

# THE IMPERFECTIONIST

## Just go to the shed

It's always a little disorienting to realise how much of life is dictated by psychological avoidance – by the effort to avoid having to think about, or deal with, things that evoke discomfort. (All right, I mean *my* life. But I have it on good authority I'm far from alone.) It's an old story: some task, or some entire domain of life, triggers anxiety when you think about it – so you just don't go there. You're worried your bank balance might be alarmingly low, so you don't check it; or that a stomach pain might be something serious, so you never quite get around to making a doctor's appointment. I've sometimes caught myself avoiding my inbox, for fear of discovering a message from someone impatient I haven't replied to them yet. Or avoiding getting down to writing, for fear that I might not meet a looming deadline.

In rational terms, of course, this makes zero sense. If your bank balance *is* alarmingly low, or the pain *is* something serious, discovering that fact is an essential precondition for doing anything about it. Equally, even if there isn't a problem, avoidance tends to create them. Refusing to open my inbox is a surefire way to make sure that I do indeed start receiving impatient messages; and there's no better way to miss a deadline than failing to get down to work.

On top of all this, avoidance is simply no fun: the more you avoid things, the more their anxiety-inducing charge grows, and your life becomes ever more constrained as you increasingly organise your energies around not addressing them. It's a bit ironic that this gets referred to, in self-help circles, as "remaining in your comfort zone", because there's nothing comfortable about it. On the contrary, it entails accepting a miserable, disempowering background pull of *discomfort*, in order to avoid the possibility of occasional more intense, but short-lived, moments of high anxiety or fear.

The Dutch writer and Zen monk Paul Loomans calls these avoidance-inducing tasks "gnawing rats", and in his book [Time Surfing](#), translated by Colleen Higgins – one of the most thought-provoking books on time I've read in a long time – he offers a powerful and unusual approach to dealing with them. Instead of the conventional advice that you should confront your gnawing rats, Loomans argues that it's vastly more constructive to befriend them.

He doesn't really mean that you can get away without confronting them at all, at least in some sense of that word. At some point, you're going to have to check the bank balance, make the doctor's appointment, or get down to work. But the crucial question is *how*. The usual approach is to tell yourself you'll just have to man/woman up, get over your fears, and face down the tasks you've been avoiding. And there are plenty of productivity gurus ready and waiting to bolster the belief that smashing your way out of your comfort zone like this is exactly what's called for.

The trouble is that this just replaces one form of hostile relationship with your gnawing rats ("Stay away from me!") with another kind ("I'm going to destroy you!") And if there's one thing I've discovered about meaningful productivity, it's that adopting this adversarial stance toward your time and your tasks will always eventually curdle into procrastination, resentment, rash decision-making, or self-reproach. At the end of the day, after all, you'll really only be fighting yourself.

Loomans advises forging a friendlier relationship with your gnawing rats by *turning towards them*, psychologically speaking. At first, that might mean nothing more than closing your eyes and visualising the actions you'd take in order to address them. Or maybe there's some minor part of the project it wouldn't faze you to tackle? Do that. If there's someone whose help you need, you could ask them. All you're looking for is *some* way to "go there", mentally or physically, thereby sapping the situation of its negative charge. Loomans gives the example of a shed that needs clearing out, a context in which "just go there" is an instruction to be taken literally:

The advice here is: go into the shed. Don't do anything yet, just look around. Observe and take stock. Make the space your own. And [...] the first solutions will present themselves. A number of items will change hands and be donated to others. Other things will wait until that Saturday afternoon when you say to yourself, 'And now it's time to clean out the shed.' You don't dread it any more, but are actually looking forward to it.

It's worth noting how the advice to "just go there" differs subtly from the well-worn idea that the way to get started on intimidating projects is to break them into smaller chunks. That's a useful strategy! But the way it works is to alleviate anxiety by reducing the size of the "threat", whereas we're talking here about transforming the threat into something else entirely. A "gnawing rat", once you befriend it – that is, once you find a way to have it exist as an unobjectionable part of your mental world – doesn't become a smaller rat, but rather, in Loomans's metaphor, a "white sheep". And "a white sheep is a very different animal. It's part of a flock, and the flock follows meekly behind the shepherd." The flock symbolizes the tasks you plan to do in future. You'll always have such a list, because for finite humans, there'll always be more to do. But the items on it needn't torment you. They can just wait patiently for their moment.

There's a specific kind of gentleness in this approach that increasingly seems to me to be central to living a calm, focused and meaningful life. Yes, it's non-

aggressive and non-confrontational, but at the same time, there's nothing submissive or defeatist about it. It's a way to maximise your room for manoeuvre, and your ability to get things done, by becoming ever more willing to acknowledge that your situation *is as it really is*, rather than expending effort trying to convince yourself otherwise.

Befriending reality in this way takes courage – perhaps even more courage than the standard confrontational remedy to the tasks you've been avoiding, which feels more like getting into a bar fight with reality. Still, it's nothing superhuman. Quite the opposite. It's just going to the shed, having a look around, taking stock. It's just hanging out in the presence of your gnawing rats, waiting to see what strikes you as the best next step.

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