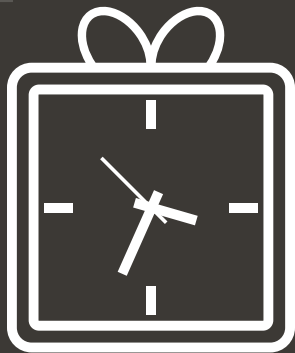


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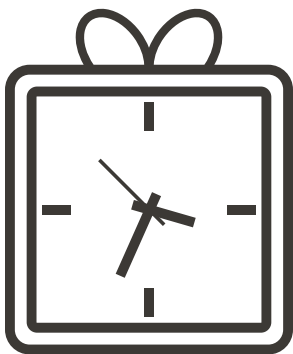
The Gift of Time

by Mike Vardy



12:00





The Gift of Time

by Mike Vardy

For Leon

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Introduction

*Yesterday's the past,
tomorrow's the future, but
today is a gift. That's why
it's called the present.*

— BIL KEANE

As long as you are on this planet, time is the one universal unit that is used to measure moments. No matter where you live or who you are, sixty seconds is equal to a minute, sixty minutes is equal to an hour, and 365 days is equal to a year. It doesn't matter what your social standing is or what time zone you are in. It doesn't matter if you are a student or an elder.

Time is measured the same way for all of us.

However, when you look at time qualitatively, time is also very different for each individual. It's not how much time you have, but how you spend it. That's why time is essentially the equivalent of money. It is the currency of our lives, and how you choose to spend your time doesn't necessarily determine how long you live, but it certainly determines the quality of how you live.

Make no mistake, civilizations in different

parts of the world measure quality in different ways. For example, the quality of life in the Americas is going to be unlike the quality of life in Europe. The same goes for other parts of the world. This short book isn't diving into that debate.

What I will do in this short book is offer up my own experiences about my relationship with time. My experiences won't be the same as yours, but I'm certain that much of this book will resonate with you in some way, shape, or form.

Perhaps you're in a situation where time is slipping away. You're afraid you won't be able to do what you really want to do with the time you have left. Maybe you have more interests than you can count, and you don't know where to focus your time and energy to get the results you desire. It's understandable that you want to figure out how to move in the right

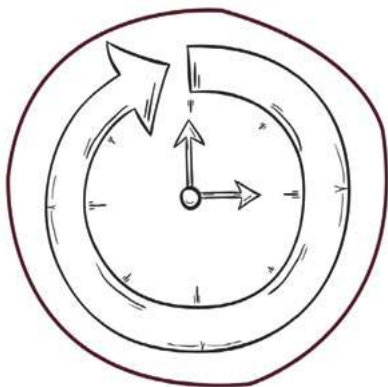


direction. You want to spend your time in the best way possible, rather than frittering away your time in a casual way. This book covers all of the above and more.

Before you turn the page and start accepting the gift of time that this book will present to you, I'd like to thank you for spending your time reading what I've written. I know your time is valuable. I also know that you spend your time pursuing the tasks you want to accomplish. I'm incredibly grateful that you are reading these words.







Do you ever feel trapped by time? As if you are a slave to it? Time does not stop and can send you to places that you really don't want to go. If you feel this way, know you're not alone. When you are ruled by time, you will not live the life you want to lead.

PART ONE

Ruled By Time

*I must govern the clock,
not be governed by it.*

— GOLDA MEIR

Getting In My Own Way

In the eleventh grade, I was given an assignment that I recall almost to the moment even today, over 25 years later. We had just received our school photos, and students were asked to cut out one of the wallet-sized ones we had received. Then, the teacher handed us all large index cards. We were told to glue these wallet-sized photos to the top left corner of the index card. Once the glue had dried, students were asked to write out what we would like to accomplish during the rest of the year, and where we saw ourselves in the future. I furiously scribbled down my thoughts.

I knew what I wanted to accomplish in my life: I wanted to perform for a living. In fact, one of my goals was to appear as a cast member on Saturday Night Live. A lofty goal, but back in the eleventh grade, it seemed very possible.

I was very active in theatre in high school. I was also a bit of a class clown, having mimicked Dana Carvey's George H.W. Bush impression to near-perfection. Not only that, I was able to do other impressions like Bobcat Goldthwait, which wreaked havoc on my vocal cords. I had performed in every high school musical since tenth grade, and by the time I had left school, I had won the school's drama award.



What did I do in order to achieve my goal? Not very much. I spent very little time considering which college I should attend. In addition, my grades were too low for me to be accepted by a top school.

The thing was, I wasn't stupid. I was just lazy. I took for granted that I was able to accomplish tasks quickly and that I could do tasks well at the last minute. This



process backfired on me when it came time to apply for university. I crammed for exams and didn't do well. I delayed working on big assignments and paid the price for it with my grades. I wanted to go to university and become an actor, but I wasn't willing to put in the time and effort needed. I was getting in my own way.

So what happened to me after high school? I worked for a college radio station thanks to several government grants. I did get to perform, albeit in audio only. However, once the grants ran out, I was stuck. I no longer had the luxury of time that I did in high school. I was on my own at this point. I moved out of my mother's place, and I was living in a bachelor apartment in a trendy part of Hamilton, Ontario called Hess Village. I had bills to pay now and responsibilities. Because I did not spend time in high school focused on becoming a performer, I found myself being ruled by time. Time wasn't my

friend anymore; time had turned against me.

There's a reason that anything big you want to accomplish is difficult. That's because it's hard work. I spent too much time partying, watching television, and hanging out with my friends instead of thinking about my future. I was used to going through the motions. By the time I had to think about creating a future for myself, my window of time was almost up.



I took some time off after my tenure at the college radio station. I just needed time to think and not be responsible for anything other than menial work. In high school, I worked at a fast food restaurant, and I decided to work there again. I also got a second job working at a shopping mall kiosk selling windbreakers and tearaway pants. (Yes, this part of my life took place in the



mid-1990s.) The great thing about working at these places was that it gave me time to think. Not just about today, but also to think about the future. I started to think about where I wanted to go and if this was where I wanted to be years down the road.

You can probably guess that this was not where I wanted to be over the long haul. But I didn't see an immediate way out. One day my stepfather suggested that I apply to work at the new Costco that was opening up just outside of Hamilton in 1995. I took his advice and applied almost immediately.

After going through a fairly involved interview process, I was offered one of two employment opportunities:

Option One: A higher-paying seasonal position working as a Front End Assistant with the possibility of permanent employment.

Option Two: A lower-paying Food Court Assistant with permanent employment starting immediately.

While the first option was intriguing, I took the second one. I figured that I already had plenty of experience working in fast food, so the learning curve would be lower. That meant that there would be a possibility of advancement in the near future—at least in my mind. But, more importantly, it was a permanent situation. I was at a point in my life where I needed stability. Ever since high school, my life had lacked consistency. Costco was offering me the very thing that I needed.

Looking back now, I realize Costco was not only offering me a job: Costco gave me time. This opportunity rewarded me in more ways than were immediately apparent. Here are a few specific ways this opportunity improved my relationship with time:



Framework. Costco gave me stability, but more importantly, I now had a reliable framework in my life. My work hours helped to shape my schedule. This shift in how I approached time allowed me to not only survive but to thrive. In essence, the framework was freeing. Once I knew what I could and could not do within the framework, I was able to make better decisions. I started to use my time more effectively.

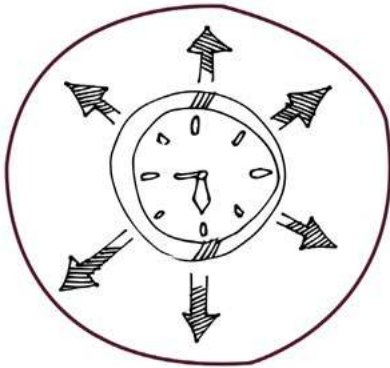
Focus. Costco gave me something to look forward to every day. Costco treats their employees very well. They give employees a stable and friendly working environment as well as providing employees with an incredibly generous compensation package. With all of that in mind, I was able to focus on doing the best job possible at work. When I started working for Costco, in my mind, I had nothing to focus on in my life that was good. But Costco kept me busy and

the rewards were great. My focus increased. I became healthier, more driven, and better equipped to handle all of the responsibilities.

Freedom. Once I had a true framework to follow and increased focus, I found freedom that led me to a very successful career at Costco. I no longer felt that I had to go down a certain path; I had the freedom to choose the path that I wanted to go down.

However, I found myself facing another roadblock in my relationship with time. The freedom that I had been given fueled my desire to make a change. And as with most change, it did not come easy.





There comes a point when you have to choose where to spend your time. Ideally, you want to be confident in how you decide to spend your time. But when your time is split, so is your focus. And that means you're losing time, which is the opposite of what you want.

PART TWO

Split by Time

*If you spend too much time
thinking about a thing,
you'll never get it done.*

— BRUCE LEE

All The Things

In late 1998, I left Ontario. I had just finished a brief tenure as the food court supervisor for Costco. I had worked in that position for three years, and I knew it was time for a change. I decided to apply for a transfer to another warehouse in a suburb of Vancouver, BC. This wasn't an easy decision. I had never been further west than Western Ontario. But I had a sinking suspicion that I was about to head back down a path of being ruled by time once again, and I knew that was not a path I wanted to take.

I sold off most of my belongings, ordered a moving truck to ship my personal effects, and hopped on a plane to Vancouver. At the time, I had \$680 dollars to my name. I decided to stay with a coworker who had also just moved out there for the first couple of weeks. I eventually found a place of my

own and used what money I had left to put down a deposit. Luckily, payday was just around the corner, and I had worked for nearly three weeks straight at that point so it was a rather hefty cheque.

For the first time since hitting the stage in high school, I was willing to do the hard work without being prompted or coerced by others. I was driven, and it showed.

I had been working at Costco for about three months and then I was promoted to the Costco warehouse located just outside of Victoria, BC. I was now a manager of two different departments– the deli and the food court–which were located at opposite ends of the building. I spent a lot of time walking back and forth in that warehouse. It was in this position that I first started to adopt some critical task and time management rituals.



During this period was the genesis of The Strikethrough System and my idea of theming my days, weeks, and months. My interest in productivity became more of a passion. And something else happened during this period that would change the course of my life forever.



My roommate Martin and I were quite the pair. He was transferred to this new warehouse at the same time as me. We had a lot of fun together. Martin had been working with an improv group in Victoria, and he suggested that I would be a good fit for them as well. He knew of my past as a performer in high school, and I assume that's likely the reason he asked me to go with him to a rehearsal one night.

I went, and that's when the acting bug returned. That was both a great thing

and a bad thing all at the same time. As I began to explore the idea of becoming a performer again, my job performance started to slip. Over the next couple of years, I formed a comedy troupe and began to perform improv and sketch all over the Pacific Northwest. On several occasions, I even made trips to other cities like Washington DC and San Francisco.

My focus was split because I had so many interests. I did not have enough time to dedicate to one interest fully. I was trying to do everything that I wanted to do. As a result, I was doing nothing extraordinarily well.

What happened next was predictable. My job performance suffered at work. I started getting more and more reprimands. The comedy troupe was not nearly as polished as we needed to be in order to take things to the next level. I had also just married



my wife, and we were expecting. Things at home weren't going that well, as I was trying to do all of my work-related stuff and my comedy-related stuff while also trying to better my relationship with my wife.

I was split by time—which meant I was going nowhere fast. So I had to choose. And I decided to choose while I still had a choice.



The birth of my daughter helped put things into perspective for me. After she was born, I reached out to someone else who had left their decent-paying job to follow another path. I was still working at Costco, running the comedy troupe, and I was now a father. Needless to say, I had a lot on my plate. I wrote Jonathan Coulton an email, asking him for advice. I wanted to know what he would do in my circumstances, although I had a feeling that I knew the answer.

I was surprised when he replied to my email, but I wasn't surprised by the reply. Jonathan suggested that I quit my job. I spent a lot of time thinking about doing just that; that email felt almost like a permission slip to do so.

The thing is, I was much smarter than when I was back in high school. I knew that if I had to quit my job outright that time would soon come to rule my life once again, and I was not going to have any of that. But I also knew that if I didn't make a change, my focus would continue to be split, and that would not be good for anyone.

So, I decided to quit my position at Costco and step down from the position of being a full-time manager to becoming a part-time employee.

I have strategically thought about why I made such a drastic “self-demotion.”



In the end, it was more of an act of self-devotion. By stepping down from manager to hourly employee, I was removing a lot of responsibility from my life. This change would allow me to focus more on the thing I really wanted to do-perform. Sure, it meant a salary reduction, but it was a compromise I was willing to make. I knew that my lifestyle would have to adjust, but the rewards associated with following this new path would be worth it. I had been with Costco long enough to know that it would be even more beneficial to step down to part-time instead of full-time.

As a part-time employee, I would have more control over my hours and my scheduling than I would as a full-time employee. I was guaranteed 40 hours of work as a full-time employee, so I would have to ask to go home early if I wanted to work on my comedy or my writing. The likelihood of regularly being sent home early when

I asked was marginal at best. But as a part-time employee, they could schedule me for no more than 25 hours a week without asking. I knew this, and I knew that this would give me some leverage.

Instead of me asking permission to go home so I could work on the thing I really wanted to work on, they would have to ask me for permission to stay and help them. More often than not, I had managed to organize my days and weeks in a way that would allow me to help Costco just as much as I was helping myself. Knowing that I had more control over my time provided me with the comfort and the confidence I needed in order to work on my own projects at a high performing level.



Being split by time is not fun. It is a form of being ruled by time, but unless you step



back and look at it, it doesn't feel that way. At least not right away. Eventually, however, you start to feel bogged down, tired, and frustrated. The problem with being split by time is that the knee-jerk reaction is to stop doing one thing altogether without giving yourself the way to really do something else. If I had outright quit my job at Costco, there is no way that I would be writing this book right now. There is no way that I would have had the successes I've had in this new chapter of my life. There is no way that my relationship with time would be the healthiest that it's ever been.

If you are feeling that you're being split by time, before you react, I recommend that you do the following:

Analyze. Take a long look at what your current situation is and where you want to be. This will mean reviewing what has happened in the past (including past

circumstances that you can find some form of connection with the current one). Then consider what you'd like to see happen over the short-term and long-term. Be realistic, and prepare for the lowest common denominator. For example, I was ghostwriting a lot as a blogger before I took Productivityist to the next level in early 2014. In fact, I kept ghostwriting up until mid-2014 just to give myself enough of a financial buffer in case things didn't go as I had envisioned.

Finances will always be a big concern and are often a reason that you don't move forward and follow another path. The key is to get all of this stuff out of your head. Look back to your past and consider your future as well. You want to do this before you make a decision that will impact your life and the lives of those around you.

Strategize. Once you've decided where



you would like to spend your time, plan accordingly. There is no point in strategizing before analyzing because you will still have remnants of doubt. When you have as much information as possible, you will be able to strategize and formulate a plan. Don't just develop strategies for today. Develop them for next week, next month, next year, and beyond.

Catalyze. Now you need to have one specific trigger that will set your plans in motion. When I quit Costco, I knew the catalyst for change would be when I visited my warehouse manager to give notice. I did not go to my direct supervisor—I went straight to the top. The impact that created was far greater than simply writing a note and handing it off to someone with less authority. This wasn't a slight to my supervisor—I did let him know shortly thereafter. I wanted to make a statement not to the company, but to myself. I needed to know that this

was a final decision. I needed to create a catalyst. I needed to show myself that I was focused, driven, and full of resolve. So when you finally are ready to make the move, make the first move a big one.

After over 11 years at Costco, I walked out of those giant doors as an employee for the final time in early 2006. Costco provided me many great gifts over the years. For example, the company gave me the ability to move across the country and set off a series of events in my life that would lead me to a family, a fulfilling career, and so much more. My time with Costco also helped me repair my relationship with myself and improve my relationship with time.

But like any relationship, the one I have (and you have) with time will always need work. Hard work.





No one can control time. But we can control our relationship with it. Whether you are a CEO, a bootstrapping entrepreneur, a stay-at-home parent, or a student, if you have a healthy relationship with time then you can be guided by it rather than ruled by it.

PART THREE

Guided by Time

*Until you value yourself,
you won't value your
time. Until you value
your time, you will not
do anything with it.*

— M. SCOTT PECK

Finding My Way

The above quote is by the author of *The Road Less Traveled*, a book I highly recommend. Up until I left Costco, I had walked along a well-worn path. As I started to add new elements to my life, like performing comedy, I found a new path. But there were still parts of that road that were easy. And I needed them to be that way.

As I mentioned earlier, fostering a solid relationship with time is hard work. During my last few years of being employed by others, I made sure that I had some low bandwidth tasks and responsibilities so I could work on my relationship with time. I also made sure that I got the most out of every one of those experiences, whether it was working for a store that sold Apple computers, or working for the local film festival. During my time selling computers, I began to improve my proficiency with OSX.

While I was at the film festival, I was able to spend a considerable amount of my day coming up with creative solutions to the problems that were often necessitated due to a limited amount of funds available.

There were also times at both jobs where I was able to do simple work. After I left work, I would use my time to focus on my new calling: exploring and specializing in personal productivity.

After leaving Costco, I discovered that comedy didn't exactly pay the bills. So while I was at the Apple retail store, I began to study productivity. I even created a character that was somewhat modeled after Stephen Colbert. This character preached productivity through satire rather than politics. However, I didn't give enough focus to the satire. I didn't do it nearly as well as I could have. That said, I was noticed by others in productivity circles. That notice



served me well, as I began to write for popular productivity websites and ultimately became the editor at WorkAwesome.

Soon after that, I was assigned another blog to monitor and was again at a crossroads. My work on the Internet was now equal to the amount of work I had off the Internet. I had to make a choice. Should I stay working at the film festival and shift my focus away from my online work, or should I dive in and embrace the world of personal productivity and online writing?

Just like I did in 1995, I chose the second option. And I haven't looked back since.



Being your own boss—or having more control over your work hours—is a lot harder than what most people think. I can't tell you how many times I've had people suggest

that I have it easier because I work from home. If anything, I need more discipline and willpower on a daily basis. I have to set up even more frameworks than I had at Costco to make time move tasks forward in a meaningful way because there were less (perhaps even little) external factors motivating me—like the idea of a promotion or the fear of punishment from my manager. I've had to make choices that force me and my family to adjust our lifestyle time and time again. I've had to work harder than ever before.

Once you've decided to make a choice that puts you in the driver seat, you need to take time seriously. More seriously than ever before. Because you need to make sure that time is on your side and not fighting you along the way. You need to structure your time in a way that gives you the flexibility you need to create. You need frameworks more than ever before.



You need to focus more than ever before.

There's a reason why I plan my next year in August. It isn't always because I want to plan at that time. It's because I have to plan at that time. I need to be proactive in order to figure out what I need to do, ought to do, and want to do in the days, weeks, months, and years ahead. Proactivity allows you to deal with the items you have on your plate that are important, but not urgent. Reactivity puts you in an unenviable position as you are forced to deal with items of urgency. Items of importance stay on the backburner even longer.

In order to really take advantage of the time you have on this planet, you need to be proactive. Whether you are working for yourself or someone else, if you are not proactive, you are chasing action instead of directing it. And that means that you are not letting time

guide you. You're letting time rule you.

Fostering your relationship with time is a very delicate balance. I'm not a fan of the word balance in the greater sense of productivity terms, either. The idea of work-life balance is a bit of a fallacy. In order to focus on the "modes" of your life, be they work-related or personal, you need to shift so that you can be fully present in that mode. That's why I am a big believer in working by context (as discussed in David Allen's phenomenal work *Getting Things Done*) rather than by project.



I have written at length about different strategies and tactics for developing task and time management. At some point, I will deliver many of them in a book that is much more in-depth and longer than this one. But in the interest of providing you



with some simple steps to guide you as you navigate your way through life, here are two things you can do starting today to improve your relationship with time:

Qualitatively track your time. Time tracking is nothing new. We all keep track of how many moments and hours we spend on certain activities. But we don't always qualitatively track those moments. Instead, we decide that the number of things we've done equates to productivity. That's simply not the case.

Two of the easiest ways that you can qualitatively track your time include journaling and regularly reviewing. Whether you journal in the morning or evening, the act of chronicling your thoughts will help you spend more time on the important tasks you want to do. Journaling also gives you a chance to reflect when looking back over the past week. David Allen

suggests reviewing your lists weekly, and I echo his sentiments. If you don't review, then you can't possibly plan ahead with confidence. You will wonder if everything that needs to be done will get done.

Routinize the start and end of your day.

Your brain has a lot of work to do every day. When you add routines to the beginning and end of your day, you can let your brain focus on other work. Even if you don't have a normal waking time and bedtime, you can create morning and evening routines.

Over the last few months, I have had to shift my daily schedule in order to accommodate coaching clients on the East Coast. As a self-described night owl, this change has not been easy. But because I started my day the same way and ended the same way without fail, the process of adjusting my schedule has been less painful. It ultimately doesn't matter what you do at



the beginning of your day or the end of your day as long as you keep it the same.

These things may sound simple, but you are really starting to build habits here. As you work on these habits, you will adjust them. And that's fine. The key is to start. It doesn't matter what time of the year you start doing them. Your routines will make you more aware of time. You will become more mindful and thoughtful about how you spend your time. You will begin to make the most of your time, no matter where you are. You will be more intentional with your time because you were paying more attention. Time doesn't just represent seconds on a timepiece. Time will represent pieces of the life you want to live.



It took over 20 years for me to find my way and understand how time can work for me.

I know that I'm not alone in this either. But once I found my way, I knew that I wanted to make sure that I didn't get lost again.

You see, when you lose your way... you lose time. And that's the last thing that any of us should want to lose.



Conclusion

*We must use time wisely
and forever realize
that the time is always
ripe to do right.*

— NELSON MANDELA

As I sat here writing this book, I couldn't help but look back at what I really wanted to do with my life back in the 11th grade. I wanted to perform. I wanted to be on stage. I wanted to make people laugh. I wanted to have a forum that would let me entertain people.

And guess what? I get to do that.

It has taken a long time for me to be able to say that and mean it. I get to speak in front of hundreds of people at events while on stage. I get to make people laugh in the way that I deliver my thoughts on productivity and workflow, which is just a form of entertainment. I run a company that allows me to do all of this, so I have given myself a forum I can use to talk to thousands of people around the world.

I didn't get here by hacking life. I got here by experiencing it. Along the way, I came up with strategies and tactics that allowed

me to travel down that path I want with less friction. Over the last few years, I've learned how to adopt a task-based mindset so that I can devote my attention to the important first and foremost. The only reason that I can do that on a consistent basis is because I have a healthy relationship with time.

I hope that after reading this book and learning a little bit more about me and my story that you'll take a step back and examine your relationship with time. Is it healthy? Could it be better? Should it be better?

Many of us are concerned about our relationship with our bodies, which is justifiable. Many of us want to focus on improving relationships with our family and friends. These are all important too.

But if you don't spend time examining your relationship with time, then you won't be



able to fully realize your own potential. You won't be able to focus nearly as intensely on the things that you desire. You won't be able to move forward with as much precision and energy as you'll need.

In other words, you will lose time.



Over the years, my self-worth has increased, primarily because I am now doing exactly what I want to do with my life. My self-worth is directly correlated with where I spend my time. And so is yours.

There's a reason I chose the quote by Nelson Mandela to begin the final section of this book. He was a man who lived to 95 years old and spent 27 of those years in prison. He knew the value of time. He knew that with what time he had, he needed to focus on the right things, rather

than try to focus on everything. And he made a huge impact as a result, one that will last for decades and beyond.

Your time is your time. Never forget that. You ultimately get to decide what you will spend your time on and why. Whether you are a CEO of a large company, a Costco employee, a stay-at-home parent, or a student, only you get to decide how you want to spend your time. And how you spend your time affects your relationship with time.

After reading this book and exploring some of the strategies and tactics I've offered (along with several insights from personal experience), I hope you value this gift more than when you began reading.



Before I let you go, I want to offer another small gift. Write down this quote to make



the most of the gift of time. While the first part of the quote will be familiar, the second part might surprise you. Yet, when you put those two parts together, you will have some great words to live by:

There is no time like the present,
and there is no present like time.





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The first version of this book was written during the winter holidays in 2014. I was typing away feverishly all while my family was home. My wife, Anne, kept the kids at bay, allowing me to get this book done. Big thanks to her for doing that... and to Grace and Colton for their understanding as I put my thoughts to page during their school vacation period. I love you all very much.





About the Author

Mike Vardy is a writer, productivity strategist, and the creator of the methodology and philosophy known as TimeCrafting. He is the author of several books, including *The Front Nine: How to Start the Year You Want Anytime You Want*. He is a renowned speaker and has taught productivity practices on popular online education platforms CreativeLive, Skillshare, and LinkedIn Learning where his courses are among the most popular in the business category. Mike lives in Victoria, BC, Canada with his incredible wife, daughter, and son.