

## A REFLECTION

# Learning to Live in a Time Of Competing Priorities

---

LAURA RICHTER, MDiv

**L**ately I feel there isn't enough time to accomplish my ever-expanding task list. I know I am not alone. Just in the last month, I've experienced several interactions that suggest my company is plentiful.

A colleague decided to block her calendar at lunch to give herself a break from back-to-back meetings. But this was not time she set aside to eat — she wanted dedicated, protected time to spend at her desk in the hopes she could spend less time on her computer at night.

A nursing manager admitted to feeling overwhelmed in the midst of job review season. She confided that she had 44 more to do, having whittled the list down from 86.

Another colleague was telling me about back-to-back trips, with next month topping out at six. Six "travels" in one month. That's all in the nature of health care, I suppose, when you work for a system with facilities in multiple states.

Recently a finance colleague and I were reminiscing about the good old days in health care. Not to say there weren't challenges 20 years ago, but at least we felt like there was a break between major initiatives.

People working in health care rarely find breaks these days. We moved from a model of sprinting to one of running a marathon. Many feel they can't see the finish line, and they lack energy to keep going. Given the competing priorities we deal with daily, we need to become more strategic about our response, both individually and organizationally. In their work with "corporate athletes," performance psychologist Jim Loehr and management consultant Tony Schwartz found that

"chronic stress without recovery depletes energy reserves, leads to burnout and breakdown, and ultimately undermines performance."<sup>1</sup>

What can help us navigate this intense time? As we work to remain grounded in the midst of competing priorities, the following emerge as helpful resources in a time of unsettledness:

### PRIORITIZE

On any given day, many of us have long to-do lists. Emails appear, that list gets longer, and somewhere in the day we must accommodate personal tasks too. We easily can get lost in the sea of tasks clamoring for attention. There always are more tasks than can be completed, so it is necessary to prioritize. Which tasks must be handled today?

Our culture prefers quick responses, but it is important to recognize not all tasks are equal, and some things just have to wait until there is time. As the adage says, "If everything is important, then nothing is important." Prioritization is necessary if we want to stay afloat.

### DON'T (OR TRY NOT TO) MULTITASK

Who doesn't attempt to do two things at once at some point during the day? Listen to a conference call and respond to emails? Drive while talking to a friend? Listen to the news while making dinner? There is only so much time, why not try to get two things done at once?

Here's why: Because multitasking doesn't actually work.<sup>2</sup> Neuroscience has shown that your brain can do only one thing at a time — that is, do one thing well or correctly. When you try to do two things at once, one suffers from lack of attention. Yes, you may be cleaning out your inbox while you suffer through a required meeting, but you might be — likely are — missing things while you respond to emails. What happens if what you missed was key information? Or what if someone in the meeting asks for your input, but you aren't sure what the question was?

By completely focusing on the immediate task, we can move through it more quickly and absorb more material. Once a task is finished, we can move to the next task and complete it efficiently as well.

#### TAKE CARE OF SELF

In the “corporate athlete” training program for busy executives, the creators suggest that in today's complicated world, corporate executives would do better to manage their energy than to manage their time.<sup>3</sup> One important way to gain more energy is to take good care of your body by eating well, having a regular exercise routine (both aerobic and weightlifting) and getting enough sleep.

They also recommend adopting practices that lead to better emotional energy and mental focus. For example, they recommend participants write a personal mission statement so they are in touch with what is most important in their life. The mission statement then directs efforts in all dimensions of their energy — physical, mental, emotional and spiritual. Harnessing efforts in each of these allows participants to realize their mission and flourish in many areas of life.

Being good stewards in our ministries also involves taking care of ourselves. If we want to be around for the times to come, take care of self — body, mind and spirit.

#### PARTICIPATE IN SPIRITUAL PRACTICES

Those who founded our ministries started and often ended their days in prayer. They attended Mass. They took time for an annual retreat, where they could step away from the world, rest and focus on God's love for them. These practices had the power to renew them and keep them

grounded as they encountered challenges in their own ministry.

Today there are countless spiritual practices available: journaling, reflection, meditation, creative pursuits and so many more. It is important for us, each colleague, to know which practices offer the greatest respite during challenging times. Then we need to make time for them— and do them.

One of my favorite practices is to turn to literature and poetry, and in that spirit, I will leave you with a favorite poem by Wendell Berry that reminds us to take time. It also suggests another practice, spending time in nature, which is good for us as well.

#### THE PEACE OF WILD THINGS

When despair for the world grows in me  
and I wake in the night at the least sound  
in fear of what my life and my children's lives may be,  
I go and lie down where the wood drake  
rests in his beauty on the water, and the great heron feeds.  
I come into the peace of wild things  
who do not tax their lives with forethought  
of grief. I come into the presence of still water.  
And I feel above me the day-blind stars  
waiting with their light. For a time  
I rest in the grace of the world, and am free.<sup>4</sup>

**LAURA RICHTER** serves in the mission integration department at Mercy Hospital St. Louis.

#### NOTES

1. Jim Loehr and Tony Schwartz, “The Making of a Corporate Athlete,” *Harvard Business Review*, January 2001. <https://hbr.org/2001/01/the-making-of-a-corporate-athlete>.
2. <https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/creativity-without-borders/201405/the-myth-multitasking>.
3. Loehr and Schwartz, “Corporate Athlete.”
4. Wendell Berry, “The Peace of Wild Things.” Copyright © 1998 by Wendell Berry, from *The Selected Poems of Wendell Berry*. Reprinted with permission of Counterpoint Press.

JOURNAL OF THE CATHOLIC HEALTH ASSOCIATION OF THE UNITED STATES

[www.chausa.org](http://www.chausa.org)

# HEALTH PROGRESS®

---

Reprinted from *Health Progress*, November - December 2018  
Copyright © 2018 by The Catholic Health Association of the United States

---