

July 26, 2024

In Praise of Ditching the Summer To-Do List

Melissa Nicolas describes how giving up her guilt about not checking things off such a list has helped her actually have a very productive summer.

By Melissa Nicolas



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To say I dragged myself across the finish line in May is an understatement. By the time I turned in grades and finished the administrvia of the year, I wasn't sleeping much; I definitely was eating too much fried food and drinking too many adult beverages; I was cranky all. The. Time. And I was crying, a lot, for no reason: pumping

gas, checking out at the grocery store, ordering a pizza—turn on the waterworks. I think my dogs were even fed up with my mood.

I was so emotionally, physically and intellectually exhausted that I didn't even have time to make the annual summer to-do list. You know the list I mean. Most academics make one. It's the completely fantastical list of all the work we are going to do over our break. I've been making one for more than 25 years. Yet for all but perhaps two of those 25 years, I've never finished even a quarter of what was on there.

So instead of getting to late August and having a neatly checked-off list of everything I accomplished each summer, I would get to August and have a reminder of the time I wasted—my utter lack of productivity, my inability to make a plan and stick to it, my failure as a scholar to produce copious amounts of writing, my lack of dedication as a teacher to create new and engaging material for my students. What a way to start a new year!

But something strange is happening this summer, because I never did get around to making the list. At first, I just couldn't muster the energy to write it because I was mostly sleeping and battling migraines during the first week of break. Then, during the second and third weeks, my youngest child was having some problems that demanded much of my time. The fourth week involved travel for a graduation and visit with family. That travel week was when I started to notice a shift.

Most summers (OK, all summers) whenever I would go anywhere, even if it was for "vacation," I would bring work with me, whether it was an academic text to read, page proofs to review or, at minimum, my computer so I didn't get too far behind on email. Full disclosure, it was a bit different this year because I knew I'd be on sabbatical in the fall and would not have classes. But even so, I still had hanging over me lots of writing I normally would have felt I needed to do—book reviews, conference proposals, grant proposals, to name a few—as well as various other academic chores.

When I was packing for the graduation trip, however, I realized I didn't have any work I needed to bring because I wasn't working on anything. There was no list. Somehow, I was four weeks into a gloriously unscripted summer! I boarded a cross-country flight with only movies and pleasure reading uploaded to my iPad. Not only was my backpack lighter without my texts and my laptop, *I* was lighter.

I spent a week at my sister's house actually being with my family. I didn't take any Zoom calls; I didn't excuse myself to go to a coffee shop "just for an hour" to get some work done. I didn't sneak off to bed early so I could read an article. My mind was with my body, not on the list of things I wasn't doing. I started to wonder what the rest of the summer might be like if I didn't make the list I had been planning on the plane ride home.

The list, dear reader, did not get made. I am spending the summer without a plan. And it is liberating! I don't feel guilty about all the things I am not doing because I didn't make any promises to myself to get anything done. Ironically, without the guilt weighing me down, I actually am having a productive summer. I wrote the abstract for a new article in the locker room of the gym because the idea hit me out of the blue while I was on the treadmill. I was on the treadmill because I don't feel compelled to be (futilely) sitting at my computer all day and have been able to start exercising again. And I am in the midst of planning two workshops for two very different audiences because I have had time to reconnect with other human beings in my community, having actual conversations where I am fully present and engaged because I am not worried about taking time away from the things on the list. (And now I can add this essay to the accomplishments.)

Truth be told, even if I didn't have a few things to point to and say, "Look what I did this summer," I would still say this summer without the list has been a good one. So I didn't write three articles and draft a proposal for a new conference. I wouldn't have done that anyway, even if it was on the list as it has been so many times before. The life-changing difference this summer? I don't feel guilty about not doing it.

I saw a colleague yesterday who asked me how my summer was going. Without missing a beat, I said, “Great!” This is the first time since starting graduate school I didn’t complain that it was going too fast or that I wasn’t getting enough done or that it was too short.

A few precious weeks are still left in the summer—I hope you can burn your list and enjoy. You may start the semester with the same amount of work crossed off (read: little to none), but you may very well have a chance to recharge just enough to make it to the holidays.

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