

inaction planner

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a year of doing less and enjoying more

Concocted by Mark Van Steenwyk



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INACTION PLANNER

a year of doing less and enjoying more

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*"Some of us need to discover that we will not begin to live more fully until we have the courage to do and see and taste and experience much less than usual... And for a man who has let himself be drawn completely out of himself by his activity, nothing is more difficult than to sit still and rest, doing nothing at all. The very act of resting is the hardest and most courageous act he can perform."**

—Thomas Merton

*Gendered language left as-is, but I assume Merton is referring to people in general, not just a man.

an invitation to do nothing

Many of us have noisy minds. A cacophony of voices ring in our brains. Insistent voices. One of the loudest of those voices tells us things like “your success defines you.” Or “you are what you do.” Or “your value is wrapped up in what you accomplish.”

And so it is that many of us push ourselves to complete tasks that, if we are honest with ourselves, don't bring us much joy at all.

Sure, there are necessary tasks in life. In a society like ours, many of us will end up destitute if we don't complete some basic tasks. Including work tasks.

There are also extra-curricular tasks that we push ourselves to do for a variety of reasons. We have a picture in our minds of what success looks like and we try to conform to that picture.

But in the midst of striving, we can lose touch with the things that give us joy or peace.

In our drivenness, we prioritize success over family or friends.

We push ourselves to care for others' needs even as our bodies cry out for rest.

We do extra work to stay in the good graces of our bosses—extra work without extra pay—even though we suspect they don't notice.

There are so many tasks to accomplish. So much to do that we need help.

Which is why there are a sickening amount of to do apps, productivity software, motivational books, and action planners.

But maybe what we really need is to slow down. Stop trying so hard. Focusing on rest. Finding our joy.

We need things that, by our society's standards, waste time. Do-nothing apps. Unproductivity software. Demotivational books. And, perhaps, an *inaction planner*.

Yes, an inaction planner is a bit ironic. It could very easily become another irritating thing on the to do list. If that's how you feel, please just put this on your shelf. But put it somewhere where you can see it everyday. Let this notebook be a reminder that it is ok to do absolutely nothing. It is ok to rest. It is ok to prioritize things that give you joy. Things that give you life. Even if those things get in the way of success.



Here's how the inaction planner works.

In the front of this inaction planner is a three-month calendar. Some folks fill their calendars with doctor's appointments or work commitments or due dates for projects. This calendar is designed for vacations, relaxation, and breaks.

Included are 92 individual entry pages; some may use this as a quarterly practice. But you don't have to fill out a single page. Or you can fill out some. Or all of them.

Each page is the same. At the start is an invitation to check in with how you're feeling. Then I invite you to make note of the stressful tasks you feel like you have to tackle on that day. But instead of treating that as your to do list, I'm asking you to engage in a healthy bit of willful procrastination, outright dismissal, or intentional half-assery. Which things can be set aside? Which things can be accomplished with minimal effort?

And then we get to the good stuff. Next, I invite you to make a note of the things you'd love to do with your time. What would give you joy? How can you prioritize these life-giving things?

At the end of each page, I invite you to spend a few minutes doing nothing. Not a fancy sort of nothing like meditation or mindfulness. Rather, an agenda free nothing. Nothing for nothing's sake.

At the end of the inaction planner, if you are in need of exploring possible sources of joy, I suggest some intentional unproductive practices. So unproductive that they subvert societal expectation. You may choose to try them out. You may rip them out of the notebook to start a restful campfire. Or you may let them sit there, unread.

What you do with this book is up to you. My hope and prayer is that, however you use it, it becomes a small source of peace and joy in a pushy world.

— *Mark Van Steenwyk*

monthly inaction

planning to do nothing

We tend to look at calendars as blank canvases. Little boxes into which we pour our ambitions. Or spaces for the marking of big events. Ambition is good. Events like holidays and parties and important meetings are also good.

Yet most of us rarely set aside agenda-less time. Yes, we may plan fun things like vacations or dates. We may even have scheduled days "off." But what about hours, days, or even weeks with no goals whatsoever? Before moving on to the three month calendar in the pages ahead, consider spending some time in silence.

Pay attention to your body. Where do you feel tension? What does your body need? After some time, when you are feeling as relaxed as you are able, fill out some times in the coming months for regular times of sabbath. Of rest. Prioritize being over doing.

Resist the temptation to fill up those set-aside times. Don't let them be the first things to go when something pressing comes up. Hold on to them as though they are sacred.

You might also avoid planning activities—even recreational activities—for those times of inaction. Instead, as the times you've set aside approach, receive them as an unopened gift. After the set aside time has come, open that time as a gift and use it as you will.

Then, after you've set aside time for rest, feel free to use the calendar for other things as well. But give yourself permission to prioritize planned inaction.

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daily inaction

inaction planner

Day / Date:

How are you feeling right now in this very moment?

What tasks do you feel pressure to complete?

What would give you joy today?

Which of these things can you let go of?

How can you prioritize these things today?

Which can you engage with minimal effort?

Notes:

Daily Gratitude:

Before moving ahead with your day, let yourself do absolutely nothing for a few minutes. Write down anything that comes up amidst the stillness. Or write down absolutely nothing.

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Before moving ahead with your day, let yourself do absolutely nothing for a few minutes. Write down anything that comes up amidst the stillness. Or write down absolutely nothing.

inaction planner

Day / Date:

How are you feeling right now in this very moment?

What tasks do you feel pressure to complete?

What would give you joy today?

Which of these things can you let go of?

How can you prioritize these things today?

Which can you engage with minimal effort?

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practicing inaction

breathing

Breathing happens to us whether we like it or not. It is unintentional. But there is also *intentional* breathing. Breathing as a practice. It is, perhaps, the oldest spiritual practice.

Intentional breathing helps us relax and focus. Practicing it just a few minutes a day can be refereshing. And it is also nicer than doing stressful things.

There are, oddly enough, a wide array of breathing practices. Human beings are good at taking basic functions and complicating them. I want to share a very basic form with you. One that takes little effort.

Find a comfortable place to sit. A place that you like. And sit there.

Your mind may be racing, filled with all sorts of judgements or demands. That's ok. Human minds tend to do that. Don't resist them. Instead, turn your attention to your breathing. The natural rhythm of breathing in and breathing out.

That's it. Just notice your breathing. If you start getting anxious about the stuff you should be doing instead, notice it, but turn your attention back to the gentle rhythm of your own breathing.

If your neighbor is noisy or there's a strange hum coming from your refrigerator, or there is any noise at all bothering you, notice it. Let yourself be momentarily annoyed. But then return your attention to your breathing.

Once you get caught up in the rhythm, notice the sensations that go along with breathing. The swelling and deflation of your chest. The sensation of air passing over your lips or tickling the hairs in your nose. Notice the sensations of your body as you breath. Notice. Be present. And when your noisy mind tries to butt in with it's increasing lists of demands, kindly return your attention to your breath.

niksen

Niksen is the Dutch concept of doing nothing.

One might be tempted to think, "well, I do a lot of nothing all the time." But such an assumption is likely wrong.

Niksen isn't about laying on the couch with a bag of Cheetos as you watch Netflix. It isn't about going on a walk. It isn't about doing anything. It is about doing nothing.

It isn't mindfulness, where you actively engage your awareness on what is in front of you or focus on the present moment. Rather, it is about setting aside space and time just to be. To let your body relax and let your mind wander wherever it will.

Technically, you can do stuff while embracing nixen. But only the sorts of activities you can do mindlessly. Like knitting. Or sitting on the toilet. Or moving back and forth in a rocking chair.

Niksen is about pure relaxation. The sort of relaxation without expectation. The sort of relaxation that could result in an unintentional nap without you feeling any guilt whatsoever. In a world where stress is an epidemic leading to all sorts of health issues, doing nothing at all is a precious gift.

If reading this makes you anxious, have no fear. It is literally impossible to shut off your brain. Even as the front of your mind is doing nothing, the back of your mind is busy. By resting your engaged mind, you create space for all manner of breakthroughs. Some of our best thinking happens when we aren't thinking.

Where to start? Just sit there and look out the window and let your mind wander. That's it. That is the heart of nixen.

napping

Napping isn't just for toddlers and elderly people. Napping is for everybody.

Many of us struggle to fall asleep at night. Our minds are full with the activities of today. With fears of tomorrow. We lie there in the darkness, wishing for quick slumber so we can get enough rest to function in the morning.

When the alarm goes off, we wake up in protest. We wish we could linger in those warm blankets. We long for a life where there weren't a thousand and one tasks to accomplish. In the end, urgency usually trumps sleep.

As we engage in those tasks, it isn't uncommon to find ourselves a bit tired in the afternoon. We may tell our bodies: "Suck it up. We still have much to accomplish this day!"

But what if we yielded to the wisdom of our flesh? What if we succumbed to the sleepy feelings that come to us around 2pm? What if we...took a nap?

Sleep experts tell us that the optimal time for a quick nap is 15 minutes. Just enough to get a shot of rejuvenation. This is what is called a "power nap." What a ridiculous name for something so gentle and warm.

But if we want to linger in bed longer, it is best to allow ourselves the time for a full sleep rotation...about ninety minutes. This is the sort of nap that lets the brain and body have a good reset. Napping for a bit less is likely to disrupt the full cycle and leave us groggy. Napping for more is likely to interfere with our nightly sleep.

Napping isn't a guilty pleasure. It is a physiological necessity. An act of grace that we bestow upon ourselves. Climbing into bed in the middle of the day is one of life's great pleasures. Why deprive ourselves of something like that?

bathing

Most of us don't take baths anymore. Showers are quicker. More efficient.

Quickness and efficiency have their place. But sometimes your soul needs slowness and inefficiency. A bath is a great way to satisfy your soul's needs.

When drawing a bath, make sure it is nice and hot. As hot as you can tolerate without pain. That will give you time to linger before the water becomes too cool to be relaxing.

Bubbles help too. I don't know why, but by some archane magic, bubbles intensify the bathing experience. There is something about the foamy texture, the perfumed scent, and the subtle sensation of expiring bubbles against the part of your body that is above the water that allows you to be more present in the moment.

It is best to bathe when there is a low chance of folks demanding to use the bathroom. Having to do a number two is always, it seems, a higher priority than soaking luxuriously.

After the bath is drawn, put your feet in, one at a time. And then slowly settle your body into the eager warmth. Lean back. Close your eyes. Enjoy the sensation of being enveloped in warm water...an experience harkening back to your carefree days in the womb.

Some folks like to have a glass of wine ready nearby. Some like relaxing music playing. New Age yoga music. Baroque. Even Metal. So long as it relaxes you.

After a while something inside of you will say "I've got stuff to do, let's get dry off." Say to that voice: "No thanks." Stay until the water becomes lukewarm enough to no longer be enjoyable. Or until your level of raisiny skin becomes off-putting.

sipping

Inaction is great with beverages.

On hot days, relaxing with a cold glass of water, or a cold beer, or any enjoyable cold beverage feels like stumbling upon an oasis whilst traversing a desert.

On cold days, sitting with hot cocoa or coffee or tea is more than simply ingesting warm fluid; it is like placing a heated blanket upon our very souls.

In our frenzied world, we often drink and eat at the same time. But the wise ones teach us that drinking and eating are best kept separate. This allows us to take our time eating and drinking, which is good for our bodies and our brains.

It also allows us to soak up the joy that comes from eating and drinking. Allowing each flavor and sensation to stand on its own.

Sipping is also preferable to guzzling. Drinking isn't a race. Let the fluid enter your mouth and linger before making its way to your gullet. Pay attention to all of the flavors. The texture. Close your eyes as you swallow the deliciousness of your chosen beverage. Enjoy it. Let the experience be so sensual that it becomes profane.

Sipping your standard eight to sixteen ounce beverage can take at least ten minutes if you're doing it right.

Often, we become tempted to find something else to do—tap away on our laptops, read a book, engaging in officeplace banter. But proper sipping is done alone. Without distraction. Giving as much attention as you can to the seductive brew. If such complete attentiveness lies within your grasp, let yourself observe clouds or birds or people passing by.

dérive

The dérive is a practice developed by the Letterist International, an avant-garde collective in Paris in the mid 20th Century, as a resistance to capitalism. The dérive is an unplanned ramble through a place, usually a city. The idea is to simply wander without purpose, without destination, and let yourself be drawn to whatever captures your imagination. This is a practice you can do as an individual or in a small group.

What seems like a casual walk can become revolutionary. When we let our geography shape our imaginations, we begin to notice things for what they are. Rather than engaging things in prescribed ways. We begin to exist with other things, rather than treating other things as objects for our use.

The dérive was central to radical groups like the Situationist International. For the Situationists, the dérive was a revolutionary technique to combat the malaise and boredom of capitalist society.

Situationist philosopher Guy Debord notes:

"The sudden change of ambiance in a street within the space of a few meters; the evident division of a city into zones of distinct psychic atmospheres; the path of least resistance that is automatically followed in aimless strolls (and which has no relation to the physical contour of the terrain); the appealing or repelling character of certain places—these phenomena all seem to be neglected. In any case they are never envisaged as depending on causes that can be uncovered by careful analysis and turned to account."⁺

In other words, when we allow ourselves to drift, to notice, and to react, we can break ourselves free from our preconceived notions. We can begin to break free from the way we've been conditioned and programmed by our society.

⁺ Guy Debord, *Introduction to a Critique of Urban Geography*

fill in the blank

You're clever and wise. You've probably got some ideas for your own inaction practices. Why not write them down as a reminder to yourself? As a way of giving yourself permission to simply be without having to do?

