

# Procrastination may not be all bad

By Frank Partnoy, Salon

Our society is obsessed with productivity and efficiency, and we despise procrastination. The early Americans imported the Earl of Chesterfield's admonition: "No idleness, no laziness, no procrastination: never put off till tomorrow what you can do today." They read Jonathan Edwards's sermon "Procrastination, or The Sin and Folly of Depending on Future Time." They built on the Puritan work ethic, which wasn't much fun, but became a major part of American culture. Over time, the admonitions from Chesterfield and Edwards seeped into everyday life, along with the biblical references that Edwards peppered throughout his speech, especially Proverbs 27:1, which advises, "Boast not thyself of tomorrow; for thou knowest not what a day may bring forth."

And then, beginning in the 1970s, the do-it-now anti-procrastination industry burst onto the scene. Managers began following Peter Drucker, the consultant, who advised, "First things first; second things not at all." Jane Burka and Lenora Yuen wrote a best seller about how to avoid procrastinating, and their "Procrastination Workshops" became popular. Self-help guru Stephen Covey told us that highly effective people do "first things first." David Allen coached us to "Get Things Done."

Over time we began to feel terribly guilty about procrastinating, yet we did it even more. The percentage of people who say they procrastinate "often" has increased sixfold since 1978. Students report spending over one-third of their time procrastinating. According to some studies, nearly one in five adults is a "chronic" procrastinator. Our focus on procrastination is relentless. America really has become a

“Procrasti-Nation.”

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