



I have no time

“A man who dares to waste one hour of time has not discovered the value of life.”

[Charles Darwin, The Life & Letters of Charles Darwin]

“I have no time.”

I have heard this sentence on several occasions.

I have heard this from my co-workers, staff, fellows, residents, nurses, and managers. I have heard this from friends – who used to spend long hours chatting, laughing and playing music – but now, they have no time.

I have heard this from close family members who have exclaimed, “I have no time.”

Finally, I have heard this sentence – the same four words – said by myself. It has become part of the dialectic armamentarium that I use upon invitations – “I have no time.”

Time has become a valuable commodity.

As academicians, our job descriptions specify the “time” allocated to different roles: (i) “time” for clinical work, (ii) “time” for teaching, (iii) “time” for research. We call the latter “protected time.” The notion that our time is “protected” is comforting. We are protected. Our “time” is protected.

The structure of our life is built around time; it accepts different metrics, depending the cultural background, the level of education, and the earnings and savings.

It is “time” for you to move to your own house.

It is “time” for you to further your career.

It is “time” for you to get married and start a family.

It is “time” for you to retire.

Although time can provide structure and discipline, it has become a regulator of our abilities to do something during our life.

Inadvertently, or not, we also use time to structure the life of others, such as family members, employees, or trainees. The ability to guide – or manipulate – someone by regulating the time they spend under one’s supervision is more powerful than any other form of intervention, such as encouragement, motivation, salary, or recognition. Nothing compares to the impact that “time” regulation has over our actions, either voluntary or mandatory.

In that sense, we self-allocate “time” to activities that we perceive as meaningful or enjoyable, such as going to the gym, conversing with partners, reading a book, et cetera. Violating this principle is a trigger for anxiety and frustration. The feeling of guilt that we experience when doing something that we perceive is in place of another timely activity – despite being part of human emotions – is a source of discontent.

There is not a generalized approach to using “time” wisely – it is individualized. We go through life, with more or less success, defying our own *chronometer* to do some of the things that we have dreamt, and we allocate the “time” that we speculate we have to reach those goals.

Few years ago, I found myself overwhelmed with work. My mentor called from the other side of the Atlantic and I responded without much enthusiasm. The wise man of only 83 years of age recognized my exhaustion and told me, “You sound too busy...you are doing too many things at the same time...you should slow down.” Rather than taking the advice with sincerity and consider reducing my workload, it agitated me. I replied, “What do you want me to do? I have no time.”

I said “I have no time” to my 83-year-old mentor who has, from a statistical point of view, much less time than me to accomplish his dreams.

There was a period of silence on the phone line. Some say that more than 23 s of silence between two individuals is the most tolerable duration before one of the two individuals breaks the moment with a comment; after about 10 to 12 s, I said “are you there?” He replied, “I was wondering whether you have time to think?” I have not forgotten this phrase since it was spoken many years ago.

When did I lose my capacity for contemplation? When did I sacrifice my ability to enjoy doing nothing? The “dolce far niente” (“sweet doing nothing”) that the Italians have immortalized. Albert Einstein said, “Time is an illusion.” Does the perceived lack of time represent the absence of illusions? How do we regain, in this world of immediacies, the ambition of living in a world of illusions? How relevant, for the creative process of enjoying your life (and be productive) is to have illusions?

While Mahatma Gandhi taught us that “there is more to life than simply increasing its speed;” Benjamin Franklin has counteroffered that “lost time is never found again.”

If we live in this world with a constant perception of not having “time,” how are we going to construct memories that at some point may be our only companion in life? Are we losing the ability to contemplate? Does this affect our ability to relate to our patients if we have no time to connect with them?

One of my other mentors – after consultation with a patient in the hospital ward – once asked me what book the patient was reading. “I have no clue” was my immediate answer, all the while skeptical about how this would relate to patient care. I did not understand at the time that our ability to contemplate and have holistic views will aid us as physicians to relate to the patient, which is a skill that is of immense value.

Where do ideas come from? How do we connect an idea with the creative process and the systematic work flow to move it into action? How does an idea move forward into realization?

Apparently, “time” is the key that regulates this process. Time is the precious commodity that we all want to attain – despite where we live and work, and how our family is structured – and we are all “offered” the same total amount every day.

So far, we have not been able to create “time.” We have not succeeded in having 25 h in a day. We have to resolve the enigma of

how to distribute our efforts and energy throughout the same amount of minutes and seconds in a day. A strict 24 h per day.

I would like to teach my students to use their time wisely so as to enjoy their life and balance their ambitions. I want my students to be happy, and help them evolve not only as great scientists but also happy and content individuals. I want my students to have time to contemplate and think freely as such that time is not a factor that regulates their decisions.

I only wrote this piece today because I had convinced myself that I had no time before.

I propose to the readers to exercise the search of finding time for what they really want to do with their lives. Perhaps allowing a few minutes a day to do what they did not find “time” to do lately.

Because the “time” that we think we do not have, is out there. It is a matter of learning how to grasp it and to make it ours.

It is time to do it.

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