

Just About Anything...

TO DELIGHT THE CURIOUS READER

a blog by Mona McHaney

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Confessions of a Recovering Procrastinator

I was the worst. Many students wait until the night before a paper is due to write it. Not me. I waited until the very morning the paper was due to get started. I would set my alarm to wake me up at 4:00 a.m. Then I'd fuel up with a hot cup of strong black tea. Soon I was off and typing. Hours later I'd finish up about two minutes before I had to hurry to class. There's nothing like a looming deadline to light a fire under the Muses.

Why did I do this? Why wait until the last possible minute and experience all of that stress and anxiety? Did I really need an adrenaline rush to motivate me? Apparently, many people do.

A 2014 study revealed that 20-25% of adults world-wide are chronic procrastinators. Eighty-eight percent of workers procrastinate 60+ minutes a day on the job. And 80-95% of college students procrastinate to some degree. Among these various folks, 94% are unhappy about their procrastination.

“You can't just turn on creativity like a faucet. You have to be in the right mood. What mood is that? Last-minute panic.”



—Bill Watterson, cartoonist of *Calvin and Hobbes*

One survey revealed some reasons why people put things off: 41% said they didn't feel like doing the task, 25% claimed they didn't have time, 24% cited a lack of urgency, and 10% didn't understand the task.

Looking back, I've thought of a few possible reasons why I procrastinated. Sometimes with an important project, I wanted to carve out a big chunk of time to focus on it exclusively. But with many things going on, one rarely gets such an opportunity. Only by waiting until the 11th hour did I feel justified in swiping everything else off my desk to concentrate on the one thing.

Another story I told myself was that I enjoyed having a long stretch of time to let my thoughts simmer. Only at the last minute could I turn up the heat, bring my ideas to a boil, and put pen to paper.

Mostly, though, I think my problem with procrastination stemmed from my struggle with perfectionism. Anything less than the best was unacceptable. I needed to do a fantastic job. But I didn't feel capable yet of doing a fantastic job. So, I postponed the task until I was capable of rising to the task. But that perfect



moment with perfect ability never came. Only at the last minute did the adrenaline of panic overcome my fear of failure.

So why did I change? When did I—a confirmed procrastinator—go into recovery? I think a moment finally came when my “system” broke down. I waited too long to write a paper—as always—and instead of pumping it out—as usual—at the last minute, I froze. Nothing. Came. Out. For the first time in my life, I had to request an extension and take an incomplete in a course.

*“The scholar’s greatest weakness:
calling procrastination research.”*

—Stephen King

That was the beginning. Then I married another procrastinator. My time was not exclusively my own. I realized that I couldn’t postpone everything to the last minute because sometimes the unexpected happened and derailed my plan.

Then I moved to Africa, where nothing happens on a schedule or according to plan. I’ve had to grow more flexible—no, not flexible, fluid. If I want a project done well—or done at all—I need to set myself an artificial deadline way ahead of the real deadline.

I’ve also learned the value of “good enough.” I love this quotation: “Lowering my expectations has succeeded beyond my wildest dreams.” My new motto: aim for a B+.

Somewhere along this journey I discovered something wonderful: the magic of early. If you start on a task earlier than necessary, then you can chip away at it bit by bit. You actually have the time to leisurely fashion it to a higher degree of excellence than you could at the last minute. Planning and completing tasks early will also inspire confidence in those around you. You reduce your own stress and anxiety, and you generate less drama and worry for your family, friends, and co-workers. No man is an island; no procrastinator is either.

Nowadays, the thing that causes me stress and anxiety is waiting until the last minute to do something.

Do I still procrastinate? Yep. Frequently I fall off the wagon. But in keeping with the theme of this blog, I am pleased to make another confession: I finished writing this piece on procrastination over two weeks before it was due. Yay!

Have a delightful day!



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