

To List Or Not to List

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My father was an insurance underwriter and always arranged his sharpened #2 pencils on his grey desk blotter so that the points were perfectly aligned. Because of his orderly work habits, I thought he would approve of conducting one's life with the aid of lists. I was wrong.

My dad said lists were unnecessary since things that needed doing always established their own priorities. The biggies shouldered their way into the footlights and the bit players naturally waited in the wings until they could take their place center stage. In his view, lists were too pushy.

My father's no-list theory worked well in my teens and twenties and saw me through a wedding, a first trip on my own, even a big party. I missed a few items, but, after the fact, it didn't really matter. Following marriage and children, I confess I succumbed to a grocery list. There were just too many biggies yelling from the pantry. In general, though, trust in the nature of a balanced and benign universe, a sort of clock that perpetually wound itself up and set its own time, was a benevolent space in which to live.

However, when I reached my forties and went to work for a large corporation, I was unable to pull off the zen of my father's laissez-faire approach to lists. Since my father had passed on, I sought the advice of my older brother. I assumed he had gotten the same paternal list advice and I was correct in that assumption. He had a variation on the no-list program that helped him retain his corporate sanity. He called it time management - a list theory in business school dress.

My brother's time management program went like this:

Make three columns and title the first "Me," the second "Boss," and the third "Colleagues." Put all the things in each column which need to be done and which are appropriate to the title. Each day when you arrive at the office, do something in the Me column first. Then do all of the things in the Boss column next. You probably will get to the end of the work day with no time to do anything for your colleagues. In practical effect, you take care of yourself first and feel better, your superior is satisfied, and tasks that do not get done for your co-workers will magically, in the course of time, either rise to the level of tasks that must be done for the Boss - or be forgotten. Most of them will be forgotten.

Perhaps all this explains why Mrs. Dalloway herself chose to buy the flowers for her party...