



# BUSYNESS

THE archenemy  
OF every life

## “For fast-acting relief, try slowing down.” — LILY TOMLIN

No one answers the phone anymore. They “let the machine get it” to save time. And if you have the time, they’ll tell you about all the things they have to do before tomorrow or before dinner or before they go to bed. They have the housework to finish, a deadline at work, a family party to go to, the dry cleaning to pick up, and the exercise class. As one of our friends is fond of saying, “We’re all as busy as a fiddler’s elbow.”

Larry Dossey, a physician, coined the term “time sickness” in 1982 to describe the obsessive belief that “time is getting away, that there isn’t enough of it, and that you must pedal faster and faster to keep up.”<sup>1</sup> By that definition, we’re almost sick all of the time. Who among us isn’t busy and in a rush?

Nearly 20 years ago, when we were first married and living in Pasadena, we attended the same church as Dr. James Dobson. One Sunday morning, he made a guest appearance in our newlywed class, and in the context of his lesson, he said something that got the full attention of every neophyte in the room: “Overcommitment and exhaustion are the most insidious and pervasive marriage killers you will ever encounter as a couple.”

We’ve never forgotten that. In fact, we’ve been working at guarding against busyness ever since. Once you realize the potential harm busyness can have on your marriage, you become more conscious of how much or how little time you have together each day.

No matter how much time stealing, time stretching, and time bending we attempt, we always find ourselves up against a certain mathematical law: Thirty-two hours worth of tasks can’t be crammed into a 24-hour day. So, we are busy. Nobody’s disputing that fact.

The real question is, “How busy are you?” We take that back. The real question—the one upon which this article hinges—is, “What are you busy at?”

LES AND LESLIE PARROTT

### How to Battle Busyness and Win

The Governor of Michigan issued an official proclamation recently in her state: “On behalf of the citizens of Michigan, Governor Jennifer M. Granholm hereby proclaims October 24 as ‘Take Back Your Time Day.’ Whereas too many are suffering from overwork, over-scheduling and time poverty... and whereas, many Americans are working extremely long hours, taking shorter vacations and suffering from stress and burnout... and whereas, time pressure has a negative impact on family life,... therefore be it, I, Jennifer M. Granholm, Governor of the State of Michigan, do hereby proclaim this day as ‘Take Back Your Time Day.’”

We had never heard of such a proclamation. It almost made us want to pull up our roots in Seattle and move to the Great Lakes state. Who wouldn’t want to live in a place where even the Governor wants you to not be so busy? If only it were that easy.

Unfortunately, it takes more than a proclamation to actually win the war on busyness. Here are a few suggestions for doing just that.

### Umm... Slow Down

No duh! Right? Of course the cure for hurry sickness is to slow down. Lily Tomlin’s quote at the beginning of this article is one of our favorites: “For fast-acting relief, try slowing down.” If you prefer a more contemplative thinker, here’s what Gandhi said: “There is more to life than increasing its speed.”

Okay. So we all know we should slow down more often, but how? Well, at the end of reading this sentence, close your eyes, take a deep breath, put your hand over your heart and feel the beat for about 15 seconds. Did you do it? If so, you know how something as simple as this can slow you down.

But if you didn’t, if you kept on reading, let us ask you a question. Do you seriously not have time to pause for

15 seconds before completing this paragraph? If so, we have a more challenging assignment. Try not wearing your watch tomorrow. If you’re really brave, take the clock off the wall. Just for a day.

You’ll be amazed to discover how tuned in to time you are and how your watch speeds you up more than you think. It’s a little exercise that can’t help but get you to ease your foot off the gas pedal of your day and slow down.

### Examine Your “Secondary Gains”

We have a friend who actually feels complimented when you tell him he looks tired. “Been pushing hard,” he’ll say with pride. Know someone like this? They view “busy” as a badge of honor.

Why? It has to do with something we psychologists call secondary gains. The primary gain of being busy appears to be productivity. But just under the surface, we also gain from running in high gear because it may keep us from reflecting on the deeper issues of our lives—something that tends to scare us.

Or perhaps it keeps us from thoughts and feelings, and even people, we dread. Being busy gives us license to arrive late, slip out early or be absent altogether.

Busyness can keep us from having a conversation that’s long overdue. It can prevent us from confronting an issue that’s begging to be addressed. Busyness may be a means of avoiding something you need to confront. Perhaps it’s your mounting financial debt or the lack of passion you feel for your job. Maybe it’s the feeling of just drifting through life without real meaning or presence. You get the idea.

If you’re ever going to be successful in wrestling your busyness to the ground, you need to take a serious look at any potential second gains. You need to ask yourself what exactly your busyness is getting you besides the belief that you’re getting more done? Be honest, brutally honest, with yourself as you explore your answer and yourself.

## Quit Serving Leftovers

Busy people rarely give their best to the ones they love. They serve leftovers. We're not talking about the kind that comes from your fridge. We're talking about emotional and relational leftovers—the ones that remain after the prime energy and attention have already been given to others.

This is sometimes known as sunset fatigue. It's when we are too drained, too tired, or too preoccupied to be fully present with the ones we love the most. They get what's leftover. And meaningful relationships—be they with family, friends or a significant other—cannot survive on leftovers forever. We give our best to our loved ones when we give them attention and energy. We give our best when we prioritize them.

## Say No Gracefully

One of the most difficult things some people can ever do is say no. Yet this little word is one of your strongest weapons in the war against busyness. If you don't believe us, we've got to tell you that we've seen people literally collapse from fatigue, drown in depression, and develop debilitating illnesses because they never said no.

Some physicians even call cancer "the disease of nice people." Surgeon Bernie Siegel tells about one of his cancer patients who never said no. She began to improve, however, after she finally told her boss that she could no longer work extra hours whenever he asked. She began to reclaim her time.

Siegel said, "People who neglect their own needs are the ones who are most likely to become ill. For them, the main problem often is learning to say no without feeling guilty." If you suffer from the disease to please, treat it seriously and assert yourself. Begin by making a list of things you have on your plate right now that you'd like to say no to. Discuss them with a friend or someone else you respect. Chances are, he or she can provide perspective and

coach you on wielding the mighty power of this little word.

## The Business of Eliminating Busyness

My wife and I read nearly everything John Ortberg writes. We went to graduate school with John and have long known him to be one of the most down-to-earth writers on heavenly issues you'll ever find. In his book, *The Life You've Always Wanted*, he has a chapter called "An Unhurried Life" in which he tells the story of getting some spiritual direction from a wise friend shortly after moving to Chicago.

"I described [to my friend] the pace at which things tend to move in my current setting," John writes. He also told his friend about the fast clip of his family life. "What did I need to do," John asked, "to be spiritually healthy?"

After a quiet moment, his friend finally spoke: "You must ruthlessly eliminate hurry from your life." Another long pause.

"Okay, I've written that one down," John told him, a little impatiently. "That's a good one. Now, what else is there?" John had a lot to do and he was talking to his friend long-distance, so, as he puts it, "I was anxious to cram as many units of spiritual wisdom into the least amount of time possible."

Another long pause on the line. "There is nothing else," his wise friend said. "You must ruthlessly eliminate hurry from your life."

That's it. His spiritual mentor could have given him a laundry list of things to do that would have aligned his spirit with the Almighty. But that's all he suggested. There's nothing else but to eliminate hurry from your life.

We felt compelled to leave you in this article with John's story because we fear you might approach our article the same way he approached his friend. We fear you'll come to the close of this article and then move on to the next to find

out "what else" you can do for your time starved life. After all, you've read about the negative impact prolonged busyness can have on you and you've read through our suggestions for combating it.

That's great. But don't fall to the temptation of thinking that just because you've read it that you will now practice it. That's easy to do if you're like most people. But, of course, you know it doesn't typically work that way. That's why we want to keep you from the temptation of "checking off" this article and then thinking you're now less busy.

You've now got to get about the business of ruthlessly eliminating busyness from your life and key relationships.

## For Reflection and Action

- What makes you feel most busy? In other words, in what specific areas of your life do you most often feel that you must pedal faster and faster to keep up? Why?
- Which of the four most common ill-effects of busyness do you think is impacting your life the most and why? Is it your conversations, your love life, your ability to have fun or your spirituality?
- After reviewing the ways to battle business in this article, what is the one you feel can be most useful to you and, in specific terms, how and when will you put it into practice? ☞



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## Endnote

- <sup>1</sup> Larry Dossey, 1982, *Time and Medicine*. Boston: Shambhala Publications.