

Letters to a young Catholic: How to study and work

Dear Friend,

Let me tell you a lie: Your value is measured according to how many things you can do at once. The key to being fully alive, maximally successful and highly important is the ability to occupy yourself with as many things as possible, simultaneously. You are made to switch between tasks with increasing rapidity, all the way to the point of instantaneity. You are only as good as the number of things that you can do. This is all a lie, and now I will stop lying to you.

Neither of us is so naive as to think that anyone tells us a lie like this outright. No one has to. If we reflect on what we have just subconsciously assumed about what qualifies as impressive or winning or even thriving, we might recognize that this elusive image of a person who does many, many things at once – and seemingly with ease – is silently held up as the ideal. When we do not live up to that silent expectation, we feel empty.

When we manage for a brief time to do it all, we feel fulfilled, but the feeling is fleeting. This image is not only impossible to achieve and sustain, it is also diabolical. It is born of a spirit that will lead us to despair, one that insists that the human being fully alive is the one who is “always doing everything.”

This is the myth of [multitasking](#). You and I never took a class on multitasking. We have simply assumed its value and learned how to multitask through practice. If you are like me, it is hard to not multitask. Just doing one thing at a time never feels like enough.

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This myth of multitasking is bolstered by so many images of presumed success that surround us, but the nefarious part is that the myth is strengthened from what emerges within us, too. What I mean is that when we multitask – doing multiple things at once, quickly switching back and forth between unrelated tasks – we think that we are getting better and better at paying attention to every single thing we are managing. But the truth is that the more we multitask, the worse we get at paying close attention to any single thing we manage. The appearance and the reality are out of whack. It is a myth.

To tell you the truth: multitasking changes the kind of person you are and what you are capable of, just as, on the other side, the habit of focused and singular attentiveness changes you. Clifford Nass was a communications professor at Stanford who studied the effects of multitasking, and here is what he had to say in a radio interview once:

“So we have scales that allow us to divide up people into people who multitask all the time and people who rarely do, and the differences are remarkable. People who multitask all the time can’t filter out irrelevancy. They can’t manage a working memory. They’re chronically distracted. They initiate larger parts of their brain that are irrelevant to the task at hand ... they’re pretty much mental wrecks. ... Unfortunately, they’ve developed habits of mind that make it impossible for them to be laser-focused. They’re suckers for irrelevancy. They just can’t keep on task” (quoted from Cal Newport’s 2016 book “Deep Work”).

This is the myth I am talking about. We think we are really good at multitasking and that we can shift gears to being hyper-focused when we need to be, but the truth is that by continually multitasking, we lose the ability to focus. We cannot do it well even when we want to. “Always doing

everything” leads to “never doing anything well.”

I want you to know about this because the way you study and the way you work changes the kind of person you will become. The content of study and work is important, but so is the way we study and work. The manner of study and work is a formative practice.

Developing healthy and life-giving habits of study and work requires intentionality and repetition. Multitasking has become the default, so we need to work hard to create a new normal. I want to share with you three recommendations for how to study and work well.

First, set aside time for your study and work. It typically takes about 90 minutes of continuous attention to develop insights and reap some of the fruits of true concentration. That might sound like a long time, and at first, it is, but with practice, we become more and more accustomed to concentrating for longer periods of time. At first – and if you do not already do this – plan to give 30 minutes of uninterrupted attention to what you need to work on or study. Then give yourself a break, before returning for another 30 minutes. After a week or so, try to increase your blocks of concentration to 45 minutes, then 60, up to 90 minutes. One of the secondary benefits you will soon discover is that you are a lot more efficient with your time, while the quality of your work also increases.

Second, prepare a space for your study and work, and clear out distractions. You and I both know that if your phone is next to us, you are going to check it. We know that if our [favorite news site or social media page](#) is open, we are going to constantly peek. And we know that if we put ourselves in an environment with other things that will distract us – friends, TVs, etc. – we will be swayed to break concentration again and again. So choose your spots well. Or, if you have an assigned place of work for your job, think ahead to how you can

organize that space to help you stay on your chosen task. The other part of this is the importance of planning breaks. Maybe there is some mindless game you like playing – okay, plan to play that for 10 minutes after one of your blocks of concentration. In other words, contain what would otherwise become a distraction. Give it its own time and space, which is separate from the time and space for concentration.

Third, use a timer. Checking a clock is another form of distraction, leading to a strange kind of multitasking where you are keeping track of time in addition to whatever else you are doing. So just set a timer with an alarm, then forget about the time. Just focus on what you are doing. Free yourself of the burden of keeping track of time.

These are practical strategies that put us on course to avoid being mental wrecks like habitual multitaskers and move us towards becoming more of what we, as human beings, are meant to be. We are meant to use our minds to plumb to the depths of things. We are meant to develop the skills in our bodies to become more and more experts at our crafts. And above all, we are meant to be able to give our focus and attention to what (and especially who) is right in front of us, being fully present rather than chronically partially-present. As we will explore in future letters, this is all part of training for intimacy, which requires heartfelt attentiveness.

You might think something like, “Well, a great chef multitasks, paying attention to lots of things at once in a kitchen.” Or we might imagine an air traffic controller, an orchestra conductor, or a parent. Indeed, each of these persons deals with increasing levels of complexity, but the ones who have developed expertise are wholly focused and present to what they are doing. The great chef is not also writing a sonnet, tracking a ballgame and texting. Likewise, the focused and present parent gives his undivided attention to the variety of things going on with his children at a given time.

A friend of mine who is an expert woodworker once said in an interview that, while in the shop, "I'm always in a state of focused attention. First of all, you're trying not to cut your thumbs off. You're always focused on that." Indeed. I learned something like this when I waited tables at a steakhouse. As a waiter, I had a lot of people to serve and myriad little details to attend to. But I was at my best when I was focused on that work, not splitting my focus on other things at the same time. There was a kind of mastery in being fully present to the work at hand and keeping distractions at bay with intentional breaks.

As we will discuss in the next letter, much of what I am talking about here, as well as in my previous letter, will find resonances in "How to pray." Maybe I should have addressed prayer first, but I wanted to spend time with you thinking about these more natural abilities we develop for listening and for study or work, because if prayer has to do with spiritual abilities, then those spiritual abilities will build on natural abilities. And attention, focus, concentration and presence are the natural abilities, which God's grace builds on and perfects when we seek him in prayer.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in cursive script, appearing to read "Lenny".

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