

New productivity

Taking the multi out of tasking

■ “Pardon?” My husband was looking at me like I’d just asked him to list the Latvian port cities.

I repeated my question.

“Do you find, when you wake up in the night, that there is music blaring in your head?”

“No,” he said decisively, turning back to his newspaper. “I think you have a problem.”

I’ve always been proud of my multitasking, assuming it’s a key reason for my success, my sense of self-worth. I get a lot done in a day.

I like the stair-climber at the gym because I can sweat, watch television, listen to music and clear emails on my iPhone. I once asked my physiotherapist if he’d considered arranging French/English flashcards on the ground so that people could hone their bilingualism while facing down through the hole in the plinth. I feel a thrum of satisfaction if I’m on a conference call from home and manage to get a load of laundry churning in the machine, a coat of polish drying on my toes and a batch of muffins in the oven before being asked to contribute to the conversation. Never mind the light dusting of flour misting my gleaming nails.

Women, it’s said, are better multitaskers than men—something we tend to view with pride as much as with irritation. I can’t count the number of times I’ve caught myself hopping with frustration while my husband ambles around the house talking on the phone. Can’t he see the dishwasher needs to be unloaded?

But the music in my head at night gave me pause. Like it’s not enough to simply be getting a few hours of sleep, I’ve also got to rehearse the lyrics to *My Favourite Things* at the same time.

It set me wondering if all my multitasking is splintering me more than keeping me whole. As if the stacking of tasks in my day has ceased to be vertical—instead they are stretched end-to-end and the elastic might snap. My very life is being drawn and quartered, and I’m the one nudging the horses to gallop.

As an experiment, I’ve been trying get less done, to actively unlayer my hours. I’m not finding it easy: the psychological effort of doing less is exhausting, as if carrying the force of something physical. Like I’m taking a crowbar to the glulam of my very being,

prying apart everything I’ve built.

I’ve started switching off the news while making dinner so I’m not catching up on current affairs while slicing an onion. I’m just slicing an onion. I’m leaving my phone at home when I take the dog for a walk, simply putting one foot in front of the other rather than firming up appointments or nattering with my mother. The dog is getting older—who knows how much longer I’ll be able to enjoy him cantering along the trail. Watching him thrust his snout into the brush I can see that every molecule of his furry self is concentrated on whatever it is he’s smelling. It’s a good reminder to give myself wholly over to a given moment. My yoga instructor, of course, has been urging me to do this for years. Which is fine, I’ve always thought, as long as I can also be elongating my hamstrings and practicing forehead unfurrowment at the same time.

Heading to bed, I have to ignore the tug of laundry—clean but unfolded. Calls unreturned, papers unread, miles unrun. By day, my clothes may be rumpled, but my mind feels both quieter and more open, I think I’m more creative, more alert, more agile, mentally. I can’t help but wonder about all the ideas that might have tried to come to me in the past, but ricocheted off my whirring brain, unable to find a way in.

When I wake in the night, the music is gone. Or, if not gone, at least the volume is down low, so as not to interfere with my busy dreams. **OL**