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P . M . F O R N I

*Author of Choosing Civility and The Civility Solution*

THE  
THINKING  
LIFE

HOW TO THRIVE IN THE  
AGE OF DISTRACTION



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# Why You Don't Think and Why You Should



HEADS DOWN, WE ARE ALLOWING OURSELVES TO BE EVER-MORE  
ENTRANCED BY THE UNSIFTED TRIVIA OF LIFE.

—*Maggie Jackson*

## DOING WHAT IS OF THE ESSENCE

They took their name from the Stoa Poikile, the famous painted porch in the heart of Athens where Zeno, their founder, philosophized. A Greek slave and a Roman emperor were two of the most influential among them. And in more than two thousand years of Western thought, you will not easily find more effective principles and strategies with which to face life's challenges than the ones they bequeathed us. I am talking about Stoicism, a school of thinking that flourished in Greece and Rome between the last three centuries BCE and the first two CE. The Stoics maintained that temperance in all things human and benevolence toward all people are part of the natural and rational order of things. Conforming to this order entails

living a life of virtue, which is the only kind leading to happiness. We are the ones who make our own lives good or bad through the workings of our own thoughts. In other words, life is what the inclinations of the mind make it. A self-help author of our day might say, “Attitude is all.” Since we have control—at least some—over our attitude, this is a comforting message, but of course it also saddles us with responsibility. Ultimately the Stoics say, “Life is up to us.”

The Stoics did not disdain to address the ordinary and practical aspects of life. In his intellectual autobiography, which is at the same time a guide to the good life, Marcus Aurelius (121–180 CE), the emperor who fell in love with philosophy, wrote about everyday life topics such as learning from mistakes, minding your own business, and controlling anger. He also considered the wisdom of keeping the number of one’s commitments as low as reasonably possible: “Is it not better simply to do what is necessary and no more, to limit yourself to what reason demands of a social animal and precisely in the manner reason dictates? This adds to the happiness of doing a few things the satisfaction of having done them well. Most of what we say and do is unnecessary anyway; subtract all that lot, and look at the time and contentment you’ll gain. On each occasion, therefore, a man should ask himself, ‘Do I really need to say or to do this?’ In this way, he will remove not only unnecessary actions, but also the superfluous ideas that inspire needless acts.”

Do few things and do them well, speak only when necessary: The wisdom behind the economy of action invoked here has not

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faded in its journey across the millennia. In fact, we are as likely to benefit from it as any of the generations that preceded us. Our narcissism and our worship of self-expression are relentless producers of unnecessary words. Our activism is irrepressible, and our quest for happiness is usually about adding things to do, not subtracting them. As devoted worshippers at the altar of consumption, we want more, and to have more we do more, only to realize eventually how wrongheaded our decision was. Marcus Aurelius's admonitions resonate with us by contrast. They remind us that more is not always better than less. In fact, less can give us more of what we really need—of what really matters.

### THINKING IS HARD WORK

Delightful as it may be—thanks in part to the release of dopamine in our brain—thinking is also hard work. After we have engaged in it for a while, our levels of dopamine and glucose drop, and mental fatigue sets in. That thinking is tiring only begins to explain why so many people are wary of seriously engaging in it. Of course, some of us are naturally more inclined to think. Our formative years are a factor as well. If our family and friends did not model serious thinking for us, that was probably not without consequences. We may also avoid serious thinking because we do not want to get too closely acquainted with ourselves—just as many of us avoid looking at our faces in a mirror under an unforgiving light. By making us want to

learn, humility keeps us willing to think. Unfortunately, in times like ours that condone and even encourage inflated self-opinion and reckless overconfidence, humility is in short supply. When we feel that we know it all, we are not inclined to spend a lot of time reflecting, let alone second-guessing ourselves. A further disincentive to think is the perception that the problems we are confronting are just too daunting. I may care about world hunger, but if I feel that nothing in my power can make a real difference, I may simply relegate this concern to a corner of my mind that I will seldom revisit. Finally, anti-intellectualism is still a force to be reckoned with. Americans admire full-time doers but are wary of full-time thinkers, especially when the results of the latter's thinking are not usable for practical purposes, such as finding a cure for cancer. The American ethos may not be easy to define, but one thing it is not is bookish. In fact, more often than in other parts of the world, in the United States "bookish" carries a connotation of "freakish." If asked if they would like their child to become an egghead, few parents would answer with an enthusiastic "Yes!" An intellectually gifted child will often be prevented from becoming a good thinker by the attitudes of his or her immediate environment and of society at large. Am I suggesting that we should retire from the world to live a life of contemplation? I am not. I am simply arguing that we should find the resolve to welcome deep thinking into our very active lives. The problem, then, becomes finding the time.

B U S Y , V E R Y B U S Y

A charming vignette graces the first page of William Powers's *Hamlet's BlackBerry*, one of the must-read books for those who want to understand our times. The vignette is about the author's friend Marie when she was a recent immigrant to the United States and still learning to speak English. Whenever he asked her how she was doing, she would respond, "Busy, very busy." The fact that her words never changed, and that she invariably uttered them with a big smile, gave Powers pause: "She seemed pleased, indeed ecstatic, to be reporting that she was so busy." It took him some time to figure out that Marie had been constantly hearing Americans say they were "busy, very busy"—to the point where she'd come to believe it was a polite formulaic response like "Very well, thank you." When was the last time you managed to sit down, sit still, and just think for a while? I mean losing yourself in the ebb and flow of serious reflection, neurons humming, and without letting your attention drift to the nearest computer screen. If you don't remember, you are certainly not alone. For many of us, serious thinking—the kind that makes a positive difference in our lives—has been shrinking like an endangered, pristine marshland threatened by suburban sprawl. The daily need to take action on short-term goals makes it difficult to reflect on the big picture at work. Much to the frustration of the best brains among us, work is increasingly for *doing*, not thinking. We are logging in a growing number of extra working hours that we scavenge in the rubble of what used to be leisure time. Thus, fatigue sets in at times of the day and

the week when in the past our refreshed minds became hospitable to insight. Performance-addicted people do not think as much as they should because, engaged as they are in achieving, they look at thinking as a waste of time.

Maybe the family still feels like a sanctuary to chronically overworked Americans. The erosion of true leisure, however, has not spared the realm of the personal. Two-earner and one-parent households are forever pressed for time. Simple and ordinary tasks such as cooking, cleaning, and getting children ready for school can easily become burdensome chores to add to a daunting to-do list. “Overscheduled” is a recurring definition of today’s family life, when fourth-graders need appointment calendars and unstructured child play is becoming a thing of the past. Very often it is as difficult to set aside some thinking time at home as it is at work. Good thinking requires time, and we believe we don’t have it; it requires energy, and we are fatigued; it requires the conviction that it is good for us, and we have become indifferent to it; it requires concentration, and we have embraced entertainment. Ill at ease with the rare moments of true quiet still gracing our days, we fail to turn them into opportunities to assess who we are, where we have been, and what awaits us. It is more often the case that we hasten to disturb the unsettling void around us by turning to the closest digital screen. A dubious accomplishment of the often misguided age in which we live is its unparalleled perfecting of the art of distraction.

T I M E   W A S T E D

Gifted Canadian illustrator Melinda Stanley blogs both with words and with images ([melindastanley.com/blog.html](http://melindastanley.com/blog.html)). In one of her long-gone entries, a stylish cartoonlike image of herself was sitting at a draftsman's table in an otherwise empty room, one of whose walls was covered from floor to ceiling with Internet logos: Facebook, Yahoo!, Blellow, Vimeo, [cnn.com](http://cnn.com), Google, eBay, LinkedIn, Technorati, and so on. She was supporting her tired head with her left hand, and her face was a grimacing mask of comedic vexation. It only took a couple of seconds to realize that in her hour of exhaustion, her computer's screen had morphed into an elongated shape clearly identifiable as a shark with an enormous, toothed, wide-open mouth. The caption beneath the image read: "Sometimes I think about how big the internet really is and I feel as though it could swallow me whole." The Internet may not literally swallow us whole, but trillions of precious hours do disappear daily around the world as we sit transfixed at our remarkable digital machines. Melinda Stanley's cartoon can serve as a commentary on both the size of the Internet and our sizable Internet-related budgeting of time. Being in awe of the former should not prevent us from questioning the wisdom of the latter. One problem with our communication-saturated environment is that in it the actual value of what gets exchanged can become almost an afterthought. As the line separating the seriously consequential from the mostly entertaining keeps blurring, shallowness is entrenching itself as part of the human condition. Is it in the billions or trillions the numbers of workplace task interruptions that in any given day

launch us into more or less furtive forays into the alluring realm of the digital? Do you really need to check the BBC headlines again, the silly video that is the viral craze of the moment, or the latest largely overlapping postings by half a dozen of your favorite news bloggers? Do you need to do it right *now*? What do those interruptions do to the quality of your work? The first, basic responsibility we have toward ourselves and others is choosing to think. In an age of distraction, that is also our challenge. Bypassing the ever-present temptation to divert and amuse ourselves is the first, crucial step toward an engaged and meaningful life. The next chapters will help you find the motivation and the time to do exactly that.

This is where you must decide whether you wish just to *read* this book or whether you wish to *live* it. Should you choose the latter, every chapter of this book ends with a number of exercises that are meant to maximize the benefits of the material covered in that chapter.

1. In the age of multitasking, is Marcus Aurelius's exhortation to keep things to a few inspirational or impractical?
2. Is finding time to think hard for you? What are the main obstacles you encounter? Is it family obligations, too much time spent at work, addiction to online amusement—to name a few? How can you overcome these obstacles?

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3. Work on your motivation to think. Start making a list of the benefits that increasing your thinking time will bring you.
4. “Humility” is one of those words that seem to be covered by an archaeological patina. I do not remember the last time I heard a parent teach his or her child to be humble. It must have been decades ago. Besides the one mentioned earlier in this chapter, what are the uses of humility in today’s world?



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