



# CRUNCHED FOR TIME

BY J. RAYMOND ALBREKTSON

**T**ime, according to an anonymous physicist, is what keeps everything from happening at once.<sup>1</sup> So why do I usually feel like the bottom guy of a fifteen-man football pileup? I'm besieged by deadlines; plagued by undone tasks; under attack by to-do lists filled with chores that have yet to feel my harried touch. Will I ever find the time to watch the sunset while cuddling with my wife, or sit on the front-porch glider and read a good book or just lay around the house doing absolutely nothing?

In a word—probably not. We 21st century North Americans are among the most driven people who have ever lived. We work harder at both work and play than any prior or present culture, and we have collectively decided that going for the gusto should be the standard by which life is lived.

*Carpe diem*—seize the day—could easily be our national motto, and by “seizing” we actually mean grabbing the day and cramming it to the bursting point with work, leisure, family, exercise, education, shopping, home improvement, web-surfing and countless other aspects of modern life. We're so busy seizing and cramming that we seldom have a chance to take one of those deep cleansing breaths they are always nagging us about during a power-workout at the gym.

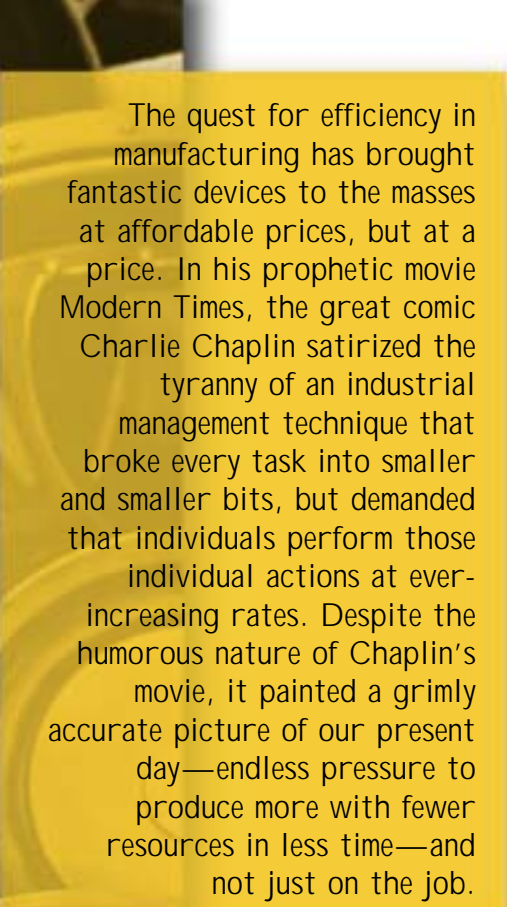
How did we get to the point where 24 hours aren't nearly enough for all we have to do? Is there anything we can do to uncork the pressure and find a way to live as I'm sure God intended us to live—calmly, deliberately, filled with inner peace and a sense of vast contentment? What nifty three-step program can I adopt so

that *in only minutes a day* I will be able to arrive at my goal of heavenly bliss on Earth?

I hope the irony of that last sentence penetrated, because it gets right to the heart of our problem. Like the apocryphal prayer, “Lord—give me patience, and I want it *now!*” We all want peace, calm and contentment, but we also want enough time in the day for everything else we have to do. We generally insist on making time for all the things we would merely *like* to do (learn French, hike the Appalachian trail, take ballroom dancing lessons, sail to Bora-Bora) as well.

There's one little catch to doing everything we must, want and wish to do, and it's a fundamental law of physics. Time comes in 24-hour days and is spent at a rate of one second per second. Short of invoking Einstein's theories of

PHOTO—CHAPLINS, MODERN TIMES, 1936—Bettmann/CORBIS



The quest for efficiency in manufacturing has brought fantastic devices to the masses at affordable prices, but at a price. In his prophetic movie *Modern Times*, the great comic Charlie Chaplin satirized the tyranny of an industrial management technique that broke every task into smaller and smaller bits, but demanded that individuals perform those individual actions at ever-increasing rates. Despite the humorous nature of Chaplin's movie, it painted a grimly accurate picture of our present day—endless pressure to produce more with fewer resources in less time—and not just on the job.

general and special relativity,<sup>2</sup> we're stuck with a fixed quantity of time. The good news is that—so far at any rate—we get a fresh 24 hours just as soon as the last batch has been used up. We can't borrow it from the future, and we can't scavenge it off the junk-heap of the past. It's always fresh, and, when thoughtfully expended, can provide us with the framework to live a life that is free, unpressured and full. What? You say that the word "unpressured" isn't a word you would use to describe your life? Let's take a short side-trip into the history of time—or clocks, at any rate.

### A Brief History of Time

One of the most obvious characteristics of the modern age is the way we pay attention to time, and the instrument that we use for that is the clock. Even a child knows that there are 60 seconds to a minute, but until the modern era<sup>3</sup> most people didn't even know what a minute was, let alone a

second. The clock's minute hand wasn't even invented until 1577. When the first mechanical clocks appeared on the scene in the 14th century, one clock per town was sufficient.

Everyone measured time in far more traditional ways in those olden days: Years, months, seasons and days (especially the special days of the church calendar) all served to divide life into larger and somehow more manageable chunks. Nobody needed to know what hour it was, but farmers were very concerned that they plant their seed at the right time in the spring to get the best possible crop. Even in colonial America, most farmers didn't own a clock—but few were without an almanac.

With the coming of mechanical clocks, townsfolk learned that the day was divided into hours, because bells chimed throughout the town to let them know the hours of prayer, and later the hours in general. The invention of the minute hand was followed by the second hand, but only on specialized chronometers used for navigation. For most of the 20th century the majority of wrist-watches didn't even have second hands.

But our perception of time changed drastically after the Second World War. Timekeeping became very important to the industrial world, and not just for keeping track of labor and wages. While workers grew accustomed to clocking in and out, engineers developed ever more precise ways of dividing time. In our generation satellite-based navigation (which relies on ultra-precise clocks whirling in orbit around the Earth) has become a must-have convenience. Many commuters, even cyclists and wilderness hikers, use GPS (satellite-based) navigation on a daily basis.

Today's work-a-day wrist watch not only has a second hand, but even the cheapest watches (like the kind that come free with a Happy Meal) rely on quartz-crystal time-standards that are better than any

time sources available for most of the 20th century. Many clocks, video recorders and personal computers automatically synchronize with hyper-accurate atomic clocks in Boulder, Colorado, for an accuracy that amounts to infinitesimal slivers of a second per millennium.<sup>4</sup>

### Do We Have Less Time Than Our Grandparents?

Has modern life sped up in proportion to our ability to measure time in ever-finer slices? For most of us, it has. Many of our great-grandparents worked on the farm, where sunrise and sunset were the major chronological events of the day. Our grandparents may have worked in factories where they were paid for every hour and fraction thereof that they worked. Our own parents (and we ourselves) have no more hours in our modern days than anyone else in history, but are expected to do much more with it.

The quest for efficiency in manufacturing has brought fantastic devices to the masses at affordable prices, but at a price. In his prophetic movie *Modern Times*,<sup>5</sup> the great comic Charlie Chaplin satirized the tyranny of an industrial management technique that broke every task into smaller and smaller bits, but demanded that individuals perform those individual actions at ever-increasing rates. Despite the humorous nature of Chaplin's movie, it painted a grimly accurate picture of our present day—endless pressure to produce more with fewer resources in less time—and not just on the job.

Sadly, our idea of leisure has become contaminated with the clock-watching, second-splitting mentality that accompanied industrialization. We might allocate ourselves twenty minutes to take a "power nap,"<sup>6</sup> then thirty for a high-speed ultra-efficient workout on a miraculous exercise machine,<sup>7</sup> then fix a quick dinner (also thirty minutes<sup>8</sup> or less), followed by evening tennis, night school or just sitting on the sofa trying to jam six hours of *Tivo'd* TV programs

into the three hours remaining before falling exhausted into bed.

## Doing More in Less Time

Just as we've divided our hours into ever tinier slivers (after all, Olympic medals are won by differences of only a few thousandths of a second) we've assumed that there is no downside to packing more into the same basic 24 hours that humankind have had since the beginning.

I travel a lot and often have to pack for weeks at a time. When faced with an overwhelming amount of material to fit into my bags, I always try to "pack smarter." In other words, I can find clever ways to make more fit.

But can we apply this strategy to the challenge of a high-pressure, activity-oriented lifestyle? Some trumpet that yes, we can do more in less time if only we pursue the path of efficiency.

"Efficiency—that's the key!" We can become our own efficiency experts. We can find ways to brush our teeth faster.<sup>9</sup> Don't waste time reading books—listen to a recording while you drive! Have more on your *Tivo* than you can watch? No problem—transfer those files to your video *iPod* and watch them while you use the toilet. Your children want you to take them to the park? Take your laptop and get some work done while they have fun!

Don't get me wrong—I don't believe that there is anything wrong with living efficiently. But there is obviously a point of diminishing returns. Who wants to live like the protagonist of Anne Taylor's book, *The Accidental Tourist*, who was so consumed by his quest for efficiency that his alarm clock turned on a popcorn popper, thus preparing his breakfast while he showered? He even used his shower time to tread his laundry, like grape workers squishing out the vintage with their feet, to a cleaner state. *Yuck!*

Efficiency is great in its place. I love my *Palm Pilot*, and without to-

do-lists and deadlines I would fail to do many things (like writing this article) that I believe are really important. But efficiency doesn't *create* time; it only lets you pack more into the time you have. And what if you really like reading? I've always resisted speed-reading courses (except for a brief and short-lived fling in college) because I *like* to read, and the best books are the ones you either read slowly<sup>10</sup> because you love them, or you read them quickly<sup>11</sup> because you can't wait to see what happens next. Either way, efficiency kills the whole reason I'm reading.

## The Real Enemy—Wasting Time

Although hyper-efficiency certainly seems to be a dead-end in our quest to depressurize, there is one thief of time that certainly deserves a few whacks with a stout stick. I'm referring to procrastination, and especially the tendency to put off important things for later in order to make time for the irrelevant but probably more fun things now.

I'm no stranger to procrastination and periodically have to do battle with this time-wasting supervillain. Practical weapons that are genuinely useful in recovering lost time include prioritized to-do-lists complete with deadlines and accountability partners. Another technique is simply being willing to pick out the most unpleasant task facing you and, with the ancient battle cry of "Do it now!" on your lips, roll up your sleeves and polish off that ogre before going on to more appealing chores.

Attacking procrastination is a battle worth fighting, but the war isn't likely to be won on the "become-more-efficient" front. If greater personal efficiency isn't the key to rediscovering the joy of the relaxed life, then perhaps we need to chuck modern ways and live like people did a few centuries ago—as some groups (the Amish, for example) still do today. If we just move

to the country, find an old farm not equipped with cable T.V. or Internet and learn to do without cell phones, electricity, piped water, flush toilets, refrigerators, supermarkets and the like—maybe *then* we'll find inner peace.

Right. Good luck with that, as they say. While the Amish and other non-traditional rural religious communities may live a life which appears like a low-pressure paradise to the uninformed outsider, it's not quite that simple.

If we can't get dinner on the table with all the advantages of a supermarket down the street and a microwave in our kitchen, how is that going to work when we have to breed a pig, raise the pig, butcher the pig, cook the pig, etc.? One reason why groups like the Amish still function today is because they are a community—everybody works and everybody shares their labor. Ever hear of a barn-raising? Rural communities that survived committed themselves to similar acts of mutual assistance. Imagine your reaction if you were to get this phone call: "Say, Bill, any chance you could come over Saturday and help me re-roof my house? We're having burgers afterwards!"

And those farming collectives really do emphasize work. The typical rural concept of leisure is an hour of reading religious literature by kerosene light, or an occasional quilting bee or taffy pull.

I'm afraid that most of us modern urban types are too committed to conveniences (like flush toilets, electricity and grocery stores) and modern leisure pursuits (video-games, sports, shopping) to fit in with an 18th century rural community.

## Our Quest to De-Pressurize

So where does that leave us? We're all feeling the crunch of modern life, and there's no hope that simply increasing our efficiency can help us pack it all in. After all, isn't the concept of "packing more in"

Don't waste time reading books—listen to a recording while you drive! Have more on your *Tivo* than you can watch? No problem—transfer those files to your video *iPod* and watch them while you use the toilet. Your children want you to take them to the park? Take your laptop and get some work done while they have fun!



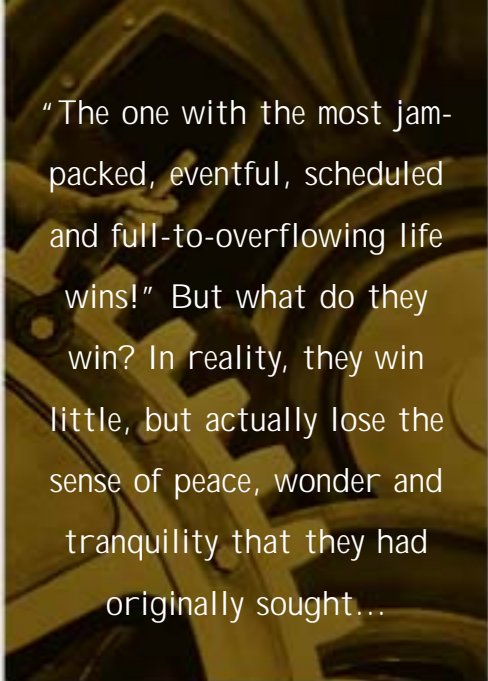
exactly what we mean by being “under pressure” and “feeling the crunch?” And, while a popular fantasy, most of us aren’t good candidates for abandoning the trappings of modernity. Is it realistic that we can exchange them for the tyranny of a poor, unindustrialized, rural lifestyle where participants bear heavier collective burdens than we can bear individually?

In our quest to depressurize, to take the lid off our warp-speed lifestyle—letting the steam out and some fresh air in—what options remain viable? We finally come down to this: Maybe we *can’t* have it all, but can we find a middle ground? Perhaps we don’t have to abandon the 21st century for the 16th, yet perhaps we can find the wit and will to filter out the least important aspects of our lifestyle and keep the essential ones. If we can manage to clean our overstuffed house and put the junk we don’t actually need out on the curb, then the idea of reorganizing what remains makes some sense.

To paraphrase the Joni Mitchell song,<sup>12</sup> how do we get ourselves back to the garden? One of the wisest individuals of the ancient world expressed the secret of the tranquil life this way: *There is a time for everything under heaven*. When obsessive moderns like ourselves read those words we tend to put a “have-it-all” spin on them:

“Oh, so there is time for everything? Time for a career that will put every conceivable luxury at my disposal, time for personal development and endless recreation, time for grooming my children into the kind of superkids that will be able to seize the future and wring its scrawny neck until it whimpers in defeat? Excellent!”

Sorry, but the whole point of that philosopher’s essay<sup>13</sup> was that only a few things are really important, and those are the big things in life: There is a time to be born, and a time to die; a time to plant and a time to reap; a time to tear down and a time to build. In other words, the wisdom lies in the affir-



“The one with the most jam-packed, eventful, scheduled and full-to-overflowing life wins!” But what do they win? In reality, they win little, but actually lose the sense of peace, wonder and tranquility that they had originally sought...

mation that there is enough time for the things that matter.

### Determining Priorities

A few nights ago I sat in my driveway with my grandson and at the same time could see the moon (almost close enough to touch), both Venus and Mars (our celestial neighbors), and surrounding them countless stars and galaxies extending off into the depths of truly deep space. There was something wonderfully satisfying about looking at the same heavenly objects that Abraham, David and Jesus doubtless gazed at in the early evening.

Back in the garden—the original home of the human race—God told the first family that the sun and moon were not deities to be worshipped, but humble servants tasked with telling us what time it was. The sun told us days, the moon indicated the months and the whole revolution of the celestial host gave us the year.

When we live by the scale of the year and month, then each day begins to take on a new perspective. On the one hand, we can relearn the important lesson that each day is unique, and there is nothing more tragic than a wasted day. But on the other hand, God’s timekeepers remind us that his scale of time is long—ininitely longer than the frantic beat of quartz crystals or the chaotic dance of

cesium ions in a laser-pumped fountain.<sup>14</sup>

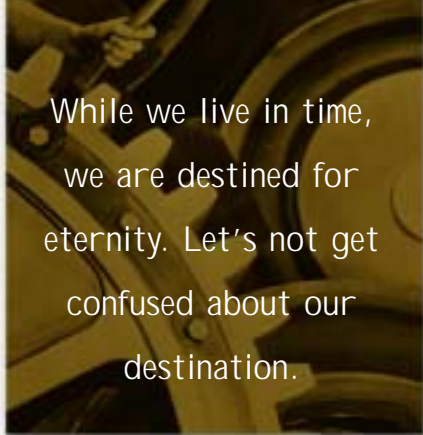
Taking the long view of life means that we will have to make some tough choices. Living in our modern age can be compared to being among the survivors of a jumbo jet that crashed in a remote desert. In this hypothetical situation there is both good news and bad news. First the bad news: Nobody is coming to rescue us. We must hike an unknown distance to safety. And the good news? Because of all the goods on the plane there is a virtually unlimited amount of resources to aid us in our survival. But here’s the catch: we can’t carry it all. In the scenario I just painted we have to choose what to take, and the best basis for choosing is whether or not it will aid us in getting to where we need to go.

Like the hapless crash survivors, we are overwhelmed with activities that we could try to jam into our day. Is it any surprise that the more we try to accomplish, the less satisfying any one achievement becomes? There was an obnoxious slogan from the 1980’s that, mercifully, seldom appears on T-shirts or bumper stickers: “The one who dies with the most toys wins!”

That slogan always seemed obviously self-contradictory and ironic, but many of us seem to base our lives around a variation of the principle it expresses: “The one with the most jam-packed, eventful, scheduled and full-to-overflowing life wins!” But what do they win? In reality, they win little, but actually lose the sense of peace, wonder and tranquility that they had originally sought, perhaps unwisely, in each of those many activities.

### Choosing What’s Really Important

How do we decide what to abandon and what to carry away? That question was answered almost two thousand years ago. Imagine that you find yourself in this situation: You are about to entertain the single most important, interesting and wise person who ever lived. You have a choice to make. You can make advanced preparations



While we live in time,  
we are destined for  
eternity. Let's not get  
confused about our  
destination.

in proportion to your wealth and ability, and then enjoy your evening. Or, you can do the preceding and, in addition, spend the evening doing everything in your power to even further enhance the experience for your guest.

This was the situation when Jesus chose to spend an evening with two sisters, Mary and Martha<sup>15</sup>. As it happened, Mary made the choice to enjoy her time with Jesus, while Martha chose to labor even while the visit was taking place. When Martha complained<sup>16</sup> to Jesus that Mary wasn't doing her share, he replied that Mary had made the better choice. Jesus hadn't come to their house for a free meal—he had come to spend time with people he loved!

In this, I believe, we find the great principle for not only surviving, but thriving in the frantic pace of modern times. Like a child at a candy counter, we are tempted to spend from our daily allotment of hours and minutes on large quantities of the cheapest and poorest. Were we to choose more wisely, we should spend at least some of those minutes on things of lasting significance—such as our relationship with God.

We still don't understand much about the nature of time, or whether the universe will end with a bang or merely a whimper. What we do know, however, is that God made our universe (and us in it) to traverse time until it ends; either for the universe as a whole or just for us as individuals. The same wise man who wrote that there is a time for everything under heaven also observed that God has put eternity in our hearts.

### Destination—Eternity!

We are acutely aware of our mortality, and each passing second reminds us that the end of life awaits. It's no wonder that, facing such a vast unknown, humans have always sought to fill the known (i.e., our lives) with good things. And is there anything wrong with that? Absolutely not! Providing, that is, that we don't miss the main point of those good

things. They didn't just happen; they are the gifts of a kind and loving God. Like children who forget that the Christmas presents they treasure actually represent the love their parents have for them, we must remind ourselves that every good thing comes to us from the hands of our heavenly father.<sup>17</sup>

If there is a secret to finding time, depressurizing and rediscovering the joy of living in the here and now, it's learning to see the long view of time. Think years, not days. What do you want your life to be like in ten, thirty or fifty years? What are you doing now that will be irrelevant (or even embarrassing) when you're sixty? Consider taking a half-day retreat every few months to do nothing but focus on what is (or should be) really important in your life, and how to abandon what is trivial to allow the crucial to flourish.

Finding a place of quietness in our hectic environment is a challenge, but even in the eye of a hurricane there's a moment of calm. We should seek out those moments of calm and epoxy them into the structure of our days, spending them quietly reading God's thoughts. Just as Mary spent time with Jesus, despite the presence of the nagging demands of her world (especially her sister), we need to spend time soaking up his view of life, eternity and our purpose in existence.

While we live in time, we are destined for eternity. Let's not get confused about our destination. All of the audio-visual goodies in the world, taking the greatest dream-vacation of all time and having the flattest abs on the planet won't mean much to us when our

minute on Earth begins to deconstruct into its final seconds. With the end of time in view, what will matter is not the frantic dance of modern life, but having spent time in the presence of the one who made us—who loves us—and who set eternity in our hearts. □

<sup>1</sup> And "space," in a quote attributed to the physicist John Archibald Wheeler, "...is what prevents everything from happening to me." <http://en.wikiquote.org/wiki/Time>

<sup>2</sup> We could slow life down, according to Einstein, by traveling at a significant percentage of the speed of light, or by residing deep in a powerful gravity field—such as, for example, near the event-horizon of a black hole. Sadly, neither would actually give us more time, but an observer in another frame of reference would see our clocks running slower.

<sup>3</sup> I define the modern era's beginning with the 16th century, corresponding as it does with the end of the Renaissance and the beginning of the Reformation.

<sup>4</sup> The current generation of atomic clocks in Boulder won't gain or lose a second in 60 million years. <http://tf.nist.gov/timefreq/cesium/fountain.htm>

<sup>5</sup> "Modern Times" came out in 1936, but the counter-cultural revolt against the dehumanizing impact of industrialization dates back to the early 19th century.

<sup>6</sup> One on-line huckster offers a hypnosis CD that will supposedly enable a user to "refresh and energize your body in only a few minutes" and get the value of an entire night's sleep in only 20 minutes. [http://www.wendi.com/html/power\\_nap.html](http://www.wendi.com/html/power_nap.html)

<sup>7</sup> For example, the one at <http://www.FastExercise.com>

<sup>8</sup> Witness the popularity of Food Network superstar Rachel Ray, whose breakthrough series "30-Minute Meals" bumped her to the top of the TV-chef food chain.

<sup>9</sup> Before you laugh, ask yourself if you own an electric toothbrush.

<sup>10</sup> Such as the works of Patrick O'Brien, P.G. Wodehouse and Bernard Cornwell

<sup>11</sup> Such as Elmore Leonard, Carl Hiaasen, Larry Niven

<sup>12</sup> From "Woodstock" (1970) by Joni Mitchell: "I'm going to camp out on the land, And try and get my soul free. We are stardust. We are golden. And we've got to get ourselves back to the garden."

<sup>13</sup> See Ecclesiastes 3, thought by many to have been authored by Solomon. Note that this chapter must be viewed in the context of the entire point of the book, which makes the point that the life worth living is one lived in a relationship with God.

<sup>14</sup> How the cesium fountain atomic clock works at <http://inventors.about.com/library/inventors/blcesiumfountain.htm>

<sup>15</sup> Luke 10:38-42

<sup>16</sup> "Lord, don't you care that my sister has left me to do the work by myself? Tell her to help me!"

<sup>17</sup> See James 1:17.

Dr. J. Raymond Albrekton is a professor at large with the International School of Theology consortium and regularly teaches graduate courses in New Testament and Theology in regions of the world where theological education based on biblical Christianity is not readily available. He lives in Redlands, California, with his wife Kathy, a local real estate planning attorney. For more about Ray see his website at [www.albrekton.com](http://www.albrekton.com).