

## How To Lose Control of Your Time and Life

One of my long-time favorite comic strips has been the cartoon *Sally Forth*, about a modern, middle-aged, middle-manager mom.

In one episode, Sally is sitting on her bedside adjusting her alarm clock and talking to her husband Ted. "If I cut two minutes off my shower, three minutes off my hair and makeup, one minute off dressing time, four minutes off breakfast ... Oh, and if I run from the parking lot to my office instead of walking ... Then I can set my alarm twelve minutes later than usual." "I can't believe you," replies a sleepy Ted. "Just trying to make time for what's important in life," Sally replies.

The cartoon reminds me of a book that was popular a few years back called *How to Get Control of Your Time and Life*. The book was a potpourri of advice on how to take charge of yourself by making the minutes matter. Each of us should have a list of life goals, for instance: all those items in the bucket list of things we'd like to accomplish, sights we'd like to see, continents we want to explore during our brief time here on earth.

If it seems difficult to formulate life goals, it might be helpful to ask ourselves how we would choose to spend our time if we knew that we had only six months or a year to live, the author suggests. Then, once we've decided what we really want from life, the next step is to plan our daily and weekly activities in a way that moves us closer toward those goals. If every morning we make a list of things to do and tackle only the most urgent and rewarding items on the list, we'll soon find our dreams becoming realities. Just as a journey of a thousand miles begins with a single step, asking ourselves, "What is the best use of my time *right now?*" leads to lasting fulfillment, and our lives, that once seemed unmanageable and disorganized, take on an orderly and workable form.

There's much practical wisdom and good sense in "getting control of your time and life." Yet it seems that many of the most meaningful and important moments in our lives are not the kind we can plan for. None of us planned to be born, for example, and few of us plan exactly how or when to die. Falling in and out of love don't happen according to schedule. And children have an annoying habit of arriving or not arriving on their own timetable. Moments of beauty and intimacy, as well as grief and despair, unfold according to their own inner rhythm. There's a T-shirt you've all seen with the slogan printed on the front: Stuff Happens. Actually, it's phrased a little differently. But whatever the wording, it's a good reminder of a basic theological truth that however hard we try to plan our lives and control our destinies, powers, forces and mysteries greater than ourselves are ultimately in charge. Much as we like a tamed and domesticated existence, there remains something wild and unpredictable about the way our universe works, as poet Robert Burns wrote:

**The best-laid schemes o' mice an' men  
Gang aft agley.**

**Which is Scottish for "Honey, I think our car got towed."**

**Of course, I do have long term goals in my life. My wife Dori and I realized one of those goals awhile back when we became empty-nesters, successfully launching our two kids off to college. But of course, you never really stop being a parent, and if "getting control of your time and life" is the name of the game, then adopting a four-month-old and then immediately getting pregnant, which is the way it happened for us, with two in diapers at the same time, two needing braces, and two with tuition bills coming due all at once is probably a losing proposition. You're supposed to stagger your children, I understand, but often they end up staggering us instead! Another episode from Sally Forth shows young daughter Hillary talking to her mother about the facts of life: "Let me get this straight," Hillary says. "Parenting is one of your most important functions, and yet all your years of schooling did nothing to prepare you for it?" That's right," Sally answers. "What a goofy system," mutters Hillary. "I take that back," Sally says. "Chemistry helped prepare me for parenting ... It taught me that even when you have no idea what you're doing, it's possible to muddle through."**

**Muddling through may be what people do best. Back in 1959, a professor of business at Yale named Charles Lindbloom wrote an article titled "The Science of Muddling Through." There he compared the way executives and public leaders make decisions in textbooks with the way they operate in real life. In theory, the executive first sets clear goals and objectives. Next, he or she makes a cool, clearheaded analysis of what needs to be done to get from point A to point B. The entire process is rational, logical and sequential. But in practice, Lindbloom suggested, decision-makers seldom operate according to this model. Instead, much of what they do boils down to simple coping behavior, since a quagmire of complications invariably arises to confuse and frustrate the best laid plans.**

**As an example, think of the way a typical church "search committee" has to operate. Some of you have firsthand experience with this, and others soon will. The initial step is to scientifically survey the congregation to determine the "ideal profile" for a ministerial candidate. Focus groups are formed. The committee spends weeks collecting data and opinions and carefully tabulating the results. Of course, the profile that emerges is mostly predictable:**

**The perfect minister preaches exactly fifteen minutes. He or she**

condemns sin but never upsets anyone. He works from 8:00 am till midnight and is also the janitor. He makes \$50 a week, wears good clothes, and gives \$30 a week to the poor. She's 28 years old with 40 years of experience. She has a burning desire to work with teenagers and spends all her time with senior citizens. The perfect ministers smiles all the time with a straight face because he has a sense of humor that keeps him seriously dedicated to his work. He makes 15 calls daily to shut-ins and is always in the office when needed.

So the hardworking search committee completes its homework, does their due diligence. And they find that what most of the congregants want is "intellectual stimulation" on Sunday morning. No surprise there. This is what Unitarians always say. But c'mon, you're looking for a minister, and the truth is you don't have to be all that bright to get into divinity school. If I was a serious intellectual, I'd have a Ph.D.. I'd be teaching college somewhere, not pretending to be the West Wind arguing with Mister Sun on Sunday mornings. The search committee may also find that a majority of the congregation say they want a woman as their minister, and that most prefer a candidate of experience and maturity, yet they end up choosing a thirty-five year old guy. They discover that their congregation is composed of 37% Christians, 22% Theists, and 11% Humanists, but the person they wind up inviting may be a goddess-worshipper or "none-of-the-above." The process is less scientific than subjective, relying more on intuition, compromise, hunches and horse sense than technical skill or expert knowledge.

Now Lindbloom argues that this style of decision-making called "muddling through," while not the most rational or efficient mode of doing business, is in the long run the best and most democratic because it responds to the real life complexity of the situation, where ministers never match ideal profiles, balancing conflicting values and competing needs. Things get done more slowly this way, and the results often look as if they were designed by a committee. Yet everyone has a chance to participate, and if the bus doesn't always leave on schedule, at least everyone's on board.

People who are turned off by organized religion are often right at home in Unitarian Universalism, which can seem rather chaotic and improvisational. Because muddling through for us is not only a science but a spiritual discipline. As the interim minister here, and still relatively new in this position, for example, I'm strongly tempted to put on a performance of being in control and having firm command of this new situation. I'd like to assure you that I understand the tasks that need to be accomplished here and have all the skills to do them. I'd like to tell you that I won't make any major blunders in my new role, and to demonstrate that I'm fully competent to handle whatever crises or conflicts walk through the door. But as a matter-of-fact, I don't know all there is to know about

**Worcester. I'm learning on the job, still putting together names and faces as I will be five months from now when I leave this place. I think I've already managed to step on at least a few toes, and I doubt if I'll ever feel fully competent to cope with the unforeseen difficulties that can show up on a minister's doorstep. So I don't begin here with a pre-determined game plan or hard-and-fast agenda. Instead, I see the first order of business to be listening and learning, adjusting and adapting, groping and growing. In short, I'm trying to muddle through.**

**This church is a place where we can learn to muddle through more successfully, for muddling through, just like getting control of your time and life, is a discipline that can be taught and that requires real skills, although the skills for gaining control and for losing control are very different. To gain control of your life, you need the skill to influence other people and change the way they think. To lose control, you need the skill to listen with an open mind to what others say, and to let your own opinions be modified. To gain control of things, you need the power to dominate and alter your environment. To lose control, you need the capacity to be sensitive to your environment, to understand that every part and player is important to the balance and well-being of the whole. To gain control of time, you need clear priorities for the future. To lose control, you require an appreciation for the rich ambiguity of the present, as well as for the history and traditions that have brought us to this moment.**

**Both sets of skills are valuable. On the whole, however, our society has emphasized the skills of gaining control and neglected the equally important ones of losing control. That's why we've been highly successful when our goals are building highways, or skyscrapers, or other projects that require engineering mastery and manipulation. But it's why we've been such terrible failures when our goals are building families or neighborhoods or livable cities or existing in ecological harmony with nature, because they are goals that require us to let go of always having it our own way.**

**We lose control whenever we fall in love, whenever we get married or enter into a partnership, whenever we make friends or have children, whenever we become subject to the give-and-take of living in relationship with other people. And it's these skills--the skills of maintaining healthy personal relations and nurturing democratic, life-affirming communities--that our religion attempts to foster and encourage.**

**I'm working hard here in Worcester, and want you to know that I appreciate your hard work too, to set goals and meet them: to reach out to new members, to deepen programs of religious education, to get your financial house in order. But as we reach toward these worthy goals, we can never lose sight of our more far-reaching reason for being together: to grow in love and compassion, to practice kindness and civility, tolerance and mutual respect, to walk with**

**gratitude on this earth which sustains us, and bow with wonder and reverence before those greater forces upon which we depend but cannot control.**

**For this is our purpose in meeting here, not to learn how to live more efficiently, but to live more graciously, more charitably, more humbly, more gently. Not to be like Sally Forth, madly trying to count each minute, but to make these minutes we have together count.**