

CHAPTER ONE

Making Time



If George Washington had been able to step into a time machine 250 years ago for a journey forward to the twenty-first century, what would he think of the tempo of our lives? The dizzying demands that intrude on modern life at breakneck speed, and with apparent boundlessness, test both our physical limits and our cognitive range. Our packed days are time-pressed; our hours are precious. There is nothing especially wrong with this, but it does tend to take a toll on courtesy. For some, being busy has become an excuse to be rude or,

at best, less than gracious. There's no such thing as civility on the fly.

Today's chock-a-block lifestyle demands that we juggle, at a minimum, two or three things every single minute. Can we rise above the fray? Can we take a break from the frenetic schedule set by long work hours and pervasive electronics? Can we afford the time to consider the welfare of others over the short-term needs of self?

Staying calm, assuming good faith, and remaining civil is not (and should not be) a revolutionary idea. The *Rules of Civility* shaped our Founding Father's character and taught him to make a habit of slowing down, listening to, and looking out for the other person. Washington's life was not always easy: he endured a string of defeats in his personal, military, and political life; but he confronted the setbacks with the faith that he could achieve what he had set forth to do. As our leader philosophically reflected, "Human affairs are always checkered and vicissitudes in this life are rather to be expected than wondered at."¹ History stands as a testament to his success over adversity. Can we follow in the footsteps of the resolute and ever-courteous George Washington? Yes, we can. At the start of each subsequent chapter, as well as scattered throughout the text, you will find sage advice from our first president, with further advice on how to apply it to modern life.

KNOWING WHY WE RUSH

Most people, if asked, say they would prefer a balanced and relaxed approach to life. Why, then, do they so often adopt a harried lifestyle, even though it does not make them more productive? Because they have become addicted to stress.

Stress addiction can take many forms. *Schedule junkies* get a burst of adrenaline from feeling rushed. By constantly adding false items to their list of necessities, they feed their need to be busy, feel busy, and look busy. Many of us share this addiction. Busyness—multitasking, having a full calendar, being double-

booked, stretching ourselves thin, being forever on the run—has become a prerequisite for our feeling good about ourselves.

The *information junkie* is a technology addict who needs to know everything that is happening at every moment. Hooked up to a twenty-four-hour-a-day news grind with his smartphone, computer, iPad, Kindle, and GPS, he is unable to power down. For fear of what he might be missing, he misses the best thing life offers—a connection with others.

The *self-important* person creates a “to do” list that he cannot possibly complete but refuses to alter. He inflates his sense of importance by inflating his workload. Confusing productivity with mere activity, this basket case moves too fast to realize how much he is distressing others.

The *guilty* person has a free-floating sense of guilt associated with leisure. He has bought into the Puritan work ethic in a major way and keeps himself busy so that no one will think him lazy or useless. Not only does he fail to help anyone else, but also his constant make-work projects cause an irony: he becomes more useless after all.

The *frightened* person stays busy so that he does not have to face his fears. A good prescription for depression is to plan active days, but these unhappy souls often become like hamsters on a wheel. Ironically, the most important factor associated with happiness and well-being—meaningful relationships with other human beings—continues to elude these lonely folk as they run themselves ragged.

The *confused* person keeps scurrying to and fro like a rat in a maze, hoping that he will find his way. As Yogi Berra quipped, “I don’t know where we’re going, but we’re making great time!” When something important happens, this person does not respond appropriately, because he does not know how. Bumbling through life, he is not purposely inconsiderate, yet he simply is.

The *pathetic* person is constantly involved in a crisis and thinks that because of his pitiful state he is exempt from all expressions

of common courtesy. How can he be expected to sympathize with other people when he is barely escaping some catastrophe?

One common, modern way of dealing with these stress addictions is no better than the addictions themselves. Consider the *reluctant* person. The popular self-help advice of saying “No” as a way to avoid stress has created a group of people who avoid committing themselves to *anything*. These people make saying “No” even to friends in need feel natural.

We all need to slow down. Busyness is a poor substitute for genuine living, and it doesn’t fool anyone. Worst of all, it isolates the people who hide behind it from a positive connection with life and other people. Life is full of things one simply cannot drop, but if you are busy from morning till night like most people, with a hundred places to go and things to do, do not despair. Ask yourself what has to be done no matter what, what can wait, and what can be delegated.

As a French businessman noted, “No one ever appreciated better than George Washington the value of time and the art of making use of it.”² He never appeared to be in a hurry. Despite the hustle and bustle of war, politics, and farming, he always maintained an elegant air of comfortable ease.

It is not some great show of busyness, but the tasks we actually accomplish, that make us look impressive. Still, it can be hard to let go of the show. If you need to start by focusing on how your attitude appears, then appear relaxed and carefree, as if you have time to stop and listen to others. Do not worry if you do not feel it yet. By appearing relaxed and carefree, you not only make other people feel welcome and valuable, but you also radiate the message, “Of course I don’t look busy. I did it right the first time.”

FINAL THOUGHTS

Contemporary life has not made us uniquely harried. The relentless passage of time has always existed—the ticking clock, the hourglass, the sundial, or the setting sun itself. Although we'd like to think that time pressure was invented about the same time as the digital clock, the truth of the matter is that time-management challenges have been around forever. Fortunately, so has the cure—social contact.

As George Washington reminded us, sharing time with a friend has always been, and will always be, a choice. Detained in Philadelphia and desperately trying to raise the money to pay his army, Washington missed the fellowship of his officers away on the southern campaign. He wrote General Greene, “To participate and divide our feelings, hopes, fears and expectations with a friend is almost the only source of pleasure and consolation left us in the present and uncompromising state of our affairs.”³

The same minute can be given resentfully or gladly. The art is not merely making time, but making time gracefully. Attempt to eliminate the expression “I have to,” and instead use the terms “I get to,” “I want to,” or “I choose to.” The more we anchor our awareness on the “here and now” and the more we embrace the moment, the better use we can make of what precious time there is.