful to be doing something simple and easy for a change.

As Stephan Rechtschaffen warns in *Timeshifting*, “If we push away the mundane, we push away the present. And when pushing away becomes our habitual pattern, we’re likely to push away the extraordinary moments too – unable to fully savor them in our rush to ‘get on.’”

What is on your list of ‘mundane’? This could be a good time to see them more as a gift, a chance to focus on the simple, rather than always trying to unload unwanted tasks. Yours might include:

Opening the mail. With the wide scale of adoption of electronic billing and email it’s become a bit of a novelty to read mail that comes with a stamp. Once a week I go through the mail: total time about fifteen minutes. The mechanics of the exercise (slice open the envelope, read, assess, toss, respond, pay the bill or file) requires little effort, but it can actually be a welcome change of pace to complete such a simple task. Sometimes I even get ideas to use for marketing or improvements for our own correspondence.

Updating records of progress. We use a number of tools to track our progress in sales, type of sales (by industry and month by month to previous years), web site analytics, etc. Each tool requires a few minutes of attention each week to keep current. It’s not work I relish, but I find the ritual of entering the data and paying attention to empirical results (as opposed to my overly optimistic assessments) very grounding. Many of our best marketing decisions came from taking the time every week to keep these records up to date.

Writing thank you cards. I know, I know, they love you and you know it. Right. Thanking people for their business or their help

with your business is another task that competes with your burning priorities, but it also could be one of the best investments in five minutes you make.

I remember author and retired CEO James Autry saying that one of the best investments he ever made as the leader of a national printing house was to start every morning by writing a *Thank You* card to a staff person. As he explained, it always seemed like nothing at the time, but invariably, months later, Autry would visit one of his plants and a worker would approach him to thank him for the card that he still kept. It's mundane, it's routine, but it's a great use of time.

Planning a trip. How often have you procrastinated about organizing your flights and hotels for a conference or sales trip only to find that prices had gone up since you first checked and your favourite hotel is now full? I'm sure Brad Pitt doesn't book his flights, but you need to and the sooner you act the sooner you get the satisfaction that comes with completion.

The steps are basic: a little research on-line, one or two phone calls and the deed is done. No late registration charge on the conference, a good rate on the flight and you got the corporate rate at your favourite hotel. Don't think of it as a 'hassle', instead think of it as a simple (in fact, probably one of the simplest tasks you will do all day), twenty minute investment that saved you money.

At my daughter's karate lesson the class always starts by washing the floor of the dojo. Even though the class before them had washed it just one hour before, the new class repeats the same ritual. It's mundane, routine and completely essential for bringing energetic young students into a calm, attentive state for the Sensei.⁴³

43. I'm sure I'm not alone as I marvel at the enthusiasm a twelve-year-old can have for being bent over pushing a rag ahead of them back and forth across some else's floor when, at home it's a battle to get them to even pick up their clothing!

When I'm on the road there are many travelling rituals I must endure: packing and getting to the airport on time, waiting for flights, taxi rides, waiting to check-in at hotels as well as all the steps needed to prepare for a presentation. It's part of the package that comes with the privilege of being able to speak to audiences.

One of these travel rituals has, surprisingly, become a favorite meditative moment. When I am on an airplane all day travelling, my workday is usually reserved to the evening hours before the event the next morning. I usually spend two to three hours in final preparation and catching up on other work. The last ritual I have before packing it in for the day is ironing my clothes for the morning. I don't want to leave this task for the morning when I know I will be doing my final preparation, getting some exercise and concerned about being on time.

Instead of dreading my visit with the ironing board, I actually look at it as a kind of meditation. After all, this is one of the simplest things I will have done all day, so it may be as close to being meditative as I will get.

For about fifteen minutes I carefully prepare my clothes. I pay close attention to details and intentionally think about nothing else. I notice I am very relaxed and unhurried. As I complete the task I quietly acknowledge my efforts during the day and give thanks for all the gifts that I have received.

The Buddhist monk, peace activist and author Thich Nhat Hanh describes it this way:

“If I am incapable of washing dishes joyfully, if I want to finish them quickly so I can go and have dessert, I will be equally incapable of enjoying my dessert. With the fork in my hand, I will be thinking about what to do next, and the texture and flavor of the dessert, together with the pleasure of eating it, will be lost. I will always be dragged into the future, never able to live in the present moment.”

Take a moment now and consider a task that you often procrastinate about or you tend to do it begrudgingly. How could you reframe your motivations and see the process as something richer than a burden or irritation or, perhaps, even as a gift to be honored.

Have you ever hit an afternoon slump or leave the hardest work to the end of the day? Let me show you how to avoid this by going with the flow.

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Go With The Flow

*Knowing when not to work hard
is as important as knowing when to.*

—HARVEY MACKAY, businessman and author

It is 2:30 in the afternoon and I feel like my brain has gone on holiday. I just caught myself re-reading a paragraph in a report I'm working on for the third time (and it still doesn't make any sense). I have two other projects on hold in front of me and I'm not getting traction on any of them. I don't know if I should keep ploughing ahead, hoping my synapses have enjoyed their mid-day nap, or try a brew of caffeine. Neither choice seems likely to succeed; I'm in the afternoon doldrums with no wind in sight.

Sound familiar?

I think a common fallacy is that we should be able to focus and produce the same results throughout the day; like we are electrical motors – just plug us in and we produce. Minute after minute, hour after hour, we should be focused, concentrating on completion, and pleasant to everyone who crosses our path. Yeah, right.

Of course we know this doesn't happen. We have energy highs, lows and in-betweens. Our bodies respond to what we eat, when we ate and how long it's been since we've seen our pillows. There is also the natural fatigue that comes from working hard at thinking for six, seven or eight hours.

Personal Energy Chart

A better approach is what I call: Go with the Flow. First ask yourself when are you the most energetic, optimistic and ready to tackle the tough stuff on your list? And when do you catch yourself semi-comatose reading the same paragraph for the third time?

Maybe you notice that often around 1:30 or 2 p.m. you are searching for a chocolate bar, pouring another coffee, or snacking on something you will regret later. It feels like your brain has stopped firing and your reaction is to try to give it life support.

And just like it's natural to need sleep, it's also natural for your body to cycle through energy highs and lows. Rather than trying to jump-start your synapses during an energy slump, a better solution is to *work with* your energy patterns and not fight what is natural. First, let's see what your energy pattern at work really is.

In the chart below, imagine that the horizontal line represents your time at work. The left-hand star represents when you arrive at work, midday is represented by the small triangle, and by the end of the day, when you go home, is indicated by the right-hand star. The vertical column represents your energy at a given moment. The higher up the chart, the more energy you have and the easier it is to get work done while being optimistic, productive and creative. Conversely, the lower you are on the chart, the less energy you have and the more difficult it is to concentrate on work or complete tasks.

Now think about your energy during the day.

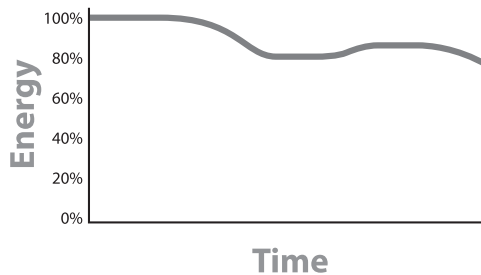
- When are you the most energetic, focused, optimistic and resilient?
- When does your energy wane and you start searching for a sugar snack?

On Chart #1 draw a curve, from left to right, to represent your typical energy flow in a day. Again, the higher the line, the more energy you normally have at that time of day, and the lower the line, the lower your energy level.



The Chart #2 I am showing an average energy curve based on a study of over 2,200 Canadian workers (conducted by Accutemps) with two high-energy periods in the day.

Don't fret if your chart doesn't match; this is just an example. What is important is to distinguish between the 'highs' and 'lows'



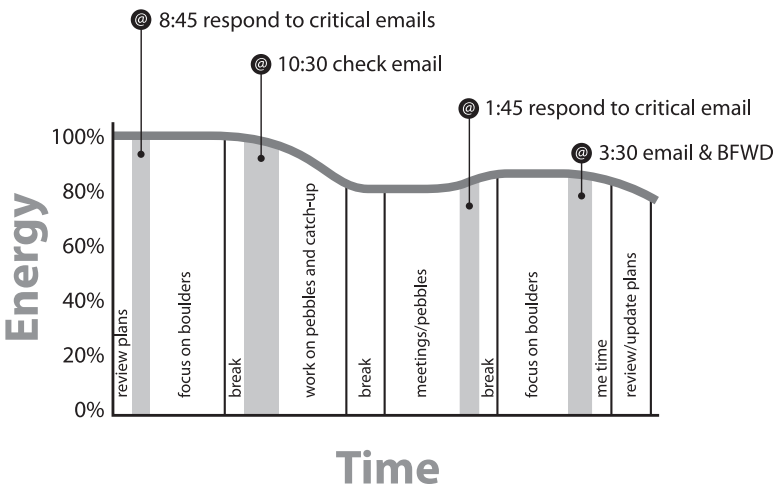
in the day. If you are like most people, one peak time is in the morning, usually for about ninety minutes, and one shortly after lunch lasts about one hour. Again, it doesn't matter if this is true for you – I want you to just focus on where you have 'highs' and 'lows'.

At our high-energy times our thinking is clear, we have positive energy and we are more creative. Work is easier, we are happier doing it, and we are far more likely to be efficient and successful at completing it.

But how are you using your high-energy zones? And what are you doing in your low-energy zones? If you are like most people, you choose what to work on based on what is routine or most urgent day (other than scheduled events, like meetings, of course).

One common pattern I see in almost every group I work with is starting the day with email (low energy work) in what is most people's high energy zone and then trying to attack Boulders (high energy work) in low energy zones later in the day. It's completely backwards and counterproductive. It's also easily fixed.

In Chart #3 I am presenting what an 'ideal' day could look like.



I'm suggesting this formula because, in fact, this is what I strive for when I have a day in the office.

Here is a break-down of the plan for the day:

- First up is a review of my plans. This is when I update what I recorded the night before or on Friday when I left for the weekend. Having quiet focused time for fifteen minutes as soon as I arrive will guarantee a less stressful, more successful day.
- You might recall that in the Chapter *Exorcise your email* I suggested having about four email visits a day. Here is that list again:
 - **8:45 am** – After checking my Day and Action Plans I check email, but only to respond to emergencies, clients, or client-related work that I know was left over from the day before. I delete, click and drag email to Tasks or Calendar or move to a folder. Total time: fifteen to twenty minutes.
 - **10:30 am** – Check email (fifteen to twenty minutes).
 - **1:45 pm** – Check email (fifteen minutes). This is a quick check for returned messages and any important new messages.
 - **3:30 pm** – Check email (thirty minutes). I spend more time composing longer responses and cleaning up the Inbox.

Total time is about one hour to one and one half hours.

- I have two crucial periods dedicated to Boulder work: before 10:30 am and before 3:30 pm. Each session will be about forty five minutes to one hour.
- There are a couple of undedicated flex time slots built into the day for scheduling conference calls, or catching up on client work.

- The end of the day is important Me-Time for setting the stage for the following day. I like to have thirty minutes to do some reading, wrap up some Boulder work or make appointments.
- I finish with my planning ritual: check my Action Plan, update my Day Plan and acknowledge what I have accomplished. The more I focus on what is going well with my work and progress towards my goals the more excited I am about returning to it the next day.

Consider the routines you have now. Are you making the best use of your high energy zones and your low energy zones? Chances are that your energy patterns are predictable, so it just makes sense to work *with them*, instead of against.

Is Your Work Really Unpredictable?

Simon oversees procurement in a food processing company that makes fruit juices and snack bars. He often finds himself responding to immediate needs from suppliers and staff as well as negotiating long-term contracts for the supply of fruit. When I showed him this model, at first he was skeptical. The unpredictable nature of his job had convinced him that he needed to be in reaction mode all day. At the same time, he complained that he frequently found himself struggling to do financial planning when his energy was low.

We all have repetitive work (reading email, returning phone calls, making sales calls and filling in forms or schedules), and we have some unpredictable work (receiving phone calls, managing interruptions and attending impromptu meetings). Once you identify the nature of the various tasks, you can start to plan for them to be scheduled at your high-energy times (if they require your full concentration) or low-energy times when the work is routine and less taxing.

Simon now blocks his day with large chunks of time for his

high-energy work and for routine work in his low-energy time slots. For example, he makes calls to suppliers before 10:30 am, when his energy is up and he knows they will be in their offices. He does the bulk of his email work after 10:30 am and between 2 and 3 pm, when his energy is low, and he leaves most of the afternoon for emergencies and paperwork.

“It’s not a perfect system,” Simon reported after one month working with the new system. “Stuff still comes up, but I feel like I have a game plan and, even when my energy is low, I am still being productive.”

Harness Your High-Energy Zones

Here are some strategies to harness your high-energy zones and get more work done in less time:

- **Protect your high-energy zones.** If you are a morning person, minimize your time on email for the first ninety minutes, close your door, and let people in your office know that mornings are when you need uninterrupted time to work on your Boulders. This time zone could represent 80% of your work if you plan for it.
- **Reschedule meetings.** Move meetings to outside your high-energy periods. Unless they are brainstorming or problem-solving meetings, you will do everyone a favor if you hold routine meetings just before or just after lunch. If it is a creative-thinking meeting, try to schedule it before 11 am.
- **Cluster similar tasks together.** For low-energy times, plan on clustering routine work together (email, reading reports, sending invites for meetings). Similarly, cluster your high-energy work together.
- **Make a plan.** Always make a Day Plan for the next day before

leaving the office. Make sure you know what you will work on first thing in the morning and block that time on your calendar.

- **Complete tasks.** Before moving on to other tasks, finish the task you are working on. Avoid multi-tasking (especially in low-energy periods), focus on completion, and work on getting the Pebbles off your Day Plan.
- **Be realistic.** Get into a habit of setting realistic targets for each time slot. Only thirty minutes? Plan for twenty-five minutes of work and actually complete it before moving on.

The following Pebbles are great candidates to include in your high-energy zones:

- Creative planning with your team or committee
- Checking on a committee's progress since the last meeting
- Making critical phone calls that require your full attention
- Resolving a relationship issue
- Writing thank-you cards
- Making sales calls of any kind, or follow-up calls to clients
- Feedback, coaching and performance reviews for staff
- Interviewing job applicants
- Composing a critical communication by letter or email
- Planning an event
- Making critical budget or staffing decisions

Here's a good rule-of-thumb if you tend to procrastinate about

some Pebble, whether it is repetitive or not, it belongs in your high energy zones. This is where I put my writing assignments, proposal writing and calls with clients. It feels great to cross the tough tasks off my list and cruise into some flex time knowing that the hard push is behind me.

Now it's time to look at how to go on vacation . . . for free!