



**11 Steps to Embracing
Life in All its Messiness**

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Table of Contents

Introduction: Changing Your Time Paradigm	Page 1
Step 1: Determine Your Tofo Quo.....	Page 5
Step 2: Acknowledge That Time Is a Tyrant	Page 11
Step 3: Reimagine Time as a Treasure-Giver.....	Page 23
Step 4: Break Out of the Time Box	Page 31
Step 5: Strive Toward Imperfection	Page 39
Step 6: Face Your Fears.....	Page 49
Step 7: Give Up the Need to Be in Control	Page 59
Step 8: Dream	Page 65
Step 9: Get Messy	Page 71
Step 10: Reshape Your Lists.....	Page 77
Step 11: Just Say “Yes”	Page 85
Epilogue: Remeasure Your Tofo Quo	Page 89
Appendix: 11 Steps to Embrace Life in All Its Messiness...	Page 93



Introduction

Changing Your Time Paradigm

Ever since I was a small child, I've wanted things to be just so.

Neat. Orderly. Organized.

Not messy.

When I was little, I wanted my toys to be carefully arranged in the toy box, my books systematically lined up on the bookshelf, and my supper appropriately arranged on the plate. As I got a little older, I wanted my days to have a predictable routine: when to leave for school, with whom to walk to classes, and in what order to do my homework.

In the same way, I wanted the people in my world to be equally organized and systematic. That way I would know what was expected of me and when it was expected. When people behaved in ways that were predictable, and I could do what was expected of me, my life felt secure. It felt as if I was in control of my world.

Time became an important factor in my need for predictability.

I wanted to know which of the swing shifts my father was working, so I could gauge his mood and anticipate the acceptable noise level for the week; I wanted to know which after-school chores I was assigned so I could plan how much time to linger at my friend's house before heading home; I wanted to know which teachers were harder to please or which subjects were more difficult to conquer so I could plan time for extra study.

Introduction: Changing Your Time Paradigm

Life Can Be Messy

As I became an adult, I found that carefully parceling out the minutes and hours of my day helped me feel that I was keeping the messiness of life under control. I lived by my schedule. My calendar was my king.

Let me clarify what I mean when I say “messy.” I’m not talking about messiness involving bread that lands jelly-side down on the kitchen floor, or three-day-old snow, stained black by exhaust, or the pile of bird droppings on your newly-washed car.

No, I’m talking about disorder, chaos, unexpected and unwelcome disruption to our carefully laid plans for a well-ordered life, such as:

- Occurrences in our day-to-day life that we don’t expect, want, or plan for.
- People who don’t act the way we think they are going to.
- Events that occur on the world stage that personally impact us: wars, natural disasters, catastrophes, financial market meltdowns, and other happenings.

In other words, things totally and absolutely beyond our control. Things that suck the joy out of our days, that deflate us, defeat us.

Our Relationship with Time

In my ongoing, but futile attempts to organize unpredictability out existence in my life, I made an important discovery about time. I’ve learned that our relationship with Time—with a capital T—

has a great deal to do with our ability or inability to live joyfully in the midst of life’s capriciousness. In other words, I have realized that our “Time Paradigm”—how we perceive Time—defines our relationship with life.

Time as a Tyrant

If we see Time as a tyrant—an ogre, a beast, a dictator that rules our every moment—then we perpetually live in fear. We cower, crouch, bow before, and try endlessly to please this tyrant.

From the moment we wake up to the second we fall asleep, we are haunted by the demands of Time and our inability to please it. I’ve discovered that people who have a driven need to “fix” themselves and others often see Time this way.

As a youngster, I was certain that the unexpected, unexplained, unpredictable situations within my family—my father’s drinking, my mother’s unspoken disappointment in her circumstances, the struggle of growing up with eight siblings but not much money—could be fixed. I was sure the perfect family was within reach.

Being a child, however, I knew I didn’t have the power to fix those things. So I thought, well, I’ll fix what I do have power over—myself. I thought if I could just do things right, all those family problems would go away. I was certain that if only I could be the perfect daughter, the perfect student, the perfect little child of God, then life would be spic and span.

Introduction: Changing Your Time Paradigm

Boy, was I fooling myself!

Unfortunately, I didn't get any smarter when I grew up. As an adult, I was still trying to do damage repair by paving over imperfections in myself and others. Yet just as potholes reappear after a March thaw, I found to my dismay that the same thing happened to my life maintenance work.

The smoothed-over places caved in year after year. I became exhausted trying to play road repair crew for myself and everyone else for whom I felt responsible.

And there were a lot of people I felt responsible for: aging parents, younger siblings, spouse, children, coworkers, employees. There weren't enough hours in the day to do everything I felt I should do for all these people, let alone for myself.

Time Was My Enemy

The clock ticked like a bomb. I was frantic to get everything done on my impossibly long to-do lists. If only I could defeat or defuse Time, I'd be all right. But Time always seemed to have the upper hand, and underneath my calm, controlled surface, I was always on high alert.

The death of my mother was an unexpected blow to my seemingly well-ordered life. Even though it was a predictable event—she had been ill for nearly a decade, but declined rapidly in the end—it rattled me in ways I wasn't expecting.

In spite of spending years mentally rehearsing the emotions that I would allow myself to feel when the moment came, when I stood by her hospital bed and watched her draw her last breath, it stunned me. Knocked me off my feet.

In the ensuing years a new paradigm of Time gradually began to emerge. After a lot of mental, emotional, and spiritual agony (and therapy), I finally realized that *life is messy*. And beyond that recognition, I got to the point where I was okay with that fact.

Time as a Treasure-Giver

I was okay because I had developed a new relationship with Time.

In those years of searching and questioning, I learned that if we see Time as a Treasure-Giver—a muse, a benefactor, a keeper of a chest full of endless possibilities—then we can live in a state of expectation, joy, and wonder.

We are delighted at the break of dawn and contented at the close of day. We are able to embrace life despite its unexpected twists and turns.

I've recognized that people who are able to accept their mistakes and failures and give up the need to control everything often have this concept of Time.

I've perceived that sometimes the messiness of my *own* life *is* my own fault. I've learned to accept ownership for the

Introduction: Changing Your Time Paradigm

results of my own actions and let others take responsibility for theirs.

I finally figured out I needed to drive around the potholes or, better yet, to just drive down a different street.

As my relationship with Time the Treasurer-Giver has grown, I've accepted the reality that I am not, cannot, nor ever will be perfect. It is one of the most freeing realizations I've ever had.

I've been able to put limits on my workaholic nature, a side effect of my perfectionism, and learn to live in the moment. I've been able to start *be-ing*, instead of always *do-ing*.

Limits of Responsibility

Another outcome of this new relationship with Time was realizing that I am not, cannot, nor ever will be responsible for the choices *other people* make in their lives.

This includes my spouse, siblings, grown children, grandchildren, coworkers, employees, and friends. I can be a listening ear and a supporting presence for others, but they need to make their own decisions and deal with the consequences of those decisions.

To be a workaholic perfectionist who has come to embrace the messiness of life has been an astounding journey. I've made many discoveries on the way that I'd like to share with you in the hopes of making your own journey a little easier.

This book, which includes exercises, activities, and worksheets, will help you tie up the Tyrant and unleash the Treasurer-Giver in your life. It will introduce you to an 11-step process to do just that.

Why 11 Steps?

Eleven is an incomplete number. It falls between the perfect ten and the self-help 12. It feels not quite finished or as if you've not quite arrived.

In learning to embrace the unpredictability of life, you need to get used to imperfection, to become comfortable with incomplete or unfinished tasks, to enjoy the journey and not focus solely on the destination.

Eleven is also fun. I believe the serious task of changing our attitude, behavior, or belief system needs to include some lightweight moments.

Therefore, you will find these 11 steps involve things that will make you smile, chuckle, or laugh out loud. Learning to tie up the Tyrant and unleash the Treasurer-Giver, thus embracing life in all its messiness, can be challenging. But it can also be enjoyable.

Let's begin.