



Grateful & Gracious

How to Actually Make More Time In December

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psychology *for* photographers

(and other creative professionals)



OKAY, FINE, WE'RE NOT GOING TO BEND THE LAWS OF PHYSICS HERE. YOU CAN'T ADD HOURS TO DECEMBER.

BUT (REACHING INTO MY POCKET) - WHAT DO WE HAVE HERE?

Psychology research that confirms: We do not perceive every hour the same way.

You know this. One hour can feel like *three* in a dentist waiting room. That same hour would feel like ten minutes when talking to an old college friend.

Collectively, these effects are called “time dilation.” In a way, it doesn’t matter that an hour is an hour if it *feels* longer or shorter.



That opens up a window for something to happen. A cool way to feel like you have more time.

I’ll tell you about it in a minute, but first, a little story:



HAVE YOU EVER SEEN THAT DEMONSTRATION WITH ROCKS AND SAND?

Say you have a jar, some rocks, and a cup of sand.



 **Can you get both the sand and the rocks to fit in the jar with room to spare?**

If you pour the sand in the jar first, it takes up over half the jar. When you add the rocks, they spill out.



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Now watch: What happens if you put the rocks in first, then pour the sand over it?



 **The sand settles into all the spaces between rocks, and poof - amazingly - it all fits, with clean room to spare!**

Someone taught me this as a parable when I was about twelve. I think of it often:

Your time is like a jar. It's fixed. There's only so much space. You can't expand it. Every day, everyone gets the same size of jar.

Rocks are the things that are most important to you. You get to decide what they are: *Time with family, exercise, sleep, the play you'll attend next week.*

Sand is everything else that occupies your time: *Errands, events you're invited to, emails, replacing lightbulbs, etc.*

If you fill your time jar up with sand first, you won't have room for the rocks.





But if you put your rocks in first, you'll always have enough room for them. Plus, everything else still has a way of settling in place.

Keep that in mind for a moment.

NOW. WANT TO KNOW WHAT PSYCHOLOGY SAYS WILL ALWAYS MAKE YOU FEEL LIKE YOU HAVE MORE TIME?

One word:

Control.

People in powerful positions feel like they have more time available to them. Which is counterintuitive - if you think of a leader like a CEO, aren't they incredibly busy and scheduled to the minute?

Yes, but if you feel you control your time, you still feel like you have more of it. Curious, but true.

This doesn't just apply to CEOs. You can create a sense of power in an experiment simply by assigning someone to be the "boss" of a task at random. As that person assumes control, their perception of time changes.

So. Let us hereby declare that you are the boss of your time, responsible for all tasks in it. (You already were, but it doesn't always feel like it!) Now, let's heighten your sense of control.



When you feel like there's not enough time for what you want to do, know this:

The story you tell yourself about why your 'rocks' don't fit in your jar makes all the difference in your life.



If you say “I don’t have time for _____,” you might be correct that it currently doesn’t fit.

But have you tried putting that in your jar first? Before the errands, the emails, the chores?

Just like you saw, when you put your rocks in first, the rest of your list seems to rearrange themselves in the spaces around that rock. Stuff that must be done still has a way of getting done.



But if you fill your hours with sand first, then it’s all but guaranteed your rocks will spill out.

That doesn’t mean there’s no room for rocks in your life though. It matters when and how you try to put them in.

I PROPOSE AN EXPERIMENT.

LET’S TRY A SIMPLE WAY TO GAIN CONTROL OVER DECEMBER, AND SEE HOW YOUR MONTH CHANGES.

Find a piece of paper or open a Google doc, and write down: What are all the things you want to do in December? Don’t worry about putting them in order, just pour it all out, make it as messy and stream of conscious as you please.

Writing by hand? Leave a little space between items so you can expand if needed:

Christmas Party at Jones house
Want to take the kids caroling
Buy gifts, wrap gifts, tree and lights
Want to visit Doris next door because her family isn’t around
Client orders done by Dec 10
Send out my own Christmas cards
Just sit in my living room and enjoy some peace and quiet





Now, let's make sure we're realistic about how much jar space each thing takes up.

Go through and write out any “hidden” items that expand something's size.

Why? Well, increasing your focus and sense of control can also make you underestimate how long something will take. So let's make sure we're realistic:

Christmas Party at Jones house - This isn't just the three hours of the 6-9pm party. Participating means I need to find an appetizer recipe, get ingredients, make it, and get myself ready for the party and drive the 30 mins there and back. So 3 hours of party, plus another 3 hours of prep.

Send my own Christmas cards - I need to mail by the 15th, send to the printer by the 5th, which means I need to take the photo of my kids on Dec 2nd.

Etc.



And now, THE MOMENT OF DECISION.

Which items are the rocks - the absolutely most important things that need to fit in the jar of December's 31 days?

And which items are the sand - the things that are going to need to fit in when and if there is space?

If you're hand writing, you might circle the rocks. On a computer, you could cut and paste to a 'rock' list and a 'sand' list.

Remember: “Rocks” and “Sand” are not positive and negative judgments. Sand is beautiful! Sand is essentially made up of tiny rocks. We can respect each grain and want to have a place for it. We just have to acknowledge its size of importance to us.



The sand of errands is necessary to keep our life functioning. What's not okay when these grains collectively displace a larger rock.



Making this active decision helps you feel in control.

The labels of rock and sand help organize your thinking.

When you sense a sudden task is going to push off time for X, you can remind yourself - nope, X is a rock, and I'm not going to let this (lovely but not as crucial) sand push it out.

If you decide that "being fully present with your friends or family in the evenings" is your rock, then email might actually be sand that needs to fit around when you can get to it.

If email is still a rock, then those extra afternoon errands might be the sand, and you need to let them run into the space tomorrow morning. (Or wait all the way until January.)

Make intentional decisions. Honor them.



I KNOW THAT EVERY LESSON ON PLANNING AND SCHEDULING YOU'VE EVER HAD INCLUDES SOME VARIATION ON THE THEME OF “DECIDE WHAT’S IMPORTANT.”

HERE’S WHY WE’RE REVIEWING IT:

When we are at our most busy, we start *responding* instead of *making choices*. Control slips out of our fingers. We react to what’s in front of us and let tasks that jump up and down yelling “I’m important!” commandeer our time.

Time dilation strikes again: We get optimistic about how much we can cram in, and underestimate how long something will take (“oh I can just do this next week it’s fine”).



So here’s how December can go:

We accept the invite to a last-minute Dec 2nd birthday party. We spend that Saturday time getting and wrapping a gift, and driving over there. Pretty soon the whole day that you had planned to leisurely take the photo of your kids in the cute Santa hats is gone.

You try to squeeze it in the next day but only have 30 minutes before the sun sets. The kids sense your rush and frustration, scream the whole time, and you throw up your hands “I guess there is no Christmas card this year! There is never enough time!”

But there was enough time. You just have to put the Santa hat photo first, and let anything else slip around it. Instead of letting the Santa hat photo do the slipping.



You're entitled to schedule a family photoshoot and treat that time as inviolably as you would a client shoot.

You absolutely have permission to set one Thursday evening aside just to sit in your living room, turn off your phone, read a book, sip cocoa, and enjoy. If someone invites you out, you can honestly say you have a prior engagement.

(An 'engagement' means you have arranged to do something at a specific time. You can absolutely make and keep engagements with yourself.)

If an errand presses, you can say "I'll have to do that tomorrow" the same way you would if you were on your way to an appointment.



Taking the time to do this now will make your December feel more dreamy and spacious. It creates that control that you EXPERIENCE as more time.

This changes your whole month even more than adding an extra day would.

Looking at your day's to-do list and being able to quickly decide what is rock and what is sand gives you a sense of control that makes it easier to say things like:

Thank you for the invitation! I have another engagement that evening, but we could catch up over tea on ____ date instead!

My schedule does not allow for that this week, but I'd be happy to _____ in January.

I can't do _____, but I can _____ if it would help.



A FINAL NOTE OF CAUTION:

WATCH OUT FOR CLEAR SAND.

Ever been at the beach and stared closely at the sand in front of you? Some grains are so pale they're almost clear.



 **But never forget: Clear grains take up just as much space as the more visible ones do.**

A few months ago I realized that I could ring up a total of half an hour on social media per day, no sweat. It happened almost invisibly, a few thinly-seen minutes here and there.

A half an hour is enough time to wrap a present. Search for recipes. Prep an appetizer. Run to the store for a sick neighbor. Read a book chapter or two. Sit in the quiet glow of holiday lights, just being.

Social media has great uses. When we have a moment of boredom or stress, it's an ever-ready distraction that needs no prep or warm-up. These short bursts are like clear grains, hardly noticeable at all. But that 5 minutes STILL displaces the next task. Social media may feel magic, but it does not bend the end law of physics - 5 minutes is 5 minutes.



A collective 30 minutes a day of displacement means a later bedtime, or being too tired at the end of the day to do X.



Social media is actively engineered by psychologists to keep you coming back frequently.

These companies really do employ PhD-level research psychologists to work on this task. (I personally know and went to grad school with some of them.)

Breaking down the habit and reinforcement devices they use is a story for another time. But let's just say that a casual, aw-shucks "I'll try to spend less time this month" is not typically enough to actually change your behavior. In a tug-of-war between the draw of their methods and a head nodding in agreement that "yeah I should log in less," my money would be on their methods to win. And the prize is your time.

The good news is, YOU can use good psychology methods to stop this.



One of the best tools is external accountability for personal decisions. Meaning: Someone/something outside of you is involved.

There are apps and browser add-ons that block specific apps and sites within assigned hours, ensuring any time you do spend really is 'extra' time. (I go low-tech personally - my husband has my password and logs me in once a week. I'm shocked by how little I miss out on, even at long intervals, and what I'm able to do in its place.)

I highly recommend you choose and use one external accountability method this month as you manage your time, especially as relates to screen time.



Please don't confuse this for a general rant against social media. When using social media wisely, I have created and maintained deep connections that could not have happened any other way.



But this month, may I suggest that you decide exactly what you want to use social media for, and appoint ONLY its proper amount of space in your jar? Not a grain more.

(Bring in some external accountability to make sure.)

There are going to be lots of large, once-a-year rocks this month that you'll need the space for. (Yes, even those ten minutes waiting in the car. That could be your recipe-finding or gift-hunting time.)

Decide what your rocks are. Let the sand run around them. If something has no place in the jar, let it be the sand that spills out, not the rocks. And remember - clear grains of sand take up just as much space as anything else.



If you do these things, December will feel slower, more spacious, with markedly fewer harried exclamations of "I ran out of time!!"

No one wrinkles their brow in anguish over not having time for a grain of sand.

May you find yourself toasting on New Year's Eve to a month that comfortably held exactly what you most wanted it to.

**THIS WAS PART 3 OF 3
OF THE GRATEFUL & GRACIOUS SERIES.**

THANKS FOR JOINING!



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