What to Avoid in Life? aka Time Management

Opening Remarks

While many of us may have illusion that we have abundant time in our life and we can squander it wherever and whatever way we want. However, the reality is otherwise. All "successful" persons carefully chose to spend their time and always ran out of it. The pith of the matter is that everyone has got 24 hours/day and if he/she doesn't put enough thought behind the way he/she spends it, consequences could be severe. Having said that and realizing things in hindsight is easy. However, what is difficult is to know in-prior and avoid the "waste" of time which is the most valuable thing in human life. Unless we understand the value of time we are willing to “trade-off” with anything in life i.e. time with money, time with entertainment, time with acquiring materialistic things, we wouldn't be able to spend it in meaningful ways. I would try to kludge my experiences and thoughts together on this which you might find useful.

Analysis of Productive Time

Those who are still skeptic here I offer a simple analysis. According to vast data available we all know that human life expectancy is around 75 years - which is on higher side. If we assume that average human requires 8 Hrs/day sleep then we are simply taking away 25 years in which even a super-human can not do any productive work. Take out 2-3 Hrs/day for other mundane activities such as meals, bathing, cooking, exercise etc. and we have taken out another 10 years or so from total of 75 years. The sad part of story is that this is not what one should be "mistaken" to consider as productive time. In reality, one can hardly do any productive work until he/she has done with the college or at least high schools. If that has to be believed we are taking away first 20 years of life in which one can not really expect much from him/herself. But if you think that's all then it would be another mistake. There is something called retirement time and one can safely assume that last 10 years of life would/should be spent as that. Partly because, again like childhood you can't expect more in that phase or else it might result into disappointing scenario. So, Finally we are at the bottom of the calculation and "Productive Time" can be defined by the following equation:

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\text{Productive Time} = \left( 75 \, (\text{Human Life Expectancy}) - 20 \, (\text{Formative Years includes Childhood}) - 10 \, (\text{Retirement Years}) \right) \times \left[ 24 \, (\text{Hours/day}) - 8 \, (\text{Sleep Hours}) - 3 \, (\text{Mundane Hours}) \right] / 24 \, (\text{Hours in a day}) = 24.375 \, \text{Years}
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Number in previous paragraph is no way the absolute available productive time but rather what one can get if he/she is sensible enough to avoid unnecessary activities such as meaningless hang outs, parties, social activities etc. The conclusion is that one really has only around 20-22 years of productive time in his/her whole life. Imagine for a moment if anything of that chunk goes without doing anything meaningful one has every right to feel miserable at the end of his/her life.
Social Circles

Looking beyond the analysis, here are few bits to ponder and hopefully some ways to avoid the waste of time. Generally, in my view, people waste a lot of time in social activities and while they are important I would try to single out which kind of those are not going to be constructive. A social gathering/activity can not be possible without a social circle and the short and long term impact of those depend upon the kind of circles in which one is. For example, a casual chat about some new idea over dinner among like-minded, intelligent and passionate people may result into a startup company whereas in other casual circles it may not be anything more than a grapevine. The idea of classification of circles is absolute universal and one can easily tell that all successful people had a circle around them which was conducive to their activities. While the world offers various kind of circles it offers more bad one particularly than the good one. The saddest part of story is that not most of us realize until it is too late. Here is my litmus test which you can go through in order to decide the importance of social circles. *What does that social circle offer you in long and short term with exchange of time?* If your answer is "nothing significant" then move on and find a better one if you could else cut down on the time which is spend in socializing.

Circles to Avoid

This article would mainly focus on what kind of circles should be avoided. Mainly because people end up spending too much of their productive time in such circles. The most important thing is to identify such circles and then take a decision on the amount of time one wants to spend in such circles. Two important and intertwined elements of such circles are people/members and the kind of discussions/activities they do when they meet up. By and large, the talks and activities are derived element of kind of people in the group. One can't expect a great idea from group of low-confidence, and indifferent people. Here are some of the circles which in my view should be avoided in order to save something as valuable as time.

a. Lackadaisical Circle: A circle which consists of potentially below average students may fall easily into such category. Here are few techniques to figure out about these kinds of circles: Take every person in isolation, look for his/her educational background and his/her excuses for being below average in the class. A bad student may not necessarily could lack directions but more likely they do until proven otherwise. Typical example includes students who are mediocre and try to supplement their academic drawbacks by extra-curricular activities. If acads are screwed up then learn a lesson and try to correct it instead of thinking about other ways to make your profile stronger. In general, they might not accept the mistakes which they committed in past. Also another trait is that they can not think pragmatically and coherently when a random idea (good or bad) is thrown to them. They might have arguments just sake of having them but they are not serious about them. It might not take more than couple of meetings to figure out that group doesn’t have any direction. If you think that everyone is here to spend time indifferently then it is not a good idea to be in there.

b. Materialistic Circle: This is one of the simplest kind of circle which is easy to detect thus can
be easily avoided. In this kind of circle more people tend to talk about materialistic things most of the time. For example, they will talk which car is best, which is best watch, the best cuisine in town, how much their business school friend earns etc. etc. They would also talk about going and hanging out in big cities as oppose to somewhere close to nature. Nature hardly attracts materialistic. They are often obsessed with "apple" products and MAC books. Ringtone of their Blackberry is more pleasing to them then the raindrops or whistling of crickets in night. In fact, they fail to notice the spectrum of sound and color of nature and things it offers. Accessories are to be used but it seems like accessories are using their lives and they are happy/proud about it. One might tend to think that most of the girls may fall in that category but that's not true. Even boys could be like that. In fact, it is a gender indifferent thing to be materialistic. Hinduism and Buddhism both describe this as "Trashna" which is the never ending desire of acquiring/owning materialistic things in life. Sooner you will quit such circles better you would be.

c. Random Gossip-mongers: While one may think this as a variant of lackadaisical circle but indeed it is not. There could be some overlap but one needs to distinguish these two. A Random Gossip-mongers circle might still consist of above average students but that doesn't mean they are preferred. The problem with these kind of circles is that they spend too much time on talking about trivial things. Such as telling stories, mostly trivial and not amusing, about their workplace, their past life, some sci-fi movie, any of their ideals, their religion etc. They also spend some time about talking about others who might not present in the scene. The two most "foolish" people in the world are the one who talk about a third person (not present at the scene), either good or bad or anything but mostly anything. By this way, they are wasting the enormous opportunity to discuss something more meaningful and useful. Either change them or leave them -- choice is simple.

d. Party Animals: Celebrations are not bad inherently but they can quite be a distraction to your determinations and focus if they are quite frequent. "Life should be a celebration" doesn't mean that one should party every week or every night but what it means is that you should be joyous about what you do on daily basis. The dumbest thing in the world could be to "screw" things up in daytime and in order to wash the whole frustration, party in the night and forget about it. The better way is to be frustrated until you make things right, learn a lesson and be happy about it. Celebration to show are not needed in most of the cases. These kind of circles are easy to figure out. One can easily figure out that they usually center their activities around eating grounds. They need any trivial reason to party. Some occasions like birth day, graduation party, buying a new car, win of favorite team are OK to celebrate. What is not OK to celebrate are followings: which might include the beginning of semester, end of semester, mid of semester, before midterm, after midterm. The height is that when people want to celebrate if it is sunny outside, if it is raining outside -- they just want to celebrate. Avoid them! They are good for nothing.

e. Pretentious Circle: Being explicit does not only helps you but it makes others feel good about the whole situation. However, there are many circles in which people pretend that they care about each other but by and large they don't. Possibly they don't have any other better use of time so they decide to get-along and pretend the false care, interest in each other which
is volatile in nature. Such circles are dangerous and must be avoided at all cost in my opinion. Human life is just too short to pretend anything. My favorite quote is: "Let's not pretend what you are not so that you can focus more on what you are." Learn the art of saying blatant “NO” which might be hard to digest for others in beginning. Over the time it saves lot of confusions and unnecessary hassles.

Conclusion

In conclusion, your success, confidence, satisfaction, life-style and most importantly your destiny would largely be determined, or at least be influenced, by the circles of which you are part of -- knowingly or unknowingly. While it might be hard to pull out from circles mentioned above abruptly but that's the only way forward to make life "a meaningful thing". You can start avoiding them from the moment you are sure about them, slowly you would be able to pull out from such places. Results would be better from the moment you subside your activities in such groups.

Closing Remarks and References

My recommended read is "The Last Lecture" by Randy Pausch. It is essentially about a person who knew that he has only couple of months to live unlike many of us who think that they have eternity to live. In those two months, Randy tried to put everything in place so that when he is gone he shouldn't have any To Do List. We all are here with a purpose to solve and a To Do List -- whether we are aware of it or otherwise. Let's stop "trading-off" time with other less valuable things. The irony is that when we are not aware and we have significant time we trade time with everything possible in the world and when we ran out of it we want to trade everything else with time. While first part of trade is very much feasible the other part doesn't exist. Nothing can sum this up better than Dr. S. Radhakrishnan's words about life - "To be Human is his nature. Being a Monster is his downfall. Becoming great person is his achievement". Achievements are mere footmarks in the journey of life of those who understood the value of time and traded it carefully.

-- Raj Parihar