

Less

Accomplishing More by Doing Less

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Introduction

We all get overwhelmed with busyness at times. But if you find yourself frequently comfortable with or bragging about how overbusy you are, you may want to question whether you've become addicted to being busy.

Have you convinced yourself that you thrive on busyness? Do you often feel a physical satisfaction and increase in energy from "multitasking" - from the thrill of jam-packing a day with more than seems humanly possible, or from the drama of working under impossible deadlines and meeting them at any cost to health and family? At the end of a workday, do you stay buzzed and/or does the stress of the workday remain in your bones? When you're not working, do you have difficulty focusing and calming down? Do you feel a sense of emptiness?

If the answer is yes to most of these questions, you might want to consider developing a more sustainable approach to work and activity in general. Your current and future health probably depends on it.

Three Tasks

Harry Roberts - Yurok Indian-trained shaman, naturalist, cowboy and Irish curmudgeon - highlighted three tasks that matter in a lifetime. "The first task, although not the most important task, is to quiet the busyness in your mind. The second is to find your song. And the third task is to sing your song," he said.

Those three tasks are the essential underpinnings for transforming busyness into composure and results.

Quieting the mind generally begins by taking the time to be still, to be quiet, and paying attention to our breath and body. It doesn't mean we stop thinking, but we reduce the noise and increase our focus and concentration.

The process is like applying WD-40 to our minds. Increasing our awareness and paying conscious attention to our inner and outer life loosens the somewhat hardened or rusted parts of our thinking. Often, without even noticing, we get a bit stuck in mental habits and assumptions that underlie and drive our thinking. Applying some attention can loosen these patterns. Quieting the busyness in your mind is something you can practice at any time, in any moment when you want to let go of the activity-driven busyness that can make you feel depleted.

Finding your song describes your ability to access your deep power - which is your appreciation for being alive. This embraces both who you are and all that you have right now, as well as the greater possibilities you imagine and envision for the future.

We can hear our song only when our minds are quiet, when we can reflect on what's truly engaging and important to us - what brings us the greatest sense of belonging and accomplishment. Finding our song means discovering our fierce and tender heart, where we feel deeply connected to all that surrounds us. Though our jobs and professional careers are important, our song is much deeper and wider than our work. Our song includes our way of being in the world, our personal relationships, our daily routines and how we create a sense of community.

You can choose to sing your song - have a positive effect on the task at hand and feel personally productive - anytime and anywhere, in small or large ways. Where you live and work and who you work with matter tremendously. How you express your deepest longings and intentions is vitally important to enlisting others in your vision and in taking steps toward implementing that vision.

Singing your song is simply a rather poetic way of reminding yourself that no matter what your circumstances are, you can engage them effectively and with as much personal satisfaction as possible.

Doing Less

The hunger for doing less is palpable. Many people feel overwhelmed and frustrated with their work and personal lives.

But the solution is not to sit on the sofa, feet up, doing nothing. Sitting and doing nothing is certainly one way to do less, but it accomplishes less too - and it's laziness or wishful thinking to hope otherwise.

The Less Manifesto describes a more effective way of approaching life and work, and with it, we can do less and accomplish more - with a great deal of satisfaction - in nearly every situation.

The guiding principle is that when we approach any task in the right spirit, we become more successful and efficient at it. When we engage in fewer self-defeating behaviors, when we feel less fear, when we become less distracted, we accomplish more of whatever we set our hearts to. Thus, by recasting our attitudes, we reap tangible, practical benefits - we then "do less" by streamlining our efforts and eliminating unnecessary or reflexive responses. But to achieve these external real-world benefits, we first have to turn inward and "do less" within ourselves.

Here are five important ways we can learn to do less:

- We do less by taking the time to rest mentally and physically in between or outside our usual activities, perhaps instituting a regular practice of meditation, retreats, breaks and reflection.
- We do less by pausing in the midst of activities. Two examples are mindful practice (such as coming in touch with our breath in between reading or sending emails) and walking meditation.
- We do less by identifying and reducing unnecessary activities. In this case, "unnecessary" means those things that aren't in alignment with what we want to accomplish.
- We do less by the very quality of our being. We must be completely present for what we're doing, without sacrificing or rushing what's in front of us in order to get to "more important" stuff later. No matter how mundane the activity, treat everything as important and take pleasure in it. At bottom, whatever we're doing right now is *what we're engaged in* and it deserves our full attention and appreciation.
- We do less by integrating effort with a feeling of effortlessness. That sounds like a contradiction but it isn't. With practice, we can all find that sweet spot that combines engagement, creativity and composure.

The Less Manifesto

The Less Manifesto focuses on engaging *less* in five self-defeating habits in order to experience *more* ease - more composure and better results - within ourselves and with others. This can translate into more productivity - and productivity of a less exhausting sort!

The five categories, or habits, build upon each other. They're each compressed into one word - one behavior or activity we can do less of - but each represents a huge arena of human emotional and psychology that can require much explanation and nuance to understand and transform. They are:

1. **Fear.** When we're afraid, our first impulse is to tighten our bodies and shut down our minds. We become the opposite of receptive and playful, and this is an enormous hindrance to learning new skills in the workplace, to collaborating and to making interpersonal connections. The impulse to tighten can become so deeply ingrained that we may not even be aware of the ways that we keep ourselves back, or the subtle and not-so-subtle ways that we communicate our fears to others.

Buddhism speaks of five primary fears: fear of losing our state of mind, fear of public speaking or humiliation, fear of losing our reputation, fear of losing our livelihood, and fear of death.

Reducing fear (and its physical manifestation, anxiety) and opening ourselves to new possibilities - surprises, even - is the first step toward a more lasting sense of accomplishment. Reducing fear can be the first action that frees us to achieve a goal (even when, in losing our fear, our goal becomes something very different than previously imagined).

2. **Assumptions.** We're always making predictions and assumptions. In fact, we're generally brilliant assumption-makers. But predictions and assumptions are often wrong. And when things go wrong and conflict ensues, the fastest and most effective solution is often to identify and let go of false assumptions.

What assumptions do you make about other people - on the phone, at work or on the highway? Is the world full of idiots and selfish people, or warmhearted, caring people who pretty much want the same things you want?

Then, what assumptions do you make about yourself? What kind of person do you think you are? How do you expect you'll show up, act and respond in any given situation?

We cannot know another person's experience. We cannot truly know how someone feels, what they think or what their aspirations are. By the same token, others cannot know what ticks inside us. The best way to understand others is to ask them, how do you feel about this? How do you see or understand the situation? What's your perspective?

3. **Distractions.** Distractions and interruptions are such a part of modern life that we don't realize how hard it is to concentrate. We've almost lost the ability to pay attention to the fact we're not paying close attention.

There are two primary types of distractions: those that draw us in multiple directions at once, resulting in confusion and an inability to complete a thought or action, and those that provide mental relaxation, offering small "breaks" that support intense focus and effort. Clearly we want less of the former and more of the latter.

A *New Yorker* cartoon shows somebody opening a fortune cookie in a Chinese restaurant that reads: "You are going to die." If you let this fact sink in - that life is short and we all die - it can act as a powerful motivating force to help maintain focus and priorities. Everything changes and is impermanent, so are we fully present and making the most of this fleeting moment?

Appreciating impermanence clarifies priorities and helps us identify any frenetic, shallow and ineffective activities we're being distracted by. We see clearly the things that exhaust us and distract us from experiencing the blessing and opportunity of each particular day.

4. **Resistance.** On the subject of change, the Buddhists got it right. Everything changes. Everything is impermanent. Everything that we take for granted is changing, constantly.

However, we often find it difficult to accept change and the uncertainty that goes along with it. We grasp at what we know and what's familiar and resist anything that might change them. Our desires can also be a form of resistance: perhaps we want things to be different from what they are, or we desire a particular outcome, a certain future, and we resist other possibilities.

When we stop resisting what is or what might be, when we let go of grasping at what we have or what we want, we see that change is neither good nor bad. When we do this, we can see our lives and the world the way they actually are. We become more effective because we can respond appropriately to any situation.

We inhabit a changing, dynamic world in continual flux. When we don't cling to what we have and resist change, we can more fully enter the situation at hand and be more open to learning from whatever may arise. As with all aspects of the Less Manifesto, this is easier to see and understand than it is to implement in our daily lives.

5. **Busyness.** Though we often associate busyness with activity and speed, and lack of busyness with stopping or slowing down, that's not always the case. It's possible to be actively engaged and not be busy. Not being "busy" doesn't require that you stop, slow down or step out of the activity of your life. Most of the time we learn, we adjust, we find our composure right in the midst of the activity and intensity of our lives. We have to!

A study comparing the swings of professional golfers with the swings of average golfers found that when an average golfer is swinging without a golf ball in front of him or her, the swing more closely resembles a professional golfer's, but when an average golfer is actually hitting a golf ball, the swing changes for the worse.

That lesson can be applied to your life. Tension, anxiety, extra effort, an overly busy mind, our inner critic, or any negative inner voice can all interfere with a calm, composed mind, and affect our performance. Less effort achieves more. Less striving, less pushing can lead to surprisingly better results. When we reduce *busyness*, the productivity of our business improves - whether it's our personal business or the profit-oriented kind.

Conclusion

It is possible to accomplish more by doing less, if you're more mindful. Quiet the busyness in your mind. Find your song - and sing it. Follow the Less Manifesto: reduce fear, assumptions, distractions, resistance and busyness.

- End -

About the author: [Marc Lesser](#) is a Zen teacher, MBA, entrepreneur, and founder and CEO of [ZBA Associates](#), a management consulting, coaching and training firm.

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