The Case for Being an Unproductive Entrepreneur Right Now

September 3, 2020 6 min read

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Years ago, I took a trip with my wife through Europe for three months. I didn't have to work, and only did a check-in once a day. Instead, I spent the bulk of my time hand-in-hand with her, admiring the scenery. We allowed ourselves to dawdle, to look out in awe at the landscape, to simply not DO.

To this day, I still consider it a defining experience in my life. In part, it's one of the reasons I deeply believe in the philosophy that we need quality time off or periods of *un-productivity* if we want to grow.

As I reflect on the current moment we're all living in, I would give anything to return to those days of lingering in-between sidewalks and strolling down unknown streets. The struggles we're currently facing in this pandemic are personal and heavy to bear. The discomfort of not being *more* productive is palpable. We crave a sense of control, and as author Peter Bregman wisely puts it: "It's hard to trust *not-doing* when we're all suffering loss right now. It feels risky. Our *doing* habits are so strong."

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In a story for *Harvard Business Review,* he asks whether it's possible to use this time to shift our worldview away from relentless productivity and achievement.

“Two things many of us spend our lives scrambling and acquiring and competing and succeeding and workaholic-ing to avoid admitting,” Bregman says. “It’s disorienting to let go. To realize — to admit — that our control is really only a *sense* of control.”

Many of us are forced to do a lot right now. We’re working from home while keeping up with childcare and homeschool activities. We’re maintaining homes while trying to maintain careers. So much is uncertain.

How can we possibly slow down amidst the storm?

The answer, according to Bregman, is to resist the temptation to always be “on.” Whether we’re anticipating the next work email or scrambling to complete yet another task, there are ways we can relax the pressure of our daily lives.

I’ll be the first to admit that I am constantly learning and re-learning the above lesson. But I’ve made it a point to build my work and professional life around these pauses. Below are some ways that have helped me navigate moments of uncertainty.

Relax the urge to optimize every minute

Writing for *The* New York Times, Taylor Lorenz illustrates how the crisis we’re living in has reinforced the demand to get things done. From blog posts to social media, we’re convinced we should be using our time more productively. “This urge to overachieve, even in times of global crisis, is reflective of America’s always-on work culture,” Lorenz asserts.

She’s not wrong. Our hustle mindset is deeply ingrained. We place endless pressure on ourselves to get as much done during the day as humanly possible. Yet, by optimizing or commodifying our every moment, we’re also losing out on the

opportunity to grow and develop. Writer Nick Martin puts it aptly: "This is a time to sustain. To find ease where we can in a world rapidly placing us into chaos."

Lately, when I've felt scattered or hear that small voice in my head tell me I should be doing more, I ask myself: Would I place this same expectation on someone I love?

We are our own harshest critic.

But the best way for defeating self-imposed-pressure comes down to giving ourselves the same compassion we would offer our family and friends.

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Leave space for the unknown

I created my company, JotForm, out of a passion to help time-strapped businesses, organizations, and individuals. I've also been outspoken against the pervasive "busyness" mentality in the tech world. I continue to insist that "busy work" doesn't equal progress.

When I say we need to leave space for our minds to wander, I'm referring to the act of not letting our thoughts stay on one single topic for an extended period of time. I'll put it this way: Positive mind-wandering is like allowing your brain to breathe after being in a noisy cafeteria all day. According to researchers, it can also help our creativity and overall well-being, helping us connect the dots of information in new compelling ways.

The good news is that we can give room for these pauses by going on a run, listening to meditative music, or even folding the laundry. As long as we aren't forcing our thoughts, we can enter that not-doing space.

"Walk away from your calendar," Bregman urges us. "Leave that

space for, literally, nothing. Not a thing. It's not your writing time or even focused work time. Don't fill those moments with the busy work of email and to-do lists."

Courageously feel everything

> *"You must have a level of discontent to feel the urge to want to grow." – Idowu Koyenikan*

At this moment, it seems as though the easiest route around discomfort is to suppress our anxieties about the future. If we are "busy," then we can distract from constant uncertainty.

Yet, lingering in this liminal place of change is where real transformation happens. Only by giving ourselves the freedom to embrace the complexity of our feelings can we release the illusion of control.

The question we should be asking right now isn't how can we preserve the life we've been living: It's how can we allow for growth? How can we courageously feel everything? Perhaps Nick Martin explains it best:

"Some of us, the fortunate among us, have a kind of time now that may feel new," Martin says. "It can allow us a second to be true to ourselves and our emotions, or to turn away from ourselves and toward care for others, or both at the same time."

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Thinking back to my three month trip through Europe, what I remember the most was my openness and vulnerability to the entire experience. Small mishaps like getting lost or not knowing where we would end up were okay because we surrendered to the unknown.

We gave ourselves permission to stumble and to ultimately find our own path.

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