

Chapter One

The Disease of A-Thousand-Things-To-Do

It has always seemed obvious to me that the faster I move, the more things I can do and the more fun and meaning my life will have. But it has gotten to the point where my days, crammed with all sorts of activities, feel like an Olympic endurance event: the everydayathon.

—Jay Walljasper, *Utne Magazine*

When my children were two and five, I remember thinking, “I’m pretty sure I used to have an inner life. What happened to it?” Most days, I was experiencing life in a way shared by almost every woman I met.¹ I later came to call this experience “life as to-do list.” Here are some of its characteristics:

- Rushing
- *Feeling* in a rush, whether there is a reason to rush or not
- Never having quite enough time
- Too many demands on too little time
- Too many interruptions while trying to meet those demands
- Skidding across the surface of life, checking things off the ever-present, never-ending List, perhaps getting things done, but going through the motions in a fragmented way, without feeling any sense of satisfaction or completion before having to push on to whatever’s next

- Feeling disconnected, in the midst of this everydayathon, from the *meaning* of what I am doing, from myself, and from the people I care about

This experience often includes feeling exhausted, overwhelmed, and stressed; it sometimes includes feeling empty, numb, and depressed; and it seldom includes feeling a sense of joy, contentment, fun, or gratitude for the simple pleasures of life.

Does any of this sound familiar?

Based on my private therapy practice and my group work with women during the last decade, I would say this experience is far too common. We feel its effects viscerally, in physical ailments that range from migraines, hypertension, and heart disease to gastrological disorders like ulcers, irritable bowel syndrome, and colitis.² We feel its effects emotionally, sometimes in clinically diagnosed depression and anxiety.³ We may try to remedy the effects with prescribed medications (women receive two-thirds of the prescriptions for tranquilizers and antidepressants in the United States)⁴ or through self-medication with alcohol or other substances, including food, tobacco, and illicit drugs.⁵

Jennifer, a woman in one of my Deep River groups, is a stay-at-home mom with four young children. She came to the group because the demands of caring for her home and family left her feeling as if she were “coming apart at the seams.” Her goal in joining the group was to be able to do what needed to get done without being so frantic. “I feel as if I’m always under the gun, always hurrying to get the next thing done. At the end of the day, I’m exhausted, but I can’t really relax.” The hardest time of day for Jennifer was in the evening, from dinnertime through her children’s bedtime. Her only relief from the pressure she felt was her glass or two—or three—of wine in the evening. This “solution” did relax her, but it also made her a bit foggy, which in turn made it more difficult for her to get her kids to bed on time. She would stay up later to compensate and then have a tough time getting up when she wanted to the next morning, thus reinforcing her sense that she was always under the gun.

Whether we seem to be handling our busy lives well or are experiencing physical or emotional symptoms and using some sort of mood-altering substance to ease the pressure, most of us can feel trapped by the tyranny of our to do's. Once we reach a certain degree of overwhelm, we may look for help or try to make a change. When Melissa, one of my clients, hired a professional organizer to help her with the clutter in her home, just finding a time when both she and the organizer were free to meet was a task in itself! At first, Melissa was excited about getting her piles of papers cleared up and organized and having a system for keeping them that way. But the effect was short-lived. Shifting her habits, sorting her mail and other papers in new ways, and putting them in new places became overwhelming tasks in themselves.

It is often the case that our best efforts at getting organized or simplifying our lives don't bring a lasting shift. When we fail in our attempts to rearrange or simplify daily routines, self-confidence can suffer. We begin to wonder, "What is wrong with *me*?"

The Fallacy of "What Is Wrong with Me?"

Most women are quite skilled at blaming themselves. When my second child was born, I was surprised at the quantum leap in stress I began to experience in my role as mother. Juggling work, the needs of a baby and a three-year-old, and keeping the household running left me feeling ragged at the edges. Despite some help from my husband, baby-sitters, and a flexible work schedule, I felt overwhelmed by all the characteristics of "life as to-do list." I kept thinking, "How do single moms do it? How do women who have three or four or five kids do it? How do women with no job flexibility do it? How does my neighbor, who seems to manage everything so effortlessly, also have time to bake bread?" And that wondering led me to ask what seemed a logical next question: "What is wrong with *me*!?"

In trying to answer this question, I'd analyze which personal traits, flaws, and shortcomings might be causing my stressed and fragmented experience of daily life. I'd wonder, "Is it because the world

is divided into two groups—the organized and the unorganized—and by accident of birth, I fall into the latter category? Is it because I'm a Gemini, astrological sign of the twins, which destines me to forever divide my attention between at least two things at once?" Or I would think, "Maybe the experience of mothering young children, which easily qualifies as boot camp in how to never do anything for more than five minutes without being interrupted, has permanently altered some brain cells. Or maybe it's the fact that my desire to please makes me too willing to interrupt myself to respond to others' needs. Maybe I'm just not determined enough, or tough enough." The fretting and speculation went on and on.

Now, many years later, I know that this self-blaming tendency is very common. Women see themselves as not organized enough, not smart enough, not disciplined enough, not efficient enough, not focused enough, not good enough at parenting, at communicating, at relaxing, at making choices . . . not good enough, period. I also now understand that the belief underlying most of this self-criticism is "something is wrong with me."

Meditation teacher Tara Brach calls the state created by this belief the "trance of unworthiness."⁶ Much like the seemingly scripted drama of a bad dream, our actions in this trance state are defined and driven by a fear of not measuring up. It is as if "the rest of the world is merely a backdrop as we struggle to get somewhere, to be a better person, to accomplish, to avoid making mistakes."⁷ In her book *Radical Acceptance*, Brach tells the story of a meditation student's experience that awakened her to the tragedy of living in this trance:

Marilyn had spent many hours sitting at the bedside of her dying mother—reading to her, meditating next to her late at night, holding her hand and telling her over and over that she loved her. Most of the time, Marilyn's mother remained unconscious, her breath labored and erratic. One morning before dawn, she suddenly opened her eyes and looked clearly and intently at her daughter. "You know," she whispered softly, "all my life I thought something was wrong with me."

Shaking her head slightly, as if to say, “What a waste,” she closed her eyes and drifted back into a coma. Several hours later she passed away.⁸

Her mother’s dying words were a wake-up call for Marilyn, helping her break out of her own trance of unworthiness: “It was her parting gift. I realized I didn’t have to lose my life in the same way that she did. Out of love—for my mother, for life—I resolved to hold myself with more acceptance and kindness.”⁹

Living in a trance of unworthiness, with the underlying belief that something is wrong with you has at least two unfortunate effects. First, it prevents you from seeing and appreciating all that you *are* doing. One evening in my early years of child rearing, I took to my journal in sheer frustration after one of those all-too-frequent marathon bedtime routines. I simply made a list of everything I had done that day. It included lots of very mundane tasks like laundry, grocery shopping, making dinner. I listed everything I could think of. There was nothing momentous on the list, but I actually felt quite a sense of accomplishment when I read it. Somehow, seeing on paper what was filling my days silenced, at least for a time, the inner voice that kept saying I never did enough.

The other negative effect of the something-is-wrong-with-me syndrome is that it drives us to do *more* in order to try to be better, keeping us on the very treadmill that has us feeling overwhelmed and inadequate to begin with. If feeling inadequate causes us to add more self-improvement activities to our list, we reinforce the pattern of overdoing, which further strengthens our sense of inadequacy. There is no shortage of people and programs telling us how to improve ourselves, but if these opportunities start with the assumption that there is something wrong with us, the solution will inevitably become part of the problem. In my groups, I sometimes share a cartoon by Dan Wasserman of a frazzled-looking woman doing an exercise routine. The caption reads, “I exercise strenuously for longevity . . . stretch for flexibility, meditate for tranquility . . . count fat, eat right, rest well, brush, floss, warm up, cool down . . . no wonder I don’t have a life!”¹⁰

The truth is that personal inadequacy is not the root of the problem. In fact, we are all asking the wrong question. Instead of asking, “What is wrong with *me*?” as we try not to sink under the pressure of our to-do lists, we should be asking, “What is wrong with *this picture*?”

The Water We Swim In

While our personal history, habits, and shortcomings do play a part in our fragmented sense of daily life, we need to zoom out and see the picture from a wider angle. There are larger influences at work in our feelings of overwhelm. They’re not personal to you, to me, or to any of us, but they shape our experience unless we become aware of them and learn to resist. These influences constitute an all-encompassing environment, like the air we breathe or like water we swim in. They are all around us, even within us; they emanate from our *culture*.

The culture we live in, with its ever-expanding array of technological advances and time-saving conveniences, is beginning to feel more like a nightmare in which we are getting nowhere fast than the dream of comfort, leisure, and freedom we set out to create. Newspaper and magazine articles, books, and talks about how to simplify, slow down, and calm down are more and more common. Yoga classes provide serious competition in the exercise market, where hard-driving aerobics once reigned. Meditation, an activity on the fringe of American society thirty years ago, was the cover story of an issue of *Time* magazine in 2003 and was featured in a 2004 issue of *Newsweek* as part of a series of articles called “The New Science of Mind and Body.” As a society, we are beginning to wake up to a profound imbalance in the way we conduct our lives, but we are still so deeply and unconsciously embedded in a culture of speed, interruption, and distraction that it’s difficult to fully see or feel its effects, much less counter them in any significant way.

For the last several years, I’ve been collecting newspaper and magazine articles that address the issues of speed and lack of time and what we can do about them. Some articles have insightful analyses of the

problem. Some have useful suggestions about how to slow down and simplify, and some offer examples of people who have effectively downsized and created a simpler lifestyle. The fact that we find these topics newsworthy indicates that the water we swim in has a rapid current indeed.

The articles I find the most fascinating and amusing are the ones that offer "solutions" without so much as touching the problem. For example, a popular women's magazine featured a brief (so as to be read *quickly!*) article called "Hurry Up and Relax" that was inadvertently laugh-aloud funny. The first line reads, "If you run yourself ragged rushing through the day and find no time to put on the brakes, don't despair: you may not have to slow down to relax."¹¹ Another popular health magazine devoted its cover story to suggestions on how to "simplify your life and *finally* have free time." One suggestion is a group of recipes for "warp-speed weeknight meals" that allow one to "forget cooking." Another suggests that rather than reading books to stay "hip to the latest best-sellers," one might just read the reviews to get the highlights; that will "see you through any casual conversation, and provide ready-made commentary to boot."¹² No need to bother with the pesky, time-consuming task of actually reading a book!

Once again, we might ask, "What is wrong with this picture?" These articles that attempt to tell us how to slow down without slowing down or how to save time at any cost are symptoms of our inability to really grasp the underlying problem and its pervasiveness. These so-called solutions do not question their culture-based assumptions.

As we try to find new ways to cut corners and pare down the time it takes to do everything from making meals to tending our relationships, we fail to notice that we are operating on the assumption, a fundamental and dearly held one in our society, that faster is automatically better. We usually don't pay attention to the fact that, unlike a hundred years ago, when the pace of life was set by the rhythms of nature, the pace of our days is set by our technology: cars, planes, cell phones, computers, the rapid-fire images of television, and so on. When I learned from my son that computer technology is based

on the nanosecond, or a billionth of a second, my first thought was “What is a billionth of a second?” And then, more important, “What does it mean for the pace of our lives that we live in an age that has a name for an increment of time that is a billionth of a second?”

The strange irony in our sped-up lives is the fact that while our technology has enabled us to get things done faster and faster, we seem to have less and less time. Women I meet complain almost universally that they don’t have enough time. “Our lives are filled with devices invented to ‘save time,’” explains author and columnist Michael Ventura, but “these devices don’t really save time; they merely shorten tasks. A task that took hours now may take only minutes . . . but those hours aren’t ‘saved’; instead, they are used for other tasks that take only minutes. . . . What we have is a staccato rhythm of doing one thing after another after another, filling up the ‘saved’ time with new chores, and what we experience is . . . a frustrated sense of continual interruption.”¹³ As we will see in Chapter Two, our sense of time is subjective, malleable, and to some extent culture-bound, and the experience of “not enough hours in the day” goes along with a linear sense of time that is chopped into small increments, making for the unsatisfying staccato rhythm that Ventura describes.

Adding to our pressured sense of time is our acceptance of the constant interruptions that punctuate our days. Most of us don’t question the inevitability of being interrupted by phone calls as we go about our daily activities; often the interruption itself is interrupted by another call. (And we actually *pay* to have this privilege!) A woman in one of my groups had an epiphany when she realized that she could cancel the call-waiting option on her phone service. She said that it somehow hadn’t occurred to her that she had a choice about this source of interruption and that she could choose to eliminate it.

Along with speed and interruption, distraction is a fundamental characteristic of the cultural water we swim in. When Edward Hallowell, a doctor who specializes in the treatment of attention deficit disorder (ADD), was asked about the high incidence of

ADD in the United States, part of his answer was to describe what has been called “pseudo-ADD,” or “attention deficit trait.”¹⁴ According to Hallowell, this ailment mimics the symptoms of the neurological disorder but is environmentally induced, and affects a significant portion of the population. Essentially, he is saying that many of us are being driven to distraction (the title of his book about ADD) not by a genetic disorder but by the very culture in which we live. New research confirms this, showing that children ages one to three who watch two or more hours of television a day have a harder time paying attention by age seven than those who are exposed to little or no television early in life.¹⁵

I remember being shocked the first time I saw someone wheeling a cart through a grocery store while talking on a cell phone. Now I am disturbed by the fact that I am no longer shocked. People everywhere are driving while talking on the phone, talking on the phone while working at a computer, working on a computer while eating, eating while watching TV while doing homework in front of a computer while on the phone. We now have a word for this distracted behavior—*multitasking*—that makes it seem desirable and praiseworthy. Our culture seems to direct us to do too many things at once, and the quality of our family and social lives, our work lives, and our inner lives is suffering deeply. By way of example, here are some observations:

- The average working couple in America spends twenty minutes a day together.
- “Family time” has become a goal, an achievement, rather than a natural consequence of being a family.
- Many of the families who are not frenzied and exhausted by trying to make enough money to keep food on the table are equally exhausted and trapped in a cycle of overwork and overconsumption.
- Dropping in on a neighbor, commonplace just thirty or forty years ago, is an almost nonexistent social behavior.

- Keeping busy and multitasking are unquestioned as praiseworthy behaviors. Slowing down, doing one thing at a time, and taking our time to do it, is becoming a lost art in America.
- As a society, we are reading less. Computer technology is supplanting the written word. Sven Birkerts, author of *The Gutenberg Elegies*, makes the case that with the decline of print, we are, as a culture, becoming shallower, that we “are giving up on wisdom, the struggle for which has for millennia been central to the very idea of culture.”¹⁶

So once we see that there is something wrong with our cultural picture and not necessarily with us individually, what can we do about it? Is it possible to follow a different path, take some measure of control, and downshift in our own lives, even if the world around us continues on the fast track? My answer is “yes,” and the rest of this book explains how to go about doing it.

Exercise: The “What I *Have* Done” List

A list of things to do is a reminder of what we *haven't* done and can reinforce a sense of inadequacy and never doing enough. In this brief exercise, the focus is on what you have already accomplished, so that you can experience the cup as half full instead of half empty in relation to the ever-present to-do list.

At the end of a day, make a list of everything you've done that day. Write down everything you can think of, including things you think don't count, like shuttling your kids around, showering, or making a phone call that only took a couple of minutes. When you're finished, read over your what-I-*have*-done list, take a deep breath, and appreciate yourself.

You can make this other kind of list any time you become aware that your to-do list is triggering you to ask, “What is wrong with me?”

 **Exercise: Registering the Pace of Your Life**

Next time you are driving on the highway, drive five miles per hour more slowly than you usually do for at least five minutes. Notice how you feel. Are you more relaxed? More restless? First one, and then the other? Just notice what it feels like to slow down your ordinary pace.

Driving is only one of the many activities in which you may be unconsciously matching a pace that is faster than you need or want to go. You can try this intentional slowing down with walking—even just from one room to another—eating, or almost any daily activity.

This simple exercise is intended to heighten awareness of the external pressure to speed up and the internal tendency to match the pace of our surroundings. Heightened awareness of the effect of your environment is valuable because you are more likely to make positive choices in relation to the culture of speed once you can actually feel its effects.

With the recognition that our culture's need for speed rather than our own shortcomings is at the root of our problems of fragmentation, time pressure, and trying to do too much, let's take a look at where the solution lies.

