

BUSY AS A BEE



People who understand that busyness is actually just a state of mind cope effortlessly and gracefully with whatever is thrown their way.

This past summer zipped by as if it were just three days long. Memorial Day flew to the 4th of July, and the 4th sailed to Labor Day. The holidays were like brief intervals of leisure as life rushed by. So much to do, so little time.

Not long ago a mother was putting her eight-year-old to bed the evening before a school holiday, when the child asked, "Mommy, will you have time to play with me tomorrow?" When the mother replied, "Honey, I'm so far behind at work that Daddy is going to have to be with you," the child cried out, "But Mommy, you've been working ever since I was born. Aren't you caught up yet?"

For many of us the answer is "No! I'm not caught up." And it appears that we never will be. Most of us are leading increasingly harried lives, hounded by undone tasks, pressed by co-workers who need something immediately, sought out by customers who expect instant response, and led by people who have no time for us, just as we have no time for our children.

No one is surprised when a friend answers the question, "How are you?" by saying "Busy!" in a tone that is terse, abrupt, or even curt. Yet it wasn't so long ago that being busy meant being productive. Just as the bee steadily goes about his business of gathering pollen, we humans were expected to go about our tasks calmly and productively.

Life seemed no more rushed than the bee's easy progress from flower to flower. Our work explored things the same way a bee examines many flowers to find the one with the best pollen. Nights were a time for rest and regeneration with family and friends.

In the year 2000, living seems dramatically different from what it used to be. Technology lets us to work anytime, anywhere. We are accessible by cell phones, pagers, email, or voice mail, seven days a week, twenty-four hours a day. Also, the response time between request and action has shrunk dramatically thanks to overnight services, electronic distribution, and instant information. And thanks to conference services, including teleconferences, we can participate in meetings without ever seeing another human face.

Yet, recent data from the Bureau of Labor shows that in 1999 the average employee spent 39.6 hours a week working - up just a few minutes from 1989 when the average workweek was 39.2 hours. If we are not spending more time at the office, then why does it feel as though all of our waking hours is consumed by work?

While it is easy to point to technology as the culprit, we are accusing an innocent bystander. Our lives seem overwhelmingly busy only because we are busy thinking busy thoughts. In other words, the only reason we are feeling so rushed, pressured, or even frantic is that our thoughts are dwelling on undone tasks, "to do" lists, meeting schedules, unreturned voice mails or unanswered emails. It is not that these tasks are not real. They are. But by themselves they have no power to harry us. It is only when we give them power by focusing on them that we feel stressed-out.

For example, suppose your boss asks you to ferret out the answer to a vital question. Quickly, you respond that you will have it done by tomorrow morning, forgetting, in your eagerness, a report that is also due, your kid's soccer game, and a scheduled afternoon meeting. In a heartbeat, keenness turns to discouragement.

This is a moment of truth. We face a choice - to stay with the feelings of eagerness about exploring an interesting issue or to dwell on dispiriting thoughts of the commitments that stand in the way.

Most of us give in to negative, busy-minded thoughts. Our minds get caught up in finding excuses for being unable to possibly get everything done, in apologizing for being too busy to devote quality time to an issue, or in fretting over how many tasks must be accomplished in so little time.

In short, we pay too much attention to our heads and too little to our hearts. Once we start thinking analytically, we begin looking for what is wrong with the picture instead of waiting to be touched by what feels right.

What we miss is that we have a choice of whether or not to entertain this kind of pessimistic thinking. By "entertaining" these thoughts we do nothing more than pay attention to them. We can instead turn our back on them and look towards what seems intriguing, interesting, or even inspiring. These constructive feelings then guide productive behavior - productive because our energy and creative intelligence are being applied to achieving progress, rather than brooding over the way external pressures are overwhelming our ability to respond.

As we give free rein to feelings of wellbeing and warmth, our minds grow calm, and our mood lightens. We receive a precious gift - our sense of time's passing slows down. Our most urgent need at that moment - more time - is miraculously provided.

We cannot control our thoughts, nor can we wish away our concerns about all the things that need to be done. But we all have been given the gift of being able to choose what thoughts to pay attention to. So, freeing your mind is not about controlling your

thinking! Mind control, in the sense of being able to ban unwanted thoughts, is impossible; but understanding the mind, in the sense of living with the awareness that existence is an inner experience, is possible. You simply have to give it a try.

Undoubtedly the phrase, "If you want something done, then give it to the busiest person", rings a bell. In truth, people who look terribly busy to others rarely describe themselves as leading hectic lives. Their secret is that they understand, sometimes instinctively, that living in an affirmative state of mind is the most important thing.

They know that when they feel calm, their mental gateway to common sense and wisdom is wide open. In turn, this openness lets them see to the heart of the matter, gain perspective, and know exactly what must be done. They don't waste effort by spinning their wheels, they don't miss what is important because they are distracted, and they don't repeat themselves because they have forgotten what has already been done.

To anyone who believes in a busy world, all the self-help books about time management, putting first things first, or learning the tricks of the one-minute manager are as useless as a computer to a cave man. These books may contain wonderful advice, but that advice won't be accessible when it is most needed.

People who understand that busyness is just a state of mind cope effortlessly and gracefully with whatever is thrown their way. They treasure a quiet mental state, appreciate the value of rest, and focus on one thing at a time. Simplicity rather than activity is what feels wonderful and helps them achieve a natural state of balance.

If you find your mind abuzz with ever-greater urgency, ask yourself if this is what the bee hears. Perhaps what comes to mind will be a languid summer afternoon accentuated by the pleasant hum of the bees as they go about their business. May your honey be as sweet as theirs.

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