

2010 Fall Congregation

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Distinguished colleagues, honoured guests, members of the UBC graduating class of 2010.

What a wonderful day for all of you graduates. Congratulations -- you've made it! Perhaps you are surprised by that. After all, most, if not all of you, have managed to fulfill the requirements of your degree despite that most common of human impulses, procrastination. Am I right? Don't try to tell me that you always got a good night's sleep before that exam had to be written, or that you always had days to spare before having to hand in that term paper! Study after study shows that students are chronic procrastinators. But the good news for you is that now that you are graduates, the procrastination can continue. Study after study shows that *humans* are chronic procrastinators! I want to suggest that we can turn that vice into a virtue.

Yes, I admit it. I procrastinate too. As I was writing this speech, I just could not resist my youngest daughter's invitation to watch a little bit of the first Harry Potter movie. Well, you see, the latest one was about to be released, and I just had to remind myself of how Harry, Hermione and Ron had looked when they were 11 or so. By the way, I have seen that first Harry Potter movie at least seven times over the last decade.

In a marvelous review of the recent academic literature on procrastination, *The New Yorker's* James Surowiecki explains that we should not confuse procrastination with other, seemingly related, impulses. You are not a

procrastinator if you simply don't care about obligations, if you always live for the moment. That just makes you selfish or irresponsible. Nor are you a procrastinator if you delay on purpose because you think you have a better use for your time. No, "[t]he essence of procrastination lies in not doing what you think you should be doing, a mental contortion that surely accounts for the great psychic toll the habit takes on people." (Surowiecki, 2010).

There are many competing explanations for procrastination. Economists like Nobel-winner George Akerlof say that procrastination reveals the limits of rationality. Since the time of the Greeks, philosophers have accepted the lack of rationality in procrastination: even if it seems that one is avoiding an unpleasant or difficult task, delaying actually makes most people unhappy, and the consequences can be decidedly negative. I hope that none of you was ever docked a grade for handing in something late.

For me, the most intriguing recent explanation of procrastination comes from game theorist Thomas Schelling who suggests that delaying what we know we must do reflects a "divided self": the person who plans and the person who fails to deliver are but different parts of a complex personality. We want to plan and to fulfill our obligations, but we also want to delay and do things that seem to provide more immediate gratification. But just because we may be internally divided, with different styles and approaches battling themselves out within ourselves, this does not mean that we are doomed to the real negatives of procrastination: failure to achieve and guilt.

In a fascinating paper in a collection called *The Thief of Time*, Joseph Heath and Joel Anderson suggest that merely trying to address the problem of procrastination with our own internal resources may not be adequate to the task:

there are reasons to doubt that "simply buckling down" will be enough to solve many pathologies of the will – or, indeed, that it ever has been enough. To begin with, there are many unanswered empirical questions about how such self-discipline is possible and what the limits of it are. Several recent studies suggest that although willpower is like a muscle, and can be trained, it can also become exhausted.

So in addition to willpower, Heath and Anderson suggest that we humans need to rely on external tools and techniques that help us to do what we know we need to do, what they call “the extended will.” A great example is a software programme designed by a PhD candidate at the University of North Carolina in 2008. It enables users to shut off their access to the internet for up to eight hours: It is called “Freedom”! You may want to try it.

So, my friends, you will likely have to exercise more willpower now that you have graduated. Missing deadlines at work or in a family can have consequences far more severe than missing deadlines at university. You may also want to look for external techniques to help create an “extended will.”

But what if you still end up procrastinating? I have a suggestion. Make sure that you don't procrastinate by relying on junk. Don't sit in front of the television watching the latest episode of "Survivor Samoa". Don't just wash your hair or clip your finger nails (though you should do both regularly!). Instead, take your procrastination and appreciate something beautiful in the world. I say this, because the inverse of procrastination – another part of our complex personalities – is our tendency to focus so much on goals (even ones we are procrastinating about!) that we overlook the wonder around us.

Consider these lovely words of young American poet Todd Boss (Boss, 2010):

ONE CAN MISS MOUNTAINS

And pine. One

can dismiss
a whisper's

revelations
and go on as

before as if
everything were

perfectly fine.
One does. One

loses wonder

among stores
of things.
One can even miss
the basso boom
of the ocean's
rumpus room
and its rhythm.
A man can leave
this earth
And take nothing
--Not even
longing – along
with him.

So on this day of graduation, I encourage you to do two things now and in the future. First, try not to procrastinate, and find ways of helping yourself avoid it. Second, if you must procrastinate, and you do, do it with beauty. Congratulations and good luck!

CITATIONS

Anderson, Joel and Heath, Joseph, "Procrastination and the Extended Will" in *The Thief of Time*, eds. Mark White and Chrisoula Andreou (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010).

Todd Boss, *Yellowrocket* (New York: W. W. Norton & Co, 2008).

James Surowieki, "Later" in *The New Yorker* (11 October 2010).