



VALORIE BURTON

BESTSELLING AUTHOR OF *SUCCESSFUL WOMEN THINK DIFFERENTLY*

IT'S ABOUT  
TIME

THE ART OF CHOOSING  
THE MEANINGFUL OVER THE URGENT

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VALORIE BURTON



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*To my husband, Jeff.*

*You jumped into this “experiment” with time without hesitation. And the journey that has unfolded as a result is beyond anything I had imagined. Thank you. I love you.*

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## CHAPTER ONE

# THE NEW NORMAL IS NOT NORMAL

The morning of her father's open-heart surgery, Marie had an ambitious plan to take her children to school, attend a work meeting, and get back in time to see her father before he went into surgery.

As a top-producing sales executive and divorced mom with sole custody of her three children, Marie was accustomed to juggling an overloaded schedule. Work had become her priority because, with no child support, she wanted to do everything she could to make sure her kids didn't suffer financially. It wasn't the way she had imagined her life when she was younger, but it was her reality, and she tried to make the best of it. Almost daily, she raced from one appointment to the next.

Marie is an optimist. It was part of what had gotten her promoted to vice president in an industry where such a position was rare for a woman. And her plan that Wednesday morning was nothing if not optimistic.

The previous day was like most others. Marie's father picked up

the kids from school as he did every day and brought them to her house. When she arrived home, the kids were doing their homework, and her dad even had dinner on the stove. He was outside skimming the pool, a weekly chore he gladly did for her. But on this day, instead of standing over the pool with the skimmer and walking around the perimeter, he was sitting down. She stepped outside and asked him if he was okay. He said he was tired and felt like he had a little indigestion. She gave him some over-the-counter medicine, but when he didn't get any better, she became concerned. Her dad had been diagnosed with heart disease several years earlier and had a pacemaker, so if this wasn't indigestion, she was afraid it might be something much more serious. She picked up the phone and called 911.

She followed the ambulance to the hospital, where an EKG revealed he'd suffered a mild heart attack. The doctors insisted he have triple bypass heart surgery the very next day. Marie had an urgent meeting the next morning. Instinctively, she contemplated how she could go to both.

Her dad's surgery was at 10:00 a.m., and her office in downtown Dallas was just a twenty-minute drive from the hospital. So she came up with a game plan. The next morning, she would drop her two sons and daughter off at school by 7:30 a.m., attend the one-hour meeting that started at 8:00 a.m., then rush out as soon as it was over and arrive at the hospital by 9:30 a.m., just in time to tell her father she loved him and everything would be okay.

The meeting ran over by ten minutes, and she drove as fast as she could to the hospital. But by the time she arrived, it was 9:40 a.m., and her father had already been wheeled away for surgery. Marie was so disappointed.

*What was I thinking?* she berated herself as she reflected on her whirlwind morning.

Frustrated with herself for her decision, she headed into the surgery waiting room and sat with her mother and brother. It was a long



few hours, but her father was eventually brought out of surgery and taken to the critical care unit (CCU) to recover. He had made it!

“The doctor said it took longer than expected, but he was doing well,” she recalls. “A couple of the arteries were worse than originally thought. The doctor said as soon as they got him settled in his room, we could see him.” They were all relieved.

Marie sat quietly as her mom and brother chatted with her mom’s best friend, who’d joined them in the waiting room. She was thinking and people watching when she noticed something out of the corner of her eye.

“I saw lights flashing, and I heard the hospital activate a code blue,” she remembers. It was a big hospital; the code blue could have been for any patient, but Marie felt led to walk to the door of the critical care unit out of curiosity. “I cannot tell you how, but I just knew it was him.” As nurses and doctors rushed down the hall to the unknown patient, panic overwhelmed Marie. She prayed intensely, pleading with God to spare her father’s life.

Within a few minutes, she saw the nurse who had taken care of her father the night before crying as she walked out of the CCU. “I didn’t say anything to anyone,” Marie says. “My mom, my brother, and my mom’s best friend were still chatting. They hadn’t noticed any of the activity going on outside of the waiting room.”

Soon, though, they saw the distant gaze on Marie’s face. They asked her what was wrong. Marie replied softly, “I think it’s Dad.”

While in recovery, he had gone into cardiac arrest. Determined to bring him back, the surgeon opened him up right there in the CCU and began massaging his heart by hand to get it beating again. But to no avail. Her father never regained consciousness. He was gone.

The nurse ushered them into the room for one last opportunity to see him after he passed. Marie says his lips were pressed together in a beautiful, ear-to-ear smile. “None of us cried in that moment,” she recalls. “He was at peace.”

But Marie was not. She was drenched with guilt and sadness—and deeply disappointed in herself. She had traded her last opportunity to see her father alive—to look him in the eyes and tell him how much he meant to her—for a sales meeting that could have gone on without her.

“I don’t even remember what that ‘urgent’ 8:00 a.m. meeting was about or even who was in it!” Marie now says with deep regret. “What daughter would forgo seeing her dad before surgery for a meeting? It was my wake-up call.”

Marie thought she could do it all. It was her norm—trying to do too much in too little time. Her overloaded lifestyle clouded her view of reality. So used to squeezing it all in, it never occurred to her that she couldn’t—and shouldn’t—attempt to go to both the sales meeting and her father’s surgery. This is a consequence of a norm that is not natural. It is natural to choose the meaningful. It’s what we crave. But when our lives are filled with too many commitments, we can’t hear the craving of our souls for the meaningful over the false urgencies that demand our time.

Some decisions in life don’t give us second chances to get it right. The sad truth is that we have to learn to live with a poor decision that cannot be undone. We can forgive ourselves—and if we are wise, we will take steps to make sure we don’t find ourselves in the same predicament again.

In your day-to-day life, the stakes might not seem as high as missing the last opportunity to see a loved one alive. But who knows what tomorrow holds? If given the foresight to know it was the last day of her father’s life, of course Marie would have made a different choice. We all would. But we don’t get that privilege in life. We don’t know which day will be a loved one’s last—or ours.

We don’t know how much stress will be too much stress on our bodies before we get that diagnosis. We don’t know what the breaking point is in that relationship before the other person starts pulling away

because they are tired of being so low on our priority list. We don't know when our children will give up hope of having a parent who is fully present and listens to them, and instead turn to dysfunctional ways to cope. Frankly, sometimes we don't know just how much the pace and load of life are stripping away the very essence of who we are—causing us to be irritable and demanding, stealing our creativity and joy, and making life more about *doing* than *being*.

Here's what we do know: if we intentionally choose what's meaningful over the false urgencies that try to demand our attention daily, then we can reclaim our time and live lives that we will look back on with peace rather than regret.

If I had a video recording of how you've spent your time over the past week, would it reflect the values and vision you say are priorities in your life? Or would you, like Marie, make some different choices if given the opportunity?

## URGENT VS. MEANINGFUL

When you are laser focused only on what is right in front of you, you treat every challenge equally. That is what Marie did: both the meeting and the surgery were treated as equally important. Truth be told, we all do that—and therein lies the problem. The options in front of us about how to spend our time *are not equal*. They may feel equal, especially the tasks and opportunities that have become the norm, that others deem important, and that are celebrated and rewarded with tangible and immediate feedback. Today there are even more time demands that fit into this category: unnecessary or unproductive meetings, social media, overinvolvement in extracurricular activities, or anything that feels urgent even though in the grand scheme of life it isn't. There is an art to choosing well when so many demands vie for our attention. So we must learn to choose the meaningful.

## WHAT IS MEANINGFUL?

To be meaningful is to be significant, relevant, important, consequential, or *worthwhile*. Worth your while—worthy of your time.

So to have an appreciation for the meaningful is to first have an appreciation for the value of your own time. If you don't value it, you will be more likely to spend it doing things not worthy of it. You must recognize the preciousness of the gift of time you have been given.

Is it possible that when our insecurities devalue our sense of worth, we spend more of our time on people and things that are not worthy of it? I believe this to be so. It becomes harder to say no to requests that are not meaningful, harder to set boundaries with those who want to use or abuse our time, and easier to waste time proving our worth to those who don't want to see it.

Is it possible that when we take for granted the gift of time, we are more likely to squander that gift and find ourselves living in regret? It's not only possible but probable. When we take for granted the gift of time, we spend it as though our lives are a dress rehearsal and we'll get to come back later for the real performance. But life rarely grants us do-overs. We must choose what is meaningful *now*. Today. In this very moment. We must ask constantly, "What is worthy of my time?" and pursue what is meaningful in a way that is meaningful.

A potent measure of meaning is timelessness. What is meaningful today will also be meaningful tomorrow or next year or even decades from now. The meaningful moments of your life so far were not just meaningful in the moment they occurred. They still hold meaning for you today. They taught you something, moved your life in an important direction, opened a door that otherwise would have remained closed, or made an impact that was significant to someone else. Meaningful is timeless. It transcends the moment.

Spent in meaningful ways, your time can build a life you are excited to live, heal and build relationships, and create a positive legacy

that multiplies your impact. But if your perspective is skewed about the true value of your time, you won't see the urgency of making a change.

## TIMELESS LIVING

I learned timeless living from my paternal grandparents. The meaningfulness of how they chose to spend their time was aligned with the natural pace of a spiritually grounded life that prioritized relationships and people, and a pace that gave them the margin to invest in what they valued. I spent seven summers with them between the ages of three and eleven, when my grandmother died. My cousins also spent summers there, which made the visits even more fun and memorable. I can't tell you what time I awoke each day during those summers, only that the rooster was my alarm clock. To this day, when I hear a rooster crow, I picture myself opening my eyes and feeling the brightness of the sun shining through the window directly over my head. By the time I woke up, Granddaddy was off to work and Grandmama was likely tending her garden or collecting eggs from her chicken coop.

Every afternoon, starting around three or four o'clock, we all ended up under the big apple tree that separated the backyard from her garden. We sat on the metal foldout chairs beneath the tree, enjoyed the shade, and chatted while we shucked corn or strung green beans for dinner. After a while, Granddaddy would pull up from work in his powder-blue Chevy pickup truck. Oftentimes he'd bring a roadside treat such as watermelon or cantaloupe. I was the only one in the family too finicky to like either, but I loved the excitement and energy of his arrival and listening to everyone rate the tastiness of whatever fruit he'd brought home.

While we certainly enjoyed our share of game shows and Carol Burnett reruns, most of our summer days were spent outside. My cousins and I would play hopscotch and tag, catch lightning bugs

and put them in jars with holes poked into the top, and enjoy snacks from the fruit trees around my grandparents' home; peaches, apples, blackberries, plums, and blueberries were always just a few steps away. Sometimes I helped my grandmother hang clothes on the clothesline in her garden as we chatted about random topics. I recall handing her clothespins one morning as she mentioned casually in conversation that she was fifty-nine years old. I had never contemplated that age before, and I tried to wrap my five-year-old head around it. *If I lived to be that old, what would I do with all that time?* I wondered.

Six years later, during our last summer, it seemed perhaps she was aware that her time in this life was nearly up. Granddaddy had died two years earlier, and I imagine the loneliness of losing her husband of nearly forty years had been deeply heartbreaking. She had begun prefacing future plans with the phrase, "If uh live." It frightened me, especially because I had also begun having premonitions that it was our last summer together. And so I willed myself to savor our moments and vividly store the memories in my mind.

One day, as we sat on the front porch snapping peas, she told me about something she was going to do for the church next year "if she lived."

"Grandmama," I said with a tinge of anxiety in my voice. "Why do you keep saying that? I don't like that. It makes me scared."

"Because tomorrow is not promised," she said matter-of-factly. She spoke the truth with a softness that assured me all would be well. "The Bible says do not boast about tomorrow for you do not know what tomorrow will bring," she continued. She told me she wasn't worried and I shouldn't be either. She seemed at peace with the fact that life is not forever. She was also confident that when her time came, she would pass from the finite time of this world to the eternal time of heaven.

Just a few months later, my grandmother passed away. The scene at her funeral gave me a glimpse of what she'd done with her sixty-five years. I was eleven years old and devastated by the loss of two

grandparents in two years. Theirs had been my second home. As I sat in the front row with family, I could feel the presence of many people behind me. I turned around out of curiosity to see the faces who'd come to pay their last respects to my beloved grandmother.

The crowd was so large it was standing room only. And the image that has stuck with me all of these years is that of three gas station attendants standing along the wall of the chapel in their navy-blue coveralls with white patches bearing their first names stitched in script. They held their hats in their hands in front of them. These men were not family. They were not even family friends. But they'd heard that Mrs. Burton died, and they took time off from their jobs to honor her.

Even at that young age, I was moved by the idea that your life could touch individuals in such a way that even the people who pump your gas and tune up your car would miss you when you're gone. From the outpouring of condolences from students who'd come through her lunch line to the genuine love of the many children she raised as her own, she had clearly spent her time making choices that were meaningful.

Grandmama didn't fall victim to false urgencies. Instead, she was clear about what mattered. She and Granddaddy kept five grandkids all summer. All these decades later, I have told stories about those summers to hundreds of thousands of people when I am onstage because the lessons they taught were so powerful. I keep her picture on my desk and see her face daily, reminding me to love people, to be humble, and to be brave.

Grandmama understood what we all innately know but too often lose sight of: life is not about how much you can pack into your days but about the impact you can make with your days—especially when that impact touches people. Time is finite, but your legacy is not.

## PRESSURED LIVING

Perhaps you had summers similar to mine, or at least summers absent a schedule and structure. But for kids today, summers have

changed. Few children know the freedom of roaming outdoors for hours, enjoying technology-free play, or spending abundant time with extended family. Day and overnight camps have replaced free play as more and more families consist of two working parents, a working single parent, or parents wanting to give their children an edge with summer learning opportunities. According to the American Camp Association, summer camps are now an eighteen-billion-dollar industry.<sup>1</sup>

Consider the following comparisons:

UNSTRUCTURED SUMMERS OF DAYS PAST	STRUCTURED SUMMERS OF MODERN TIMES
Awareness of time was based mostly on the natural rhythms of the sun, the heat, and hunger pangs telling you it's time for lunch.	An awareness of time is based on ever-present mobile phones and a regimented schedule.
Kids created their own schedules together outside, including creative games and walking or biking around the neighborhood.	Adults create the schedule for the day, often mostly consisting of indoor and tightly supervised activities.
Kids learned by independent learning and exploration, including navigating conflict and challenges.	Kids learn by directed learning and exploration, and conflicts and challenges often are managed by adults.
Kids came in when the sun went down.	Kids get picked up when parents get off work.
Parents felt safe with their kids playing and exploring beyond their own front porches.	Parents are afraid for their kids to venture beyond their own front porches.



The amount of time kids spend outdoors has dropped drastically in recent decades. Only 10 percent of children spend time outdoors on a daily basis, according to a nationwide survey by the Nature Conservancy.<sup>2</sup> Children today spend more than 90 percent of their free time indoors, and during the summer, much of that time is now spent alone with personalized technology that is rarely enjoyed as a family activity like television was just twenty or thirty years ago. Instead, technology is often an individual indulgence that isolates the watcher from the environment and people around them. That is the new normal.

Increased screen time and structured play have negative consequences on development, according to the American Academy of Pediatrics.<sup>3</sup> But the consequences aren't true for just children. Adults are dealing more and more with the anxiety, sleep disruption, and health challenges that arise from too much screen time and too little relaxation and time in nature.

Much of the new normal of dual-working households and over-scheduled kids and adults seems to be rooted in a collective angst many of us have: the fear that our future is not secure, that our kids' futures are not secure, that we must work more to make more, that our kids need more structured camps and classes and extracurricular activities to give them an advantage in a world that is increasingly competitive.

Generation X is the first generation in American history to be poorer than their parents,<sup>4</sup> and the economic picture appears even dimmer for Millennials.<sup>5</sup> For those born in the mid-1980s, just 50 percent earn more than their parents did.<sup>6</sup> Not long ago, the American dream could be secured with the foundation of a high school education and a job that did not require a college degree. Today, only 36 percent of jobs require only a high school diploma, according to the Bureau of Labor Statistics,<sup>7</sup> and those jobs typically do not pay enough to live a middle-class lifestyle.

Getting into the top colleges is harder than it has ever been. For example, for the class of 2001, which was accepted to college in 1997, the admission rate at Stanford University was 15.5 percent and the admission rate at Harvard was 12.3 percent. For the class of 2021, accepted in 2017, the admission rate was 5.2 percent at Stanford and 4.7 percent at Harvard.<sup>8</sup> These schools, whose acceptance rates twenty years ago were their lowest in history at the time, now have twice as many applicants and an admission rate three times more selective. No wonder so many parents are trying to get their kids involved in as many activities as possible to help them stand out from the crowd. And once they get into that great college, these kids continue overscheduling themselves so they can land that great career. The new normal for them is just normal. They've lived it their entire lives.

My grandparents' world, even my parents' world, was one in which the aspiration of living the American dream was much lower. The pressure to work more and earn more, to stand out from the crowd and take on debt, was simply not as immense. And the constant pull of distractions, brought on by technology, was minimal. So while the definition of what is meaningful has not changed, the ability to make meaningful choices has become more difficult.

## WHAT IS "URGENT"?

Just as there are timeless choices, there are also false urgencies. We call these activities "urgent," but they will mean little or nothing in the future. You may not even remember why they were important or who they involved. These are the things we treat as urgent, but they are *false* urgencies—like the meeting Marie attended the morning her father died. It is imperative to learn the difference.

We are intentionally bombarded with messages that wear away at the boundary between real and created urgency. I'm guessing that, like me, you've had the experience of getting breaking news alerts across your television screen or cell phone, and within seconds you realize the news

is not actually anything breaking at all. In the 1980s, breaking news really was breaking news. It was the urgent news that everyone needed to know—now! Breaking news was a public service of sorts that meant a major and sudden military action was taking place or a tornado was about to rip through your town. Then, starting sometime in the 1990s, as networks were forced to fight harder to keep the attention of viewers, breaking news instead became a way to get us to stop changing the channel and watch. As we will discuss later in this book, so many of today's distractions and temptations are rooted in commercial motives.

What are some of the most common false urgencies?

- When we pick up the phone in the middle of dinner because we heard the text message chime or we want to check our social media feeds
- When we choose to multitask rather than give our full attention to the people right in front of us
- When we give up on the idea that a full night's sleep is a reasonable expectation because we just don't have time
- When we struggle to see the big picture and constantly make decisions by focusing only on what's happening today, without thinking about the consequences that could come tomorrow

False urgency steals time from the things that are meaningful. Your to-do list may feel urgent. Your self-imposed deadlines may stress you out. But what if you stepped back and asked yourself, "What is the most *meaningful* choice I can make right now?"

## LIVING IN TIME POVERTY

Nearly three years ago I stumbled on an article that led to the series of events that has me writing this book. I was probably procrastinating

(that's what I'm usually doing when I read random articles while surfing the internet), but I don't remember for sure. What I do know is that the content of a *New York Times* opinion piece called "No Money, No Time" got my full attention.<sup>9</sup> I stopped what I was doing. I leaned forward as I read, devouring the information as though the knowledge might actually change my life.

Just what was so intriguing to me about the article? It introduced me to a phrase I'd never heard before: *time poverty*. The article's author, Maria Konnikova, described the "time debt" she creates when she needs an extension on deadlines to complete an assignment:

My experience is the time equivalent of a high-interest loan cycle, except instead of money, I borrow time. But this kind of borrowing comes with an interest rate of its own: By focusing on one immediate deadline, I neglect not only future deadlines but the mundane tasks of daily life that would normally take up next to no time or mental energy.<sup>10</sup>

I've mentioned the term *time poverty*, but let me define it fully here. According to Harvard economist Sendhil Mullainathan, two new types of poverty have emerged in society: time poverty and bandwidth poverty.<sup>11</sup> Time poverty occurs when we accumulate time debt from too many obligations that require our time. It is being in persistent time debt and continually borrowing from the future, falling behind, and feeling the pressure of never being able to catch up. Bandwidth poverty is a shortage of attention due to the constant use of our cognitive resources. In other words, when we have too much to do, our mental energy gets stretched thin and we have an attention shortage, so much so that it can impact the decisions we make, our stress levels, and our commitments.

So we are in time debt when we keep saying yes to new things even when we don't have time to finish what's already in front of us. But

the bandwidth problem comes when we are just doing way too much at the same time—keeping up with our kids' schedules and our own, too many projects, school requests, fitness goals, volunteer work, bills, car repairs, family needs, and the list goes on.

According to the article, I was time poor. I had never articulated it quite that way before.

The content spoke to me so deeply and the implications of it so bothered me that I printed out the article and laid it in plain view on a shelf in my closet, to make sure I would not forget I had a problem that needed solving. Every morning when I went into my closet, I was reminded that I didn't want to be time poor. I also didn't know how to stop being time poor. *But I wanted to.* If I could just keep reminding myself of that fact, then maybe, just maybe, I could dig my way out of the hole I was in.

I soon printed another copy for safekeeping in my laptop bag. Occasionally, on a trip I'd pull it out and stare at it, unsure of what to do with the knowledge it contained but certain I needed to make the change the article spoke of.

Why did this article so deeply resonate with me that I carried it around with me for the better part of a year, hoping that somehow through osmosis I might make some changes? In my twenties, my biggest stressor was the financial debt I had accumulated—not because I was ill or faced unexpected tragedy, but because I was an impatient and emotional spender. One night while I was praying for the miracle of a heap of money to pay off my credit cards, car loan, and student loans, I had a sudden revelation that the path to financial freedom would come only by changing my attitude about debt. It took me three years of staying out of clothing stores, learning to negotiate higher pay, and getting clear that no amount of stuff and no brand name could ever bring the satisfaction that comes from not owing anyone anything.

So when the idea of debt was presented as it relates to time, it really

hit me. After working so hard to climb out of financial debt years ago, the realization that I'd piled up a different type of debt—time debt—felt deflating. It also felt like a challenge, an opportunity to climb out and find new freedom. The process of digging out of time debt does indeed parallel the process of climbing out of financial debt. I believe avoiding time debt is far more vital to our well-being, though. While money is a renewable resource, time is not.

## CHOOSING TO SHIFT FROM “NORMAL” TO NATURAL

Looking back, Marie still asks herself, “What daughter would forgo seeing her dad before surgery for a meeting?” She asks the question rhetorically, the implication being that the kind of daughter who makes the decision she made is not a good one. But I believe there is a more compassionate and accurate explanation. The kind of daughter who makes the decision she made is a daughter living in time poverty. She is someone with no margin. Hers is a soul so pressed for time that she loses her perspective, because in order to function daily, she must be narrowly focused on what's right in front of her—carrying out as many tasks as possible as quickly as possible. This way of being has become her normal, and she rarely veers from it because to do so could create a domino effect of problems. But it is possible to climb out of time poverty. It is possible to make new choices.

But first, we have to gain perspective. The problem of time feels more pressing today because it is harder to gain control over our time. Over the next few chapters, we will delve into the reasons why. This is an important step I don't want you to miss, because we are at a unique point in history. The world we live in today is more demanding than the world our parents and grandparents and even we grew up in. There are more options and distractions. Your brain isn't wired for what you

deal with daily, and if you're not careful, the way you react to the environment you have been thrust into can literally make you feel as though it's nearly impossible to change.



## MEANINGFUL MINUTE

Take a quick minute to answer this question:

What's at stake for you if you continue on the path of trying to do too much in too little time? What meaningful moments and opportunities might you miss?

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