

A Two Year Calendar

*O, I got plenty of time...
I love the passing of time
Never for money
Always for love*

-David Byrne

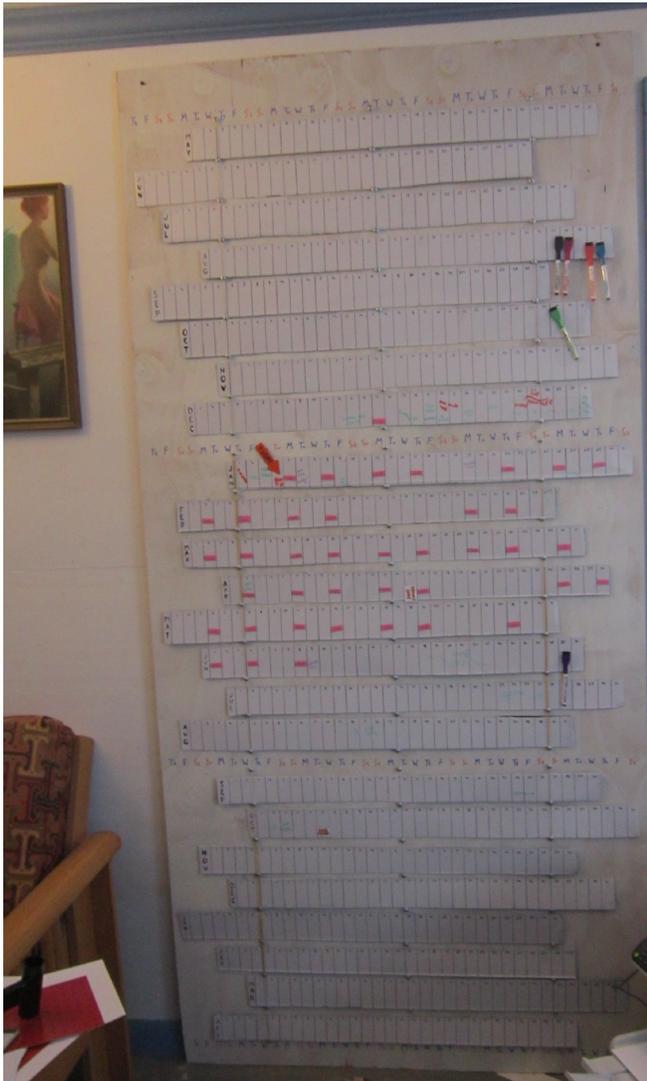
*You know I can just go and keep going,
And forget what I'm going for,
And I rush away from the moment,
As if anything mattered more*

-Anais Mitchell

*When push comes to shove, you gotta do what you love
Even if it's not a good idea.*

-Hermes

I have recently finished building myself a new calendar. It's ridiculous. It's so large I had to completely rearrange my office to make it fit. It's a perpetual, magnetic, homemade-white-board calendar covering the next 2 years, a.k.a. the next 4.5% of my estimated remaining lifespan. It's made out of a dumpstered plumbing-fixture display stand, a chunk of plywood, some screws, and rubber bands. But most of all, it's a physical manifestation of my neurotic struggles with time and hope.



Too often, I think, discussions of organization and productivity have an upbeat, positive tone: *with these seven executive synergy methods, you can revitalize your core productivity overnight!* I'm against all that. I think the original motivational posters were the *memento mori*, like the skulls that monks used to keep on their shelf. I like a productivity tool that reminds me I'm going to die, and that I haven't gotten anything done all day/year/lifetime. In that vein, I've always been fascinated with the idea of totalizing calendars and grand plans. I think of Bartlebooth in *Life; A User's Manual*, or [my favorite Bowle's quote](#), or my father's quixotic attempt to chop and stack a lifetime supply of firewood. Working on stone and history, I feel like I have been vocationally exposed to this temporal scale. I will never forget working on the design for a town veterans' memorial, when someone raised the question of how much space we ought to leave, pragmatically speaking, for the local kids who will die in *future* wars. That way lies Ozymandias...

There is an inherent tradeoff, though, between the shock and awe of the lifetime-as-a-scale, and the resolution needed for us to perceive each moment individually, with some sense of accountability.

This is why it is much easier to write a set of life goals than a realistic to-do list for the next week. There is a mindfulness institute in Vermont that puts out a newsletter called *30,000 Days*, and I think that title, by itself, strikes a good balance: I can understand what a day is, and I have a fairly clear sense of 30,000 units as an order of magnitude (e.g., I know what \$30k buys) but it is still surprising to think of my lifetime in those terms.

Similarly, I've settled on two years as the appropriate size for a calendar that will cover a large swath of my life, but can still be scanned at a glance. By covering *two* years, rather than one, I want to break down my sense that annual events are somehow unique or exceptional. For a given value of the progressive tense, I work at NBTSC *every year*, I go to GESA *every year*, I celebrate certain holidays and anniversaries every year. And yet these events are spaced far enough apart that they can feel like a catastrophic novelty each time: I have never once made any kind of plan for what I'll do at NBTSC the year after next, because it's simply beyond my threshold of awareness. This calendar is designed to challenge that.

Now, this false consciousness about annual events is actually just one aspect of a larger quarrel I have with time. It's a quarrel I've recently lost a couple times, but I'm thinking best out of five. Or seven, or some large odd number, I don't know. And it goes like this....

Porter Knight, who is a professional organizer (inbox not labor), once made a point that stuck with me. She said that people who set about to [re]organize their lives often begin by going to Staples and buying some kind of day-planning color-coded interlocking plastic box hanging file. Whatever looks nifty. And usually their grand plans to get organized and write the novel or whatever die at the end of the checkout line, because they have just finished the only part of the life-organizing process that can be turned into a consumer experience. Similarly, today is New Year's Day, when everyone goes out to buy gym memberships, and thereafter discovers that they cannot *actually* get exercise simply by swiping a card. With that insight in mind, I have largely avoided any kind of ready-made organizing tools, either physical or virtual. My calendars, like my to-do lists, have generally been simple marker-on-paper grids, usually covering 4-5 weeks at a time. (On the right...)



As you may note, most of those calendars look fairly full. The word “look” is important here: actual time budgets are notoriously hard to reconstruct, and my own life contains very few routine scheduled tasks. But subjectively, my life feels full to the brim with recurring-if-unscheduled obligations and crises, and these cover the calendar to the point where there isn't much white space left.

[Aside: A text like this is static, but I would invite the reader to imagine a sort of montage in which I write, edit, delete, and rewrite about three paragraphs, at this point, over and over again. I use irony, and self-pity, and humor, and the long lenses of economics and sociology. And then I abandon those efforts. The point here is that (1) there certain exigencies of my own life (caregiving, mainly) that have fragmented and socioeconomically devalued my time, but (2) I don't really have all that much to complain about, by any quantitative comparison with any version of my peer group. I wish I had more time to pursue my heart's desires, which lately means working on Sphinx. And it annoys me that other aspects of my life get in the way, as of course they do for everyone.]

The New Age dictat “follow your bliss” has its proximate roots in a passage from Thoreau:

If one listens to the faintest but constant suggestions of his genius, which are certainly true, he sees not to what extremes, or even insanity, it may lead him; and yet that way, as he grows more resolute and faithful, his road lies. The faintest assured objection which one healthy man feels will at length prevail over the arguments and customs of mankind. No man ever followed his genius till it misled him. Though the result were bodily weakness, yet perhaps no one can say that the consequences were to be regretted, for these were a life in conformity to higher principles.

It is a passage that I wind up discussing with young people several times a year, in several different contexts. Often, in those conversations, I feel a certain sense of professional obligation to uphold the FYB party line. But there are doubts. Once I knew a poetry teacher who, in a moment of unguarded cynicism, told me that her great pedagogical aim was to ensure that 99% of her students gave up writing poetry. And that is Very Wicked, of course, shame on her, yes, but there is some insight there. Our whole society, and any even-semi-coherent society that we can envision, is predicated on the idea that most people will not follow their bliss (or genius, if you prefer), at least as anything more than a minor hobby. Some people—*most of us*—need to spend our lives washing dishes and mucking out the latrine and making sure grandpa took his meds. We cannot all be creative divas, passionately smashing the world around us for the sake of a few bad quatrains. Or at least, most of us cannot be divas most of the time.

There is also a profound wisdom in the mindfulness traditions which tell us that chopping wood and carrying water are themselves the path of blissful genius, or at least that they *can be*. But there is a real tension between these truths. The history of mindfulness-and-acceptance teachings is mostly a history of their differential relevance by social strata. A warrior prince and a child prostitute may both be told to greet the day with love and dedication to the roles bestowed on them by karma, but those are two very different messages. And even today, in our relatively casteless society, I have seen people embrace a chop-wood-carry-water philosophy in order to subsume themselves into shitty relationships and soul-destroying jobs; using such koans like Quaaludes to get over the pain of abandoning their dreams. This attitude is fairly common in the support literature available to caregivers, and my innate tendencies lie more in this direction than they do in the diva-artist genre.

For myself, though, the battleground for this tension has often involved calendars. I envision my future as a sort of blank slate. “The future is unwritten”, so saith the Clash, and Machado, and all the good anarchists, right? But in point of fact, the future isn't so much unwritten as it is a rough draft. I know, for instance, that we have a houseguest coming over in two days, and that I have to go back to work on Monday, and that I have a dentist appointment Tuesday morning. Those things might not happen—the world might end, our friend might change his plans, I might have an existential crisis and move to Nepal to become a yak herder. But in all probability, the major events of the next week will play out more or less the way they are written on my desk calendar.

As I said, my own calendars used to run to four weeks or so. Our wall calendars show a month at a time. In each case, the cutoff point, while arbitrary, works a certain spurious magic on my consciousness. It says: “*these next four weeks are booked pretty solid, but after that, the future is unwritten.*” And that happens to slide in just under the wire of my patience: I can wait for four weeks. It also strikes at some fault line in my psyche: I am predisposed to justify postponing my desires temporarily. Or as I often put, or *hear* it, in my own head: “*after [date x], I'll really start to live my own life.*” Obviously, four weeks later I create a new calendar and it fills up with the usual obligations, and nothing changes, except a new [date x] getting assigned.

Over the years, my own relationship to the elusive white space on the calendar has shifted. When I was younger, I had the impression that I could multitask like a juggling circus monkey on cocaine. I could switch back and forth between carving and writing and cooking and programming, twenty times in a day, without losing a beat. And now I have the impression that I need two weeks of uninterrupted free time in order to accomplish anything.

While I'm sure that my brain has, in many respects, gotten old and creaky, I also tend to assume that both poles of this putative shift are largely illusory. It's all fine and well to cook dinner while writing a sonnet, but at some point one must ask the question: *how great was that dinner, or that sonnet?* There are always kids who think that they do all their best work when they're high (I'm looking at you, Coleridge and Lars von Trier) and I'm guessing that most of that crowd who don't OD at 27 live long enough to think something along the lines of “*shit, what was Kubla Khan really about? Where is this Mount Abora? Was this all a metaphor or what?*” It seems possible that the major objective shift in my vaunted “ability to multitask” was simply that I am no longer satisfied with peanut butter noodles and ABAB rhymes.

That penny dropped a while ago, but the other is still stuck in the machine, and I am trying to bang on it with this calendar. Despite the obvious appeal of having unlimited free time to work on Sphinx (or other projects), that *isn't* something that I absolutely need. In various ways, with a great deal of help from my environment, I can work myself up into a feud state where I don't utilize my free *hours*, because I'm holding out for free *weeks*. Absurd as this attitude is, I think it has been subtly propped up by the false horizons of my four-week calendars.

I've had the two-year calendar hanging on the wall for three weeks now. Action-packed weeks, full of house-guests and social obligations and medical melodrama and cars stuck in snowbanks. And yet I've gotten an immense amount of work done, both on the house and on Sphinx, without—I think—shirking my caregiving role(s) too much. For me, at least, it seems useful to come to terms with the fact that the future is of course very heavily pencilled in, and I need to start writing between the lines.

