



The time of **YOUR LIFE**

TOO MUCH TO DO AND NOT ENOUGH TIME TO DO IT? TAKING A BREAK MIGHT BE
ALL THAT'S NEEDED TO RESTORE BALANCE TO YOUR BUSY LIFE.

Words by DAVID LESER

This is a story about downtime. If only I had the time to write it.

Just this morning I raced to a meeting about teaching people to write, then filed a story about people who've lost their jobs, then visited my elderly sick mother who needs my help in divining the difference between her password, pin number and user name.

My Dropbox is playing up (as is my fridge and dishwasher) and my Inbox – which I realise I shouldn't have checked before leaving my apartment – is groaning with solicited and unsolicited emails.

There are missed calls on my iPhone from my two daughters and a number of friends, while there are dozens of important messages on my Twitter feed from important people I think I need to follow, one of whom mentions a quote from the 17th century French playwright Moliere telling me “the trees that are slow to grow bear the best fruit.”

Well that's all very well for Moliere to say but Jetstar has a “Friday Fare Frenzy” and if I don't secure that red-eye flight to Melbourne next week the fruits of my labour could wither on the vine ... and yes I know I've overcooked that metaphor but, as you can tell, I don't have much time for original thought.

I haven't yet got to the *Australian*, the *Guardian*, the *New York Times*, the *New Yorker*, *Vanity Fair*, the *Daily Beast* and *Crikey.com* and the growing pile of books next to my bed keeps reminding me of another world that awaits on the other side of this bombardment of scattered thoughts, electronic bites and search options.

There is something missing. I know it and you know it. It's called Downtime, although we could just as easily call it Dreamtime. Spare Time. Chill Time. Innocence. Wonder. Care for the Soul.

I remember years ago when I was a Washington-based reporter and I came home one evening to sit idly in my basement apartment. As I sat on the couch staring at the floor, I felt the gaze from three pairs of eyes falling on me from the sidewalk. Do you know what I did? I grabbed the newspaper next to me and began poring over the day's headlines, hoping desperately that those eyes had seen a young man casually reading after a long day at the office, not some no-hoper staring into space.

That became my strongest memory of my time in Washington – not covering Congress, or visiting the White House, or reporting on dirty wars in Central America, or visiting the Smithsonian, or playing my first game of baseball or delighting in the cherry blossoms of spring.

It was pretending to be doing something rather than getting caught in the act of doing nothing.

Now there's no pretence. Now most of us are doing something while wishing we could do nothing.

Just over 10 years ago the progressive think tank, The Australia

Institute, warned us we were working longer hours than employees in any other developed country. (A phenomenal 200 hours longer!) Today, it's worse, with growing anxiety about job security and the often incapacitating stress that comes from financial pressures and an absence of work-life balance.

The information revolution has wrought changes that are no longer part of a pattern. The world is a village where no sense of space and time exists anymore. Everything, everywhere, interrelated and in rapid flux 24/7 — new sectors, new services, new technologies, new deadlines, new skills, new jobs or no jobs at all.

Our downtime has vanished and/or morphed into an online world, and in our telecommuting, clickbaiting, texting, tweeting Monday to Monday frenzy we have become like cyborgs – half-human, half robot – fired by both blood and internet protocols.

I know I am part of this collective attention deficit disorder because I too am tethered to my devices. I feel the dopamine hit every time I get a text or email. And when the three dots of the “typing awareness indicator” appear on my screen I feel the rush of ... what? Pleasure? Anxiety? Anticipation?

“THERE'S SOMETHING MISSING. I KNOW IT AND YOU KNOW IT. IT'S CALLED DOWNTIME”


So here's what I do. I put this story aside for a few days and turn off my Outlook Express, Facebook alerts and Twitter feed. I cancel my subscriptions to three news sites and switch off my phone. I then go to my local BodyMindLife yoga class to remind myself that I actually have a physical body and a life outside the virtual world.

“Follow the tidal flow of your breath,” the yoga instructor says. “We breathe in and out 20,000 times a day. How many of these breaths do you notice?”

I then walk around the headland near my home and, as I crest the hill, I inhale the stillness of the landscape and feel instantly some of the chatter and distraction of my mind start to empty.

I then go home and, for the next three days, make endless cups of tea and re-read books and articles that remind me of what I thought I already knew.

I dip back into Eckhart Tolle's international best-seller *The Power of Now*, in which he observes that “All the things that truly matter to us – beauty, creativity, joy, love, inner peace – arise from beyond the mind, from beyond thought ... All true artists, whether ➤



When you take
time to stop,
creativity flows
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➤they know it or not, create from a place of no mind, from inner stillness. Even the great scientists have reported that their creative breakthrough came during a time of mental quietude.”

I then turn to a *New York Times* story about an American software company – 37signals (now called Basecamp) – that allows its employs to work four days a week, eight hours a day during the warmer months.

Why? “Because better work gets done in four days than in five,” declares the CEO Jason Fried. “When there’s less time to work, you waste less time. When you have a compressed work week, you tend to focus on what’s important.”

“ALL THE THINGS THAT TRULY MATTER TO US ... ARISE FROM BEYOND THE MIND, BEYOND THOUGHT”

In addition, giving the employees the whole month of June off to explore new ideas led to “the greatest burst of creativity I’ve seen from our 34-member staff,” says Fried.

After reading this I sit in the stillness of my living room. I think of the seasons of my own life – my childhood and teenage years, my family and friends, the music, laughter and good conversation I’ve been privileged to share, the work I’ve done – and I realise that something important has been happening during this period of self-imposed downtime.

I have reminded myself that there is a part of the world that periodically stops and takes a breath before it moves on again; that even if we might not know who we are when we choose to stop, it’s important we try.

Viktor Frankl, the Austrian psychiatrist and Holocaust survivor wrote in *Man’s Search for Meaning*. “So live as if you were living already for the second time and as if you had acted the first time as wrongly as you are about to act now!”

Thank goodness I’ve just had a reboot because I think I know what he means. **J**

BALANCING ACTS

Making time for yourself is not selfish – it’s essential for regaining and maintaining your equilibrium.

Australians are spending more time working and less time relaxing than ever before. The Bureau of Statistics says five million of Australia’s 7.7 million full-time workers put in more than 40 hours per week. Of them, 1.4 million put in more than 50 hours per week. Around 270,000 put in more than 70 hours per week. It doesn’t allow for much work/life balance.

The problem is compounded for women who juggle jobs with caring for children, which often leads to feelings of guilt about not giving enough to either role. The stress this causes can spawn a host of problems from weight gain and memory and concentration loss to depression and heart disease.

It may feel impossible, but taking a little time for yourself – finding some downtime – is key to restoring a sense of balance and peace.

Medical experts suggest practical lifestyle revisions to rediscover yourself on a daily basis and help bring your body back into biochemical balance. These include eating more whole foods, trying meditation or yoga, breathing, prioritising adequate sleep and having an honest conversation with yourself about the impact of alcohol and caffeine.

Build some “me” time into your day, either by getting up before the kids and enjoying some quiet time or by packing lunches and backpacks, signing notes or setting out clothes before going to bed.

And don’t spend your extra time making “to do” lists! Use it to actually focus on you. Whether it’s reading a novel, soaking in the bath or simply daydreaming in the sun, it’s important to give your mind and body a break.