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SOMETHING IS MISSING  
IN THE FABRIC OF OUR WORK  
AND LIVES. IT'S POSSIBLE  
TO GET IT BACK.

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I never learned to make a fire when I was a kid. It's not one of the core skills of growing up in Manhattan. Did I learn the art of trick-or-treating floor to floor by elevator? You bet. Could I masterfully fold-and-tilt a slice of Ray's pizza so all the grease slid onto my napkin before I ate it? By the age of three. And of course, I learned to nimbly sled down a five-foot Central Park slope between a garbage can and a mound of black snow. However, as an apartment-dwelling kid, unless something goes terribly, terribly wrong you never learn to build a fire.

As I grew up, fire-making skills continued to elude me. I gave it a try on beaches with bonfires or camping with an outdoorsy boyfriend, but I never mastered how to get the flames started. Many years and three kids later, my husband, our boys, and I went to a little cabin near Big Bear Lake, not far from our home in Los Angeles. The journey there was a typical boys-in-back road trip alternating between two games, "Which Would You Rather?" (lick a street after a parade or eat a toothpick?) and the ever-popular escalating competition of "Does *This* Hurt?"

The cabin was worth the drive. Tucked into a beautiful woodsy area with giant windows, it had a wide, stately stone fireplace calling for something to be ignited. The boys were so excited at the prospect they were bouncing. Unfortunately, we had no

wood or expertise and my husband had run into town, so I did what city folks tend to do in any area of knowledge lack: I found a coach.

On the round, doily-topped table at the Three Bears Lodge was a little sign: TEXT FOR FIREWOOD! DROP-OFFS IN TEN MINUTES. (It was right next to an unforgettably titled newsletter from the local chiropractor called *The Spinal Column*.) I whipped out my phone, sent the text, and with a comic speed that made us feel like he'd been waiting around the corner, Charlie arrived. He had the fashion leanings of a lumberjack and the chill-i-tude of a surfer. He told me and my chanting, bobbing, amped-up, pyro offspring that when starting a fire, layers are best: a little paper first, some dry pine needles over the grate, then a few chunks of fire starter, followed by two types of wood—softwood to catch quick, and hardwood to burn long. But he forgot to mention one critical ingredient: *space*.

We carefully constructed a dense pile of every fuel source known to man and then hurled matches at it unsuccessfully for twenty minutes before my husband returned. After a glance at our compact pile of charred wood, he lovingly extracted the mangled matchbook from my hands and began to redesign our stack. He fluffed the pine needles, staggered the fire starter, and “tee-pee’ed” the wood to create the perfect passages for oxygen to feed the fire. And then, with exactly one match, it was roaring. The boys roasted a whole bag of marshmallows, and I learned something valuable.

It’s the space between the combustibles that fire can’t live without.

The space is what makes flames ignite and stay burning. However, we forget this law of nature in every area of our lives beyond the hearth—especially at work. Our schedules are packed

like the last moment of a winning game of Tetris, and our brimming minds overflow into dozens of insufficient note-taking apps. There's no oxygen to feed the fire. We strike through matchbook after matchbook, desperately trying to ignite our brilliance to the fullest, but the resource we really need to elevate our work is a little breathing room.

Without space we can't sustain ourselves. The full fortitude of our professional contributions eludes us. We miss game-changing, breakthrough ideas that fail to grace us with their presence because busyness is barring the door. We miss human moments of serendipity and connection that should occur in the in-between moments of life—because in-between moments no longer exist.

To fully comprehend the gravity of this loss, imagine what would happen if the periodic table of elements were to drop a tile or two. Imagine if nitrogen or sodium simply vanished, leaving plants pale and weakened and every single french fry incomplete forever. That single loss would ripple through the entire world. This has actually happened. Through our constant push to do more, we've buried the free, flexible time that used to be the buffer throughout our days. The element of open time has vanished.

## **The Age of Overload**

As a result of this deficit, we sprint along daily in a trance of false productivity, maniacally checking off boxes while uncertain of each task's relevance. Every interstitial second finds its own assignment. In fact, most are double-booked. The tyranny of the urgent subjects us to a thousand forms of daily pressure

and stress. But finding time to solve this problem of overwhelm seems impossible. Tragically, we are too busy to become less busy, and our 3:00 a.m. insomnia provides the only unscheduled thinking time of the day.

Let's look at this oxygen deficit in the flow of a typical professional workday. (Cue "Flight of the Bumblebee.") From the starter pistol of our cell phone alarm, we jerk out of bed, checking email and social media feeds while stumbling over a terrier or a toddler. A seated breakfast is only a fantasy as harsh reality shoves an energy bar in one hand and keys in the other and we're out the door. We search for a podcast *while* driving with our knees *while* using our passenger-seat-desk at stoplights to check PowerPoint slides for our first meeting. As we catapult ourselves into the office, we join the human stream of pressure, panic, and paperwork already in motion. Or we work from home and have a shorter commute, from the kitchen to the den, but somehow experience the same daily insanity as the rest of the tribe.

For eight or nine or ten (or twelve!) hours, we're bombarded with an avalanche of emails, meetings, messages, reports, and interruptions. Any pause brings a flood of uncertainty, self-consciousness, and anxiety. When we have gaps in our calendars—God forbid—we cram and jam those slots with more action items driven by the core belief that unscheduled time is wasted time. We proceed till the breathless walk to the parking lot (or back up to our living space) when we ask ourselves, "What *did* I get done today?"

Often, we don't have a clue. We wake up every morning and bring our best spark but there's no space to feed the fire. Somewhere deep in our subconscious we think to ourselves: "If only I could plan before I act." "If only I could think before I speak." "If only I could rest before I have to turn back on." But we can't

because modern work has a megaphone to our ears pushing us forward. If met with the slightest naturally occurring gap, like an elevator ride or a computer powering up, we multitask with our phones to fill the open moment. Wonder why there's a television installed in your gas pump? Because if you had to pump all twelve gallons without it, they think you'd die of boredom.

And then there is the guilt—the strange, pernicious guilt that clients from every industry, role, and professional level share with me. We feel guilty we haven't solved our own busyness, guilty for the incorrect assumption that we're the only ones chronically behind, guilty for our romance with gadgets and our inability to stop the tsunami. We ruminate about neglecting family members, worry about sabotaging our health, and fear a long, empty future of running hot and accomplishing little.

Mindy, whom I have dubbed the Peanut Butter Manager, was a victim of this paradigm.

Peanut butter is not on the typical office supply list. But for Mindy, a handy jar of chunky is just as critical as a headset—because Mindy does not eat lunch. This bright-eyed woman loves the work she does as a top salesperson supplying IV nutrients to medical patients too ill to eat. After surpassing her targets, she was rewarded with a promotion at work, which, she explained to me, became a demotion in her life.

Her schedule, which was previously rock-and-roll busy, now became crushing. Every second at work counted and there were none to spare. Since lunch seemed, in her words, “so foolishly wasteful,” she began to work with an ever-present jar of peanut butter on her desk to keep her blood sugar up. (It's ironic for a professional whose entire focus is helping sustain her end users with the vital nutrients they need.)

Then, the lack of space began to take an incontrovertible toll on her and her team. Errors in her group's processes began to

surface in client-facing situations. Her health deteriorated, leading to constant headaches and insomnia. This dedicated team was wrung out and spending all day, every day just getting back to even.

And then there's Pete. Pete knows a lot about the interactions of flames and oxygen from his thirty-year history of fire and rescue service and his training as an EMT. He also knows a lot about managing pressure since he used to conduct "stress inoculation" drills for first responders, putting them through progressively more taxing scenarios to prepare for life-and-death assignments. Using these techniques personally, he felt he'd gotten to where he was able to "drive through complex issues that would completely debilitate someone else."

But when a huge company bought his smaller one, for which he was a regional manager, the strain was too much for even this powerfully protected man. He began to get up to two hundred emails per day and was saddled with an unforgiving boss who sent those emails at 11:00 p.m. on Sunday night, expecting immediate answers. His work life and home life became blended, he said, "like a shuffled deck of cards." Pete ended up in the ER with trouble breathing from stress. And he broke my heart with his response to the last question I always ask folks, "Is there anything else you would like to add?" Pete thought for a moment, and said, "The only thing I'm trying to figure out is, when is it going to stop?"

I've met a thousand Mindys and Petes. Their busyness is back-drafting the air out of every room they occupy. Most would not even say they have a problem. It's just the way they think work has to be and they've resigned themselves willingly to it. And that, my friends, is the biggest problem. It's our consenting that's killing us.

## Busyness Is Everywhere

Motrone, Italy, has thirty inhabitants—thirty-five on the week we visited. You arrive there through the medieval town of Lucca, winding up a steep five-mile road cut into the side of a wooded mountain. It's a two-way road that is the width of one car. When you meet another driver, one of you needs to ever-so- gingerly inch over into the foliage, to let the other pass. The ice truck comes twice a day and you'd better pray not to meet it.

Our B&B hosts, Geoff and Jenny, invited us to dinner the first night and shared their stories. When Geoff turned eleven, he left his English mum to go live with his dad in New Zealand, on a seven-week trip by ship. Standing on the deck and so alone, he felt the hot tears start and one of the passengers firmly said to him, "Boy, don't cry. Eat this apple." And he did—and grew up in that singular moment.

He learned to trap possums at two shillings per and was soon the only boy his age who could afford to buy a girl a milkshake at the corner store. And though he tried working in many industries he found his true calling when he fell in love with Italy on a visit, and became a farmer in Motrone, where he and Jenny raise sheep, geese, and bees.

In this microscopic village without a single store or restaurant, this couple is blisteringly, screamingly busy from 7:00 a.m. to 7:00 p.m. In fact, when he drove me down the perilous hill to buy some prosciutto and cheese, he kept checking his phone (yes, while driving on *that* road) and muttering, "It's a busy day. It's a busy day. Whew! What a busy day!"

*Busyness is everywhere.*

Busyness is overseas and in our backyard. It's felt by the young and old, working and not. In Houston after a speaking

engagement, a radiant older woman approached me. Her perfume cloud was like being passed over by a Chanel crop duster, but her manner was instantly appealing. She said my message was a gift as she'd been trying to slow down for years. I asked what kind of work kept her so busy, and with a huge grin and a little ironic laugh, she said, "Oh, I'm retired!"

Juliet B. Schor, an economist who eloquently writes about our life and work in the shadow of consumerism and time pressure, calls the way we choose to operate "performative busyness." There's no "they" doing it to us anymore. From corporate executive to sheep farmer to retiree, our driving pace and pressure have become fully *internalized*. We carry it with us wherever we go. But as indoctrinated as most are to the white-water rush of busyness, a small yearning lurks within: A little whisper we can hardly hear says we just need a minute to think—a minute to breathe. And sometimes we get a hint of it by accident.

## The Posture of Thoughtfulness

Think about those times when you do a little catch-up work on a Sunday, focusing on the difficult tasks there was no way to do during the harried week of clients' problems and reactivity. The kids are out with friends. Your inbox sits frozen in time and it's quiet, like a church. Without colleagues around or any distractions you take a little pause to collect your thoughts—because you can. And then you begin a very special type of work. Real work. The kind of work chronically displaced by the daily march of crises, meetings, and urgent demands. The type of work you usually start after the official workday is done.

In this protected environment there is room to think. You contemplate tasks before acting. You mull over problems without



prying eyes. You take breaks as your body requests them. The feeling of flow is incredible. A mere two hours later, you stand up to stretch and realize you've completed what would have taken days during the week. No wonder you burned so brightly. You had plenty of oxygen.

It is possible to capture this Sunday feeling during the workweek. All we need to do is to reclaim—or discover for the first time—the skill of adding the space and thoughtfulness that fires us up. We begin by staking a single claim: Thinking *is* time well spent.

Only a certain generation remembers when this was an un-debated fact. Back then if you caught your boss feet up on the desk, lost in thought, and staring out a window, you'd freeze as if you'd seen a rattlesnake, and then shift slowly backward, determined not to disturb them. Why? Because thinking time was commonly agreed to have *value*. There was an entirely different relationship with the posture of thoughtfulness.

I defy you now to remember the last time you actually caught someone thinking where you work. And if you did, what would you do? Go on, play the full movie scene in your head. You come around the corner and stumble upon a thinking coworker—glassy-eyed and far away, as thinkers are. Would you call a paramedic? Would you tweet a picture? A typical stressed colleague or manager would feel a pinch of frustration, even anger, and instigate an immediate intervention to jolt our beautiful thinker back to the urgent present with a slightly too-loud round of “What are you working on? What are you working on?” Thoughtfulness has become an oddity—and even an embarrassment.

But what if . . . What if this person's liberated mind was just about to turn the corner in solving a problem or trying a new approach? What if a moment of brilliance was cresting, an

un-thunk thought just about to be birthed for the betterment of the company, the core product, or a customer need? The world will never know because that dear thinker has been successfully redirected back to their inescapable inbox and is now proudly deleting their e-trash, showing off their activity for all to see.

If only activity and productivity were the same—but they are not. There is visible work and invisible work. Thinking, pondering, considering, reframing, mulling, concocting, questioning, and dreaming—none of these require a single muscle to be moved in order to be enacted. We only see the results when completed, not in the process. In a flip of common perception, we must entertain the possibility that pushing harder often defeats our goals while interlacing space and thoughtful time supports and amplifies results. Like Olympic athletes taking recovery between sets, we must arrest our effort in order to excel over the long term. We need permission to pause—and to do so during business hours, not on our own time like a public school teacher going broke to buy their own clay and markers.

When we do, all sorts of things get better. We stop for a moment before sending a challenging email to make sure of our message. We pause and refresh ourselves when we feel fatigue that interrupts our focus. We step away for a few minutes between meetings to digest and ingest the insights from the last session and truly prepare for the next. Leaving time for these moments changes the entire nature of work.

## **The Arrived, the Sneaks, and the Fortunate**

There are those among us who already utilize thoughtfulness and pausing as part of the business day. Some are senior executives who've risen above the minutiae to conclude that thinking

is the greatest contribution they can make. They have executive assistants, offices with doors, and titanium-strength boundaries to create time for themselves. Then there are the sneaks—those whose situations don't allow them to publicly think or pause, but who know its value. They slip in moments of reflection or refreshment, hiding around the corner like smokers.

Finally, there are the lucky ones—those who work in an environment that's purposefully relaxed and thoughtful (usually trickled down from the values and behaviors of the senior leadership). In these groups, it's *normal* to take time for recuperation and idea generation. It's *normal* to be strategic. It's *normal* to stop and think before answering a question. And because everyone is doing it, there is no fear or risk.

Any company can bring back oxygen to feed the fire of its talent. It can be—and wherever possible should be—a team-driven process that carries you along once you step aboard. But rest assured, this work can be practiced solo or on a smaller scale with great effectiveness.

## Meet the Strategic Pause

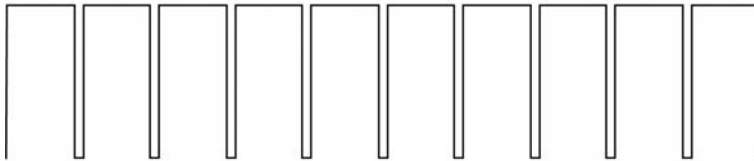
The element that's missing for Mindy, Pete, and every other weary worker out there is white space, or “time with no assignment.” It's the open, unscheduled time—long or short, planned or improvised—that allows us to breathe again. The term came from looking at the white unencumbered spaces between tasks on a calendar and realizing that seeing open time in the scheduling of a day was an indication of how much untapped potential that day could hold.

This marvelous white space is a counterintuitive necessity that was always ours—always present—but has slipped away amid

overbooked calendars, overflowing inboxes, and the pressure to do more. Call it gap, buffer, slack, or margin, allowing white space between our endless doing makes everything better.

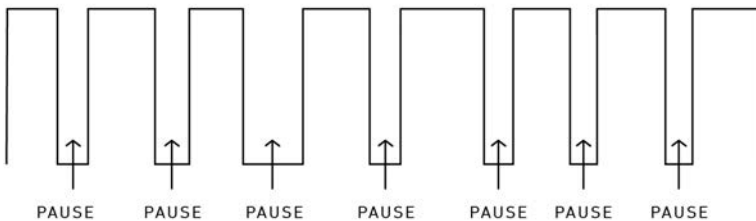
The strategic pause, a moment of chosen cessation of activity, is the catalyst for white space to appear. Stop what we're doing and white space rushes in. But stopping is not our forte. Going is—and that's the problem. Without the strategic pauses that help us access white space, people like Mindy and Pete have days that look like this:

### Life and Work Without Pause



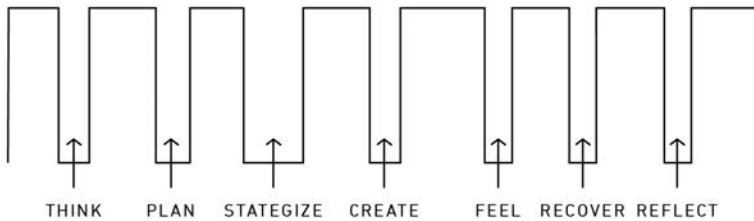
If they gave themselves permission to pause, we would see this:

### Life and Work With Pause



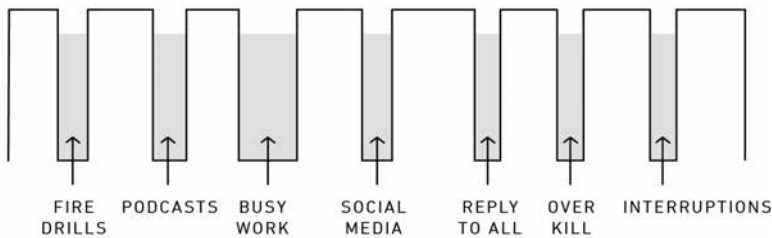
And then they would have time to use those pauses for thoughtful activities like this:

### What We Do In The Pause



It seems so obvious, healthy, and smart. (Even the savage pros of the mixed martial arts get a minute between rounds.) But something gets in the way. *Filling*. We find, choose, and are subjected to endless activities grouting in these critical open spaces.

### Pause Fillers



Our filling activity has become so engrained in us as individuals and in our organizations that we've forgotten white space ever existed in the first place. Pete said it this way: "I have

become so conditioned to a full calendar that when I see five open minutes there's this overwhelming power in my mind telling me to fill it."

Think for a minute about that satisfying feeling when you clean out a garage. You're sure to find treasure among the holiday decor and memorabilia, but one find is far more valuable than the rest—the space itself. Stand before a freshly emptied room (or a freshly emptied hour) and you feel instantly thrilled about all its possibilities. Beautiful, bountiful space sets our energy free and yet is missing for so many. But open space does not need to be absent forever. I found it myself by accident.

## The Origin Story

My first experience of white space was over a mixed green salad, and a holy one at that. I was, despite a secular Jewish childhood (bagels yes, candles no), experimenting in my early thirties with observing some version of the Sabbath. I learned the basics from more religious friends. From Friday to Saturday, observant Jewish people abstain from many things. In order to take a profound break from all labor, they don't work, drive, spend, or use the telephone or lights. For twenty-four hours each week, a hiatus is taken from changing the world or themselves in any way. Eat, sing, laugh, love, and nap—fine. But no bettering, aspiring, or building. It's a lesson in stopping and is harder than it sounds. But I discovered it's also delightful.

My group of friends met every Friday for what we called Salad Shabbat. The rotating host would provide sweet wine, a giant bowl of lettuce, and the challah, always raisin. Guests would provide salad toppings and creative dressings to make an instant feast. We were a foodie bunch and would contribute

goodies like chunks of burrata cheese, blanched fresh peas, or smoked chicken to toss into our field greens. After a wicked-hot shower that drained away the tensions of the week, I'd always put on the same comfy pair of faded denim overalls and not a hint of makeup or jewelry. This became my transition ceremony to switch off the world for just a little while.

I fell in love with the emptiness and freedom—with the sense of improvisation and purity and escape. This emotional tone was memorably captured by the Jewish rabbi Joshua Heschel, who described the Sabbath as a “castle built in time” that we enter for sanctuary. So it was for me—richly and palpably so.

A second realization came in my early days as a keynote speaker, when I taught subjects ranging from communication skills to time management. When people approached me lamenting the fullness of their schedule, we'd look together at their paper calendars searching for the first line of defense against busy—the actual *white spaces on the page between tasks*, which I knew were essential but which few of them had.

I'd now tasted the experiential beauty of time with no assignment. I'd gained professional clarity on the importance of unscheduled work moments. My next insight into the creative and strategic possibilities of white space came in 2005, when I became a mom. My three beautiful, curious blue-eyed boys, each born two years apart, were angels in the day and demons in the night and took forever to go to sleep. So, we lay with them every evening until they were out. (Can you hear every grandparent in the world groaning?) I did the math once and calculated I spent around 353,300 minutes of my life in pitch-black rooms waiting for little people to fall asleep.

Funny thing: Those periods turned out to be amazingly rich times. Trapped in the distraction-free quiet with only a soft little hand to hold, I would start thinking about the big questions of

life, about how I show up in the world, and often about work. I'd ponder our business goals, our troubles to solve, and write new content. When they were still, I'd break the contact of touching their back or belly by lifting one finger at a time, and then tiptoe out—an escaping jailbird trying not to wake the dozing guard. But then I *dashed*—searching for pen and paper, because during that forced reflection time, I'd generated sales strategies, new product design ideas, and client communications I wanted to make. It turned out my first professional gifts from white space arrived in the dark.

In the years following, white space became fully crystallized through the process of teaching and writing about what I'd learned. As I developed the frameworks and practices, I saw that the white space payoffs I'd experienced—of calm (Shabbat white space), efficiency (calendar white space), and creativity (trapped-in-bed white space)—formed a well-rounded set of benefits. Taking time to step back and think helped nearly everyone who came in contact with the practice. The topic of white space became the sole focus of my professional life and later of our company. We've witnessed the change it brings. When people are freed from the antiquated notion that unfilled time is the enemy, they discover that taking a minute to think is a formidable source of professional power.

## Short and Long Pauses

One of those people was Mitch Barns, a CEO who gave himself permission to think once he realized “it's not an indulgent pause, it's a strategic pause.” For total precision, it's also not a lazy pause, an idle pause, a procrastinating pause, an empty pause, a



nap, a snooze, or an aimless pause. It's a *strategic* pause. It draws white space into your day and will elevate all that you touch.

A strategic pause for professional enrichment can be an hour noodling on a legal pad; it can be a shared team time of unplanned creativity before a whiteboard; or it can be the moments an executive spends designing the next five years of their company's story.

Short interstitial pauses are potent. Like truffles of little weight and enormous worth, these precious ticks of the clock occur between concluding one task and choosing the next. They are found in the vital transition time between meetings. Or in a confident, silent beat of conversation, where the next words to be spoken are crafted. White space becomes like a glass of water sitting on your desk and you have infinite options of when and where to take a small sip.

Deeper, longer uses of the pause are rarer in our seamlessly urgent life, but positively transformative when taken. From a thirty-minute thinking block to an hour of strategy to an uninterrupted evening, weekend, vacation, or even the Holy Grail of white space—an extended professional hiatus. These are great aspirational targets, even if you initially have to sneak them in.

Tony Calanca didn't sneak. I'm not sure he could, as this trade show executive stands six feet eight and is as kind as he is tall. Working in conferences, "a business that will eat your life if you let it," with eighty shows per year, the pressure on Tony was always high. In his poignant words, "it's like you reach in and grab the wire and the buzz is going through you and you can't let go."

A white space believer, Tony had an enormous company-wide negotiation coming up worth tens of millions of dollars over the term of the contract. At first, he thought, "I'll just SALY it"

(Same As Last Year). But then he took a strategic pause and said, “You know what? I’m not doing that. I’m going to put time on my calendar to sit and think about this.” He scheduled six sessions for himself ranging from thirty minutes to two hours. His deep dive included targeted research and important conversations with colleagues and partners. Ultimately, he created a collaborative outcome that saved the company millions while meeting or exceeding everyone’s expectations. Not everyone will invest in this kind of white space time, but even the intent to pause and think can alter the course of a project.

However long or short, the strategic pause should never be mistaken for a corporate tool—it’s *everyone’s* tool. In speaking with Dr. Frank Reed, a family doctor in a small western mountain town, he said he values pausing as applied to medicine because “it allows you to enter the next moment without a vapor trail behind you from the previous one.” A man ahead of his time, Frank had a rule that he would dock the pay of any employee who worked through lunch, because he wanted his staff to be truly present for every afternoon patient—and it worked, and they thanked him. He taught his interns to stop outside the door of every exam room for around thirty seconds before entering to align themselves physically, mentally, and emotionally. Some of his protégés said it was the single most valuable thing they learned over a three-year residency.

Over and over again, the pause is there for us. And I want you to embrace it. But dear reader, friend in the trenches I’ve not yet met, I know how hard it is to pursue self-improvement. Everywhere we look there’s a challenging new routine, habit, or practice we feel we need to adopt to make ourselves better (and that quietly implies we are lacking as we currently are). But here’s all you need to do to access the freedom of white space: *Take a strategic pause.*

Find one. Make one. Allow one. Just the tiniest littlest moment every single day of your life and you are transformed. Full stop. One second of pause. Five seconds of pause. Grab what you can and dance around the room.

If you abandon every specific tool and technique, if you forget my name, shred this book, or delete the file, and do nothing else but make the strategic pause a daily habit like brushing your teeth, YOU WIN. And when the white water of work inevitably sweeps you away (as it will) and you snap back into the present and realize it's been weeks of nonstop, nonpausing activity—acknowledge, forgive, and begin again. Repeat forever. *How much pausing per day?* You pick. *Do I use a timer?* Have at it. *Can we do it together?* Yes, you can.

Take a strategic pause. Every. Single. Day.