

LIVING IN END TIMES

NewPhilosopher

Use your

time

wisely

TOM CHATFIELD
Everything is relative

TIFFANY JENKINS
Never enough time



Winter 2018/19
USD \$ 10.99
CAN \$ 11.99
Display until Feb 28



The art of time management

by Mariana Alessandri

Time-management expert Laura Vanderkam has heard too many people say they have too little time. She argues that the problem isn't our lack of time, but our routine failure to count the minutes and hours we squander. Video streaming and social media are easy targets, and those of us who use them already know we could be using our time better. But it's also true of the 20 minutes it takes to drive a kid to sports practice or to wait for the bus. These bits look nothing like quality time, but if we treat them as such, they become so. For the most part, Vanderkam believes that we can have it all: career, family, a social life, me-time, and hobbies. But not effortlessly. It takes planning. If we agree to Vanderkam's terms and commit to studying how we use our time, our weeks will begin to look like a spread-

sheet of 168 blank boxes, chunks and mini-chunks of free time for us to allocate to work, rest, and play. "I don't have time" will turn into "it's not my priority", as we become like magicians making time out of nothing while our neighbours take a drag on their preferred time-sucking vice.

Vanderkam is not the first to suggest that it's a matter of perception. Søren Kierkegaard wrote that the true artist is not the one who travels the world in search of a face worth painting, but the one who can convey the beauty of an ordinary one. Van Gogh did this with shoes and Pablo Neruda with salt. Proust said it best: "The real voyage of discovery consists not in seeking new landscapes, but in having new eyes." It's a cliché and it's true. Long before Vanderkam challenged us to detect quality time under a monotonous disguise, Proust dared us to slow down and smell the cattleyas.

I read the first volume of Proust's *In Search of Lost Time* while nursing an infant. If you've read Proust you know how he painstakingly describes every button, every brooch that adorns his heroine's dress, every feather and bird affixed to her latest Parisian hat, every

crushed or intact cattleya that lines her blouse. Proust narrates at a level of detail routinely overlooked in real life. He crafts, curates, and expresses memories abundantly, gratuitously. He makes the boring world enviable, and he gave it to me in flowers, textures, and breezes. When I was in the right mood for reading Proust, he showed me the meaning of life. He and I were full, he with words and I with milk, and he let me drink to satiety. He was generous and I was grateful. Something seemingly unrelated also happened in that mood: I liked my children better. I could see that another cliché was equally true: parenthood is about the journey and not the destination. I wondered if it was possible to be happier than I was in those milky moments, and I stopped fantasising about selling my kids. Instead, I soaked in their holy naïveté, and I laid out to dry under the warmth of their skin.

When I found myself on the wrong side of Proust, I wished for his long train ride to end. I prayed that, just today, the family would choose the shorter of the two walks around the neighbourhood. Why couldn't

Proust have forgotten something or taken a nap? In haste I read for plot instead of pleasure, and I found my kids incompetent and needy. I wondered how two such small things could amass so much energy, until I caught on that they were siphoning mine. Raising little gremlins while painstakingly slogging through Proust reminded me that hours are made of minutes and minutes of seconds, and that time passed slower when you hurried it. Even in my school days, I didn't negotiate with the clock as much I did during those early years of parenting. When I could manage not to peek, I expected Father Time to reward my discipline by advancing the clock. It turned out that he's indifferent to me and my will.

Even as I rushed Proust I knew I was reading wrong. We're all desperate to get somewhere, except that *there's nowhere to go*, he whispered: *it's all flowers, walks, and train rides*. In my case it was all dishes, diapers, and dirty clothes. Friends with older children had already sounded a similar note about parenting. They warned me that I had better savour every minute, because I would miss night feedings and baby vomit. Everyone suggested that I put

on new eyes, but Proust was the only one who showed me how. The childless poet-philosopher schooled me on time-management and raising babies by teaching me the art of reading.

Proust convinced me to put on new eyes, but not by threatening me with regret like the seasoned parents I knew. Reading is about the sentences themselves, he told me. A novel's plot can fall into the background and may not matter at all. When I began to read for the phrases instead of for the future, when I smelled and tasted an entire passage, when I lingered over it, inhaling and imbibing it as the baby at my breast did instinctively with my milk, then I was learning to see. I began to nurture instead of abort the mundane minutes, and they began to take shape. It turned out that Socrates wasn't the only midwife in town: Proust helped me birth a memory – of reading while nursing, of drinking while being drunk from. He caught, cleaned, and weighed my 10 pound miracle for posterity. But before memorialising the moment, I lived it.

Proust's magic depends on training the eye of the beholder. To read him well is to swallow the cliché. He's not the only writer to try to change

the way we read – David Foster Wallace comes to mind – but he's the one who taught me that learning to read for readings' sake is the same as learning to live by looking around. Less elegantly than Proust, Vanderkam teaches a similar lesson: polish, instead of pitch, your misfit minutes. Discover the time you have and use it artfully. What Proust does to a memory – savour what most people toss – Vanderkam does to a moment. Like him, she sees our drabest hours in Technicolor. She holds up to us our clumsiest chunks, like the daily commute or grocery run, but in her hands, they look like stages on which we might fall in love. If Proust gracefully grows memories in soil we thought was infertile, Vanderkam crudely rummages through our trash bin to rescue our lost time. But the intended result is the same: both authors aim to sanctify our discarded minutes. Thanks to both, after three consecutive days of idling in the car pick-up line waiting for my son like everyone else, I packed Uno to play with my now four-year-old while we waited. The next day, without so much as a wand or a rabbit, we turned those tedious minutes into time to play. ▣

