

Getting Your Important Work Done

Michael Nobbs



Essays to encourage, inspire and reassure

1 Getting Your Important Work Done

Contents

- [About the Author](#)
- [Foreword](#)

Introduction:

- [So, what is *Your* Important Work?](#)
- [Your Important Work: What it's not](#)
- [Your Important Work: A space of your own](#)
- [Your Important Work: Getting on track \(and staying there\)](#)
- [Your Important Work: Just get started \(by stopping\)](#)

Getting Your Important Work Done

The Essays:

- [The Importance of Choices](#)
- [Get a timer!](#)
- [The Importance of “No”](#)
- [Why on some days it’s a good idea to say “no” even to to your Important Work](#)
- [The importance of putting energy back into the Energy Bank \(part one\)](#)
- [The importance of putting energy back into the Energy Bank \(part two\)](#)
- [Wabi-sabi: the beauty of imperfection \(or how to reject the tyranny of perfection in order to get your Important Work Done\)](#)

Getting Your Important Work Done

- Don't do today, what you could put off until tomorrow
- Forget about seizing the day, enjoy it instead (a gentler translation of carpe diem)
- Remember to celebrate your achievements
- Take some time to look back at all you've achieved
- Why it's okay (even essential) to stop completely
- Deciding to schedule a catch-up day into my week
- In praise of working on one thing at a time
- Stop trying to catch-up, work from where you are
- Learning to be compassionate with ourselves to get our Important Work done
- Why we need to avoid the "jam tomorrow" tendency if we want to keep getting our Important Work done
- Reaching and accepting limits
- Learning to stop (especially when we most think we can't)

Getting Your Important Work Done

- [Giving ourselves what we need helps get our Important Work done](#)
- [Do a little something to raise your spirits \(and help get your Important Work done!\)](#)
- [Taking a holiday to make sure we stay on track with our Important Work](#)

A final word (or two):

[Clarifying what Important Work is](#)
[Further reading](#)

Getting Your Important Work Done

About the Author

Michael Nobbs is a full-time artist, blogger and tea drinker (not necessarily in that order). He [writes](#), [tweets](#) and [podcasts](#) about drawing and trying to keep things simple.

In the late 1990s he was diagnosed with [ME/CFS](#) and, over the last decade, has learnt a lot about sustaining a creative career with limited energy.

He considers his Important Work to involve drawing and showing others that it is possible to live a sustainably creative life despite living with limited energy.



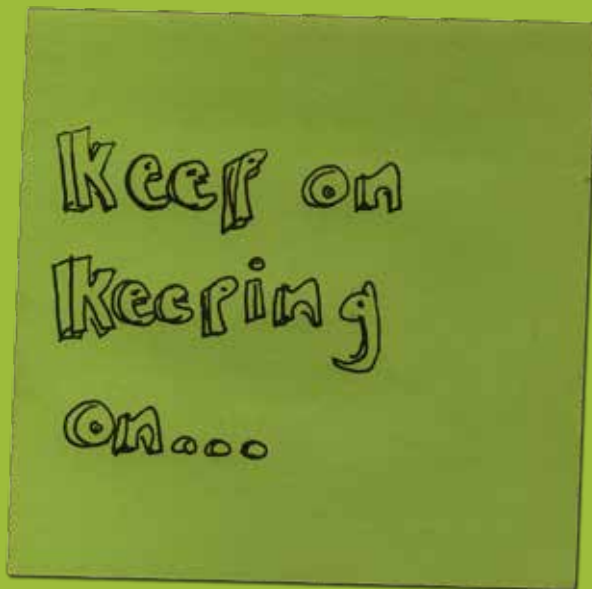
Getting Your Important Work Done

Foreword

If you read my blog [Sustainably Creative](#) regularly, you'll know that I'm someone who has limited energy, but also someone who strives to maintain a creative career despite these limitations. I'm a firm believer in adopting the "little and often" approach to work and in distilling what I do down to the bare essentials (my truly Important Work) and just getting on with that as and when I can.

Little and Often

At different times I've written quite a lot on my blog, [Sustainably Creative](#), about taking this approach to creative endeavours; my [Twenty Minutes a Day Challenge](#), encourages everyone, but particularly those with limited energy and time, to set aside just twenty minutes a day to work on a creative project. It's amazing what can be achieved in just twenty minutes a day (I produced my recent book, [Drawing Your Life](#), this way) and how the



Getting Your Important Work Done

achievement can build confidence and even be energising in itself. Other posts have looked at the importance of [focus](#) and [being kind to ourselves](#) if we're low on energy but still want to get stuff done, as well as why it's a very good idea to [concentrate on just one thing at a time](#) when we're working within energy and time restraints.

Introducing the idea of *Important Work*

These posts have proved popular and I've had a lot of people contact me asking for more information about how I maintain my own career despite my limits, and looking for inspiration and encouragement to help them forge ahead with their own.

In an attempt to offer more information I began to publish a fortnightly newsletter called *Getting Your Important Work Done*. Those essays have now be collected together into one volume which I hope will prove a useful insight into the whole idea of Important Work and also provide some encouragement,

Getting Your Important Work Done

inspiration and reassurance to people who struggle with maintaining a creative career whilst dealing with limited energy and/or time constraints.

Using this book

If you're new to the concept of Important Work, it's worth making a start by reading the five introductory essays at the start of this book first (and in order). After that just dig into the book and pick the essays that interest you.

If you are like me and are approaching your Important Work with severely restricted energy then the two essays introducing the concept of [The Energy Bank](#) might be of particular help.

The book ends with some [further reading](#) suggestions.

Introduction



Getting Your Important Work Done

So, what is *Your Important Work*?

First things first, what is Important Work and what is your Important Work?

The essential core

Put simply Important Work is the essential core of what you do, the one thing that you would do were it impossible for you to do anything else. Once you've worked out what that means for you then it makes life so much easier, you can make decisions about what to use your time and energy working on by quickly asking "does this fit in with my Important Work?" and if it doesn't you can decide not to do it.

Maybe you already have a clear idea of what Your Important Work is. I think I'm still fine-tuning my idea of mine, but at present I'd say it was "writing and drawing about my life to encourage others



Getting Your Important Work Done

to find ways of being sustainably creative.” If you’re still not clear about what Your Important Work is then why not try answering these questions from the blog post, [Distill your ambitions down to their essential core](#):

1. If there was only one thing you could work on now what would it be?
2. If there was only one direction you could take you work in for the next five years where would you go?
3. If you could only work in one field or on one project for the rest of your life what would it be (this answer may be very different depending on how long you picture your life being!)?

Do your answers reveal any sort of pattern? Is there something emerging that feels like it might be Your Important Work? If so, can you write a short sentence that clearly explains what you see as Your Important Work? If not, don’t worry, keep pondering the above questions, eventually something will emerge.

Getting Your Important Work Done

Your Important Work: What it's not

A long time ago I read an article about time management, called [The Pickle Jar](#). Now, I'm not a big fan of time management theories and systems; it seems to me that they usually involve spending more time working on the system than actually doing stuff, but there is one bit of this article that continues to hit the spot for me.

The Pickle Jar

You may well know the theory of The Pickle Jar, but briefly the jar is a metaphor for our working day (or our life for that matter). We can fill it with rocks (really important stuff), pebbles (less important stuff) or sand (other stuff). Now if we were to put the sand and pebbles in first it would be really hard to fit any rocks in, but if we put one or two rocks in first then the other stuff can fit in the cracks.



Getting Your Important Work Done

I'm a big fan of rocks, really big rocks (and always putting them in the jar first). The rocks are Your Important Work and the only way to get it done (especially if you have limited time and energy) is to pop those in the pickle jar of life first. Don't put a drop of sand or a sprinkling of pebbles in that jar until you're tackled a rock.

That's much easier said than done of course and some sand and pebbles can feel very urgent and important, but are they really? If you do tackle the rocks first you'll often be surprised just how much of sand and pebbles does fit in around the edges, or ceases to matter.

Some sand and pebbles (what Your Important Work isn't):

- Checking email
- Visiting Facebook
- Checking Twitter

Getting Your Important Work Done

- Aimless TV watching
- Aimless web surfing
- Endless Research
- Planning
- Writing long to-do lists
- Worrying about how to do something
- Going to meetings
- Cleaning/Sorting/Rearranging our desks or workspaces
- (in short any unproductive busyness!)

Carve out (just a little) work time

Now, I quite accept that some of the above may count as downtime and I'm all for rest and relaxation (I shall be taking a nap just as soon as I finish writing this), but if you want to get Your Important Work done then carve out work time (even just 20 minutes a day) and focus on working on a rock in that time.

Getting Your Important Work Done

Your Important Work: A space of your own

In her classic treatise, *A Room of One's Own*, Virginia Woolf famously argues that any woman who wishes to write fiction must first have secured both an independent income and a room of her own.

A corner to call our own

Whilst an independent income would be very nice (!), it is the second part of Virginia Woolf's equation, the room of our own (or even a corner that we can call our own), that I think is a must for anyone with limited time or energy wishing to pursue their Important Work, and it's what I want to talk about here.

When I first started drawing classes at the end of the 90s I used to visit my teacher in her studio and was completely in awe of her and her workspace. It was part of her house and I envied the



Getting Your Important Work Done

fact that she could just get up in the morning and have all her materials and equipment on hand. At the time I had only recently been diagnosed with [ME/CFS](#) and had VERY limited energy and the thought of just being able to roll out of bed and do a little work was so appealing, but at the same time I just couldn't imagine ever being able to marshal enough resources to be able to afford any sort of workspace of my own.

Start Small (and think smaller)

Now more than ten years later I have a studio at the bottom of my garden that I regularly roll into still in my pajamas (!). I'm very grateful for it. However I started off on a much smaller scale. My first workspace was a small table in the corner of my bedroom. What was important about it wasn't its size, but the fact that it was permanent. I could leave my materials and whatever I was working on out and ready and just pick up on my current project from where I left off.

Getting Your Important Work Done

Some ideas:

- If energy and/or time are limited there's no point wasting either in packing away or preparing materials. You want everything where you need so you can make most efficient use of your time. If everything is waiting for you, then it really is possible to achieve a lot in just [twenty minutes a day](#).
- If it really is impossible to leave the tools of your trade out and ready then consider using a box or a bag to keep your things in. You can think of this as your portable workspace and just reach for it everyday when it's time to get on with Your Important Work.
- Finally think of ways you can scale down the things you need to get on with Your Important Work. The less you need the easier it is to find space to keep it, and the quicker you can just get on with Your Important Work. On days with very limited energy I can get plenty done in bed with my laptop and my (very old) graphics tablet.

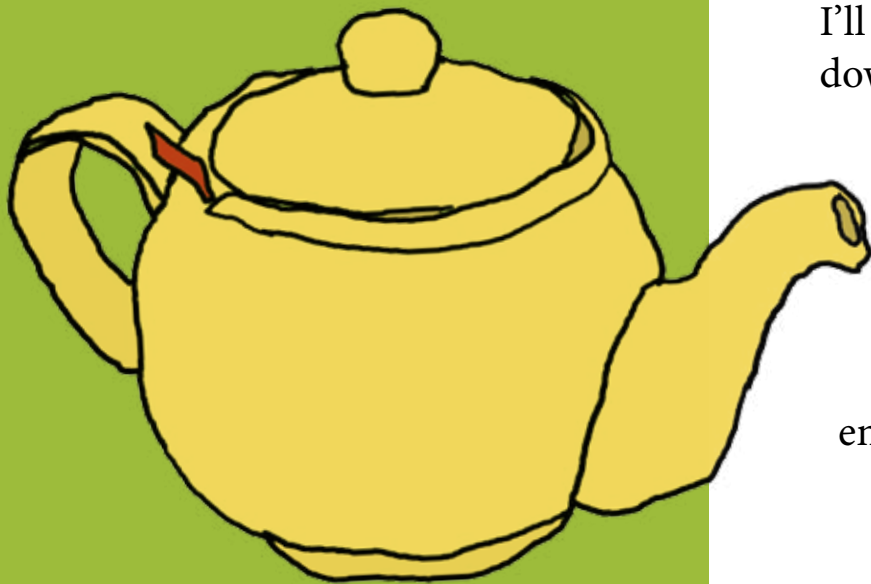
If you haven't already got one, can you set up a permanent workspace (or create a workspace in a box) somewhere today?

Getting Your Important Work Done

Your Important Work: Getting on track (and staying there)

I've noticed something very interesting as I've been writing this series of Important Work essay. I've been getting stronger and stronger resistance to writing them!

I'll let you into a secret, today, despite my best intentions of getting down to write this post (my Important Work for the day), I've made three pots of tea, been for a walk in the sun to check for messages on my mobile (no mobile signal in my house or studio), answered three emails, starting planning a trip to London, and chatted on Twitter! What doesn't help is that I've been feeling quite under the weather for the last week or so, so time and energy spent on other stuff really is time and energy I don't have to left spend on what's really important.



Getting Your Important Work Done

The destructive power of ought

This tendency to get on with everything but what I think I ought to be doing is something I've noticed elsewhere this week too. For a couple of months now I've been writing my daily [Morning Pages](#) over on the excellent [750words.com](#). This month I decided to commit to the site's Monthly Challenge. To take part participants sign a pledge committing to writing 750 words on the site every day for the current month. You can also sign up for a forfeit (the stick) if you fail and a self-awarded prize (the carrot) if you achieve the challenge. I thought both would be a great incentives to keep writing.

Now, I have managed to keep writing every day this month, but only just. Whereas last month, before I signed up for the challenge, I was happily logging in first thing in the morning to write my [750 words](#), this month I've been increasingly less willing, writing later in the day, and one day even having to rush to get my words

Getting Your Important Work Done

written before the stroke of midnight, the absolute deadline for the day.

Forget the carrots and the sticks

How does this all fit in with getting on track (and staying there) with our Important Work? Well, when I look at my notes for today's post I can see that I had intended to write how the way to get on track is to make an absolute and firm commitment (preferably a public one) to making Your Important Work the first thing that gets done every day and to enlist the help of various carrots and sticks to keep yourself on track. Now, I've come to the conclusion that it's a good idea just to forget about using language like, firm and absolute and I really do think we could do a lot worse than just tossing the sticks (and maybe the carrots too) out of the window.

Getting Your Important Work Done

Approach Your Important Work with a sense of compassion

Instead, I would like to suggest that we all approach our Important Work with a sense of compassion. Let's remember that we are in this process for the long haul, and especially if we're limited in energy because of illness, then it's important to be kind to ourselves. Yes, make an undertaking to work out [what Your Important Work is](#), and move towards reducing wasting time on [all the stuff it isn't](#), but take the long view. Habits take a time to form, and it far, far better to be moving in the right direction, than turning something you love to do into chore that you end up wasting (limited) energy and resources fighting with yourself to do.

A little gentle kindness can get you on the right track with Your Important Work and will certainly keep you there.

Getting Your Important Work Done

A role model

If you're looking for a role model, you could do worse than Stanley Lewis who [I mentioned on Twitter](#) (he painted everyday for 84 years, just because he wanted to).

Getting Your Important Work Done

Your Important Work: Just get started (by stopping)

I began this series of essays by [encouraging you to work out what Your Important Work is](#). Maybe you already have (or you already knew) but perhaps you're still searching. That's okay. In a way, what's more important is realising what it isn't. It isn't busyness.

It's VERY unlikely that Your Important Work is checking your email every five minutes (or even every hour), endless social networking, going to meetings, writing lists, endless planning (or any of the other things I talked about in the [second essay](#) in this series). Yet these are the things that many of us fill our days with.

Cut out the busyness

If you're low on energy and time then don't waste what you do have on unnecessary busyness. Eliminate the unnecessary and the



Getting Your Important Work Done

pointless and you might well find you've made room for what's important (and if you haven't, well you'll at least have time and energy for something more fun!).

So, I'm going to end this introductory series of essays back at the beginning and encourage you to get started with Your Important Work by making some space in your life and seeing what fills it. That's easier said than done, especially if you're already limited in what you can do. I know when I was first diagnosed with ME/CFS my first reaction was one of panic, a need to use what energy I did have to get on and to try to achieve (or at least look like I was achieving). Panic is a great busyness motivator (and a great energy drainer). Eventually I learnt that I had to ignore the panic (I'm still learning) and make some space.

Just for a while cut out just about everything

For a while, just a little while, you could do far worse than

Getting Your Important Work Done

stopping doing much of anything. Close your laptop lid, switch off your television or radio, put down your books and magazines and turn off your phones. Let a little silence reign (and try not to heed the panic if it starts to shout). You could take a pen and notebook and write a little about what the silence encourages you to think, or you could just sit still and see what bubbles up. Make quiet times like this a regular part of your life and the busyness will start to seem far less important, and Your Important Work may just become more obvious.

Remember: Always approach Your Important Work with a sense of compassion and self-care.

The Essays



Getting Your Important Work Done: Essays to encourage, inspire and reassure

Getting Your Important Work Done

The Importance of Choices

I was reading an article on the train the other day about a man who had realised that he probably only had time to read about seventy-five more books in his lifetime. He didn't read fast he admitted, and only got through around three books a year. Based on a life expectancy of eighty, he thought he probably had twenty-five more reading years left in him. Three multiplied by seventy-five gave him his surprisingly short lifetime reading list to plan.

A finite limit

Realising that there is a finite limit on anything we do is a sobering thought. Maybe you read faster than the man in the article, or you imagine you have a lot more years ahead of you, but it's still worth doing the sums and work out just how many books you'll likely get a chance to read.

How does the number you come up with make you feel? Do you



Getting Your Important Work Done

look at the books on your bedside table differently? Is that half finished book you're plodding through because you think you ought to really be the one you want to be reading? What about the books you've always thought you wanted to read but haven't? Is it time for a visit to the library or your favourite bookshop?

Making choices is vital

Of course, choices like this are just as vital (more so even!) when it comes to our Important Work. We really have only got so much working time in our lives. If we're also limited by our energy levels then then we more than likely have less than the average person. It's vital then to make some choices, work on the things that are important to us, that move us along in the direction we want to go.

Don't try to work harder, just choose carefully

I say this, not to panic you. If you realise you only have 75 books left to read, I wouldn't suggest desperately trying to fit more in,

Getting Your Important Work Done

rather pick out what you want to read with care and consideration. The same holds for our Important Work. Don't work harder, just choose more carefully what you want to be doing!

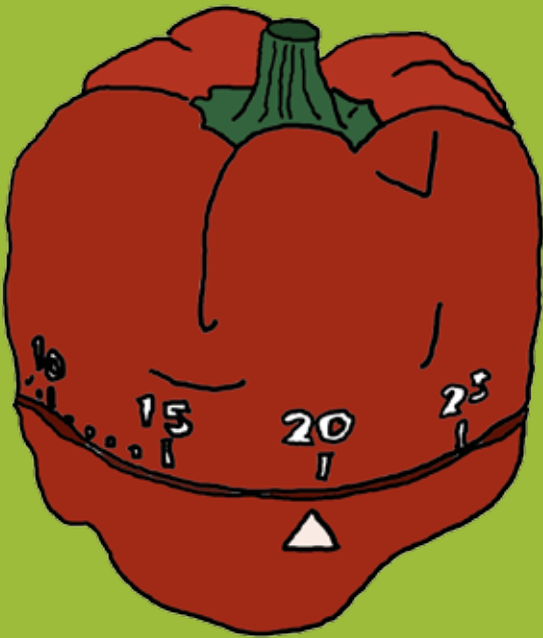
Getting Your Important Work Done

Get a timer!

If I had to recommend one thing that makes getting Important Work done easier, it would be the humble kitchen timer. I inherited my gaudy red timer from my mother and I love that it's shaped like a red pepper. It also has a very satisfying tick and very robust ring!

Encouraging us to work “little and often”

So, why is my lovely red timer such a good Getting the Important Work Done tool? It's all to do with the second great Important Work tool, the “little and often” principle. I'm a strong believer in the idea that doing just a little bit of creative work on a regular basis will achieve great things. Just twenty minutes a day spent working of a project, say two hundred or three hundred words of writing, a small drawing, or a couple of photographs will in no time build up into a significant body of work.



Getting Your Important Work Done

Just twenty minutes at a time

The humble kitchen timer is a great incentive to get down to work for those magic twenty minutes. Set it for twenty minutes and make a game out of seeing how much you can get done before it rings. Stop work as soon as it does and leave your project out and easily accessible. I'll guarantee you'll be raring to get back to it tomorrow.

Non-creative tasks too

The timer works its magic with non-creative tasks too. Set it for ten minutes and see how much of the paperwork you've been putting off you can get through before it rings. Or see how much of the bathroom you can clean in 20 minutes.

Remember to stop working when it rings and take some time to notice and appreciate what you've achieved.

Getting Your Important Work Done

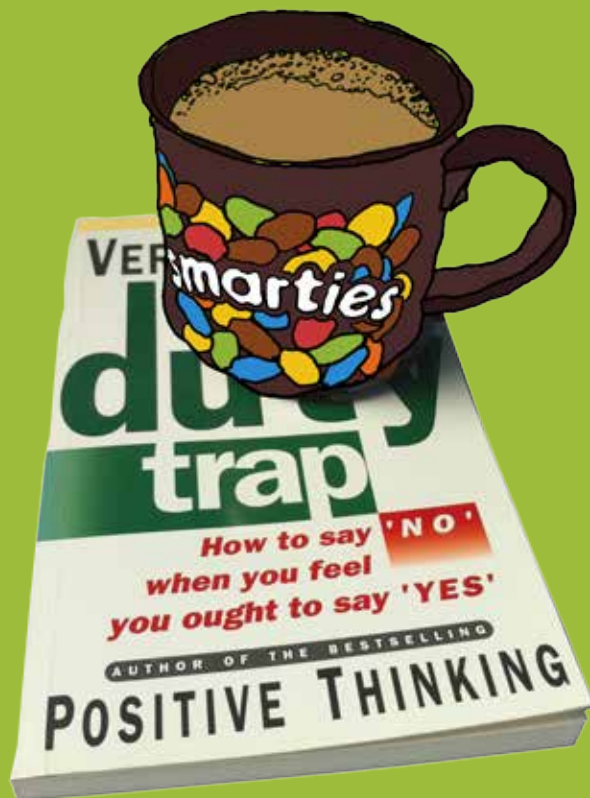
The Importance of “No”

Saying “no” to requests for your time and energy is one of the most important things you can learn to do if you want to have enough of both left for Your Important Work.

A difficult (but incredibly worthwhile!) thing to learn

Learning to say “no,” in my mind, is also one of the most difficult aspects of dealing with limited energy. We all want to be able to help other when we can, and many of us have been brought up to think it is rude to say “no” to people. Equally, can anyone not have been on the receiving end of someone else saying “no” to them, and feeling hurt and a little rejected by it?

Saying “no” then is fraught with complications. However, that’s not a reason to not get better at it. If you can get rid of the guilt and social conditioning that make turning down someone’s request



Getting Your Important Work Done

for help so difficult then you'll be rewarded with more time and energy to devote to what is important to you.

Like learning to pay yourself first

It's a little like learning to pay yourself first. Take what energy you need to get today's Important Work done, and then you may well find you have the energy and goodwill to be able to do things for other people too. Pay yourself second, and the added resentment that will come from not getting your Important Work done will more than likely just mean no one is happy!

Getting Your Important Work Done

Why on some days it's a good idea to say "no" even to your Important Work

In the last essay I talked about why it's important to learn to say "no" if you want to have the time and energy for your Important Work. Saying "no" to other people isn't easy (though it does get easier with practice), but sometimes it's saying "no" to ourselves that the most difficult thing to do, especially at times of very low energy.

When we're tired out judgement is often impaired

I know from my own experience that it is precisely when I'm at my tiredest and I really need a break, that I find it extremely difficult to not give in to my own requests to get "just one more thing" finished. I often push myself on, even though I've learnt over and over again that working when I'm tired just means it will take me longer to recover and get my energy back! The reason is



Getting Your Important Work Done

simple; when we're tired our judgement is impaired. At least mine certainly is, and that makes saying "no" to my own urgency to get things done very difficult.

Tiredness can magnify our fear of non-achievement

I quite understand why I'm like this. Maybe it's the same for you? I have a fear (magnified when I'm tired) that if I don't do stuff that I won't ever achieve anything. Moreover, I believe (wrongly!) that it is only when I'm physically doing something that I am achieving. I'm learning, slowly, how misguided this is, and also how damaging it is to my health and wellbeing.

Achievement is a cumulative thing!

The more I work in small, manageable steps, focused on my own Important Work I can see that achievement is a cumulative thing, and what's more it takes on a life of its own. Even when I'm not

Getting Your Important Work Done

twittering, or writing, or podcasting or blogging, my stuff is still out in the world, it is still being read and listened too. People still come to my blog when I'm sitting by my fire drinking tea, and they still buy my books when I'm napping. I can rest and look after myself and still be getting somewhere. What's more, when I do look after myself properly I am much more able to do more work and keep the cycle going.

Saying “no” to ourselves has two excellent results!

1. Saying “no” allows us to look after our energy levels, meaning we can in time do more of what we think it really important.
2. It allows us to sit back and see just how much we've already achieved, and how much we can continue to achieve even as we rest.

Now, aren't those good reasons to take a nap?

Getting Your Important Work Done

The importance of putting energy back into the Energy Bank (part one)

This essay (and its second part) originally appeared in my book [*Sustainable Creativity*](#).

One of the hardest lessons I've learnt about dealing with low energy (and one of the best techniques I've discovered for staying sustainably creative) concerns the concept of our own personal Energy Bank. Our Energy Bank is a bit like our ordinary bank account. Instead of money, we deposit and withdraw energy from it. And just like our ordinary bank account we can easily overspend and build up an overdraft.

Sometimes monetary overdrafts are useful for helping us through a brief cash flow problem, but used to excess they can just lead to more debt. If we're not careful with our finances we can eventually



Getting Your Important Work Done

live in a permanent overdraft, only ever earning enough to just about pay off our existing overdraft before we start to live off our debt again.

A permanent energy overdraft

The same is just as true for our Energy Bank. It is all too easy, especially if we suffer from low energy in the first place, to live in a permanent energy overdraft. I know from my own experience that in comparing myself to other people, measuring myself against what they could do and trying to emulate it, I was constantly using more energy than I had available to me. Soon I was in a permanent energy overdraft situation, when I would rest just about enough to get myself back to a zero balance before starting to withdraw energy from my overdraft again.

In time things got worse and worse and before long I wasn't even resting enough to get back to a zero position before I would

Getting Your Important Work Done

withdraw more energy from the Energy Bank. Eventually things became so bad that I was to all intents and purposes energy bankrupt!

The importance of getting out of energy debt

The only way back to any semblance of health was get myself out of this debt. There were no shortcuts and the process took the best part of a decade. What I learnt over that time was that for every penny I took out of the energy bank I needed to put three in. In other words for every three hours of rest I has about one hour of energy. So in any given day I had about six hours of energy available from 18 hours of rest. This was another revelation to me. I began to keep a very careful energy diary, noting how long I slept and how long I rested and then how much activity I undertook.

Of course my useful six hours of earned energy couldn't all be used to great feats of activity (and equally my 18 hours of rest time

Getting Your Important Work Done

didn't need to be complete inactivity either), but working with the basic equation was my first step in getting out of energy debt and eventually became the system I used to stay out of debt and actually build up a positive balance in my Energy Bank.

Part two of this essay includes practical steps that can be taken to put energy back into the Energy Bank

Getting Your Important Work Done

The importance of putting energy back into the Energy Bank (part two)

So what am I saying here? Firstly, I'm saying you always need to pay your energy into the Energy Bank BEFORE you use it, and second, you need to be aware of what we could call your own personal Energy Exchange Rate is. Maybe it's better than my 3:1 ratio, maybe it's worse. You'll need to work it out with trial and error.

Work out your Energy Exchange Rate

Start with a high exchange rate and work down. 7:1, if you're particularly ill might be a good place to start. That means that for every seven hours of rest you get one hour's worth of energy—that's three hours of activity each day.



Getting Your Important Work Done

Getting this right is really worthwhile. Even if you only have one hour of useful energy in every 24, you can still take steps to be sustainably creative (and over time, as you slowly get out of your energy overdraft you may well find you have more energy to spare).

Putting energy into your energy bank

The third thing to realise when thinking about putting energy into the Energy Bank is that energy deposits don't just need to come from inactivity and sleep. If like me you end up needing to put 18 hours of energy deposits into your Energy Bank to get six hours of activity then you can "earn" your energy in a variety of ways. Yes, sleep is a good place to start, but I've learnt over time that just sleeping to put energy in the Energy Bank isn't good for my more general well-being. I try and aim for around eight hours of sleep each day, generally split between 6-7 hours at night and 1-2 hours off napping during the day ([I love napping](#)). The other ten hours of

Getting Your Important Work Done

energy earning I do in other ways.

What works for me

Generally, “resting” for me includes two elements: What I’m doing physically and what I’m doing mentally.

Now, I’m sure there is a sliding scale between “resting” at one end and “doing” at the other, but basically for me resting involves keeping both mental and physical activity reasonably low. Again, you’ll need to work with trial and error to work out which things count as “resting” and which as “doing”, but for me I find things like the following work well:

- Meditating
- Listening to the radio (I like radio drama, but gentle music works well, too)

Getting Your Important Work Done

- Some baking and cooking (I keep this simple—making soup is good for me, putting the ingredients in the bread maker and enjoying the smell of baking works well too!)
- Stroking a cat
- Knitting
- Reading (on bad days, looking at picture/art books might be a better choice than reading actual words!)
- Drawing (again I keep this simple, just a pen and sketchbook and something small to draw)
- Watching a favourite TV programme/film (I find making an event out of TV watching is better than aimless TV surfing)
- Pottering (I believe my North American friends call this “puttering.” The art of moving slowly and doing a few very gentle chores)
- Sipping a cup of tea
- Sitting in the garden
- Writing long-hand

Getting Your Important Work Done

Mindfulness is the key

I could go on, but I'm sure you get the idea. Generally think "mindfulness" and you won't go far wrong. Notice some of the things I do to "earn" my energy might be considered work (drawing for instance). I'm careful here to stay very aware of how I'm feeling. Making a drawing when it is going well can be very relaxing, but if it becomes a struggle I always try to stop and come back to it in my "doing" time.

Find out what works for you

Basically you'll need to find out what works for you. Be as honest with yourself as you can. There may be things you love to do, that you'd dearly love to be things that feed your energy rather than sap it, but if they don't then it's important to be aware of that. That doesn't mean you can't do them of course, just that you need to

Getting Your Important Work Done

make the choice to do them in your “doing” time and not your energy eating “resting” time.

Have fun discovering what works for you!

Getting Your Important Work Done

Wabi-sabi: the beauty of imperfection (or how to reject the tyranny of perfection in order to get your Important Work Done)

I've recently come across the Japanese idea of [wabi-sabi](#), and it has brought together a few things I have been thinking about in a way that has really helped me with getting some of my own Important Work done and out into the world.

The beauty of imperfection

Wabi-sabi is a big idea based around accepting the transience of all things, more specifically it's about seeing the beauty in imperfection, and realising that, as much as we may like it to be, nothing is ever perfect, permanent, or complete.



Getting Your Important Work Done

A liberating idea

For me this is a very liberating idea. As much as we might work at finishing and perfecting our work it is never going to be truly perfect. There will always be room to tweak things just a little bit more, room to learn more before we even start.

Take this essay for instance. I'm writing about a idea that is new to me, I want to write it because I've come across a new idea that has really helped me and I want to share what I've learnt in the hope it will help other people, but it is a new idea, one that I'm still learning about. In fact this is such a big idea that I suspect people spend a lifetime studying it and still have more to learn. If I waited until I had a complete understanding about it then I'd never write this essay. Even if I waited a month before writing it I might well write something different. But I'm choosing to write it today, and that's okay.

Getting Your Important Work Done

The tyranny of perfection

The idea of perfection is a tyranny of sorts. It can stagnate us and prevent us from getting our Important Work done and out in the world. We can be so scared of the critics and what they might say that we can constantly tweak things, add things, change things as our own ideas change and develop. But if you let the idea in, just for a moment, that no matter how hard you work, no matter what you do, nothing is going to make your work perfect anyway, then perhaps you can start let yourself think that your work is fine right now, just as it is.

Some ideas to help you embrace imperfection and get your Important Work done:

1. Decide on a “done” date and stick to it.
2. Accept there will be things that aren't right.

Getting Your Important Work Done

3. Understand that however “perfect” your work is, it isn’t going to be “just right” in everybody’s eyes.
4. Celebrate what you have done instead of what you haven’t.
5. Embrace the idea of the beauty of imperfection.
6. Understand that it is so much easier to criticise than to create.
7. Ignore the critics (both your own inner ones and the ones out in the world)
8. Just get it done and out into the world “warts and all.”

Getting Your Important Work Done

Don't do today, what you could put off until tomorrow

I'll admit for the outset that the title of this essay is slightly tongue-in-cheek. I'm sure you know Thomas Jefferson's procrastination killing adage, "Never put off till tomorrow what you can do today." I'd like to turn it on it's head (just a little).

Questioning the notion that procrastination is a bad thing

Whilst I don't wholly disagree with Jefferson's sentiment (if we want to get on with our Important Work, we do at some point actually have to get down to some work!), I do find myself increasingly questioning both the notion of urgency, and the idea that procrastination is always a bad thing and the enemy of creativity.



Getting Your Important Work Done

Having low energy can increase our sense of urgency

I often find that it is people that are low on energy, or who have little spare time, that feel the greatest sense of urgency. They think they need to make use of whatever spare energy they have to rush at the things they want to get done (or think they ought to do). They worry that there might not be any more spare energy along for a while and this might be their only chance to get something done. Deeply ingrained cultural beliefs that we shouldn't "waste" time only increase the sense of urgency.

Rushing usually isn't the best way to use our time

I don't think this is helpful. If you suffer from low energy then pushing yourself will often only lead to less energy in the future, and therefore less ability to carry on with your Important Work. Moreover (and this is as true for people with limited time as it is for those of us with limited energy), rushing at getting something

Getting Your Important Work Done

done often isn't the best use of our time. It just often isn't efficient. How often have you rushed to get something done, only to discover afterwards that with a bit more time and thought you would have done it differently (or worse not done it at all)? Usually pausing, thinking and considering before you act isn't a bad idea at all (and is a much kinder way to treat yourself).

Procrastination has a bad name. There are plenty of articles on the web and books to read that tell us how to avoid procrastination, and how to just get down to work. However rather than just squashing the urge to procrastinate it might be a good idea to look at why we are distracting ourselves and not getting down to work in the first place.

Procrastination of the pointless busyness variety is exhausting and should of course be avoided. But just getting down to work instead might not be the answer either. Sometimes we need the space to let ideas grow and develop. Instead of thinking that we are

Getting Your Important Work Done

procrastinating we thought we were germinating and nurturing our ideas, then we might feel differently about it.

So sometimes I would like to suggest that just because something can be done today, perhaps that doesn't mean it should be. Instead why not put it off until tomorrow and let your ideas mature and save some energy (or use it for something fun, perhaps something that will even help put a little more energy into your [energy bank](#)).

Getting Your Important Work Done

Forget about seizing the day, enjoy it instead (a gentler translation of carpe diem)

I wonder if there's anyone who has seen Robin Williams' film *Dead Poets Society* that didn't come away from it feeling that they were duty bound, if they wanted to truly embrace life, to seize the day?

Carpe diem

Central to the film is the now well-known latin phrase carpe diem, translated in the film as seize the day. Indeed carpe diem has become a mantra in the years since the film, used by people who believe each day should be lived like it is your last, that there is no time to waste, and everything has to be done now.

You might have already guessed that I don't wholly embrace the



Getting Your Important Work Done

sentiment! Don't get me wrong, I strongly believe in making the most of life, just not grabbing at it with a sense of urgency. I'd go far as to say that there is a certain tyranny around the notion of carpe diem, certainly when it's translated as it nearly always is, as seize the day. Especially if you're someone who is low on energy, this sort of urging to get everything done today is potentially very damaging. Refusing to get caught up in the belief can almost be seen as sacrilege!

A gentle eye on the future

My tongue is only so far in my cheek when I say that if you treat each day as though it was your last, grabbing and stressing and trying to get everything done, then there's more chance it will be your last! Certainly, working without a gentle eye on the future, not planning and treating yourself kindly and acting as if there was only today, gives little respect to tomorrow (and remember more

Getting Your Important Work Done

than likely there will be a tomorrow!).

An alternative translation

Far better to embrace an alternative (and less well known) translation of *carpe diem* - enjoy the day. Thinking about how to enjoy the day still leaves plenty of scope for getting our Important Work done, but also for enjoying the process, and seeing life as gentler, long term journey too. Not every day needs to be full of achievement, we can remember to take time to go for a walk, bake a cake, sip some tea, or take a nap.

Enjoying the day!

Enjoying the day is about accepting a manageable pace, leaving room for the inevitable ups and downs of energy and inspiration, and taking the time to smell the coffee (or a freshly baking cake!). More importantly it's about realising that not everything can be

Getting Your Important Work Done

completed, and even if today is our last we might as well have a smile on our face, even if our to-do list isn't complete!

Getting Your Important Work Done

Remember to celebrate your achievements

This is the tenth essay in my *Getting Your Important Work Done* series, which means every two weeks for twenty weeks I've regularly written a short essay.

Now, I'm tempted to say that all that might not sound much of an achievement. Indeed, a few years ago I might have said just that, but today I recognise what an accomplishment this is. Something worthy of celebration!

Celebrating helps us to pause and appreciate

If you want to stay sustainably creative and get your Important Work done, then it's very important to recognise and celebrate what you achieve. Celebrating helps us to pause and really see what we've used our time and energy for and, done regularly, acts



Getting Your Important Work Done

as a wonderful incentive to keep moving on with out Important Work. Do you remember the joy of receiving a gold star at school? Didn't it make you swell with pride at what you'd done and give you a boost to work harder? Celebrations, large and small, are the gold stars of the grown-up classroom of life.

If you're going to add regular celebration to your working life then the first step is to learn to recognise ALL you have achieved.

Here are a few suggestions for ways of keeping track of what you're achieved:

1. Keep a notebook by your bed and at the end of everyday jot down everything you're done that day. It's so easy to forget the little achievements and we can often tell ourselves we've done "nothing" with our time. The opposite is almost always true!
2. If you write to-do lists, keep them. For a while when I thought

Getting Your Important Work Done

I was achieving very little I kept the short to-do lists (usually only with one or two things I wanted to get done with my limited energy each day on them) and stuck them to my studio wall when they were completed. In a couple of months I'd filled the wall and had a very visual representations of everything I'd done!

3. Arrange a regular meeting with some friends or colleagues where everyone shares what they've achieved since your last meeting. Meeting like this both offer opportunities to celebrate what we've done and act as a focus for keeping us on track so we have something to report to the group (remember though, it's little achievements done regularly that build up into a body of work, we don't need to have "big" achievements to report).

Create some celebratory rituals

Once we start to recognise what we've achieved we can start to celebrate! Begin to create some celebratory rituals for yourself.

Getting Your Important Work Done

Celebrations don't need to be grand (though once in a while it is good to organise a large celebration to honour a major achievement). They can be as simple as a cup of your favourite tea when you've finished working on your Twenty Minutes a Day project for the day. Make a list of ways you like to celebrate and start to include them in your working life.

Here are a few of the ways I like to celebrate:

- A cup of tea (made in a pot!).
- Meeting a friend for coffee and cake at my Favourite Cafe.
- Sharing a box of chocolates with some friends.
- Baking a celebratory cake and inviting people to come and eat it with me.
- Watching a favourite TV programme or renting a film.
- Treating myself to a book I want to read.
- Having [a day away](#).

Getting Your Important Work Done

- Going out for a meal.
- Chocolate!

I'm sure you can think of lots of ways you like to celebrate. It doesn't matter how you celebrate, just that you do something that feels special to you. What achievement can you celebrate this week?

Getting Your Important Work Done

Take some time to look back at all you've achieved

Whilst I'm a big fan of planning in order to get our Important Work done, today I'd like to suggest you get your metaphorical binoculars out and take some time to look back instead of looking forward.

A regular looking-back date

I would suggest you add a looking-back date with yourself to your regular creative routine. Maybe you'd like to do it at the end of the year like [I tend to do](#), or every three months as the seasons change, or even once a month.

Taking some time to look back and write about what you're achieved is time very well spent and can supply a wonderful



Getting Your Important Work Done

energy boast. At the very least it will make you realise just how much you have done recently, and will help you plan for what you'd like to do next.

The satisfaction of realising what you've achieved

If you're someone with limited energy (and even if you're not!) it's all too easy to forget what you have achieved. There is something very satisfying in seeing what we have done set down in black and white and the process of writing down a year, season's or month's worth of accomplishments will help us remember plenty of things that otherwise would have slipped our minds.

There are plenty of ways you could choose to write about your achievements. You might like to do it chronologically, working week to week, or month to month, perhaps with the help of a diary or journal if you keep one. Alternatively you could make a simple list of your projects. You could choose to include personal

Getting Your Important Work Done

developments or just keep to your working life.

Positive reflections

However you choose to recall what you've been doing, make it fun and keep your reflections positive. Why not gather together a tea tray of goodies and find a quiet corner with your laptop or notebook? Pour yourself a cup of tea, sip it and let your mind wander over the last year. When you're ready just start to write and let one memory nudge another. Don't leave anything out, **EVERYTHING** you've done is important and shows you just how well you've done with your Important Work.

Why not share your achievements?

Once you've finished your reflections consider showing them to someone you're close to, someone who will join you in celebrating just how much you've been doing. Maybe you'll want to be more

Getting Your Important Work Done

public with your review of your achievements. If you write a blog and feel comfortable to do so, then you could publish it there (it might well inspire others to reflect and realise just how much they've got done too).

Whatever you decide to do with your reflections (even if you keep them to yourself), read them and reread them, revel in all you've done and feel proud of yourself. Realise just how many steps you've taken to get your Important Work done.

Getting Your Important Work Done

Why it's okay (even essential) to stop completely

Sometimes the only way to get our Important Work done is to stop. Completely.

I understand how counterintuitive that sounds. If we're already only able to work a small percentage of the time that most of the people around us do, how can it help us to get things done by stopping? Surely we'll just get more behind!

We need fallow times

This sort of understandable panic is based on the mistaken belief that constant doing really gets things done. I don't believe it does. Unless you're working on a production line where you're just adding one component to another at a uniform pace (and then



Getting Your Important Work Done

doing the same thing over and over again will probably lead to repetitive strain injury!) then you need fallow times as well as doing times. Time to digest what you've done and to plan (perhaps subconsciously), and then times to move things along. For many of us the moving things along stage, the "doing" stage might actually be quite short, and if done in a focused way, not needing to use a huge amount of our precious energy reserves.

Let me tell you where I'm at this week.

I'm sitting in bed as I write this, a cat curled up at my feet, a book on one side and a pot of tea and a plate of biscuits on the other. The radio is playing BBC Radio 4 quietly (I intend to turn it up once the afternoon play starts) and the heater is humming gently keeping the frosty chill at bay. It all sounds idyllic, and in many ways it is, but I'm here, hot water bottle at my feet, not because I want to be, but because I've been feeling progressively iller over the last few days and experience has told me that the only way to

Getting Your Important Work Done

feel better is to stop. Completely.

I'm doing my best not to mind this enforced fallow time. Yes, I would much rather be out and about, perhaps writing this in my Favourite Cafe, or wandering around a book shop, or meeting friends for lunch. Yes, I have a lot of my own Important Work to be getting on with; I want to make some more drawings for the expanded version of [Sustainable Creativity](#); I want to write some blog posts [so I can feel a little ahead](#); I want find some lovely links to post to [Twitter](#). Instead I have to content myself with Radio 4, a pot of tea and picking away at this little essay as my brain fog clears enough to be able to put down the odd (hopefully!) coherent sentence.

Learning to trust in the quiet times

As the days go on and I don't really feel much better I have to simply trust that this fallow time is both taking care of me

Getting Your Important Work Done

physically and creatively. That whilst my body is healing slowly (I have to admit I wish it would speed up just a little!) my creative spirit is germinating and ruminating. I have to believe that once some energy returns I will know what my best next creative step will be and I'll just be able to take it.

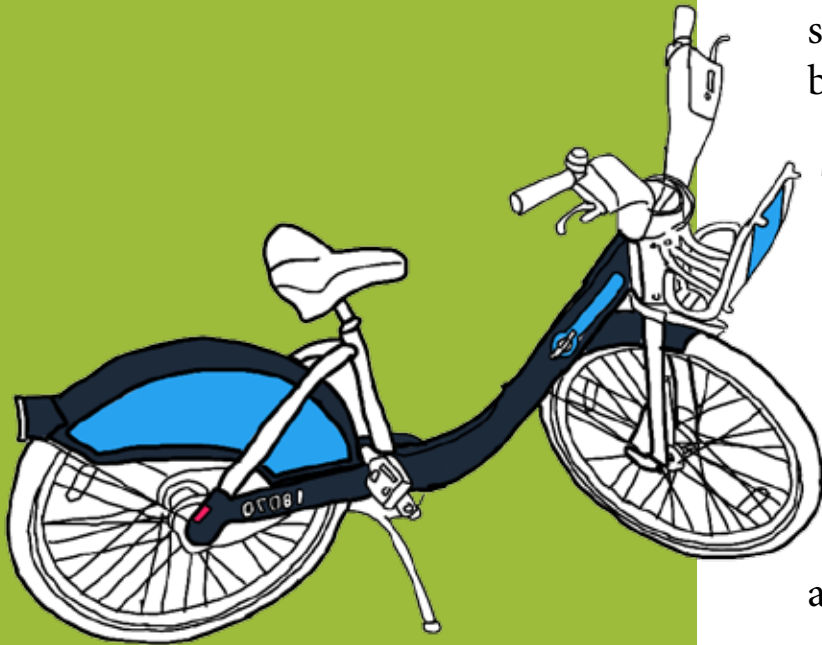
I wrote [a blog post](#) this week about how happy a bowl of crocuses and a ball of red wool that are sitting by my bed are making me very happy at the moment. The happiness I think, comes from seeing the potential in both of them. The slowly sprouting bulbs with their promise of bright flowers if I'm patient enough to wait for them to come in their own good time, and the bright red wool full of possibilities for what it could be knitted in to (a tea cosy perhaps?).

I [read](#) yesterday that "fallow" is the name of one of the oldest colours in the English language. I don't know why I find that so comforting, but I do. Time to pour out a cup to tea.

Getting Your Important Work Done

Deciding to schedule a catch-up day into my week

I've been away to London for a few days and whilst I was there got excited about the cycling scheme that started recently. On many street corners there are rows of beautiful blue bicycles which can be borrowed to cycle around the city on.



The amount it costs to borrow a bike depends on how long you ride the machine for before you return it to another of the city's bike parks. I think the pricing starts from free for the first thirty minutes, and then climbs throughout the day, to something like £300 if you were to keep it for 24 hours.

Clearly that means most people use the bikes for short trips and also means it's very rare to see one of the blue bicycles anywhere but in motion or returned to a bike park.

Getting Your Important Work Done

Resisting just rushing to a destination

I very much like the idea of just being able to grab a bike and peddle off to my destination, but really am not keen on the principle behind the scheme that seem to be saying that it is just the journey that is important, that there's no time for stopping and resting and enjoying the view on the way.

Taking time to sit on a bench and look at the view

I was delighted then, to spot one bike propped up on its stand between St Paul's and Tate Modern, its rider sitting on a bench nearby enjoying the view of the Thames and drinking a coffee. He didn't seem to mind that his rest was in essence costing him money.

I'm so glad I saw this man, because I bought his attitude home with me.

Getting Your Important Work Done

I had a lovely time, on my trip to the Big City but the combination of being away (so I was less able to work) and the extra energy I used up (meaning I've also been less able to work since I've been home) mean that I've been feeling rather behind with things since I've been back.

Ignoring the urge to work harder to catch-up

The urge of course is to work harder and longer to “catch-up” but luckily I remembered the man parking his bike and enjoying a coffee even though the meter was ticking on his journey.

I decided to just accept that my own meter was ticking and just put up with feeling that I ought to be getting on. I found my own metaphorical bench to sit on and rested and enjoyed looking back over the excitement of my trip.

While I rested I made a decision. Apart from my plan of always

Getting Your Important Work Done

having a little work in reserve for downtimes (something I have to admit I've let slip of the last couple of months), I decided that I'm going to schedule a catch up day into my week. Every week.

Like factoring a financial contingency into a budget for a project, my "catch-up" days recognise the fact that we all overspend from time to time, whether we're talking about money or energy. The unexpected demands on our time and energy are just a fact of life and it's better to accept them and allow for them as much as possible.

A feeling of space

The feeling of space this decision has given me is heartening. If I don't manage to finish all I'd like to on a given day I can now think I can do that on my catch-up day. It allows me more room to accept I might be feeling more tired than usual on a given day and just stop when I need to, rather than pushing myself harder than

Getting Your Important Work Done

I should. I also wonder if it'll mean that I feel more able to take little trips like my London one, because I'll feel less worried about what the effects of the trip will have on my work.

Time will tell.

Getting Your Important Work Done

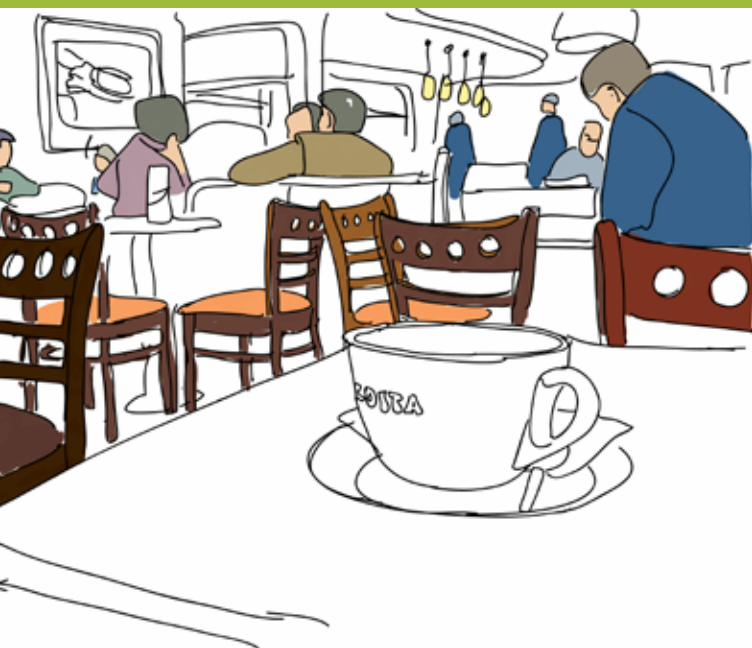
In praise of working on one thing at a time

I often talk about how important it is to focus on one thing at a time if we want to get our Important Work done, but I still often find myself juggling my time and energy between ideas and projects nonetheless.

This week however I have taken my own advice very much to heart and stopped working on everything for a few days whilst I put the finishing touches to the update of a book I've been trying to finish for more than three months.

Making the decision to focus on one thing for a few days

My energy has been particularly low recently and so the amount of useful time I can devote to work has been especially limited. After the day-to-day things I do, like blogging, tweeting and writing, got done there was nothing spare for my project. So I made the



Getting Your Important Work Done

decision to just stop everything else and get on with finishing my book.

Focus takes discipline

I've realised just how much discipline it takes to focus on something in this way. The temptations to try to squeeze in a few emails or tweets was very strong (and I did succumb once or twice!), and letting other things slide (including this microMag which is a couple of days later than usual!) made me feel VERY guilty.

The reward of staying focused

However the rewards were tremendous. Focusing almost all my energy on my one project meant that I got more done in five days than I have in the last three months. My book is finished and now I can return to my more usual routine without the distraction of

Getting Your Important Work Done

worrying about it and feeling like I would never get it done.

If you would like to take some time out to focus your resources on one thing here are a few tips:

- Tell people you're not going to be available for a few days and why (people are generally very understanding of the need to go away and focus).
- Try working somewhere different to help yourself not to slip back into more normal work patterns (I spent a lot of time in a local cafe this week!).
- Unless you REALLY need it, try to work somewhere without Internet access (or turn it off!).
- Leave your phone at home.
- If you're working on a computer only open the applications you actually need to do your work.
- Don't overdo things. Working on one thing isn't about working harder, it's about being focused. Take regular breaks!

Getting Your Important Work Done

- Set a time limit for your focusing on your one project. Having a deadline tends to get things finished, whilst an open ended timespan often means things never get done.
- Accept that you will probably feel guilty for not doing the things you usually do. Keep your eyes on the prize of finishing your project.
- Accept that you will probably slip up a few times and check your email, or make a phone call. If you do don't give yourself a hard time just make yourself a cup of tea and get back to your focused working.
- Plan a treat for the end of your focused time. Celebrate what you've achieved!

Getting Your Important Work Done

Stop trying to catch-up, work from where you are

One of the hardest things about working with limited energy (especially inconsistently limited energy) is the impossibility of making reliable plans. There are good days and bad days and we just have to learn to accept them, even if the bad days leave us feeling that we're constantly racing to catch up with the pack.

I learnt a long time ago that the only way to get any of my own Important Work done is to make it my priority. It needs to be the thing I do first in the day.

Learning to develop a base level of activity

In time I've built up a work routine of sorts that lets me get through a certain amount of things on most days. It is a kind of



Getting Your Important Work Done

base level of activity that make a priority of the things I hold most dear.

Sometimes even this base level isn't possible

That said there are still plenty of times when I can't even manage this base level of activity. I'm having one of those times just now.

Over the last couple of weeks I've been working harder than normal on finishing the update to my ebook, Sustainable Creativity and also redesigning my little free ebook, Start to Draw Your Life. I'm very pleased to have got them done, both have been things I've been meaning to do for a long time, but now I am paying the price for working so hard. It's a little like overspending my monthly budget, now I need to spend less for a while to get myself out of energy debt.

Luckily I know the signs of overdoing things, I know when to

Getting Your Important Work Done

stop. The final straw for me was the end of last week hanging my washing on the line. I suddenly burst into tears because there just seemed so many socks to hang out and I just couldn't cope with them! Definitely time to call a halt.

Accepting the need to stop

It's time for me to sit down with some tea and biscuits for a few days, probably quite a number of days. I don't mind too much needing this quiet time, but it does mean a lot of the things I would like to do just won't get done.

Don't be seduced into feeling the need to "catch up"

If I'm not careful I'll start to think I'm getting behind, and getting behind means I'll feel I need to catch up.

Catching up is never a good idea. It's like trying to get out of debt

Getting Your Important Work Done

whilst spending not only your usual budget but also extra to catch up.

Trying to catch up just leads to more energy debt

When we're in energy debt we can't even afford to spend our normal budget (that just keeps us in debt) let alone the extra necessary to catch up. Instead we just have to learn to accept the need to stop and then, when it's time to start again, just to start from where we're at.

Not trying to catch up is liberating

This is a very liberating thing to realise and accept. It's not always easy of course, especially if calling a halt affects other people too, but it really is the only way to stay healthy and to get our Important Work done over the long-term.

Getting Your Important Work Done

Some tips for avoiding feeling as though you need to catch up:

- Try to work out a base-level of activity that is possible and do your best not to commit yourself to anything more.
- If your work involves other people try to keep them informed as much as possible about your energy ups and down (be honest with them when undertaking work in the first place).
- Accept that whilst a lot of people will understand your need to stop (and not be able to catch up later) they still might feel inconvenienced/annoyed, don't let that persuade you to do more than you're able. No one will benefit from that in the long run.
- Try to build up a reserve of work so you have something to fall back on in the REALLY bad times.
- Try to develop the sort of work that is forgiving of needing to take time off.

Getting Your Important Work Done

- Develop a sense of humour!
- Find [some things to do](#) that make the bad times more bearable (it's okay for life to feel pleasant even in the bad times!).

Getting Your Important Work Done

Learning to be compassionate with ourselves to get our Important Work done

Over on [Sustainably Creative](#) I've been writing [a short series of posts](#) looking at the tools I use to help me stay sustainably creative.

There's one tool that I haven't included, not because I don't think it's important but because I'm still learning how to use it and don't feel confident to write about it in such a public forum. That tool is compassion and I wanted to discuss it a little here.

A little secret

I'll let you all into a little secret. For the last few months I've been working with a life coach. That's not something I ever thought I'd do; it doesn't feel very "British"—not at all stiff upper lip and tea drinking. Of course whilst I'm an Olympic tea drinker, my upper



Getting Your Important Work Done

lip isn't very stiff and so maybe I'm more open to life coaching and other forms of therapy than some of my fellow countrymen and women might be.

Nonetheless, deciding to embark on a series of sessions was still a bit of a leap for me. It's scary to open oneself up to a stranger and to talk about the things in our lives that aren't as we like them to be. I took what I thought was a very clearheaded approach to my sessions at the outset. Laying down clear goals for the things I wanted to achieve, things to do with money, health and relationships. I set myself long and short term goals and decided on a series of "next-step" actions to take.

Things went well to start with. I felt very in control of the process and was pleased with the results (and the possibilities of even more and better results), but I began to feel that something was missing. I began to see that I was "working" at this process, not enjoying it.

Getting Your Important Work Done

A realisation

Increasingly, as I've got older, I've realised that "working" at things is something I do all the time. I remember when I first got sick I used to "work" at getting better (and one of the devastating things about [ME/CFS](#) is that pushing oneself just makes things worse) and whilst illness showed up the futility of working and pushing at some things, I've never really cured myself of the habit!

There's been something about the life coaching process that's changed things just a little though. It's to do with how much it has made me practice being aware.

Non-judgemental awareness

Learning to be aware of ourselves isn't just about watching ourselves, it's about watching ourselves without judging ourselves. It means we are able to see ourselves with a clear vision, one not

Getting Your Important Work Done

clouded by our views of how things “should” be and how we “want” them to be. Basically it about being compassionate towards ourselves.

Letting in a little compassion

An interesting thing has happened since I’ve been letting in a little compassion for myself. I’ve been working less at things, not pushing myself to following my timetables (I’ve even had timetables for resting and napping!). Over the last month or so I’ve been watching myself be far more willing to let myself off the hook about things and even when I haven’t I’ve have been able to not give myself a hard time about it.

The result is I’m feeling a lot more rested than I have in a VERY long time, and somehow, in little fits and starts I’ve still managed to get my Important Work done.

Getting Your Important Work Done

Fledgling steps

I'm not going to pretend that I'm an expert at this compassion thing yet. I suspect it is going to take a very long time to undo old habits of pushing myself (I'm not even sure it's possible), but just opening the door at little to the possibility of being kinder to myself is making a big difference.

Some days just making the decision to sit down with a cup of tea instead of pushing myself to get something finished (or even started) opens up some space in which a lovely thing starts to happen. Suddenly there feels like there's time for things to develop at their natural pace, the pressure begins to lift and I feel myself relax.

Making room for our quiet wise voice

In this relaxed state I have a much clearer view of my needs and can start hear that quiet and wise little voice that we all have. A

Getting Your Important Work Done

voice that if we let it whisper in our ear can tell us what our next best step is.

I've found that it becomes possible to adopt a rhythm of work and rest that means I don't feel as though I am always at the edge of what I can manage, but rather that I'm working well within my means.

Why learning to be more compassionate with ourselves can help us get our Important Work done:

- Being compassionate with ourselves creates a sense of space in which we can discover our own natural working rhythms.
- Compassion will help not push ourselves beyond what we can comfortably do (and so make it more likely that we can work consistently).
- The more compassionate we are with ourselves the more we

Getting Your Important Work Done

learn to hear (and trust) in the wise voice that can help keep us on creative track.

- Compassion helps us develop a “good enough” attitude to our life and work; instead of cajoling ourselves along with the rod of perfectionism, we can encourage ourselves with the carrot of “this is the best I can do today, and it is enough”.
- Being compassionate with ourselves makes more room for life to be fun (and life should be fun!).

Getting Your Important Work Done

Why we need to avoid the “jam tomorrow” tendency if we want to keep getting our Important Work done



"The rule is, jam to-morrow and jam yesterday - but never jam to-day."

"It **MUST** come sometimes to jam to-day," Alice objected.

Lewis Carroll, *Through the Looking Glass*

Having our cake and eating it!

Poor Alice, she was understandably frustrated at the seeming impossibility of getting her hands on any jam today.

Like Alice, I prefer to have my jam today (and I also like having

Getting Your Important Work Done

my cake and eating it!), but it takes a lot of practice to not fall into the trap of always waiting until tomorrow to enjoy our jam, especially when it comes to dealing with our Important Work.

A working pattern to avoid

Do you recognise this pattern of working? You have lots of wonderful ideas for things you'd like to do? You pick one (or maybe more than one!) and rush at it, picturing how wonderful it will be to get it finished, how finishing it will make you feel like you've accomplished something grand.

You finally dot the last "i" and cross the last "t" of your opus, but before you've given yourself a chance to enjoy your achievement you're on to the next great idea, the one that will make you feel like you're really achieved something?

The jam in our working lives is the taking of pleasure in the things

Getting Your Important Work Done

we're doing and the things we've done. It isn't the about focusing on the next great idea and getting it finished. There will always be a next great idea waiting to be finished.

We need an incentive to keep on with our Important Work

Constantly living in the future, hoping for our teaspoon of jam tomorrow, is disheartening. It's saying to ourselves that all the effort we've put into something doesn't count for anything. That's hardly an incentive to get on with our Important Work!

A feast of our accomplishments

Instead, picture a tea table groaning under the weight of jam and bread and butter and cakes and sandwiches. Give yourself permission to sit at the table now and enjoy the feast.

Getting Your Important Work Done

That feast is everything you've accomplished to date, plus whatever your working on right now. How does that feel? Isn't it a treat to see everything you're done spread out before you to enjoy and appreciate?

Savouring our achievements

Perhaps there are one or two items on the table that give you even greater pleasure to see than everything else. Why not give them pride of place on a tall cake stand. Cut a slice of your achievement and savour it. Now sit back and think how seeing and enjoying all you have achieved makes you want to continue with your Important Work.

Looking back at what we've achieved and enjoying what we're working on now is by far the best way to keep ourselves on creative track. In contrast, the promise of jam tomorrow will wear

Getting Your Important Work Done

thin very quickly and simply leave us disenchanted and exhausted.

Why It's important to focus on what we've done rather than constantly looking forward to jam tomorrow:

1. We learn to enjoy the process (which will keep us wanting to continue with it).
2. Keeping our focus on today (and valuing yesterday's achievements) removes the pressure of expectation (we've already succeeded!).
3. Enjoying the tea party of our achievements engenders a calm and pleasant atmosphere that we can enjoy living and working in.
4. It's glorious to see all that we have done, and often inspires us to recycle, reuse and remake (sometimes we can get two or three achievements for the price of one if we take the time to look and to muse).
5. We actually get to eat the jam (and the cake!).

Getting Your Important Work Done

Reaching and accepting limits

I've been reaching the limits of what I can do a lot recently. Over the last couple of months my energy has been particularly bad and I've been constantly forced to accept that my wish to do things isn't being supported by my ability to do them!

Every time I think I've come to terms with having to slow down and do a little less it seems that something else comes along to make me accept a doing even less. This last week I've been suffering with a nasty cold on top of my already very limited energy and had no choice but to just stop completely.

An interesting time

It's been an interesting time, and not one I can say I've enjoyed. I've noticed how, even after all these years of working with a limited amount of energy, I still fight and struggle against the need to



Getting Your Important Work Done

slow down and even stop completely.

Learning the lessons over and over again

Even after writing over and over again about the need to be compassionate with ourselves about our limits I still give myself a hard time about not being well enough to work.

Even though I can tell other people in a similar situations to trust that a better day will be along and to just rest when it's necessary, I still find myself panicked and anxious and thinking that today is the only day I can do this or that and I must push myself just a little harder to get things done.

Even though doctors have told me (and I've seen myself over and over again) that if I push myself when I'm ill, I'm just making things worse and probably also jeopardising my recovery, I'm still unwilling to take proper care of myself when I really need to.

Getting Your Important Work Done

Why do we have to keep learning the same lessons over and over again I wonder? I've no idea, but perhaps repetition really is the only way we can learn. I'm sure I am learning, slowly, year by year that I have to accept my limits and work within them. I would dearly love to be able to accept the need for going slowly and not being led by panic BEFORE I hit my head against my limits. I'm sure life would be a much more pleasant thing if I could!

Being compassionate

What this particularly bout of ill health has shown me though, is that I need to not only be compassionate with myself about my limits, but also with myself about often not being able to see them!

Don't add more levels of reproachfulness!

It is all too easy to create yet another level of reproachfulness over and above not recognising the need to stop and rest. I started to do

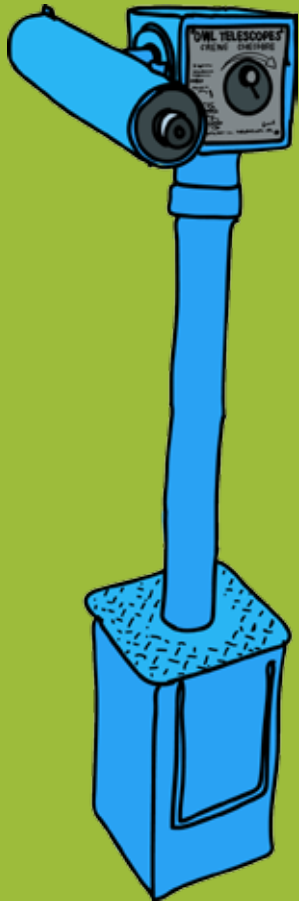
Getting Your Important Work Done

that to myself this week, but luckily saw what I was doing before it was too late. Now that's progress!

We're all just human after all and just doing the best we can with the hand we've been dealt.

Getting Your Important Work Done

Learning to stop (especially when we most think we can't)



I've been working hard behind the scenes of Sustainably Creative over the last few weeks getting things ready for the launch of my new [membership package](#). One day last week I realised I *really* needed a break when I caught myself telling myself I didn't have time for one!

I think it's precisely when we feel we can't stop and rest that we most need to. The voice that tells us to keep going, no matter what, is always very compelling. It's hard to ignore. It can list many credible reasons why what we're doing has to be done now (or even yesterday) and why we should push ourselves just a little harder to get what's in front of us finished.

But of course this voice will always be impossible to placate. There

Getting Your Important Work Done

will always be "just one more thing" that needs doing, always something else we could be doing. The truth is there is probably very little that we do that absolutely has to be done now, or even today, and sometimes, just sometimes, if we give ourselves and break and take a break we'll end up being able to get more done in the long run (and certainly will be happier doing it).

Looking out to sea

So, last week, when my *keep going* voice was urging me on particularly loudly and everything in front of me felt like the world was waiting with baited breath for me to get it done, I got in my car and went to a nearby seaside town for tea and chips and just to look at the sea.

Half an hour after walking out of my front door I found myself with an ice cream in one hand standing looking through a bright blue telescope at the sailing boats in Cardigan bay. Watching the

Getting Your Important Work Done

ships mill around the harbour reminded me just how gentle a pace life can have if we let it.

I strolled along the seafront, bought chips and drank tea. Slowly the feeling of urgency that had been surrounding my work was replaced by a more realistic perspective. I began to recapture the feeling that really there is plenty of time, that things can happen at their own (manageable!) pace.

Taking the feeling home with me

On the way back to my car I stopped at a sweet shop and bought myself a bar of chocolate—a little something to take home with me to help carry the relaxed sense of there being enough time with me.

Back in my studio I made a pot of tea and ate a little of my chocolate, leaving some for the next day to help remind me to not be taken in by my keep going voice, at least for a while.

Getting Your Important Work Done

Of course the sense of urgency with return (I've been noticing it while I've been writing this little essay, feeling like I'm not working fast enough, that it really should have been finished yesterday!) but as long as I remember to challenge it a little, maybe stop and make a pot of tea or go for a walk around the garden, I can get back the feeling that there really is plenty of time.

There really is plenty of time.

Getting Your Important Work Done

Giving ourselves what we need helps get our Important Work done

I'm sitting in bed with cold feet in the middle of June and wondering why I don't just let myself make a hot water bottle to warm my toes. There's a conversation going on inside my head. It's going something like this.

"My feet are cold, can't I just have a hot water bottle?"

"No! It's the middle of summer, you shouldn't need a hot water bottle."

"But my feet are cold!"

Why do we so often not give ourselves what we need just because convention (or some other instilled belief) won't let us? I haven't



Getting Your Important Work Done

got an answer to that, but I do know that once I make myself a hot water bottle my feet will feel a whole lot warmer and maybe, just maybe I'll feel like getting on with some work.

Fast forward ten minutes and I'm back in bed with a hot water bottle and warm feet. Suddenly, I feel far more like writing this essay.

Allowing ourselves to have warm feet

Often it's very hard to let ourselves have what we know we need, even when the giving is as simple as filling a hot water bottle with water to warm some cold feet or making some toast and Marmite (just what I fancy right now!). But if we do, if we learn to treat ourselves with the gentle kindness we deserve we are much more likely to be able to get on with our Important Work.

This is something I've been thinking about a lot recently.

Getting Your Important Work Done

Wondering how many things I do (or don't do) just because that's the way they've always been done, or because I feel I ought to do them a certain way. At almost 44 I still feel like I need to ask permission (I'm not even sure who from!) to live my life the way I want. I often put up with cold feet! Maybe you do too.

Little by little, experiment by experiment, I am learning that if I listen to myself and act with gentle kindness I find I am more and more able to get on with what's important. I am constructing a working life that fits with my fluctuating energy levels. I'm growing in confidence and finding it easier to say "no" to the things that I feel I can't managed (as much as I wish I could). I'm realising that it's okay to give myself some of the things I need whether or not they fit with convention.

Three things

I've realised that getting the Important Work done needs three things:

Getting Your Important Work Done

1. Treating ourselves kindly

Give ourselves as many of the things that we feel we need as we can in order to make life as easy as possible. This could be as simple as a hot water bottle on a summer's day or allowing ourselves to go back to bed midmorning because we didn't sleep well the night before (it might mean a plate of hot buttered toast topped with Marmite when I finish writing this!).

By treating ourselves kindly we learn to trust that we needn't struggle any more than is absolutely necessary (and that life can even be pleasant!). By alleviating the unnecessary struggle we are making space for other things. If we choose we can fill that space with our Important Work.

2. The right amount (and kind) of work

Getting the amount (and kind) of work right is the next step. For

Getting Your Important Work Done

me that means work that doesn't involve other people's deadlines and that can be done in short bursts of time. I used to paint big pictures, now I make small drawings that can either be made in one short sitting or easily picked up and put down as time and energy allows. I also know not to take on too much. Having one drawing on the go and an essay either in my head or taking shape on paper is about enough.

3. The right work structure (or even no structure at all)

Finally we need to find our own work rhythm and structure (which might be not structure at all). I'm learning that I tend to work best with a very loose timetable, but still a timetable or sorts. For example, I aim to write these little essays once a fortnight on a Monday, but am flexible enough to let them be a day or two "late" or even skip them completely at times of very low energy. I've experimented with stricter timetables and no timetables at all, but neither felt right for me. That doesn't mean they won't be right for you. What's right for me might well change in time too.

Getting Your Important Work Done

Staying aware

All this is basically staying aware of our needs, providing for them where we are able, and not being led by other's ideas of the right way to do things.

What could you do for yourself today to make a little more pleasant and less of a struggle. Do you think it might make getting on with your Important Work easier?

I'm off to make myself some toast and Marmite.

Getting Your Important Work Done

Do a little something to raise your spirits (and help get your Important Work done!)

I recently bought myself a new radio. A lovely treat and one that has raised my spirits hugely.

It is so important, if we want to get our Important Work done, to keep our spirits up, especially if we're low on energy. If we don't we're in danger of creating a treadmill for ourselves where all we experience is work (and resting to get over working!).

Avoiding the work/rest rut

It is such an easy trap to fall into and one I often find myself in. If I forget to periodically pause and take a look at my life I can easily find myself in a work/rest rut. It creeps up on me. Maybe it does on you too?

I've been in one of those ruts recently. Energy has been



Getting Your Important Work Done

particularly low and at the same time I've been working hard on a number of projects. Now I've finished one or two of them I've been more able to take a look at myself and have realised that I've got a little lost in work (and rest). My spirits have sunk rather (and even the sense of pride I have from getting some work finished and finished well hasn't been enough to raise them).

If your spirits are low don't waste a second!

Of course it's always best to not let our spirits slump if we can help it (!) but even with the best on intentions we can't always prevent it. When we realise they have it's time for a little emergency action!

Raising our spirits!

If your spirits are in need of being raised a little, don't waste a moment!

I'm sure you know of a little treat or have a favourite way of

Getting Your Important Work Done

pampering yourself that can start to make life feel a little more colourful.

Some ideas

Here are some of my favourite spirit raising ideas (some require more energy than others so I tend to pick carefully depending on the current state of my health):

- Read children's a book
- Rent a comedy
- Listen to a radio play
- Visit a cafe
- Bake a cake
- Take a bath
- Cook a meal from scratch
- Invite a friend to visit

Getting Your Important Work Done

- Put clean bedding on my bed and take a nap (or read in bed)
- Order a treat to arrive in the post
- Phone a friend
- Take a flask of tea and sit on a park bench (or in the garden)
- Buy a bunch of flowers (or even have a bouquet delivered)
- Order something from Amazon and have it gift wrapped (that's what I did with my new radio)!
- Go on a picnic (or have a carpet picnic if energy is low or the weather is bad)
- Plan a trip (even planning an imaginary trip can be surprisingly cheering and has no financial limits!)
- Take a walk in the woods
- Treat myself to a new pen or sketchbook
- Have a massage
- Eat fresh fruit (I've been doing this a lot this last couple of weeks as I have had a wonderful crop of summer berries this year).

The principle is simple. Do something lovely for yourself

Getting Your Important Work Done

(something you know someone else would appreciate if you did for them).

What can you do to raise your spirits today?

Getting Your Important Work Done

Taking a holiday to make sure we stay on track with our Important Work

I've been [writing over on Sustainably Creative](#) about how easy it is to get caught up in our creative routines and how that can sometimes mean we become too fearful to make changes.

I've decided to challenge this tendency a little by declaring next week to be a holiday. Something I'm finding frightening and exciting in about equal measure!

Holidays can be a challenge for the self-employed

I think if we're self-employed then taking a holiday can often be a challenge. If we are also a one-man or one-woman-band then this is doubly the case. Add to that also being someone who is very limited in terms of energy, only perhaps just about keeping things



Getting Your Important Work Done

ticking over (with the help of our creative routines and rituals), then there is a good chance that a holiday can feel like nothing more than something that will leave us feeling pressured and behind with our Important Work.

There is a lot of truth in that. If we only have a very limited amount energy, then only a certain amount of stuff can ever get done. If we decide to take a very big chunk of time out of our schedule then clearly some stuff, probably quite a lot of stuff, won't get done. That can leave us feeling very behind and under pressure and will probably also take a lot of the enjoyment out of taking a holiday!

Rest, reflection and a new perspective can be a huge benefit to our Important Work

But that is only half the equation of course. There are huge benefits from taking a break in terms of having time to properly rest,

Getting Your Important Work Done

reflect and gain new perspectives. Things that can only benefit our Important Work in the long term.

We just need to get past the panic!

Getting past the panic so we can enjoy a relaxing holiday

Don't lose heart, there are a few things you can do to help get past the panic and make a much needed holiday an enjoyable event:

1. Make a list of the things you'd like to get done before your holiday starts. Work through them slowly and systematically (from most important to least important), but accept that anything you can't get to will just have to be left undone.
2. Publicly declare your holiday, when it starts and when it finishes (just as aiming to get work done in a specific time frame helps us focus and achieve our manageable goals, creating a specific

Getting Your Important Work Done

“container” for our holiday will make it much easier to focus on it and ENJOY it).

3. If you're not physically going somewhere else for your holiday then think about ways you can make home more holiday-like. Perhaps pack your bedroom bits and pieces in a large box and hide them away somewhere so your bedroom feels like a lovely clear empty space. Think carefully about the things you'd take back in there with you (just like you'd think carefully about the things you'd pack if you were going away).
4. Accept that it may take a day or two to really start to feel like you're on holiday. Until you really feel like kicking back just pretend!
5. Have a (very small) aim for your time off. A book you'd like to read, a film you'd like to watch, a place you'd like to visit. Pick something that will make your holiday distinctive from the rest of your “normal” life. Something that when you look back on will make you think “holiday”.

Getting Your Important Work Done

6. Consider creating a small holiday routine. Perhaps a short morning walk, a daily cuppa at a favourite local cafe (if you're holidaying at home try and pick somewhere you don't normally visit), or maybe a visit to sunny bench to sit and read each afternoon.
7. When your holiday is over, don't try and catch-up with the things you haven't done whilst you were away, that will only undermine all the relaxed goodness your holiday has created. Instead, just start again from wherever you are by slipping back into your normal routine.

A final word (or two)

Getting Your Important Work Done

Clarifying what Important Work is

I was recently asked by a friend how she can find out what her Important Work is. I realised as we chatted that she thought that her Important Work was supposed to be something grandiose and far reaching (I suspect that's something to do with the capital "I" and the "W"!) and that was why she was having trouble identifying it. It made me think that it would be worth writing a quick, simple explanation of how I see Important Work.

A clear and simple plan and modest intensions

Far from being grandiose, I see Important Work as simply the next thing you need to get done to move your current project along a step, which in turn is a part of your Big Picture. I'll try and explain with a concrete example from my own Important Work:

- My Big Picture: Learning (and showing others) how to be Sustainably Creative

Getting Your Important Work Done: Essays to encourage, inspire and reassure



Getting Your Important Work Done

- Current Project: My A Positive No book
- Next Step: Make a drawing for the cover

So I need a clear Big Picture, a project that is inline with the Big Picture (preferably one that can easily be done in 20 minute chunks of time) and a simple (20 minute) next step towards completing my project.

That in a nutshell what Important Work is and how to get it done.

Getting Your Important Work Done

Further Reading

[Sustainable Creativity](#) by Michael Nobbs

Sustainable Creativity is about learning to use whatever energy you have available, however limited it may be, to maintain a creative life (or even livelihood). [FREE download](#) for Sustainably Creative members.

[Change Your Life Without Getting Out of Bed](#) by SARK

I love SARK's little book about napping and often nap with it under my pillow! A very good book for reminding us about the importance of rest and how to enjoy it.

[The Artist's Way](#) by Julia Cameron

The classic read for anyone wanting to become more creative and get their Important Work done. A must read. Find out more [here](#).

