

# **The Routine System, or How Priorities Work**

Jakob Jukkovski

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## FORWARD

While quite a few books have been written about time management, the majority of them simply regurgitate ideas someone else had at some point in the past. Many more are nothing more than variations on a theme, also written by someone else. People retell and rewrite others' ideas without even personally seeing if they work by applying them to their own lives.

The word *efficiency* has taken on an almost mystical aura, and time management is something every self-respecting person should have in his or her arsenal. The abbreviation GTD is now a mantra to be repeated at every turn, which is why we see books and articles titled something like “750 Tried and True Ways to Be Efficient” or “Discover Inner Peace with These 100 Simple and Easy-to-Keep Rules.” That is, of course, a joke, but in every joke there is a kernel...

Sadly, today TM brings to mind some kind of share market, where we are sold a piece of paper with nothing backing it that we buy for no other reason than because everyone else is, too. When it comes down to it, we are not being sold an actual product; we are being sold something in which we want to believe. The same goes for the TM market, as the subject has become quite the cash cow. Everyone wants it and everyone needs it, which is why people are willing to pay for a dream, idea, or, we could even say, a mirage. Here in the desert of our everyday lives and problems is drawn a mirage: a lake of efficiency.

Many head off on that path hoping against hope they will be the lucky ones. This book is my effort to dispel the “time management mirage.” I hope I will be able to help you look at this topic in a new light.

I am not an author, and so I am counting on your indulgence as I write this book simply and understandably such that it is easy to both read and remember.

This book is for everyone and anyone, be you an old hand at TM or someone just getting into the topic. Regardless, I hope it will be equally useful in the former case and the latter. This, after all, is not just a collection of ideas; rather, it is my personal experience and the conclusions I have drawn after years of practice.

I would like to do two things in this book: first, I will share my experience and offer some warning about the different TM myths, following which I will offer my own TM system.

Your comments would be more than welcome! Please leave them on the site at <http://www.routinesystem.com>.

GTD: "Getting Things Done," the title of a book by David Allen

TM: time management

## **Introduction: Where It All Began**

*Lord, grant that I may always desire more than I can accomplish.  
Michelangelo*

### **The business club**

I have since forgotten when, but at one point I had the idea of starting something like a business club with my friends. We all wanted to do something interesting and worthwhile, though nobody yet knew what exactly that was. I suggested studying and discussing different business-related books together, thus helping each other find good ideas or avenues to pursue in our lives. It was not that we were all just sitting around with nothing to do; each of us had our own family, work, children, and even different hobbies. However, not one of us felt fulfilled. We were just being carried along by the current, when instead we wanted to change something in ourselves and the world around us.

### **A new dream**

We decided to organize our group and about a year later had not only gone through books on business, but also others on self-development, understanding one's self, searching for one's personal mission and vision, and much more. It was at that point I understood that I needed some kind of system to help me bring a little order to the deluge of information.

I started surfing the internet and came across an entire treasure trove called "time management." I quickly clarified which books were considered the best and raked in a ton of positive reviews, ultimately deciding on David Allen's book, "Getting Things Done." As I read the book I became more and more convinced that I had found something I really loved.

Here I would like to take a moment to mention that way back in 1993 I had to spend some time in the hospital, and when I was released after my surgery I fell deeply into depression. I spent time at home developing my own carrot and stick system for meeting or failing to meet goals, following which I wrote down a list of things to do and got to work. Imagine my surprise when, after two weeks, the entire list was done! Not only that, but I had completely broken free of my depression. While I did not yet understand that I had taken my first steps down the time and project

management road, I did know that I thought the concept was fantastic. Right at that moment I had an idea: while I understood that I no longer needed the business club, seeing as how I had already found what I was looking for, my new dream was to launch TM courses and help others more efficiently organize their lives.

### **My life as TM practice**

For that I had to clearly understand how all this works and of course give it a try in my own life. I threw myself into it, ready for untold adventures. However, I quickly learned that it would not be quite that easy, seeing as how I would not be able to make ends meet if I quit my job and everything else I was doing to jump headlong into the time management world.

My job at the time had me working irregular hours, sometimes occupying me for days on end. For example, on Fridays I traveled to another city for meetings, returning home no earlier than 11 pm. I also frequently had to take phone calls in the evenings and handle a variety of other issues. Not only that, but I had my family, with whom it was important for me to spend more time, and I was also studying Hebrew and English, the latter for work and the former because I live in Israel. On top of all of that, I had a number of other goals, ideas, and hobbies.

Even so, do not think that I am some kind of energizer bunny: as it so happens, I tend to be quite sickly. Ever since I was young I have had bronchial asthma, psoriasis, other skin problems, and constant allergies. I get tired easily and cannot go without nine hours of sleep, otherwise my psoriasis acts up and my nervous system goes haywire. By 9 pm, when I am usually putting my kids to bed or readying them a story, I am barely awake myself. My struggle to maintain focus is just the cherry on top.

My son was diagnosed with ADHD, meaning that he has problems with concentration. As I kept an eye on him I realized he got the problem from me. Once, when my wife and I were at my son's school talking with his psychologist, the psychologist was explaining why our son can be inattentive and easily distracted. A bit later she turned to me and asked what my thoughts on the matter were. I realized that for the previous five minutes or so I had not been paying attention, already carried away by my train of thought. I did not know what to say—clearly, I share my son's diagnosis. For me that means that while a normal person would just sit down and get to work on something, I have to struggle with distractions right and left, eventually taking twice as long to accomplish the same task as that other guy.

I would like to add to all of the above that memory is not my gift. I am constantly asking my wife how old I am, and I only remember my son's birthday because it is easy to figure out using the digits 1 and 2: he was born on 12.21.2001.

Knowing all of that, I was excited by the possibilities my life presented. I thought to myself that I would be the perfect guinea pig, given that if TM would work for me with all my energy, attention,

and memory problems, it would work for anyone. Even as I set about tackling my personal issues I was thrilled to see how it would all end up.

## **What happens next**

With that I knew what I was looking and striving for: time management courses. To make my dream a reality I would have to be prepared to offer people something tried and true, meaning that I needed a system or even some kind of simple, balanced, and harmonious methodology. For that I went back to David Allen's book, which is what I would like to talk about next.

## **Chapter 1: No Rest for the Weary**

### **Getting to know GTD**

The first time I read David Allen's book was more skimming, and as a result I only really got part of what was going on. Because of that I decided to jump back in and read it again, this time in detail and without hurrying through to make sure I absorbed everything. I also decided not to move on to the next chapter without giving what I had learned from the previous one a shot to see how it worked in practice. I took to writing in the margins, highlighting, and making notes in a variety of colors, all of which helped me grasp the main thoughts behind each topic.

My work station was gradually transformed: I bought a label printer, metal filing cabinet, desktop sorters, borders for the GTD diagram, and all kinds of folders, stickers, notepads, and other office accessories.

I also started looking for a program to help keep track of to-do lists, something that turned into an endless dig through everything you could think of: online, for computers, cross-platform, and many more. In the end I bought an iPhone, though I was the first among my friends to do so, given that they had not yet been popularized. Many people just did not know what they were, but I needed one for GTD. It was an expensive but important purchase that allowed me to have my to-do lists with me at all times. I was ready for "stress-free productivity" and thought I was on the doorstep of getting everything where it needed to be and understanding the methodology. In fact, it was that hope that drove me forward, not allowing me to stop until I grasped the system and could relax into the inner tranquility about which David Allen talked.

### **Crisis**

At long last I finished my second time through the book, though there was no "peace" or "stress-free productivity" to be found. I had learned beautifully how to sort everything into folders, but I was actually accomplishing much less than before. I was less productive and more stressed to boot,

concluding in the end that I had not quite understood the entire concept. The book was packed with information, and I had the sneaky suspicion that I had missed or overlooked something. Regardless of my disappointment, I was not ready to throw in the towel, deciding instead to read the book a third time.

This time I decided to summarize each chapter, so after reading a section I would write out my conclusions and compare them to what I had read. I needed to look at the big picture to see what I was doing wrong and pick out the biggest problem areas.

## **Two problems**

There was a time when I thought the problems I was having with the GTD system had something to do with me personally. Perhaps I did not quite get something completely, or maybe even my lifestyle just did not fit the system. However, I had a friend who had also gone through the book, though he differed from me in that he was not able to read through it multiple times cover to cover. Where I had been able to implement some of the book's ideas, he had not gone farther than setting up some desktop sorters. Still, Kostya is an irrational kind of person as it is, and so I thought if we had been more thorough, responsible, and disciplined, everything would have worked out.

The last straw was a conversation I had with a friend from Germany. Andreas was an airline captain who sometimes flew to Israel. Once, while sitting on the beach eating breakfast, during the course of our conversation I mentioned what I had been up to lately, and it turned out Andreas had also read the same book. He said he had not been able to apply it to his everyday life either, which really shook me. One could accuse Kostya or me of being inattentive or undisciplined, but that could hardly be said of an airline captain.

My inspiration led me to an internet search for "GTD criticism," and what I learned was a huge step forward in my quest. Many people wrote about how the system helped them neatly sort their life, but that was where it stopped. Much was written criticizing doing things "in context." I sensed I had found what I wanted to understand and headed back to the book, in the end reading it two more times. After the fourth time it started falling apart, so I used binder clips to hold it together. In the end I was able to figure out the problem, with the criticism I had read online to confirm what I had found to be true in my personal life. There were two issues: first, vagueness about how to prioritize, and second, what to do next. Let's dig into those a bit further.

## **Prioritizing in GTD**

In my opinion, being unable to quickly and clearly prioritize is a major problem, given that everyone one of us, no matter what we do, has a to-do list. The main thing is to figure out what to do and when to do it. Using GTD I was able to neatly sort everything into ever-growing lists, but

the items on those lists generally did nothing more than stare right back at me. So how does prioritizing work in GTD?

The author offers his readers a wide array of tools. Chapter nine, “Doing: Making the Best Action Choices,” features both “the four-criteria model for choosing actions in the moment” and “the six-level model for reviewing your own work.” I cannot believe how much time I spent on chapter nine to be sure of my conclusion that it is impractical and tough to implement in everyday life—I could write an entire book on the subject. Here it is worth spending time talking about intuition, the most important secret of time management. Later we will come back to this topic a number of times, given its foundational value for modern TM. Regardless, I do not want to spend your time on a detailed review of these models, as they are not among the goals of this book. With that in mind I will simply bring up a few real life examples.

Let’s take the four criteria model for choosing actions in the moment, the filter through which the author would like us to run our to-do lists:

1. Context
2. Time available
3. Energy available
4. Priority

I took my to-do list (at the time it included 328 items) and started asking those questions for every line. That is crazy in and of itself, because getting to the end (if, in fact, by some robotic tendency you do get to the end) takes an enormous amount of time.

So let’s take one goal, for example *buy sneakers for the whole family*, and think about which context it best fits: *calls*, or maybe *computer*, or perhaps even *store*? Say you choose *internet* and decide that you will just go ahead and look around for good prices. Now you need to think of the time expenditure: how much time are you willing to spend to find the sneakers? You do not know? I do not either. Regardless, say we can spend 30 minutes. Next we try to understand the energy we need for this. We could do it in the evening when we are tired—but perhaps it would be better to do it bright and early in the morning? We can say we do not care and just pick any time.

Now we get to the most interesting part: priority. That is a bit of circular reasoning, no? You ask how to prioritize and are told, of course: by order of importance. This is where the author tries to get the idea of intuition through to us. In other words, he wants us to prioritize goals in keeping with our responsibilities, objectives, and ideals. Let’s say you decide that this is a more urgent task—what next? Next you continue working your way through your list until you get to the end.

However, even that is not good enough, because tomorrow or the day after half the list will already be obsolete thanks to changing circumstances like a broken computer. You might also realize that you are not up for anything in the evening, or something else changed and now you do not need what you previously wanted. So why spend so much energy sorting what you have to do later? I

understood for myself that it simply is not worthwhile, especially given that sorting everything the way I did still did not help me prioritize. I came out the other end with more stress and less productivity.

## **Context**

All right, let's say we have boundless energy, productivity, and a desire to filter our list every day through the "four-criteria model for choosing actions in the moment." Still, how do we take care of *buy sneakers for the whole family*? How does that work? David Allen suggests working in context, meaning that as soon as we find ourselves in the right context we can get to work on taking care of that item: the next time we are sitting at the computer we need to find those sneakers.

However, in my practice and that of my friend Kostya this was simply impossible. At first I was often angry when I found myself in one context or another, but I did not understand why. In an attempt to solve that problem I forced myself to wind up in a context, but that often did not yield the results I was looking for. For example, I figured out that I had a few minutes to call my internet provider and clarify a few issues, but my call ended up a disaster. I had to spend an entire hour on the phone and still came away empty-handed. I needed to make another call, but according to the system I was already in another context, so the call was not made.

When you live in context you do what is next on the list instead of what is most important, but that does not work. I had a few context folders:

- Reading/watching
- Computer
- Calling
- Errands
- Office
- Home

This did not work, and many were always empty! For example, I might not make it to the *office* in a given week, or while at home I would forget that I was in the *home* context.

In addition, there were times when I would go to a shopping center, open my to-do list with the *buy* tag just to realize that I had forgotten something I needed to make the next purchase. It seemed to me that the system would work better for some sort of manufacturing featuring clear working zones, timetables, and procedures. David Allen's claim that a to-do list should never be written for a particular day, but instead should be taken care of "in context" did not fit with my personal experience. I was much more productive when I wrote a daily to-do list and did my best to work my way through as much as possible. Of course, I had the idea to set an alarm on my phone to go off every 5-10 minutes asking me what context I was in, but I quickly understood that I would only gain productivity like that at the expense of my sanity.

## **Chapter 2: The Deeper You Go, the Harder It Gets**



## Wrapping up

Reading David Allen's book *Getting Things Done* did not upset me or keep me from pursuing time management; I simply did not find answers for the questions I had. As well, there was a lot I learned that I both found interesting and applied to my daily life: for example, the desktop organizers and filing cabinet.

I did not stop there, and as I moved forward I found that in some sense the going was easier. I knew what the problem was and what I was looking for—all that was left was reading every well-known time management book I could get my hands on and figuring out the answers to my questions:

1. How should I prioritize?
2. How do I actually get things done?

David Allen talked about some sort of intuition that comes with an understanding of our role, goals, and responsibilities. He also cited Stephen Covey, so I decided to see what there was to learn in *First Things First*.

## Four quadrants

I should note that I was well acquainted with Stephen Covey's well-known book *The Seven Habits of Highly Successful People*. In it the author lays out four quadrants that together make up a prioritization system for categorizing everything we do. Covey's new book was totally devoted to that habit, something that I could not help but find exciting.

Stephen Covey's assertion that his book was the most up-to-date TM system available was enough for me. At the end of the book there is even a diagram laying out three generations of time management systems (there are eight in total). Covey claims that his system represents the fourth and latest generation, something that could not help but inspire me to apply it to my life.

The book is packed with clear thinking and ideas, which is why I highly recommend reading it. My goal, however, was to understand if there was a simple and comprehensible system of priorities. Covey suggests breaking everything down into four quadrants:

1. Important and urgent
2. Important but not urgent
3. Not important but urgent
4. Not important and not urgent

The author pushes the idea of prioritizing the first two categories, also stating that the second is most important, given that it carries with it the most results and positive impact. Everything in the second category has to do with your calling, what can change your life, and what can change the world. Covey looks at life as a collection of roles and spheres, something that gives us the ability to focus on what is important. In other words, this is an opportunity to understand what is primary in

our lives, figure out our mission, and move on from that to write out a list of our roles. Those could be, among others:

1. Vice president
2. Landlord
3. Parent

Now our priority is to set goals for each of these roles or assign them from our to-do list, after which we have a list of the most important things for the week.

What is this? A magic filter for everything in our lives? I tried sorting like this and came up with a big pile of confusion. As it turns out, I have a lot in my life that is both urgent and quite important. In time I understood that the “urgent/not urgent” and “important/not important” classifications were very subjective: I think playing video games is very important and want to get to that right away, while taking back the letter that was delivered to us accidentally is somewhere way down on the list.

Here is a simple and real-life example: once a friend stopped by and mentioned how he was feeling pressured by everything he had to do, most of which needed to be done right away. For example, his list featured *buy sneakers for the entire family*—urgent and important. At that point I already had my own system for prioritization, one which I will talk about in more detail in chapter four, so we quickly went over his list again and ascertained that most items on it were nothing more than ideas or at best goals. *Buy sneakers for the entire family* was an idea that according to Stephen Covey would be the main or at least a high priority.

I had a similar situation. My highest priorities were often reserved for ideas or very raw goals, while the most important items were liable to get pushed down to the third quadrant. The goals and ideas taking up the focal point on my to-do list were incredibly stressful. Needless to say, if you use Stephen Covey’s method and it helps you, I am more than happy for you. For me and my friend, however, it was confusing and did not work.

So we took care of our *inbox*, assigned everything to a quadrant, and had a ready list. What next? Where is the fourth time management generation’s magic secret? A simple to-do list is nothing new—you get that with any old system—but I will be honest with you: Stephen Covey surprised me. On page 90 he uses the ABC method to lay out his weekly to-do list.

### **The ABC method**

What is this method? In my opinion it is a bit of circular reasoning: premise A is true because of premise B, which in turn is proven by the truth of premise A.

I once happened across a YouTube video that one would call corporate coaching. A group of women was sitting in a small room (probably the employees in a single department) listening to a TM specialist who was speaking up by the board. The clip began with him saying, “So do you get how

to do that?” His listeners’ eyes widened, their expressions shouting that they had no idea what was going on. The specialist continued by saying, “All right, then let me show you a new TM system I’ve developed. Not many people know about it yet, but it will help you out a lot. You need to split your to-do list into categories A, B, and C (at the same time he drew “A,” “B,” “C,” and “D” on the board with a marker). Then you need to figure out what is most important, what is less important, and what isn’t important at all.”

That was when I just about fell off my chair. Just think: you paid money to learn how to prioritize, and what you get in return is a TM guru who tells you that “You need to understand what goes under A, which is most important, B, which is less so, and C, which is least important.” Excuse me, but the question itself was about how to understand what is most important, what is less so, and why. This is where one more popular TM tool comes into play: intuition.

### **The great and powerful intuition**

I should note that Gleb Arhangelsky’s *Time Drive* went the furthest: while many TM books just write about using intuition to prioritize, Arhangelsky provided a mathematical formula.

Arhangelsky gets to the main point on page 107: how to understand what is most important and where to begin. Everything can seem important, and so the author states that the problem is in the criteria we use. He suggests using what he calls a “multi-criteria evaluation,” which is a table that uses those criteria—for example, *place*, *price*, and *space*—to prioritize. Now we assign a value: for example, 0.4 for *place*. Where do we get that value? Intuition, of course. A deal like that would work just as well for prioritizing bets at a casino, believe me.

Certainly, intuition helps if you have, say, three or ten things to do, but when you have 50 or even 300 it simply does not. You will always have tasks that are neither A nor B, instead ending up an eternal sticking point. The problem with the ABC method and intuition is that you will always split your list into two categories: *do now* and *do at some point*. Think about it this way: at the emergency room do they assign patients by intuition—who gets help now, who can wait until tomorrow, who can be sent home? Of course not. First they diagnose, and then they use that diagnosis to decide what to do. It is the same with us: if we cannot figure out a diagnosis, intuition will not help and may even be a hindrance.

### **Conclusions:**

I did not find what I was looking for in Stephen Covey’s book, in particular:

- How to quickly and simply sort my to-do list
- How to prioritize
- How to get to work

While I did not get what I was looking for, a negative result is still a result. My studies taught me that we are all very subjective in how we understand what is urgent and important. I saw the disadvantages of the ABC method, while it was also interesting to see how intuition can be deceptive. That, however, will be discussed further in upcoming chapters.

As I wrap up this chapter I would like to apologize if I have been overly critical. I may be writing somewhat emotionally given that I am not only sharing the path I took, but also the feelings that went along with it. I am in no way belittling the work of other authors who have gone before us—I am grateful to them for their work.

### **Chapter 3: Widening the Circle**

#### **Book, programs, and more**

I was not about to give up, instead keeping up my search for a clear and understandable methodology. I sketched out a modest plan and set to work reading TM books, though I should note that my reading was more of an in-depth study of the topic. Every book I picked up was studied chapter by chapter, including detailed outlining. At the end of each chapter I wrote down some thoughts I had based on the material and often went back to read once more.

In addition, many books offered practical advice that I sometimes needed to try out before moving on. I regularly had to master new programs: I was the first among my friends to buy an iPhone just because there are many TM programs available for iOS. Eventually I lost count of the number of various sites and programs for both smartphone and computer I tried, which does not even touch on the purchases I had to make.

For instance, I bought a pair of filing cabinets, a label printer, and even wall-hung filers. There were even more specific devices: after listening to Jim Rohn's audiobook on keeping a journal, I decided to give it a try. I thought it would be great to be able to move pages back and forth from one section to another, sorting pages by topic.

That system is called ProClick, which offers special binding that can be opened or closed to move pages around. However, to use it I needed to buy a special hole punch that was at that time sold only in the US. Happily, soon after I was in Miami, though the seller started talking to me in Spanish. I should have answered, "I'm sorry sir, I'm not from around here; I'm from Israel, so I only speak Russian" (kidding).

I will not even begin to write about all the different types of stickers and folders I tried. In a word, there was no stopping me. I did, however, move slowly, taking enough time to be thorough and sure that I did not miss a single piece of the time management puzzle. It would be more accurate to call it, I suppose, not just one puzzle, but rather several different ones. Some may think I was wasting

time, which is possible, but it did allow me to understand that not all the puzzles were even from the same set. I read a good deal and continued summarizing, leaving me with over 20 books read at the end of the first year.

## Book classification

In the space of a few years I made my way through many new books, an experience that allows me to sort them into five categories.

### 1. Tricks and tips

Gleb Arhangel'sky's *Time Drive* is a class example of this category, one in which books do not offer a clearly laid out TM system. Instead, readers are provided with a wide array of time management tools and tricks: incentivizing calendars, memoirs, personal epitaphs, long-term goal maps, strategic boxes, results-oriented to-do lists, "strict" meeting planning, and much more. Could an average Joe use all of that to finally achieve tranquility and be more efficient? I think not.

### 2. Do A, B, C

We already talked about the ABC method, so I will not go into it again.



We'll need 44 survival habits, we'll have to be on the go constantly and never sleep, and we'll have to check our inbox every day, as well as our to-do list, master list, mission list, and self-realization list. Then we'll finally be happy!

### 3. Ideology

There are not many books like these that offer their own idea or system. Some highlights are Julie Morgenstern's *Time Management from the Inside Out*, Marla Cilley's *Sink Reflections*, Stephen Covey's *First Things First*, of course, and David Allen's *Getting Things Done*.

### 4. Rewrites by an authority

These books are simply attempts to rewrite an existing idea in other words.

### 5. Rewrites based on authority

While these are also rewrites of earlier ideas, the problem is that authors appear to not practice what they preach. The books are more collections of sage advice.

Many books talk about Vilfredo Pareto's 80 – 20 rule, which has become some sort of time management enchantment. It is surprising how superficial time management approaches can be in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

Once I was watching a program about the planet that talked about how mankind has been studying it for many years, each time making new discoveries that shatter old myths or fallacies. It hit me that TM also has its share of myths, resembling the study of the planet at its early stages.

Regardless, that understanding gave me the ability to tell if a book was worth reading after just glancing at its table of contents.

### **New directions**

As I studied TM books I learned that some things I wanted to learn fell outside the bounds of time management literature, leading me to open up new avenues of inquiry. They were:

1. Books discussing how we make decisions
2. Books on making business plans
3. Books on strategic planning
4. Books on achieving personal goals
5. Books on project management
6. Books on documentation
7. Books on paper work
8. Books helping to understand one's self, temperament, and character

Regardless of the enormous quantity of ground I covered, I was disappointed that I still could not find a simple and understandable method I could use. There was a good deal of information and great advice, but how was it that it was all about organizing and sticking papers in folders? There was a time after I finished the twentieth TM book that I was ready to read another 32, but that did not happen. I finally found something I will talk about in the next chapter.

## **Chapter 4: the Routine System**

### **A new system**

Once I gave some thought to the paper on which I had written out my work plan for the week. It was divided into several sections: *crisis situations*, *current*, *upcoming*, and *ideas*. Later I added one more sections: *goals*.

I started thinking about why the list was laid out the way it was and understood that its layout allowed me to quickly look over everything happening at work. Within minutes I could see what I needed to do and what was really necessary, and it dawned on me: there were my priorities. I had the feeling I had found something, even though the picture at the time was still dim, leaving much to be hashed out.

### **What the word “routine” means to me**

I would like to immediately clarify that the word “routine” means something a bit different to me than it does to others. As I looked over the projects and goals I had in one of my sections I knew that I could not avoid doing them without incurring consequences.

People usually think that a routine is something they do every day or have to do that is boring and best to just finish as fast as possible. For me, however, routine is consistency. We go to work at the same time every day, we wake up and go to sleep, eat lunch, eat dinner, clean the house, buy groceries, do the laundry, and so much more. When we do all that haphazardly or just whenever we feel like it, sooner or later we have issues.

I am not just talking about a regimen; I am referring to a normal and regular order for a given area of your live. We can use work as an example. There is a minimum that needs to be done: arrive at a given time, work no less than eight hours, and carry out some sort of plan. All of that is your work routine.

I started imagining my routine as a wheel that must continue spinning so that everything is in order. There are, however, some things that can slow it down or stop it from spinning altogether, though there are also other things that facilitate how it works. Let’s look at both those factors.

## Active projects

The main element of a routine is your active projects (the “current” section I talked about at the beginning of the chapter), which are what require action right now. These are the projects you cannot avoid doing, are personally responsible for, and would suffer consequences for not doing.

What projects can we include here?

1. “Order gas.” If I do not do this within a week, it may run out and we will not be able to cook or even heat up food.
2. “Pay the electricity bill.” If we do not pay on time, we may be fined or have our electricity shut off.
3. “Buy a printer cartridge.” If I put this off, we will not be able to print important documents.

These examples show that putting these types of things off leads to unnecessary wastes of time or money as well as other problems. I think it is clear what belongs in the *projects* list.

## Problems

Everything that interferes with your routine belongs here. Usually these types of things have strong negative consequences and can put the brakes on your wheel or stop it completely.

For example, if we do not buy groceries for this week, we will have to stop by a 24 hour store where the prices are higher. Ultimately, moving away from one’s *routine* leads to problems and crises.

Of course, there is no avoiding problems completely, seeing as how they will always pop up somewhere. That is why we have this section in the list: *problems* are your number one priority, given the fact that they often come with their own consequences. They need to be resolved as soon as possible so as not to interfere with your everyday routine.

## Upcoming projects

We always have projects that have yet to begin, though we know for sure that after a certain period of time they may become *active projects*. They often do not have a set date, but can still become important and necessary at any moment. If we do not pay attention to them in time, they will most likely cause problems.

*Upcoming projects* should move to *active projects* before they lead to crises and problems.

Recognizing this helped me clarify my priorities, as I first had to deal with *problems*, then *routine tasks*, and then turn to *upcoming projects*.

## Conclusions:

Your routine is made up of *upcoming projects*, *active projects*, and *problems*—in other words, everything that requires something of you now or in the near future to avoid negative consequences.



Now let's talk a little about *ideas* and *goals*, both of which I mentioned at the beginning of this chapter.

## Ideas

When I started thinking of my routine as a wheel, it was important to understand the role played by *ideas* and *goals*. How do they affect our everyday routine?

Most difficult for me was separating ideas and goals from my routine, though understanding the difference between them was no walk in the park either.

So why do we call one task an *idea* and another a *routine project*? I was generally able to tell the difference intuitively, but laying out clear criteria was another matter altogether. Another issue was that some things seemed to straddle the border between the two concepts, some even leaking over into *problem* territory. I started thinking about delineating them in time: for example, how soon do I need to accomplish a certain task or project?

That led me to the following time frames:

1. Problems are very urgent and need to be done today, right now, or tomorrow at the latest.
2. Active projects need to be done today, tomorrow, or this week.
3. The upcoming projects category encompasses a wide variety of deadlines, but is generally for things that need to happen this month or next.
4. Goals can occur this year or not at all.
5. Ideas may or may not occur in general.

By then my to-do list in ToodLedo had grown to over 300 items, a number that in itself was causing me stress. Way back when I was mastering GTD everything just moved around into separate lists and laid there like dead weight. Instead, I now started taking different items from my list and asking myself five simple questions I had puzzled out of my time-based analysis and criteria:

1. What happens if I do not do it today?
2. What happens if I do not do it tomorrow?
3. What happens if I do not do it this week?
4. What happens if I do not do it this month?
5. What happens if I do not do it at all?

You can always modify these questions to fit your situation, with problems for some people ranging from one hour to one week. Everything depends on the tempo and intensity of your life in addition to the situations themselves. Regardless, I think that for most people problems are what need to be resolved today or tomorrow at the latest.

So I got to work seeing how my list fit within these questions, crossing out what turned out to be unnecessary. Imagine my surprise when I found that more than half the items on my list were nothing more than ideas for which I answered a hearty “nothing!” when asking the question, “What happens if I do not do it at all?”.

In the end I found what I had been looking for: a fast and understandable way to figure out whether we are dealing with ideas or projects.

For me that was a huge breakthrough I exploited to learn how to quickly differentiate between ideas and my routine. But how do ideas influence a routine? Are ideas good or bad for our everyday routine? Do they get the wheel moving faster or slow it down?

In chapter two I talked about my friend who needed some help. He was feeling a lot of stress due to the amount of urgent things he had to do, so we set to work using the Routine System to help him out.

His first item was *buy exercise sneakers for the entire family*. I asked him, “What happens if you never do this?” He smiled and answered that nothing would happen most likely, and with that he understood that it was just an idea. We went point by point asking the same question and soon saw that his list of urgent things to do was almost completely ideas. This question was crucial for him.

What conclusion can we make from all that? Most importantly we need to understand that many people put together huge laundry lists of things to do without even suspecting that a good half of the items on those lists are nothing more than *ideas*. We are generally unable to distinguish ideas from important projects, possibly because our feelings often fool us. Allow me to demonstrate.

A friend mentioned that this question and understanding what an idea is helped him avoid an unnecessary expenditure at work. He had a colleague who liked buying new technology, using it, figuring it out, and then selling it to someone else at a discount so he could buy a newer model. Once he offered his co-workers a video camera cheaper than it cost in the store. My friend thought it might be a good idea to buy it, seeing as how it was a good deal. The next day this guy lowered the price, and the following day halved it. My friend was ready to take the bait hook, line, and sinker when our question popped into his head: “What happens if I never do this?” The answer was immediate and clear: nothing at all. He realized he was wrapped up in an idea, though he was able to stop in time to avoid buying something he did not need.

What can we learn from this story? Ideas are often built not on our needs, but on our emotions. You instinctively think that you need to make the purchase, but if you ask yourself what will happen if you do not, you will see the situation in a completely new light.

So *ideas* are fantasies that we can characterize as “What if...?” Ecclesiastes 11:4 reads, “Whoever watches the wind will not plant; whoever looks at the clouds will not reap.” This means that when we get engrossed in ideas we stop doing what is actually important, instead spending our time on more dubious enterprises.

Ideas can be quite dangerous, sapping your energy, money, and, what is worse, your time. We are often in the power of our emotions, entranced with the thought of sating our urges.

I would like to share another story. Once another friend called and asked if I knew how to use ProShow, a professional program for making slide shows. I asked him what he was trying to do.

It turns out the next day he had a party at work and wanted to make a slideshow out of 300 pictures he had accumulated working there. I immediately understood what was going on and asked him what would happen if he did not make the slideshow. After thinking for a bit he answered that nothing would happen, though he said he would like to do something fun with the pictures for his co-workers.

I suggested the simplest possible option: writing the pictures to a DVD and showing them as a slideshow. “But what about the music?” he asked. I answered that he could add that in separately, and we had a deal. In the end my friend spent all of 15 minutes showing the pictures to his colleagues instead of the hours he would have spent figuring out the program. Everyone was happy.

What can we take from this story?

It is becoming clear that an ill-advised focus on ideas can lead to unnecessary wastes of energy, money, and time, while maintaining a well-balanced focus can yield excellent results. That means that under certain circumstances ideas can slow and even stop the wheel of our routine, while under others they can grease it.

You should never stop your routine for an idea or allow them to cause problems, something that often happens. Imagine that you need to pay your water bill right away—this is your final notice, to make it worse—and if you do not do so, your water will be shut off. Suddenly the idea crosses your mind that you might be able to pay online. You sit down and find the site, though it turns out that your computer is having trouble with it because you need to update Flash. You try to get that done, but for some reason it is just not happening. Now you start looking through forums and googling “What should I do if my computer isn’t loading a site?” Two or three hours later it hits you that you should just pay at the post office, but by now it is already closed. Have you had situations like this one? I have many times. This is what happens when you do not learn how to differentiate ideas.

## **Conclusions**

We now know that ideas are not what needs to be done right away, making it important to understand if an item on our list is an idea or a routine task. To do that we ask the question, “What happens if I do not do this?” We also figured out that if we would really like to work on an idea in our life for which enjoyment is more important than a result, we should try to spend as little as possible.

But what should you do if you can tell that implementing an idea will take a lot more than ten or 15 minutes? Now we need to understand the difference between ideas and goals and how ideas can get moved to our list of goals.

## Goals

For a long time I was not able to understand how *ideas* differ from *goals* and *goals* from our *routine*, or active projects. Sometimes I thought the entire goals category was unnecessary.

For a while I put ideas I considered important and needed in the *active projects* folder. Later, however, I realized that those projects were not getting done, as there was always something else to do first. I started thinking about each of those *ideas* I had stuck into the *active projects* folder that had become nothing more than dead weight.

For example, I wanted to boost my level of English and master Photoshop, though I did not have a clear plan for how to do either of those things.

I understood that these projects would improve my everyday routine: English would give me access to information not available in Russian, while Photoshop would provide more income and career opportunities. While these projects would both be very useful for me, they were related to different aspects of my life. I needed English for my personal development, while Photoshop was for my career.

That helped me understand that I needed a *goals* folder to help me focus on and develop different areas of my life.

Those areas could be health, work, career, family, hobbies, and much more.

The ideas or tasks you think could improve different aspects of your life and yield benefits in the future can be moved to the *goals* folder.

Later we will talk in more depth about how ideas can become goals and goals can become *active projects*.

Of course, one might ask, “Why do we need to split tasks into *ideas* and *goals*? Wouldn’t it be simpler to just throw them all into one folder and use that to take care of everything at the same time?” No, it would not be simpler.

First of all, we are talking about priorities, and moving everything into one folder risks missing out on something that is really important. Ideas are your lowest priority given that they do not lead to potential consequences. Goals are more valuable than ideas, as they are aimed at improving the different areas of our life.

Second, mixing *ideas* and *goals* into a single list will lead to the stress of watching them sit there day after day giving you the impression that you have a ton to do.

I sometimes go long periods of time without checking up on my lists of *ideas* and *goals*, but I feel much better because I know that they are where they belong, are not forgotten, and will have their turn in the sun.

Even so, my productivity did not drop; in fact, I found I was doing more. That happened because I had previously been scattering myself across many different things, jumping from one to the other, forgetting about my everyday life, and creating *crises*. I now knew how to keep from trying to implement too many ideas in my life thanks to first thinking through and understanding them, a process that yielded much better results.

**Conclusions:**

## THE ROUTINE SYSTEM



*Goals* are *ideas* that can simplify and improve your *routine*. This means that goals can grease our routine wheel, making it spin faster and longer. We also learned that *goals* relate to different areas of our lives.

## **Wrap-up**

In this chapter we looked at how the Routine System is built, going over its five basic points:

1. Problems
2. Active projects
3. Upcoming projects
4. Goals
5. Ideas

*Problems*, *active projects*, and *upcoming projects* help the wheel of our daily routine turn. Unexpected ideas, on the other hand, can slow or even bring it to a stop. Ideas can become goals, which in turn become active projects.

Having gone over the theory behind the system, let's talk about how it works in practice.

## **Chapter 5: The System in Action**

### **Inbox**

If we want to sort and prioritize everything we have to do, first we need to get everything in the same place.

Just think what would happen if you were a mailman who delivered mail to a different place every day: first you left it on the refrigerator, next on the TV, then under the table, and finally in a cabinet drawer.

Everybody has a mailbox, and we need the exact same sort of thing for everything we have to do. I use the term *inbox* for it, and the idea is to collect everything in one place.

You can have physical or electronic inbox: my physical inbox is a plastic bin where I put my prescriptions, documents, notes, and everything else.

I use Evernote for my electronic inbox (see chapter seven for more details).

About once a week I go through both my electronic and physical inboxes.

Now that we have our *inbox*, let's sort sorting them using the Routine System.

## Sorting tasks and projects

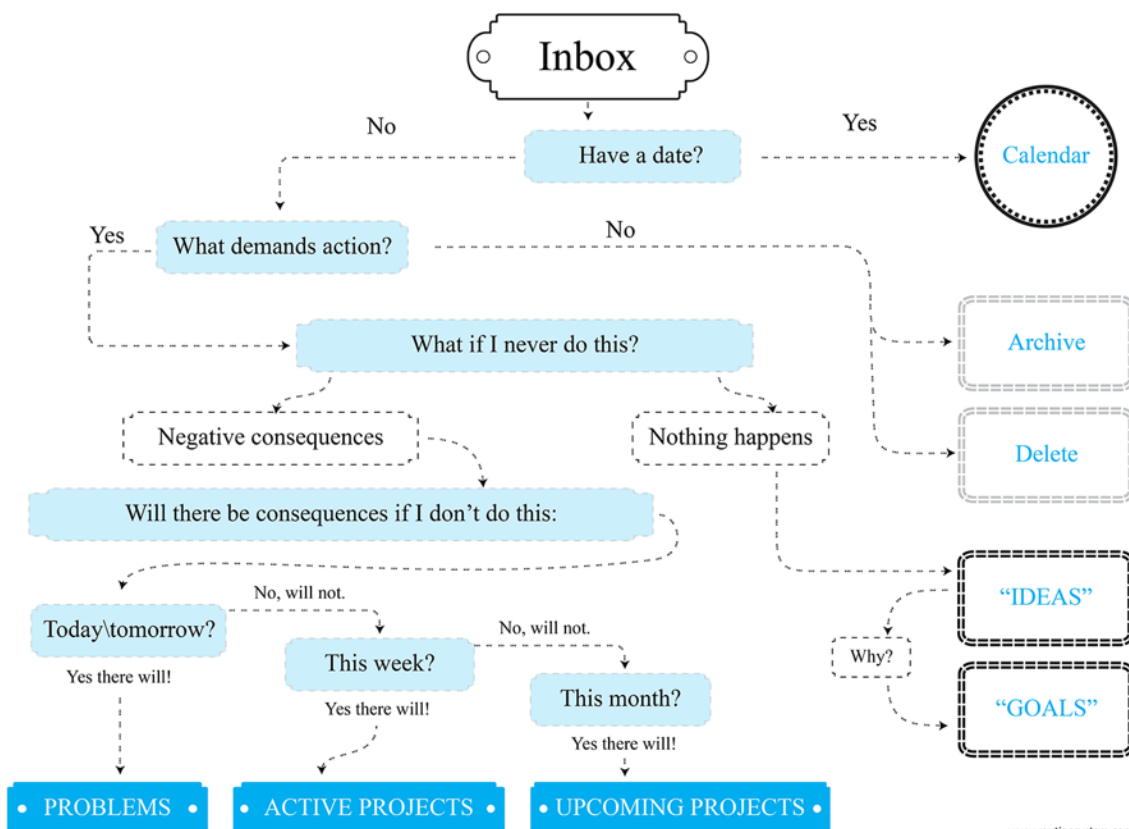
The picture shows how I sort everything that comes into my inbox into folders.

This usually takes 15 minutes and is something that should preferably be done every day. That, however, is not a crucial element as long as your projects are not turning into problems.

I would like to note that some things in your inbox can have a specific deadline and should head straight for your calendar (while this is something we will talk about more later, your calendar can be physical or electronic).

Ultimately, everything is sorted into these folders:

1. Calendar
2. Archive
3. Trash
4. Ideas
5. Goals
6. Problems
7. Active projects
8. Upcoming projects



Of course, there is also a journal, but you should not take anything from your inbox directly to your to-do list for the day. That list is made up of routine projects.

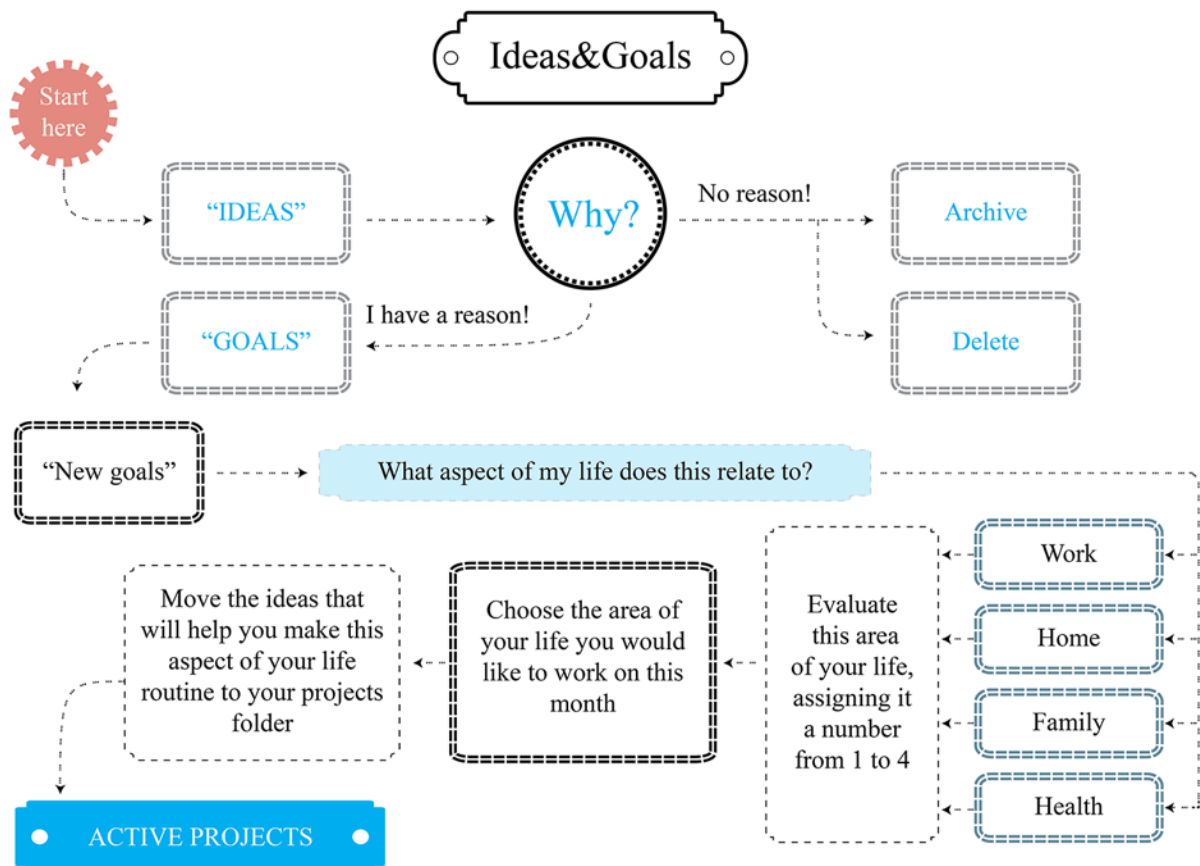
Let me offer an example. You open an email, and the first thing you need to understand is if there is a deadline for this task. If so, write it on your calendar.

If there is no deadline, you need to ask yourself if this requires anything from you. If not, you can move it to your archive, a folder that does not require any action on your part. This is where you can keep all your deferred ideas and project materials.

If you do need to do something, ask yourself what would happen if you were to not do it. If the answer is “nothing,” then you can put it in the *ideas* folder.

If you think something could happen, then asked yourself when that might happen. If the consequences would occur in this month or next, put it in *upcoming projects*. If they would occur this week, put it in *active projects*. If they would occur today or tomorrow, put it in *problems*.

Ideas and goals are listed separately, as they do not require anything from you immediately. Regardless, you will still have to do something with them before they are moved to your *active projects* folder.





## **Working with *ideas* and *goals***

Let's go over one more time how we figure out if something is an *idea* or a *goal*. Just ask yourself, "What will happen if I never do this?" If the answer is "nothing," you can go ahead and list it with your *ideas*.

This helps:

- Keep your list lean
- Keep your brain from getting overloaded

Now look at how we work with ideas and goals: ideas can become goals, while goals can turn into *active projects*.

## **From idea to goal**

Understanding your values and principles is important for *ideas* to become *goals*.

First you need to figure out why you need an idea, so ask yourself as many questions as possible.

Those questions might look like one of these:

1. Could this have a positive impact on my daily routine?
2. Could this make me more independent?
3. Could this make me happier?
4. Could this enrich my life (spiritually, physically, materially)?

If your answers show that an idea is actually valuable, you can move it to your *goals* folder.

## **Chapter 6: From Goals to Projects**

### **Introduction**

This section is so broad that I decided to give it an entire chapter, something that may surprise you. After all, what is so difficult about it? We take everything we want to do and achieve in life and stick it all in our goals folder, you say. That is how it often happens in practice: people study my system or another, similar one, attack their goals folder with unbounded enthusiasm, and get to work, the taste of success already in their mouths. It is almost as if someone announced a competition for the Most Goals of the Year.

This happens because we are curious to see how much we can achieve, and therefore take on an absurd amount of different projects. Afterwards, however, we are left with nothing to do, as we simply do not know what to do.

We need the *goals* folder because the strategic goals and plans it holds are linked to our future, helping us impact our routine and better our lives.

To some degree it is a map of our future, where we can look over what is presently happening and build potential plans.

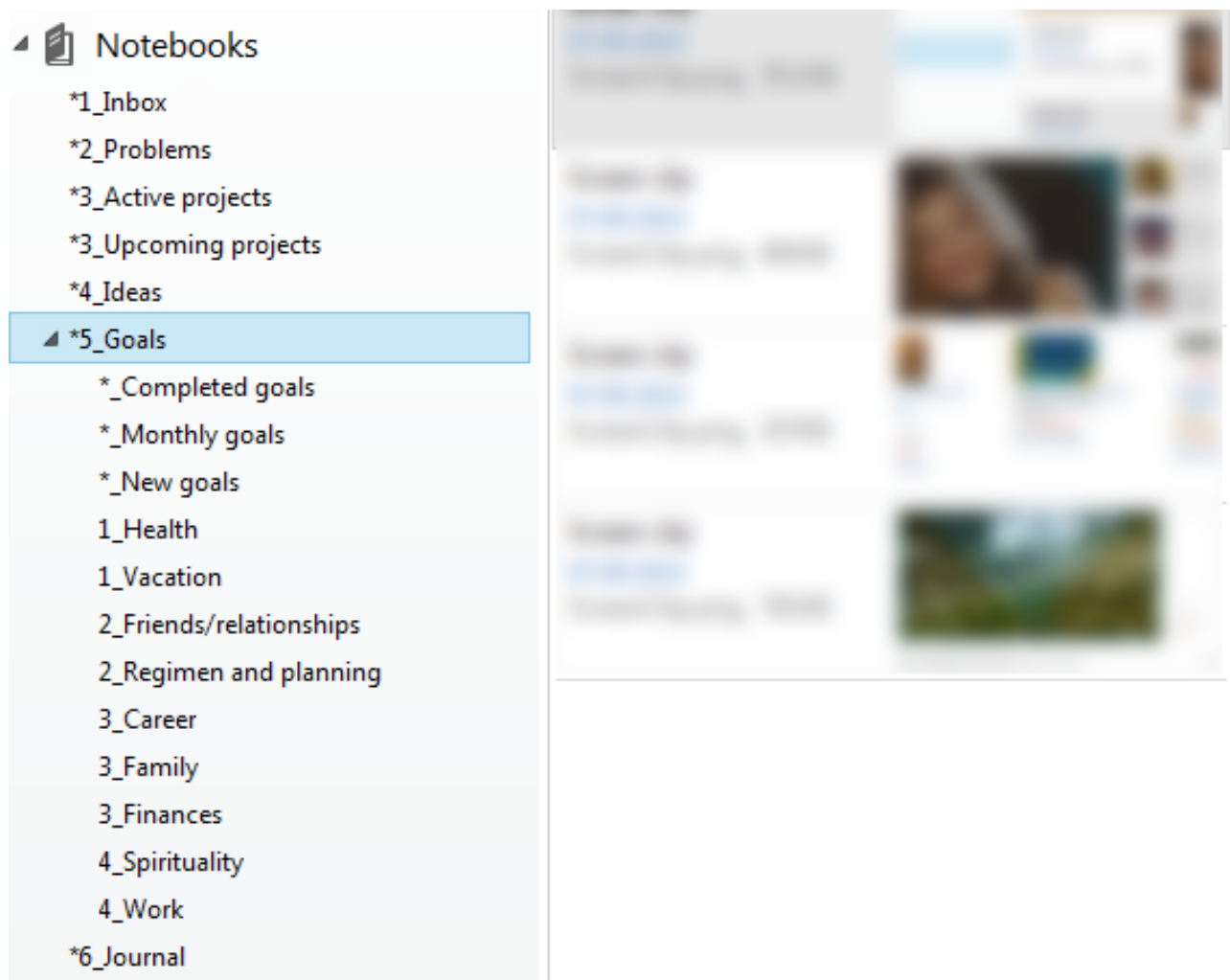
It is not simply a folder; it is the rudder guiding the ship of our lives. Wherever you turn it is where you will end up.

Let's say you want to study Spanish. That is not a task you can pick up and do; instead, it is a symbol on your map, something like a small island. You decide if you would like to sail there or not.

In other words, you need to learn how to lay out your course, which is why you need to understand how to work with this folder. However, before we discuss a system for working with your *goals* folder, I would like to talk about how it is set up.

### Setting up your *goals* folder

Your *goals* folder is home to a few subfolders: *new goals*, *monthly goals*, and *completed goals*. It also should have a few folders for each aspect of your life. I have 14 of them, but you may have more or less depending on your situation.



Working subfolders:

1. New goals
2. Monthly goals
3. Completed goals

Life aspects:

1. Exercise
2. Family
3. Work
4. Career
5. Vacation
6. Regimen and planning
7. Friends/relationships
8. Spirituality
9. Health
10. Finances
11. Etc.

### **Prioritizing your *goals* folder**

There are a few things you need to understand to correctly work with the different aspects of your life.

First:

You will not be able to change everything at once, and perhaps there will be nothing you can improve right away. Do not jump on everything at once. Be patient and remember that this is like learning how to paint: it happens step by step. First you learn how to see contours, then light and shadows, and finally you pick up paints and try mixing them. Skipping any of those steps leads you right into amateurish chaos. Goals are not a catch-all for creative ideas; your folder is built to help you build a future for yourself.

Second:

Once a month I go through the different aspects of my life using an algorithm that helps me see the big picture. In this way I understand what is worth my attention and what should be left on the back burner. This algorithm is like a ladder that takes you from the first rung to the fourth rung. The only way is to step up to the second rung, after which you can move ahead to the third rung, and only then can finish at the fourth.

For example, one of my friends broke some glass at his home and could not figure out what to do. I helped him, but then it hit me: why was it easy for me and so difficult for him? Certainly, I had some experience, as I had previously worked at a door and window manufacturer and therefore knew what needed to be done, but it had to do with more than just my personal experience. The project was tough because it was made up of multiple steps, or rungs. There were five separate steps even for this simple project:

1. Remove the glass and clean the frame
2. Take accurate measurements
3. Spend some time finding a place to buy the glass
4. Buy it and figure out how to get it home
5. Learn how to install it or have someone else do the installing

Most people have issues when they come up against problems like this one because it is often hard to consciously put together a clear plan of action—and this was just one project. Life is made up of many just like this one, which is why our *goals* folder includes many aspects of our lives.

Obviously, we need a way to evaluate the different areas in our lives, thereby giving us an overview we can glance at to see what needs attention right now and what can wait; what is going strong and what needs to be changed.

What happens when we talk about a particular aspect of our lives?

When New Year rolls around we often write out some resolutions and hope that by the same time a year later we will have somehow accomplished them. They may be losing some weight, exercising, or taking a vacation somewhere, but the list usually just gets rewritten the following year. The problem is not our naiveté, it is our inconsistency. Learning how to correctly evaluate the condition of each aspect of our lives shows us which of them need more attention than others.

Before getting to work on a particular area of your life, you need to know the level at which it is. For convenience we can assign each area a number.

Problems – 1

Vision – 2

Preparation – 3

Routine – 4

Assign each area of your life a number to see at a glance where you stand in general.

Let's look at each of those.

## **Problems**

If an area of your life is causing you problems, draining money, or anything else, go ahead and label it category one—a priority item. This is an area you need to work on right away. As an example, someone from the bank might call to let you know that you spend more money every month than you bring in and that your credit card debt is growing. That means this area of your life demands your primary focus.

Here is another example, this time from my life: my wife and I once found a problem in the “home” sphere of our life. We had a big laundry basket that was never completely emptied, with some things eternally stuck on the bottom and never cleaned. There were a few situations where the kids did not have the clothes they needed for school or we did not have the clothes we needed for work, which meant this area was affecting other aspects of our lives. In short, the basket was too big.

I suggested buying three small bins instead of the big one, and my wife suggested splitting our laundry into three categories: whites, darks, and colors. Each bin was about the size of a single load of laundry, and so we simply rotated between them. Whenever I noticed one was full, I simply did a load of laundry.

Our plan worked and has been in place for a number of years now, and since we implemented it there have been no problems with dirty laundry. However, we did not simply resolve the issue: we simplified our everyday *routine*, saving time and removing one more stress factor.

In short, problems are situations that negatively impact an entire area of our lives or, worse, leak out and affect others as well. Problems can even demolish an aspect of our lives if they go unsolved.

## **Vision**

Getting a vision for an area of our lives is not always a simple task. On the other hand, there is no skipping it if you would like to develop that area. What is a vision? Generally speaking, it is made up of the following aspects:

1. You know where you want to move forward
2. You know why you want that

For example:

Your vision for the financial aspect of your life is to achieve financial independence, a goal that involves things like:

- Paying off debts
- Saving up for a small business

So you can see how you want to move forward in this area (save up for a small business) and know why you want to do that (to achieve financial independence).

Another example:

Let's look at your career. Perhaps you at some point realize that what you are doing is not making you happy. You may even feel unfulfilled. You would then need to do something like the following:

- Study books and attend seminars to help you clarify and understand your main talents
- Understand where your talents are most in demand and how you could find self-fulfillment

Now you know how to move forward (understand your talents) and why you want to do that (maximally develop yourself and your talents).

Very few people have a vision for every aspect of their life, and most do not even have a clear understanding of what they want or why they want it. Instead, they add every idea and goal that strikes their fancy, cramming their list full of things like this:

- Learn to paint
- Learn Japanese
- Listen to every piece of classical music
- Run ten kilometers every morning
- Watch every Oscar-winning movie
- Read books on World War I
- I think you can fill in the rest...

There is nothing wrong with reaching these goals, as each of them is linked to a specific aspect of your life. However, if you have not decided what your basic vision is for the different aspects of your life, you will always feel overburdened by the sheer quantity of ideas, goals, and tasks packed into your *goals* folder.

You figure out a vision for the different areas of your life within the bounds of the situation in which you find yourself, rather than writing it in stone. For example, when I was going over the *career* aspect of my life I recognized that I need further education in this area so as to exploit my personal desires and creative abilities. That led me to the idea of taking a computer graphics course, one that took me two years to carry out. I have already achieved that goal, and now I need a new vision for my *career*.

Developing a vision for a specific area of your life takes time you will spend reading pertinent books. Maybe you will have enough free time to think through it, and as soon as you decide what is most important to you, go ahead and start figuring out what you should strive for and how you can achieve it this year or next.

You should ideally have a list with a clear vision for each aspect of your life.

## Preparation

If you have a good understanding of your vision for a specific area of your life, it will be much easier for you to see what you are looking for, how to prepare for it, and what will not happen. Here is an example:

- Life area: *finances*. Vision: achieve financial independence. Goal for this year: pay off all debts, save up some money as capital.

Now your biggest job is to get your projects ready to make part of your schedule. The preparation stage is made up of three steps:

- Collecting necessary information—looking for methods and ideas that will help you achieve the goal you have set for yourself
- Laying out a plan for how to achieve your goal—you need to be confident that you have everything your plan needs to succeed
- Action—now that everything is ready, you can move your project to your *active projects* folder and get to work

When an area of your life is in the preparation stage, you have a vision and are now looking for how to implement it. At this stage we look for ideas that could help us make our vision a reality.

## Routine

The fourth category is for the life areas that have already *become routine*.

When an area of your life *becomes routine*, you have a goal as well as a clear plan for how to achieve it that has already begun and is currently under way.

For example, I once realized that my work had me emotionally drained, though the problem was concentrated in the *vacation* area of my life. I did not have a plan for how to relax or revive myself emotionally. As I thought over the problem I understood that the revival happens when I do something I enjoy—something like painting. That was the start of a vision for that area of my life. It took some time to figure out how to make painting *become routine* (preparation), but I eventually found some classes for adults very close to my house. I gave them a try and started going regularly. At some point I realized that my emotional energy had been completely restored and I was just enjoying myself, which meant that area of my life had gone from being a problem to being routine.

Another example occurred once when my wife and I were talking about her work. She mentioned that it is tricky for her to get to the office because there are no direct bus routes. Even though her work is fairly close, it sometimes took her 40 minutes or more to get there. She wanted to get home sooner to spend more time with the family—her vision. We looked for a solution (preparation) and

decided on the idea of buying an electric bicycle. That *idea* was clearly able to have a positive impact on her everyday *routine*, so we decided to make it a reality. Now my wife goes to work on her bike, a trip that takes 15-20 enjoyable minutes. That is an example of an area of one's life *becoming routine*—in this case, work.

The more areas of your life that *become routine*, the better. That is my main goal, but remember that you will probably not be able to do everything all at once. Do not let that get you down, as it is completely normal for a preliminary overview of your life to show that half of its aspects are *problems* and the other half are *visions*. That is fine and just means you have work to do.

If most of the areas in your life have *become routine*, you can safely call yourself a TM master.

### **Issues when categorizing one's life**

How do we figure out which category to assign each area of our lives?

Ask yourself a few questions:

- Has this area *become routine*? In other words, everything is great, you have a plan, and your plan works. You can feel that this area is pleasant and profitable. If that is true, label this area a 4, and if not, go to the next question.
- Do you have a plan for how this area of your life can *become routine*? Alternatively, are you in the middle of creating that plan? That means you have a clear understanding of the value of this area and the direction in which it is headed. You know where to go, where you will be in a year, two years, or even three, and we give this area a 3. If not, go to the next question.
- Do you have a vision for this area of your life? Have you determined the main direction in which you want to go? Do you know why you want to go in that direction? If you cannot answer these questions, label this area a 2. Now your main goal for this aspect of your life is to look for a vision.
- Is this area a problem? Any area of your life can turn into a catastrophe for any number of reasons. It often happens that we have not laid out our values and the directions in which we want to go, but whatever the case, if you see that this area frequently causes problems and crises, give it a 1. You need to find a solution for this issue.

I hope these questions will help you quickly understand how to categorize the many aspects of your life.

### **What does this approach offer?**

I once happened across a TM book that described standard aspects of one's life laid out across the twelve months of the year. Later I found many more such books. The idea was to save you from thinking by allowing you to simply follow a schedule. For example, in January you need to get your



home life in order, February is for looking at how you are raising your children, in March you should move your career forward, etc. On the one hand, it was an inspiration, but on the other I could see that that approach is not effective.

I once saw a video with someone talking about different methods and approaches to driving a car. The conversation turned to blind spots. What are blind spots? They are when you look in your rearview mirror, do not see anyone, and confidently make a left hand turn only to hear honking from a car racing up on your left. How did that happen? The problem is that mirrors do not let you see everything to your right and left, leaving several blind spots a few meters behind you. If a car is in one of them, you will not see it when you look in your mirror. That is why I both glance in the mirror and physically turn to look behind me when making a turn to be sure nobody is in my blind spots.

Why am I telling you this? TM has its blind spots as well. If something is not in front of you looking you in the eye, you will probably forget about it, regardless of how important it is. Books that lay out specific tasks for you to accomplish over the course of a year are attempts to cover the blind spots in our lives. We are supposed to spend time consecutively focusing on different areas of our life in an attempt to make changes in them. The difficulty with that method is that we will not do what needs doing according to our plans, leading us to intuitively fight it.

The system I have laid out in this chapter for working with the different areas of your life is much deeper than simply sticking with a plan. We need to figure out what needs our attention, understand what we need to change in each area, decide how to achieve that, and, what is most difficult, make each area of our life *become routine*. If we do not do this, the chances are we will simply grab something at random and give up without ever reaching a single goal.

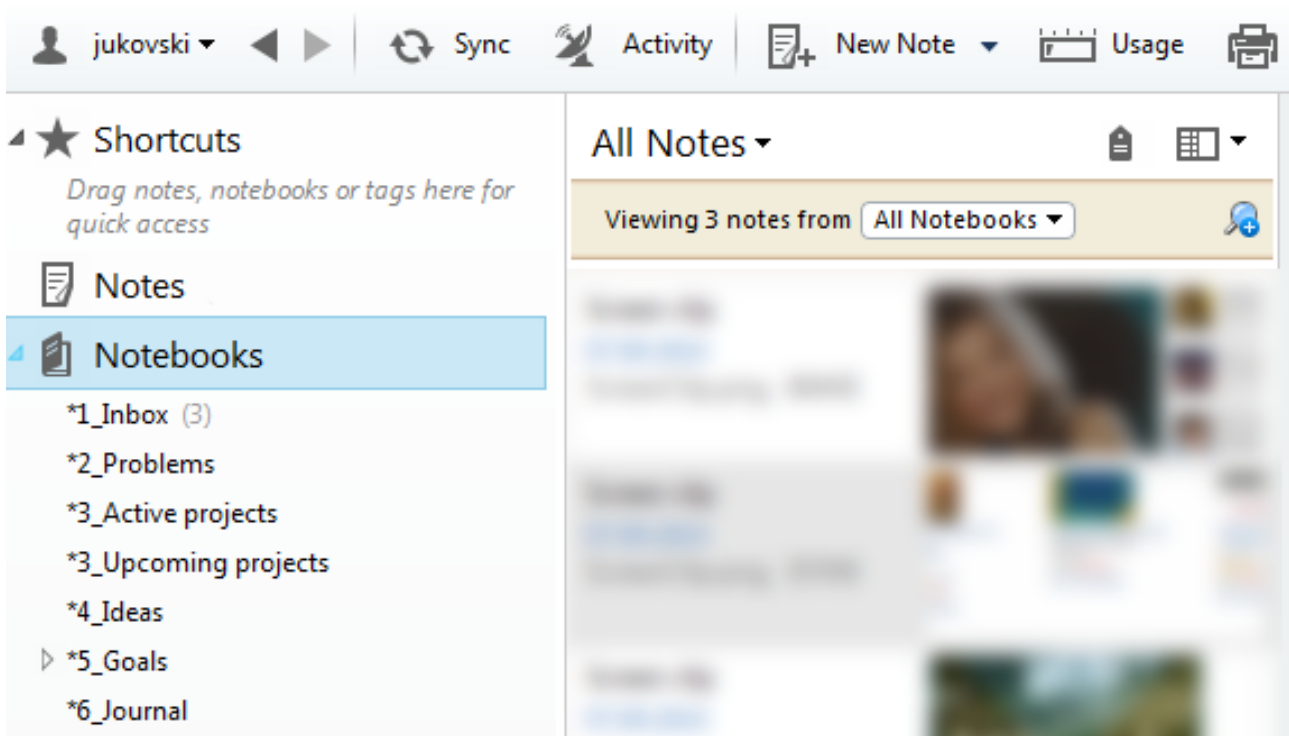
I used to read everything I could get my hands on one after the other. Everything seemed important and urgent, but now I do not have to worry any more. I can use my system to be secure in the knowledge that everything will happen in its own time. One aspect of my life can be put off to focus on another.

As you look over all the areas in your life every month you will have a clear view of the overall picture. In time you will even stop keeping everything in your head at the same time, knowing that you are not missing anything that needs your attention.

## **Chapter 7: Conclusion**

### **Tools for creating a system**

#### **Software**



I use Evernote for my system. Why? I have two reasons.

First, I have gone through a ton of different task managers, something that has taught me that a system needs to be simply enough to be used away from the computer. Evernote is just a notepad, which works perfectly for me.

Second, I learned that to successfully complete tasks and projects I need more than just a check list; I need the ability to write and add information to each project as well as think through what my first step should be. Almost all my tasks and projects are full of materials like pictures, recordings, and screenshots, all of which are handled by Evernote.

This program is the electronic version of a notepad that can be used to write a practically endless number of notes. I have *inbox*, *problems*, *active projects*, *upcoming projects*, *goals*, *ideas*, and *journal*, which we have already talked about.

Evernote has quite a few great features. I most often exploit the ability to send anything I want to the program's email address by forwarding emails I receive or sending links to sites that catch my eye. I also make audio recordings that usually get a ticket to my *ideas* folder.

As well, I have a paper version of my Routine System with a bin for documents labeled the same way. I made it to see if I could go without a computer or smartphone, but you can see for yourself what works for you. Either way is fine, though I find it more convenient to work electronically. I like Evernote, but you can use pretty much any program you want.

## **Calendar**

You have already noticed that I do not have a *calendar* folder, which is because I use Google's calendar. It works well, sending reminders of upcoming events to my smartphone. I usually do not send events to both my calendar and my *upcoming projects* folder; tasks and projects without a date are entered in my system, while everything that has a date and time is written in my calendar.

## **To-do list, or journal**

*Journal* is the section I use to keep a list of things for each day. The main goal I have for sorting everything I have to do is to eventually get them on this list. Almost every morning I quickly look over my *active projects*, *upcoming projects*, and *problems* folders as well as my calendar before drawing up a to-do list for the day.

While many people use daily to-do lists, many projects get stuck on the list day after day. This happens because these lists include many unchecked tasks and projects for which no preparation has been done. We, of course, will be writing our daily to-do lists using already sorted and processed tasks.

## **A bit about how it all works**

### **Day**

Every morning or evening (whatever is more convenient for you) you can write a to-do list for the day. That should happen after looking over your calendar, *active projects*, *problems*, and *upcoming projects* (that last one is up to you; I usually need to check it just once a week). Do not put project names on your list, and instead enter actions like "buy cartridge" or "pay electric bill."

### **Week**

Go through your *inbox* about once a week. If you have time, also look through your *ideas* and decide what to move to your *goals*, what to put off, and what to forget altogether.

### **Month**

At the beginning of every month, sort through your *goals* folder.

- a) Sort through your *new goals* folder. Decide the area of your life to which each goal is related.
- b) Categorize each area of your life, assigning each the appropriate number.
- c) Look at your *monthly goals*.
  - a) If some goals have not been achieved, you need to continue working on that aspect of your life.
  - b) Goals on your list of *monthly goals* that have been achieved can be moved to your list of *completed goals*.

- c) Decide which area of your life needs your attention this month. Write your new goal (area of your life) in your *monthly goals* list.
- d) Lay out your vision.
- e) If you have a vision, look for how to make that aspect of your life become routine. To do so, look through all the ideas you have collected in the folder for that area of your life—one of them may come in handy.
- f) If you have a plan for how to make this area of your life become routine, go ahead and move your new project to your *active projects* list.

### **Year**

At the end of the year, look through your *completed goals* list. Write out what you have accomplished and frame it—nice work!

Look over the different aspects of your life and think up a plan for what you will begin in January, what you would like to improve in February, and so on. In time you will have clearly defined plans for the year and beyond.

### **Keeping a finger on your pulse, or avoiding blind spots**

Most of my friends live by instinct. That means they accomplish the tasks and projects that happen to grab their attention or about which they are constantly reminded. Generally speaking, that approach leads to problems that occur because it is impossible to have everything you need to do in your head at the same time, and so some important things get caught in your blind spot.

Using the Routine System will help you keep such situations to the minimum, given that you will always have things to do each day, each week, each month, and even larger-scale things that need to be done in six months, a year, or more. Each of those periods can be easily controlled.

Here is how that happens:

1. The *goals* folder helps you see the big picture, create plans for each year, and have clear monthly plans.
2. The *upcoming projects* folder helps you avoid unpleasant surprises and keep an eye on the monthly picture and beyond.
3. The *active projects* folder helps you create an overview of each week.
4. Finally, the *journal* folder gives you the ability to create daily to-do lists.

Now you have what you need to look over each year, month, week, and day.

### **Time management and happiness**

I once participated in a Christian conference in Denver that included a book fair. I love reading books, so I decided to head over and see if I could find something interesting. As I stood in line I heard someone ask, “They say great books make great people—what do you think, bro?” I would

not have been able to answer then, I do not think, but I was almost sure it was true. I collected and read everything I could in an attempt to learn as much as I could about everything, which is why I was sure I had not yet found a good book on time management.

Another time I took an old friend to the airport. He registered and we decided to sit down and talk for a bit about life. As we chatted, the conversation turned to the future, at which point he looked at me and asked, “And what do you want? What would you like to do?”

Honestly, I was stumped, and not at all because I had never asked that question myself. I had often come across it in books on creating one’s mission and setting strategic goals, and I had always wanted to come up with an answer. The problem was most likely elsewhere. First of all, I knew that one deep conversation with an old and close friend was as good as tens of books. Reading a book is one thing, but looking a person in the eye and answering his questions is quite another. Second, we were not talking about what I wanted to do in general; we were talking about what I wanted to do that would make me happy.

Not long before writing this book I happened across an interesting work on TM entitled *A Perfect Mess*. It included many examples from the lives of different people that the authors used to try to soften the intense infatuation enjoyed by efficiency and order. They talked about situations where both perfect order was ineffective and a bit of chaos and disorder actually led to significant results.

Even before I read that book I had given some thought to the friends who seemed to me to have successful lives even though they did not use any time management systems. What they all had in common was an enjoyment of life, doing things that made them happier.

A few days after the conversation I had with my friend I realized what I wanted. I began thinking and looking for things that would make me feel happier, something that led to many changes in my life. I bought skates and now skate in the park in the evenings after the kids are asleep. I listen to different music and cannot even begin to describe how I feel when I do. It turns out there are art classes for adults close by, and now I cannot wait for the one day each week I head over there. Of course, I read less, but I am happier. Then, sitting in the airport, I understood that time management is useless unless it helps me become a happier person.

I no longer worry that I am not being efficient. Being happy and positive is the best efficiency you can achieve.

Why am I telling you all this? Every time you try to change something in an area of your life, your goal should be not only to achieve a result and make something become routine, but also to become happier.

## **Conclusion**

Like most people, I used to write a list of dreams I had, and the following year I would pull out that list. I was always interested to see what if anything had come true.

After implementing my system I used New Year to write a list, not of what I wanted to happen during the year, but of goals I had achieved. I used my *completed goals* list to write out 16 points, stunned that after so many years of unsuccessfully chasing after a variety of goals I had accomplished so much in just one. The list was so impressive that I wanted to hang it on the wall, and now I cannot wait for next year.

My system is no panacea or formula for happiness. As a believer I know that true happiness can only be found in God.

With that in mind, think of this book as a tool that can help you become more organized, more consistent, and more goal-oriented.

You will probably not have staggering results right at the start, but do not be disappointed or hurry. Start with the small things and aim for modest victories, remembering that every time something *becomes routine* is a small victory that gives you a little more experience, yields yet better results, and rewards you with even more happiness.