

FOUR THOUSAND WEEKS

Time and How to Use It

'I loved
this book'

Derren Brown

'A beautiful,
uplifting read'

Robert Webb

OLIVER BURKEMAN

Four Thousand Weeks

ALSO BY OLIVER BURKEMAN

*The Antidote: Happiness for People
Who Can't Stand Positive Thinking*

*Help! How to Become Slightly Happier
and Get a Bit More Done*

Four Thousand Weeks

Time Management
for Mortals

Oliver
Burkeman



THE BODLEY HEAD
LONDON

1 3 5 7 9 10 8 6 4 2

The Bodley Head, an imprint of Vintage, is part of the Penguin Random House group of companies whose addresses can be found at global.penguinrandomhouse.com.



Penguin
Random House
UK

Copyright © Oliver Burkeman 2021

Oliver Burkeman has asserted his right to be identified as the author of this Work in accordance with the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act 1988

First published by The Bodley Head in 2021

www.penguin.co.uk/vintage

A CIP catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

Hardback ISBN 9781847924018

Trade paperback ISBN 9781847924025

Printed and bound in Great Britain by Clays Ltd., Elcograf S.p.A.

The authorised representative in the EEA is Penguin Random House Ireland, Morrison Chambers, 32 Nassau Street, Dublin, D02 YH68.

Penguin Random House is committed to a sustainable future for our business, our readers and our planet. This book is made from Forest Stewardship Council® certified paper.



Copyrighted Material

To Heather and Rowan

It's the very last thing, isn't it, we feel grateful
for: having *happened*. You know, you needn't have
happened. You needn't have happened. But you
did happen.

— DOUGLAS HARDING

What makes it unbearable is your mistaken belief
that it can be cured.

— CHARLOTTE JOKO BECK

Contents

Introduction: In the Long Run, We're All Dead	3
---	---

Part I: Choosing to Choose

1. The Limit-Embracing Life	17
2. The Efficiency Trap	37
3. Facing Finitude	57
4. Becoming a Better Procrastinator	71
5. The Watermelon Problem	89
6. The Intimate Interrupter	101

Part II: Beyond Control

7. We Never Really Have Time	113
8. You Are Here	125
9. Rediscovering Rest	141
10. The Impatience Spiral	161

11. Staying on the Bus	173
12. The Loneliness of the Digital Nomad	185
13. Cosmic Insignificance Therapy	203
14. The Human Disease	215
Afterword: Beyond Hope	229
Appendix: Ten Tools for Embracing Your Finitude	235
Notes	247
Acknowledgements	261
Index	265

Four Thousand Weeks

Introduction: In the Long Run, We're All Dead

The average human lifespan is absurdly, terrifyingly, insultingly short. Here's one way of putting things in perspective: the first modern humans appeared on the plains of Africa at least 200,000 years ago, and scientists estimate that life, in some form, will persist for another 1.5 billion years or more, until the intensifying heat of the sun condemns the last organism to death. But you? Assuming you live to be eighty, you'll have had about four thousand weeks.

Certainly, you might get lucky: make it to ninety, and you'll have had almost 4,700 weeks. You might get *really* lucky, like Jeanne Calment, the Frenchwoman who was thought to be 122 when she died in 1997, making her the oldest person on record. Calment claimed she could recall meeting Vincent van Gogh – she mainly remembered his reeking of alcohol – and she was still around for the birth

of the first successfully cloned mammal, Dolly the sheep, in 1996. Biologists predict that lifespans within striking distance of Calment's could soon become commonplace. Yet even she got only about 6,400 weeks.

Expressing the matter in such startling terms makes it easy to see why philosophers from ancient Greece to the present day have taken the brevity of life to be the defining problem of human existence: we've been granted the mental capacities to make almost infinitely ambitious plans, yet practically no time at all to put them into action. 'This space that has been granted to us rushes by so speedily and so swiftly that all save a very few find life at an end just when they are getting ready to live,' lamented Seneca, the Roman philosopher, in a letter known today under the title *On the Shortness of Life*. When I first made the four thousand weeks calculation, I felt queasy; but once I'd recovered, I started pestering my friends, asking them to guess – off the top of their heads, without doing any mental arithmetic – how many weeks they thought the average person could expect to live. One named a number in the six figures. Yet, as I felt obliged to inform her, a fairly modest six-figure number of weeks – 310,000 – is the approximate duration of *all human civilisation* since the ancient Sumerians of Mesopotamia. On almost any meaningful timescale, as the contemporary philosopher Thomas Nagel has written, 'we will all be dead any minute'.

It follows from this that time management, broadly defined, should be everyone's chief concern. Arguably, time management is all life is. Yet the modern discipline known as time management – like its hipper cousin, productivity – is a

depressingly narrow-minded affair, focused on how to crank through as many work tasks as possible, or on devising the perfect morning routine, or on cooking all your dinners for the week in one big batch on Sundays. These things matter to some extent, no doubt. But they're hardly all that matters. The world is bursting with wonder, and yet it's the rare productivity guru who seems to have considered the possibility that the ultimate point of all our frenetic *doing* might be to experience more of that wonder. The world also seems to be heading to hell in a handcart – our civic life has gone insane, a pandemic has paralysed society, and the planet is getting hotter and hotter – but good luck finding a time management system that makes any room for engaging productively with your fellow citizens, with current events, or with the fate of the environment. At the very least, you might have assumed there'd be a handful of productivity books that take seriously the stark facts about the shortness of life, instead of pretending that we can just ignore the subject. But you'd be wrong.

So this book is an attempt to help redress the balance – to see if we can't discover, or recover, some ways of thinking about time that do justice to our real situation: to the outrageous brevity and shimmering possibilities of our four thousand weeks.

Life on the Conveyor Belt

In one sense, of course, nobody these days needs telling that there isn't enough time. We're obsessed with our overfilled

inboxes and lengthening to-do lists, haunted by the guilty feeling that we ought to be getting more done, or different things done, or both. (How can you be sure that people feel so busy? It's like the line about how to know whether someone's a vegan: don't worry, they'll tell you.) Surveys reliably show that we feel more pressed for time than ever before; yet in 2013, research by a team of Dutch academics raised the amusing possibility that such surveys may understate the scale of the busyness epidemic – because many people feel too busy to participate in surveys. Recently, as the gig economy has grown, busyness has been rebranded as 'hustle' – relentless work not as a burden to be endured but as an exhilarating lifestyle choice, worth boasting about on social media. In reality, though, it's the same old problem, pushed to an extreme: the pressure to fit ever-increasing quantities of activity into a stubbornly non-increasing quantity of daily time.

And yet busyness is really only the beginning. Many other complaints, when you stop to think about them, are essentially complaints about our limited time. Take the daily battle against online distraction, and the alarming sense that our attention spans have shrivelled to such a degree that even those of us who were bookworms as children now struggle to make it through a paragraph without experiencing the urge to reach for our phones. What makes this so troubling, in the end, is that it represents a failure to make the best use of a small supply of time. (You'd feel less self-loathing about wasting a morning on Facebook if the supply of mornings were inexhaustible.) Or perhaps your problem isn't being too busy but insufficiently busy, languishing in a dull job, or not employed

at all. That's still a situation made far more distressing by the shortness of life, because you're *using up* your limited time in a way you'd rather not. Even some of the very worst aspects of our era – like our viciously hyperpartisan politics and terrorists radicalised via YouTube videos – can be explained, in a roundabout way, by the same underlying facts concerning life's brevity. It's because our time and attention are so limited, and therefore valuable, that social media companies are incentivised to grab as much of them as they can, by any means necessary – which is why they show users material guaranteed to drive them into a rage, instead of the more boring and accurate stuff.

Then there are all those timeless human dilemmas like whom to marry, whether to have children, and what kind of work to pursue. If we had thousands of years in which to live, all *those* would be far less agonising, too, since there'd be sufficient time to spend decades trying out each kind of possible existence. Meanwhile, no catalogue of our time-related troubles would be complete without mentioning that alarming phenomenon, familiar to anyone older than about thirty, whereby time seems to speed up as you age – steadily accelerating until, to judge from the reports of people in their seventies and eighties, months begin to flash by in what feels like minutes. It's hard to imagine a crueller arrangement: not only are our four thousand weeks constantly running out, but the fewer of them we have left, the faster we seem to lose them.

And if our relationship to our limited time has always been a difficult one, recent events have brought matters to a head. In 2020, in lockdown during the coronavirus pan-

demic, with our normal routines suspended, many people reported feeling that time was disintegrating completely, giving rise to the disorientating impression that their days were somehow simultaneously racing by and dragging on interminably. Time divided us, even more than it had before: for those with jobs and small children at home, there wasn't enough of it; for those furloughed or unemployed, there was too much. People found themselves working at strange hours, detached from the cycles of daytime and darkness, hunched over glowing laptops at home, or risking their lives in hospitals and mail-order warehouses. And it felt as though the future had been put on hold, leaving many of us stuck, in the words of one psychiatrist, 'in a new kind of everlasting present' – an anxious limbo of social media scrolling and desultory Zoom calls and insomnia, in which it felt impossible to make meaningful plans, or even to clearly picture life beyond the end of next week.

All of which makes it especially frustrating that so many of us are so *bad* at managing our limited time – that our efforts to make the most of it don't simply fail but regularly seem to make things worse. For years now, we've been deluged with advice on living the fully optimised life, in books with titles such as *Extreme Productivity* and *The 4-Hour Workweek* and *Smarter Faster Better*, plus websites full of 'life hacks' for whittling seconds off everyday chores. (Note the curious suggestion, in the term 'life hack', that your life is best thought of as some kind of faulty contraption, in need of modification so as to stop it from performing suboptimally.) There are numerous apps and wearable devices for maximising the pay-offs from your workday, your workouts and even

your sleep, plus meal replacement drinks to eliminate time wasted eating dinner. And the chief selling point of a thousand other products and services, from kitchen appliances to online banking, is that they'll help you achieve the widely championed goal of squeezing the most from your time.

The problem isn't exactly that these techniques and products don't work. It's that they do work – in the sense that you'll get more done, race to more meetings, ferry your kids to more after-school activities, generate more profit for your employer – and yet, paradoxically, you only feel busier, more anxious, and somehow emptier as a result. In the modern world, the American anthropologist Edward T. Hall once pointed out, time feels like an unstoppable conveyor belt, bringing us new tasks as fast as we can dispatch the old ones; and becoming 'more productive' just seems to cause the belt to speed up. Or else, eventually, to break down: it's now common to encounter reports, especially from younger adults, of an all-encompassing, bone-deep burnout, characterised by an inability to complete basic daily chores – the paralysing exhaustion of 'a generation of finely honed tools, crafted from embryos to be lean, mean production machines', in the words of the millennial social critic Malcolm Harris.

This is the maddening truth about time, which most advice on managing it seems to miss. It's like an obstreperous toddler: the more you struggle to control it, to make it conform to your agenda, the further it slips from your control. Consider all the technology intended to help us gain the upper hand over time: by any sane logic, in a world with dishwashers, microwaves and jet engines, time ought to feel

more expansive and abundant, thanks to all the hours freed up. But this is nobody's actual experience. Instead, life accelerates, and everyone grows more impatient. It's somehow vastly more aggravating to wait two minutes for the microwave than two hours for the oven – or ten seconds for a slow-loading web page versus three days to receive the same information by post.

The same self-defeating pattern applies to many of our attempts to become more productive at work. A few years ago, drowning in emails, I successfully implemented the system known as Inbox Zero, but I soon discovered that when you get tremendously efficient at answering emails all that happens is that you get much more email. Feeling busier – thanks to all that email – I bought *Getting Things Done*, by the time management guru David Allen, lured by his promise that it is 'possible for a person to have an overwhelming number of things to do and still function productively with a clear head' and 'what the martial artists call a "mind like water"'. But I failed to appreciate Allen's deeper implication – that there'll always be too much to do – and instead set about attempting to get an impossible amount done. In fact, I did get better at racing through my to-do list, only to find that greater volumes of work magically started to appear. (Actually, it's not magic; it's simple psychology, plus capitalism. More on that later.)

None of this is how the future was supposed to feel. In 1930, in a speech titled 'Economic Possibilities for Our Grandchildren', the economist John Maynard Keynes made a famous prediction: within a century, thanks to the growth of wealth and the advance of technology, no one would have

to work more than about fifteen hours a week. The challenge would be how to fill all our new-found leisure time without going crazy. 'For the first time since his creation,' Keynes told his audience, 'man will be faced with his real, his permanent problem – how to use his freedom from pressing economic cares.' But Keynes was wrong. It turns out that when people make enough money to meet their needs, they just find new things to need and new lifestyles to aspire to; they never quite manage to keep up with the Joneses, because whenever they're in danger of getting close, they nominate new and better Joneses with whom to try to keep up. As a result, they work harder and harder, and soon busyness becomes an emblem of prestige. Which is clearly completely absurd: for almost the whole of history, the entire point of being rich was *not* having to work so much. Moreover, the busyness of the better-off is contagious, because one extremely effective way to make more money, for those at the top of the tree, is to cut costs and make efficiency improvements in their companies and industries. That means greater insecurity for those lower down, who are then obliged to work harder just to get by.

On Getting the Wrong Things Done

But now here we get to the heart of things, to a feeling that goes deeper, and that's harder to put into words: the sense that despite all this activity, even the relatively privileged among us rarely get round to doing the right things. We sense that there are important and fulfilling ways we could

be spending our time, even if we can't say exactly what they are – yet we systematically spend our days doing other things instead. This yearning for more meaning can take many forms: it's there, for instance, in the desire to devote yourself to some larger cause, in the intuition that this particular moment in history, with all its crises and suffering, might demand more from you than the usual getting and spending. But it's also there in the feeling of frustration at having to work a day job in order to buy slivers of time for the work you love, and in the simple longing to spend more of your brief time on earth with your kids, in nature, or, at the very least, not commuting. The environmentalist and spiritual writer Charles Eisenstein recalls first sensing this basic 'wrongness' in our use of time as a child, growing up amid material comfort in 1970s America:

Life, I knew, was supposed to be more joyful than this, more real, more meaningful, and the world was supposed to be more beautiful. We were not supposed to hate Mondays and live for the weekends and holidays. We were not supposed to have to raise our hands to be allowed to pee. We were not supposed to be kept indoors on a beautiful day, day after day.

And this feeling of wrongness is only exacerbated by our attempts to become more productive, which seem to have the effect of pushing the genuinely important stuff ever further over the horizon. Our days are spent trying to 'get through' tasks, in order to get them 'out of the way', with the result that we live mentally in the future, waiting for when we'll

finally get round to what really matters – and worrying, in the meantime, that we don't measure up, that we might lack the drive or stamina to keep pace with the speed at which life now seems to move. 'The spirit of the times is one of joyless urgency,' writes the essayist Marilynne Robinson, who observes that many of us spend our lives 'preparing ourselves and our children to be means to inscrutable ends that are utterly not our own'. Our struggle to stay on top of everything may serve *someone's* interests; working longer hours – and using any extra income to buy more consumer goods – turns us into better cogs in the economic machine. But it doesn't result in peace of mind, or lead us to spend more of our finite time on those people and things we care most deeply about ourselves.

Four Thousand Weeks is yet another book about making the best use of time. But it is written in the belief that time management as we know it has failed miserably, and that we need to stop pretending otherwise. This strange moment in history, when time feels so unmoored, might in fact provide the ideal opportunity to reconsider our relationship with it. Older thinkers have faced these challenges before us, and when their wisdom is applied to the present day, certain truths grow more clearly apparent. Productivity is a trap. Becoming more efficient just makes you more rushed, and trying to clear the decks simply makes them fill up again faster. Nobody in the history of humanity has ever achieved 'work-life balance', whatever that might be, and you certainly won't get there by copying the 'six things successful people do before 7 a.m.'. The day will never arrive when you finally have everything under control – when the flood

of emails has been contained; when your to-do lists have stopped getting longer; when you're meeting all your obligations at work and in your home life; when nobody's angry with you for missing a deadline or dropping the ball; and when the fully optimised person you've become can turn, at long last, to the things life is really supposed to be about. Let's start by admitting defeat: none of this is ever going to happen.

But you know what? That's *excellent* news.

Part I

Choosing to Choose

1.

The Limit-Embracing Life

The real problem isn't our limited time. The real problem – or so I hope to convince you – is that we've unwittingly inherited, and feel pressured to live by, a troublesome set of *ideas* about how to use our limited time, all of which are pretty much guaranteed to make things worse. To see how we got here, and how to escape into a better relationship with time, we need to rewind the clock – back to before there were clocks.

On balance, you should definitely be grateful you weren't born a peasant in early-medieval England. For one thing, you'd have been much less likely to make it to adulthood; but even if you had, the life that stretched ahead of you would have been one defined by servitude. You'd have spent your back-breaking days farming the land on which the local lord permitted you to live, in exchange for giving him a crippling proportion of what you produced or the income you could

generate from it. The church would have demanded regular contributions as well, and you'd have been much too scared of eternal damnation to disobey. At night, you would have retreated to your one-room hut, alongside not only the rest of your family (who, like you, would rarely have bathed or brushed their teeth) but also your pigs and chickens, which you brought indoors at night; bears and wolves still roamed the forests and would help themselves to any animals left outside after sunset. Disease would have been another constant companion: familiar sicknesses ranged from measles and influenza to bubonic plague and St Anthony's fire, a form of food poisoning caused by mouldy grain, which left the delirious sufferer feeling as though his skin were burning or as if he were being bitten by unseen teeth.

Time Before Timetables

But there's one set of problems you almost certainly wouldn't have experienced: problems of time. Even on your most exhausting days, it probably wouldn't have occurred to you that you had 'too much to do', that you needed to hurry, or that life was moving too fast, let alone that you'd got your work-life balance wrong. By the same token, on quieter days, you would never have felt bored. And though death was a constant presence, with lives cut short far more frequently than they are today, time wouldn't have felt in limited supply. You wouldn't have felt any pressure to find ways to 'save' it. Nor would you have felt guilty for wasting it: if you took an afternoon break from threshing grain to