

[Transcript] Plain English with Derek Thompson / The Dark Side of Being Obsessed With Productivity

Hey there, humanoids. This is David Chewmaker here with a very exciting announcement. Your favorite wrestling podcast feed, The Ring of Wrestling Show, is now going daily. And you can hang out with me and Kaz on Mondays and Thursdays for the Masked Man show. And you can join me, Peter Rosenberg, alongside stat guy Greg and Dip, every Tuesday with Chief Pete. And on Fridays, I'll welcome a friend or special guest from the world of wrestling. And on Wednesdays, we have a very special new show called Wednesday Worldwide that you're going to want to check out. Pay-per-view reaction, one-of-a-kind interviews, fantasy booking, talking about bagels. That's what we do here on The Ring of Wrestling Show. Follow the show now on Spotify and do us a favor. It was five stars. And do us another favor and stay maged. Today's episode is about happiness, productivity, and our fascinating relationship to the future. So one thing that I've tried to do in this show from time to time, in between episodes about the housing market and obesity injections, is to have conversations, however messy and fumbling and incomplete, about the sense that too many people are not as happy as we should be. I'll always consider myself, above all, a writer about the external world, the material world, and about progress in that external material world. But the fact is, these episodes about our internal world, our minds and thoughts and feelings, are some of the most rewarding shows to record here. We've talked to John Height about the mysteries of skyrocketing American anxiety, especially among teenagers. We've talked to Ethan Cross about the science of self-talk, the voice in our heads, why it can be kind of an asshole. Today I want to talk about our obsession with productivity. This idea that we ought to get as much done now so that we're well set up for the future. And I should begin here with a bit of a confession. If productivity is a cult, I have been a standing member for many years. I am obsessed with productivity hacks. I am a sucker for studies and stories about professional success. You're like, Derek, you can't possibly click on those insipid Harvard Business Review studies that are like, you know, one thing that separates successful business people from unsuccessful business people. And guess what? I can. I do click on them. I'm always disappointed, but I click. And for a while, I didn't quite know why. And then I was struck, I mean, really, really struck by this book, 4000 Weeks by Oliver Berkman. Many of us are obsessed with productivity, Berkman says. Because, flatly, we don't want to die. We want to be infinite, and we know we're not. The average life is 4000 weeks long. That's why it's the title of the book. Life is going to end no matter how productive you are. So what is it all for?

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Oliver's book got my head worrying on a lot of different issues and perhaps none more than my obsession and our society's collective obsession with the future. Think about how much of your life is spent living in the future. In your mind, attending to future concerns, angsting over future anxieties, obsessing with tomorrow. And it's not just your self-talk or your anxieties that are so future-oriented. It's our entire attitude toward education, corporate development, professional success, life. Like the least controversial values in American society are the importance of grit, the hope for progress, the dream of social mobility. I mean, all of these ideas celebrate future orientation. And of course, progress in the material world depends on making the future better. But, but those who cannot stop planning for the future are doomed to labor for a life they will never fully live. That is Berkman's thesis in a nutshell. An obsession with making the best use of our time is, ironically, a bad use of our time. In this episode, we talk about the future, happiness, goals, Buddhism, good self-help versus bad self-help, and how to reconcile our mind's ability to time travel into the past and future with our need in some fundamental way to be here now. I'm Derek Thompson. This is Plain English. Oliver Berkman, welcome to the podcast. Thanks very much for inviting me. So first, tell me, tell us a little bit about your career. Because from my vantage point, it sometimes almost seems like you were a professional self-help writer who decided to write a kind of anti-self-help book. So just take us through a sort of, you know, capsule-sized version of that history. What have you done with your life? Sure, I'll have a go. I think that makes it sound a little bit more like I sort of broke with everything that had gone before more dramatically than I probably did. But I'm a journalist by training, so I worked primarily at The Guardian for many years. And one of the things that I did there in amongst some news reporting and foreign correspondent stuff was to write this weekly column, which, yeah, the subject matter was called This Column Will Change Your Life. I spent a long time explaining to many people that this was intended as a joke. But anyway, it was sort of a, it involved sort of touring the worlds of self-help, personal development, the science of happiness, all of that stuff that was really only kicking off. You know, really only beginning properly then. It was sort of, that field sort of grew around me while I was writing about it. But you know, I definitely went into that partly with a sort of satirical aim that was in that sort of context writing in The Guardian that was definitely a sort of call for it to be sort of have a certain kind of

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critical distance

or a humor to it.

But I don't know, I went on a kind of interesting journey.

In some ways it was a journey of getting more sincere about that whole field

and more sort of engage with it.

But then kind of seeing the limitations, figuring out a bit more what I was up to psychologically speaking

in being so enamored of it, but also wanting to mock it in public.

So, you know, getting sort of more deeply into those questions, seeing the limitations of self-help.

And then, yeah, I think this book for Thousand Weeks is really what I,

it's an account of where I got to in thinking about time after spending so many years

trying out so many kind of time management productivity techniques,

finding that none of them brought the perfect paradise, utopia of peace of mind that I'd been seeking.

Eventually, if you do that enough times, you begin to wonder whether you're asking the wrong question

rather than that you just haven't found the perfect system yet.

I really loved this book.

I thought it was actually sensational at combining two of my real interests,

the way that we work on the one hand and our relationship with time on the other.

And I don't know how deep we're going to get into like the science of time.

It might not even be like that important to grasp some of the basics from your book.

But I've just always been fascinated by this idea that our relationship to happiness is so often a relationship to time that you think about some of the things that bring the least amount of happiness.

It can be regret. It can be anxiety.

Well, I see those as very time-based.

Regret is about the past.

Anxiety is about the future.

And both of them require or entail our mind time traveling to a place that we are not, because we can never be physically in the past or in the future.

We have to be plunged experientially into the present, at least our bodies.

But our minds are constantly trying to time travel on us.

And I think that so many concepts of lack of satisfaction or anxiety or unhappiness come from this interplay of happiness and time.

Did you see things just at a big picture level before we dive in?

Do you see things in a similar way that a lot of our relationship to happiness and unhappiness is fundamentally about a relationship to time?

Yeah, I absolutely think it is.

I mean, one of the things I wanted to do in writing a book that was purportedly about time management

was really make the case that nothing isn't time management if you think about it expansively enough.

And yeah, I just, you know, this what I'm about to say is not something that hasn't been that nobody said before, but it's like we're in this as humans, we're in this situation where we are completely limited materially to the moment in which we find ourselves. Anything we're going to ever do in our lives that is worth doing is going to be right now. And yet we have this conscious capacity to think temporarily about our past, where we've come from, where we're going.

I don't know if we're really going to get, need to get too much into Heidegger here particularly, but we find ourselves in this state of,

Wow, Heidegger name drop at four minutes, 45 seconds into the podcast.

Good Lord.

Let's leave that to be the only reference in the whole thing.

We find ourselves in the situation of knowing on some level that we are, that our time is limited, that it's going to run out, not knowing when it's going to run out, having the capacity to relate to time as if it were some resource that we had and could make the most of and could save or use well or waste.

And yet at the same time, that's not really the nature of our situation with respect to time because you can't actually do anything other than be in this one moment.

So I think a lot of our, you talk about regret and that's a really good example.

I think a lot about sort of anxiety, maybe because that's been my particular, you know, screw up in life.

But it's, I think about like, it's the desire in some ways to get a kind of reassurance from the future or about the future of your life that you can never ever actually have because you're just here and we're always just here.

And like bridging that gulf or squaring that circle or whatever is,

I think you can see that as what, you know, the whole of multiple spiritual traditions are trying to do and all kinds of self-help approaches as well.

For those who are lost briefly, Martin Heidegger is a 20th century philosopher who wrote a lot about the nature of being and the nature of time.

He briefly became a Nazi, which is why he is not only famous but infamous and he may make a return later in this show, but I am making no promises.

I got to say, like to me, it doesn't really matter whether you become a Nazi briefly or long term. Like that was, he was still a Nazi and it's an incredibly bad writer.

No, sorry, an incredibly impenetrable writer.

I'm sure many people would say it's beautiful writing and also was a member of the Nazi party.

So like there's just so many good reasons not to focus on his wisdom when it comes to time.

And yet he said various things that don't seem to have really been said in the Western tradition by anyone else.

Heidegger is fascinating and maybe I'll have you back on for like some weekend podcast.

I don't need a lot of people to listen to. We just discussed the entire history of Martin Heidegger.

You said something though that just randomly made me think of the concept of earworms, like in music, the concept of earworms, that you get a song stuck in your head and you keep replaying it, replaying it, replaying it.

And there's a science to earworms that says a good way to get the earworm out of your head is to

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finish the song.

And I don't know, I've never made this connection before, but the way that you described anxiety seems so similar

that it's our dissatisfaction in being able to answer questions about our future that makes anxiety so sticky.

So you end up replaying that anxiety as if on a loop because the song by definition of our anxiety cannot be finished.

There is no satisfaction in worrying about the future because the future will never actually arrive and answer the questions that we have about it in the moment, right?

Will I get into this college? Well, you don't know at that moment, right?

Will this person marry me? Will I make enough money next year?

Those questions will only be answered in the future to come.

And so you earworm about it in the present because you're dissatisfaction.

I really love that analogy, yeah. And of course, you know, those things, there will be a later version of the present

when you do know the answer to those things, but then there'll just be the next moment to worry about.

So it's actually like, it's a demand that you reach some kind of closure or completion about precisely a time that you'll never will.

And so, yeah, it's just this sort of constant, constant looping in the hope that this time you'll sort of get your arms around it and you never will, yeah.

Yeah, great. This obsessive looping will satisfyingly answer my future questions.

I want to talk to you specifically about, I mean, this has been so fun.

We've already mentioned future Heidegger. I want to talk to you about productivity and my relationship with productivity

because I think there are profound points that you make about this big, I would say American virtue. People can probably tell by the sound of your voice that, you know, America is a big global western virtue of productivity and our relationship with it.

So let me begin with a confession. I consider myself a workaholic.

I don't know anybody who knows me well who would disagree with that self diagnosis.

I wrote an article a few years ago about an idea that I called workism, which is this idea that, ironically, in an age of declining religiosity,

a lot of Americans have made work their kind of religion.

They turn to work and career to offer the kinds of things that people have historically sought from organized faith, belonging and community and self-actualization and meaning.

And to that end, I have always been fascinated by productivity hacks.

I have thought so much about how to get the most work done that I can.

And you make an absolutely fascinating and compelling argument that there is a toxin lurking in the modern idea of productivity.

There's a problem with the very idea of trying to use your time well.

Can you tell us what it is?

I'll do my best. Yes, I think we are probably cut from the same cloth when it comes to this attitude towards work and towards trying to fit more in.

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You can come at this from a number of angles.

I think the one way of thinking about it is just that we find ourselves finite.

We find ourselves with limited time, not only in a lifespan, but obviously in a day.

We're sort of confronted by a whole lot of different, essentially infinite supplies of ways in which we could use that time.

And it's common to talk about the ones that feel really unpleasant, like the endless onslaught of email or demands from the boss or something.

But it also applies to ambitions that you have for your work life, ambitions that you have for your life, places you want to visit, all the rest of it.

This is kind of an endless supply. And there's something in us that wants to achieve peace of mind and control over all that by becoming so productive, so efficient that we can handle everything that's coming to us,

make time for all the things that feel as if they matter, sort of never have to become submerged by email overwhelmed because we're working at a tempo that suits the input.

And if those supplies really are effectively infinite, and if we are finite, then that's never going to work. That's never going to cash out in sort of, okay, now I've arrived here.

I've managed to make myself capable of it, managed to increase my capacity to the point where I can get my arms around all that.

So instead, what's going to happen is you're going to get a lot busier. Obviously, if you get much faster at answering email, you'll answer a lot more email.

You'll get a lot more emails as well because you sort of generate it by replying to people's emails, things like that.

The sort of future time when this productivity finally reaches, this fantasy future time when all this productivity reaches this utopia of being in control on top of things, being the master of your time, is always obviously going to remain in the future and be pushed ever further into the future.

That reminds me, the writer Alan Watts has this wonderful observation about our talent for placing the most important moments of our lives always in the future.

He says, you go to kindergarten for high school, and then you go to high school for college, and then you go to college to find a job,

and then you get that entry level job to get the next job, and up and up and up. The point of life is always about the next job, the next thing.

Oh, it's always jammed tomorrow. And this is such a strange way to think about time.

You've called it the when I finally X school of thought, right? Like when I finally get into college, when I finally get a girlfriend, when I finally have a kid, then everything will be okay.

But reaching that threshold only unlocks the next necessary achievement.

Well, I mean, I don't know if the source you mentioned jammed tomorrow, and I don't know if John Maynard Keynes is the original source of that phrase,

but he uses it in this very, very famous speech and essay that you'll be well aware of,

where he also has this kind of this line that I've quoted a bunch of times about this mindset, this very idea of putting off the moment of truth,

the moment of real value into the future. And he talks about how the purpose of man, I've almost got this off by heart,

purpose of man is always trying to secure for his actions a spurious immortality by pushing his

interest in them further into the future.

He does not love his cat, but only his cat's kittens, nor even in truth the kittens, but only the kittens kittens and so on forward forever to the end of captain.

And I think what I love about that quote, and it gets at what you're you're talking about here is that it really, it really brings to the surface this idea that like, it's an attempt to evade death, right? It's this idea that it's an attempt to evade the temporal finitude that is the consequence of the fact that we die.

So it's this idea that if you're always working for something in the future, although you have to, although you sort of cheat yourself of ever sort of reaping the value in the present, you do get to feel that what you're a part of is a timeline that stretches off and never has to come to an end.

And I think this is much easier for people to believe in when they're sort of 20 and then it gets gradually harder as you get older and maybe one definition of a midlife crisis is the point where it's really hard to carry on convincing yourself that the timeline stretches off forever.

And yeah, so I think that that that's the fundamental problem.

If everything is focused on that sort of spirit immortality, eventually the timeline runs out and at no point have you totally fully been here for the for the things you could have been here for.

It's interesting because I am when I'm working utterly obsessed with questions of productivity.

How do I get as much done today so that I'll be in a good place tomorrow?

How do I get as much done tomorrow when I'm in a good place on Wednesday?

I'm entirely future oriented in a way that your work has persuaded me is like somewhat sick.

Like this this idea that I am consistently pushing my happiness to some day that I am not where I have an entirely opposite experience.

And I wonder if you feel the same way is when I'm on vacation, I never take photos.

I've just never really been like a photo person.

But it's always interesting when like I'm at a museum or I'm at some beautiful vista and everyone around me will have their phones out trying to capture like the perfect image of whatever it is.

The Mona Lisa, the Rosetta Stone, something of the British Museum, some incredible place in Patagonia.

You watch these tourists and like they are experiencing not the thing they are on vacation for, but rather trying to optimize their experience of that vacation when they've come home and are able to share it with people at home.

And I want to like grab them and be like, you know, you worked so hard to be on this vacation now.

And now that you're on the vacation, you're just thinking about how do I get the best, the most possible value from this experience to harvest it in a later experience?

Like, does that ever drive you like kind of crazy?

That sort of tourist phenomenon?

Yeah, it's interesting. I sort of, I'm with you on that, although I think I have fallen into it myself as well.

That desire to sort of capture things.

We live now in an incredibly beautiful part of the north of England.

And my camera roll on my phone is full of just basically the same image of a kind of a track leading

off into the distance.

Because apparently one day one of these photos is going to capture the vividness and the essence of it.

I will say, I think I've got a lot better at this and I don't really invest very much hope in that.

So I take a bunch of photos, put the phone away and then get on with being in the environment.

But it's very seductive, right, that idea that any experience that is enjoyable can be somehow taken from its context and sort of stored away.

For future enjoyment.

It's interesting that you have that different reaction in the two different places.

It's like something about the boundaries around a vacation permit you to go into that.

I think it's also worth saying, maybe I'm arguing against myself here, but I don't think that there can...

I don't want to say that the pleasure and the joy of working towards goals that are in the future is kind of completely illegitimate or something.

I think it's definitely a part of anyone who does anything that's got a sort of craft aspect to it.

You're like, you are getting better.

You are creating things that will be only ready later.

I've got a whole rant in the book against the idea that you can just be here now and not have any kind of instrumental goals with time.

Yeah, I want to bring this part of the conversation to a point to say that one way to summarize what I have taken from your work is that so often people like me are constantly preparing for a future we'll never inhabit.

Because when we get to the point that we've wanted to get to, we're just worried about some next mountain to climb.

And so we have to find some way to pull satisfaction fulfillment into the present, right?

At the same time, I want to be very clear about how do we do this?

I'm very motivated by this concept that people are constantly prepping for a future they'll never fully inhabit.

But if you flip that idea on its head, you might be able to say, isn't it true that most Americans don't save enough?

Isn't it true that many people aren't conscientious enough that they are too focused on immediate gratification and not willing to work on the habits or goals that are most fulfilling in the long run?

So how do you reconcile those two things?

And on the one hand, there's all these problems with being too future oriented.

But at the same time, there's also a problem with this culture of instant gratification as well.

Right. And I think my sort of immediate response to that is that I think part of the reason for the appeal of instant gratification is the sort of joylessness of the fully instrumentalized life, especially if you're in a position in the socioeconomic structure where you've lost faith in the idea that that kind of grinding is going to lead to a sort of wonderful outcome.

Obviously, the American dream does a lot of work in trying to persuade everybody that that can happen for everybody.

But you feel like staying on top of everything, getting through all your work, saving for the future, it feels like really, really difficult and so instant, more immediate gratifications feel pleasurable.

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When you see that actually a certain version of that is not just really difficult but impossible, that there will always be too much to do, that you are never going to achieve a total security against what the future can bring and all these things.

When you see that it's impossible non-negotiably instead of just really, really difficult, then it actually kind of comes as a liberation.

It's a weight off your shoulders, right? It frees you up in the moment to do important substantial difference making things, including saving money and all the rest of it, because it's no longer part of a quest that on some level you sort of think is impossible,

but for now you're going to just like really, really push yourself to try to do it.

One thing made me think of is that I remember the best piece of career advice that I ever got was from a writer, Jim Fallows, who said, don't take a job because it's a job you want to tell someone that you do.

Take a job because it's a job you want to actually do.

And I think of this sometimes as like the Wednesday 2pm test. So you're trying to figure out what's a job that I really, really want to get. Maybe it's this job that's really high status, it has this amazing business card, it says CMO of XYZ, it sounds really impressive.

But I say, okay, what's that job going to be like on a Wednesday at 2pm? That's a time-based test of whether you're going to enjoy being in that job.

And I think so often when we think about the future, we actually aren't thinking about ourselves in the future.

We're thinking about the future as if it's like some gate that we pass and say, when I pass that gate, I'll be happy. When I have a better business card, I'll be happy.

When I have a bigger house, then I'll be happy. When I have another kid, then I'll be happy.

When X, that's where happiness lives and then it's happiness ever after. But the experience of being in that world that we're hoping for is almost never what we wish for because we don't actually imagine ourselves in it.

We just imagine checking a box. And so this is where I think this concept of future thinking gets us in trouble so often is because we aren't actually thinking about what it's going to be like to live in this future that we're preparing ourselves.

Does that register with you?

Yeah, totally. And I think this goes to this idea that, I mean, I associate it with Zen Buddhism a lot, but I think it crops up in a lot of different traditions that the big part of our sort of suffering and anxiety and being who we are comes from this notion that there ought to be a solution to like the human condition.

And we're going to find some way, never now because it's not actually possible, so it's got to be postponed into the future. But we're going to find some way of sort of solving the problem of being alive.

And actually, yeah, I'm convinced at least intellectually and on a good day in the way I live that that's the only real problem, right? That the idea that there ought to be some sort of final way of relating to time that gets rid of any of these issues.

So there's a quote that I use in the epigraph to the book from Jocko Beck, the American Zen Buddhist, who said that what makes it unbearable is your mistaken belief that it can be cured.

And I've written before as well about this story that Sam Harris tells actually in one of his talks

about catching himself sort of being in the middle of sort of complaining to a friend about all the problems he was encountering in his professional life at that moment and being interrupted by her and her saying something like, hold on a second, are you still under the illusion that you're going to get to some point in your life when you don't have problems anymore? And realizing like, yes, that's the that's the idea, this idea that like, and again, it's this notion, I think that we're going to sort of win the struggle with time, we're going to sort of vanquish it. And, and from then on, it's all going to be plain sailing and obviously we're not going to obviously time is going to win time is going to win that battle in the end.

So this notion that we can somehow get out and on top of our lives, and then direct the whole thing like an air traffic controller or something. That's what causes the problems.

That's what causes the real sort of deep suffering with respect to time.

I feel like someone might listen to your perspective on the future and on our need to give up a certain obsession with future oriented thinking and say it sounds like this guy doesn't believe in goals.

Do you believe in goals?

I think I do believe in goals, but this is definitely like the point of all of the the place in all of this stuff that is the most sort of it's very fertile area for me sort of thinking right about at the moment but it's it is really interesting because I don't think upon reflection and consideration that firstly, I don't think we have the option as evolved human animals to to not have certain kinds of goals, the obvious ones. And then I also don't think ultimately that the fulfillment is to be found in trying to like surrender all the other ones

right and to sort of live in a kind of a in a completely goalless way. I think it I think that it has to be about the nature, the way in which a goal is held and the nature of how you relate to a goal.

And clearly it's very obvious to see how you can turn goals into precisely everything we've been talking about these kinds of things where they are stakes in the ground that your happiness is not going to you're not going to be able to be happy until you get to them.

You're not going to have to relax into your life until you until you get to those things and that's big problem. But I don't see why that needs to apply to every way of thinking about a goal a goal as a sort of a goal as a as a sort of organizing principle for

actions about what you do in the moment seems to me to be completely like that's how I try to relate to goals. Now it's like I try to have them, but I try to understand that they are ways of articulating my actions now instead of the things that are going to

by which all those actions are going to be given there are going to be given their value.

James clear has a very similar way of thinking about this the writer James clear. He believes the goals are overrated, and that habits are underrated obviously his the name of his great book is called atomic habits.

It makes this really interesting point that goals are useful for two reasons they're useful for clarity and they're useful for filtering. What is important to my life now and if having a goal for the future makes your life like a lot worse in the moment.

It probably isn't a very good goal right if it's not cashing out in in like it's sort of like the in present well being it might not be a very good goal. He has this other great point that I think it's pretty it's pretty worthwhile that when you think about success

I assume for the moment that we consider some kind of professional success important even though

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I think a lot of conceptualizations professional success are built around an idea that if I'm successful then all these anxieties will go away and in fact success just introduces a lot of anxieties.

But he says everyone at the Olympics has the same goal.

Everyone at the Olympics wants to win a gold medal. So what's the difference is the difference their goal. No, they all like the goal is standardized across all participants. The only difference has to be you know underlying capability you know maybe genetics

and the behaviors that led to the outcome and the name for the behaviors that led to that outcome are probably the habits of the athletes. So there's no way in which having a better goal seems to make someone a better Olympic athlete rather having better habits seems to make people better Olympic athletes.

And I think it's another useful way like even if you bring that down to the micro level of one's own life you know whatever you want to lose weight you want like you know a specific kind of body. Well OK like lots of people share that goal of like wanting whatever you want to call it the perfect body. The difference in outcome has to be a difference in habits which is daily and sort of present focus rather than a different difference in goals which are by definition future focus.

Yeah I think that's brilliant I think it's a great framing it also may I think it's a related but not not exactly the same thing. I've been sort of toying with expressing it this way recently that that possibly what makes a goal a good goal.

Is that in some sense you can you can be it now right you can sort of instantiate the endpoint in your actions now not in the fullest form but you know that if if what you want to be in your life is a poet screenwriter whatever it is like those are things that you can.

Instantiate now in your day today for ten minutes for an hour whatever it's a question I try to ask myself about things that I think I'm.

Progressing towards which am I am I somehow embodying this at least in some way.

In the present moment.

One last thought that I had for you is you know even as I've been more enthralled to the productivity cult I've been very interested in this idea of flow is a famous concept from the psychologist me hi she sent me hi.

That there are certain activities that seem to make us happier in the present like playing games with friends playing participating in sports being engrossed in a piece of art that's just absorbing our attention.

Having sex you know hanging out with wonderful friends because flow seems to be in part about time there's something about flow that seems to make the concept of time disappear melt away do you have thoughts about whether.

Trying to organize our lives around or finding more moments of flow is a good way to think about life.

Yeah I'm really interested in this cuz to me it sort of speaks to.

Well in in my book I in one chapter I sort of trying an extremely speculative way to.

Ask what what it would have felt like with respect to time to be like a medieval peasants in early medieval England without the four clocks before public objective agreements on on time and I sort of.

Try to suggest that and that sense of being off the clock that we associate with kind of wonderful experiences would in some sense have been present all the way through a life.

That was lived without these objective ideas of time it wouldn't have been like you and then time and you have a relationship to it and it's usually an adversarial relationship and you can sort of.

Hear the clock ticking as you go about your activities you're trying to line them up against the schedule or something now this point you always need to point out that like life medieval peasants was absolutely terrible on almost every dimension but I think that this.

The specific kind of problem time problems it there's lots of reason to believe wouldn't have been a kind of.

Part of that experience so that in some sense such a pre industrial person might have been in flow. All the time in some sense because it is that it is that idea of no longer having the mental idea of disidentification from time.

Where you're there and you're trying to fit things into this to this thing and I think it probably is in some sense more true to our real situation to be in that kind of state.

I think when it comes to designing a life around opportunities to flow for flow you've obviously got to be really careful because.

Any attempt to kind of overly manage and control your time leads to the opposite of flow even what you're even if what you're trying to do is control your time for the purposes of flow so you get to that sort of very familiar situation.

Where you know you've set aside two hours to have a completely awesome experience well almost nothing almost there's always no better way to guarantee that you won't have.

That awesome experience because you're still the primary mindset there is the one of like I will use my time resource in this specific way rather than that one so I think what that has to come down to. At least it's the most success I've ever had of it with it in my life is and is yet you've got to work on creating an environment that has the opportunities for flow right if if playing the piano.

Playing the keyboard as it does for me can bring that well I got to have a keyboard in the house where I'm living and it's got to be working deciding that a five thirty every day I'm going to play piano for that and get into flow that's that's much less likely to work.

It makes me think that we need a word for this kind of mentality like we have words for the concept of like generalized anxiety disorder or social anxiety.

But we need a concept for a different kind of anxiety like optimizing anxiety right the idea that we need to quantifiably optimize every part of our existence.

And it makes us worried that each particular experience that we're having is not particularly or is not perfect yet it seems to arrive at the crux of what you're talking about that if we believe the optimized life is possible.

We're almost certainly going to give ourselves this new fangled twenty first century anxiety disorder by larding ourselves with this impossible expectation.

We have to find like some way to shed this mentality and pick up something else that allows us to be present in the moment without constantly measuring each experience against some make believe parallel time experience that might have been more optimal.

Yeah absolutely and I think it's yeah it's it's like I think the underlying psychological urge here that which is the desire to not have to die to not have to feel what it means to be a finite human that's kind of timeless and goes back to.

You know origins of humanity I'm sure but then you get the industrial era and you get this this idea of time as a resource so now that becomes something you can try to use to achieve this kind of.

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This this kind of security with respect to finitude and you can't but you still try and so it leads to whole new range of problems and now we find ourselves at this sort of extreme end of technologies. That really make it feel like we're very nearly there right I mean when when when so many things are instantaneous when so many other things like cooking food and microwaves is not.

Instantaneous but insanely quick compared to previous generations it really becomes easier and easier to invest in that fantasy that you're just around the corner from it.

This makes me think and I'm trying out this this metaphor but let me let me know if this just utterly fails like I I would like to think.

That anxiety can be good and that regret can be good I mean how else you supposed to learn from your mistakes if you don't regret them.

But we have to find some way to let go of these feelings to come back to our experience of the present and not get lost in them and the image that comes to mind is like a bow and arrow.

And you know when the when the bow is like fully taught with the arrow inside of it right that's what it's like to be stressed that's what it's like to feel regret that's what it's like to feel anxiety.

But how does the arrow fly it flies when you release the bow and I feel like so much of the synthesis that we're trying to arrive at how can you be somewhat productive and not obsessed with productivity how can you think about the past but not be lost in it.

Comfort this ability to just let go and I wish there was some way like in our civics classes high school classes you know whatever Harvard college courses on how to be happy.

I wish that to me I wish there were like more of an emphasis on like how to let go of feelings not be afraid of feelings not be afraid of negativity but to like find that capacity to let go over the right hand so that we can actually make use of those negative feelings.

Those painful feelings the same way that an arrow intention in the bow is only made useful when you let go of it.

Yeah I think that's a great great metaphor I think you should you should you should pursue that I think and I think it really speaks to that idea that letting go is not.

You sometimes encounter in sort of personal development world this idea that letting go of negative emotions means once you no longer cling to them they'll all vanish and you won't be you won't be afflicted by them I think.

I think that's not the case I think the point about all these anxieties and the sort of poignancy of the fact that loss is built into a life that we're always having to choose things over other things.

Regret is kind of inevitable I think for anyone who sort of living consciously and and making choices in that in that conscious way.

It's not that you're not afflicted by these feelings it's that you're not.

Totally dictated to and tormented by them this is very famous quote from Carl Jung who said that all neurosis is a substitute for legitimate suffering.

Meaning that like it's not that we're going to get rid of our anxiety so we can be in the kind of avoidant mindset where we're trying to continue to convince ourselves that this isn't how it is and that this isn't it.

And then there's the mindset where you can fall into that and be.

More fully where you are and see the truth about being a human with it with limited time it's not it's not like it's not going to be.

It's not like it's going to be free of anxiety or free of disappointment or regret is actually going to

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have all those things in a really intense way.

But you're going to be free freer to live in that situation than if you're constantly trying to avoid those experiences and yes.

Also this is maybe where the metaphor of the bow and arrow comes back to in some sense harness them right to in some sense sort of.

See that they're all part of life and they can be fuel for creativity and for more opportunities for joy and all the rest of it.

Oliver brickman thank you very very much thank you it's been pleasure.

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