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by Carmen Siering



Busyness and What Really Matters

It seems there is an epidemic of busyness going around. So many people are just so busy. Trying to schedule anything with Very Busy People is tedious. You end up feeling like an item on their to-do list, another chore they need to finish so they can move on to something else. “Well, I can’t do lunch for the foreseeable future, but maybe we can squeeze in coffee two weeks from Thursday,” they’ll suggest. Really? You can’t find time to go to lunch? Do you eat?

I have found that, more often than not, Very Busy People have created their own packed schedules, either by their refusal to stand up for themselves (they never learned to say no) or, as the saying goes, for FOMO — fear of missing out. They also allow themselves to be tethered to their jobs, accessible 24/7, as if that email can’t wait till morning or the business will go under if they take a weekend away from work.

In “The ‘Busy’ Trap” (*The New York Times*, 2012), Tim Kreider wrote, “Busyness serves as a kind of existential reassurance, a hedge against emptiness; obviously your life cannot possibly be silly or trivial or meaningless if you are so busy, completely booked, in demand every hour of the day.”

Kreider’s point is that people tend to fill their lives up in an attempt to feel important, needed, necessary. I think they also do so in an attempt to avoid thinking about who they are and what they want. If you are busy all day and fall into bed exhausted every night, there is no time to examine the direction your life is taking. It’s as if busyness is a kind of autopilot making decisions for you.

Another point Kreider makes is that many people no longer have jobs where they “make or do anything. ... I can’t help but

wonder whether all this histrionic exhaustion isn’t a way of covering up the fact that most of what we do doesn’t matter.”

That may sound harsh, but I think it’s true. Most of what we do really doesn’t matter. This struck home recently when my husband’s brother died — suddenly, unexpectedly, at just 49 years old. And while he was an outstanding employee, one who had risen through the ranks and was highly respected in his field, that wasn’t what was important about his life. Someone else is doing his job now. That hole has been filled. What he did there really didn’t matter.

What did matter was that he loved his family. His wife was his best friend. They took amazing trips together and sometimes with dear friends, many of whom they have known since high school and college. He cared about his community, served as a soccer coach, and was a beloved godfather. Above all, he spent the time he had with the people he loved. He didn’t know just how little time there was. None of us do.

I make an effort to not be a Very Busy Person. I did so before my brother-in-law died, but his death made it clear to me that we don’t know how much time we have. It seems to me that most of what we do doesn’t matter, but some of what we do matters very much. I’m trying to do a lot more of the latter. ✨

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