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Communications Digest

Because Good Copywriting Should Grow on Trees!

Welcome Mid-September!

With autumn now upon us (with crisp fall air and trees turning golden), I'm pleased to send you another issue of "Communications Digest."

In last month's issue, I visited *The Guardian's* writer Mark McCartney on efficiency at work as well as Minda Zetlin on how to overcome insecurity and low self-esteem in business. Those articles were directed at peers in the mental health community who are returning to work after under- or unemployment. Thank you to those of you who responded so positively to them!

Since a new program year begins this month, I'm dedicating this issue to maintaining health amidst the stress of professional demands: I visit buddhist teachings on mindfulness from the monk Nhat Hanh; and an article on how to address procrastination from Caroline Webb (*Harvard Business Review*).

Special thanks this month to Saskatoon's best (and best-read) editor, Wilf Popoff, for sharing with me some excellent resources including Webb and more!

Enjoy the beauty of early autumn and best wishes for the year ahead.

Sincerely,
Elizabeth

Principal
Elizabeth Shih Communications
www.elizabethshih.com

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Article One: Article One: Practicing Mindfulness to Control Stress and Find Peace (from Nhat Hanh)

With most of us returning to work or school this month, issues of procrastination, anxiety, depression and insomnia may become uppermost in our minds. Medical practitioners from various fields are recommending meditation—commonly referred to as “mindfulness”—for relief.

Saskatoon editor and writer Wilf Popoff reminds me that the recommendation to live in the present is not a recent revelation, since many secular publications on mindfulness currently recycle “several older ideas for well-being. The idea of living in the present and not dwelling in the past or fearing the future has been around for ages” (Personal Communication, August 8, 2016). There are many secular or ecumenical resources on mindfulness on the market today. But I recently read the Vietnamese Buddhist monk Thich Nhat Hanh’s small volume (originally written 1975), *The Miracle of Mindfulness: An Introduction to the Practice of Meditation* (Trans. Mobi Ho. Boston: Beacon Press, 1987) and found it a good place to start.

Nhat Hanh wrote the volume in the 1970s as a long letter to Brother Quang (a staff member of a Buddhist-inspired school of youth for social service that Hanh founded in the 1960s). Since its publication, *The Miracle of Mindfulness* (translated into English) has been used by pacifists around the world, including the poor and imprisoned and by ordinary working people from many walks of life. (The late Martin Luther King Jr. nominated Nhat Hanh for the Nobel Peace Prize, after meeting and working with him in America.)

Central to Nhat Hanh’s teaching is essential awareness of oneself that comes through knowing one’s breathing, and, through it, becoming conscious of one’s presence, thoughts and actions. This is one’s purpose, instead of allowing one’s mind to become “dispersed” by daily distractions and burdens.

One should not be “tossed around mindlessly like a bottle slapped here and there on the waves,” Hanh writes (4).

He says that only by performing life's activities consciously in the moment (and not rushing to simply “get it done”) do we become fully alive and realize the “miracle of life” in the everyday and mundane. By so living with that awareness of each moment, we will come to appreciate that tomorrow that “moment” no longer exists: there shouldn't be what North Americans call “baggage” from the past, to inhibit one's consciousness.

Hanh defines “mindfulness” as “keeping one's consciousness alive to the present reality.” It is a process one must practice throughout daily life and not just when one sits down to meditate.

There are many exercises that Hanh and other Buddhist teachers recommend. Here are a few basic ones:

- **Count one's breath and follow it.** The breath is essential to achieving mindfulness. Lie flat on the floor without a pillow (with your two arms loosely at your sides and two legs slightly apart). Allow your stomach to rise as you fill your lungs with breath (the stomach first pushes out. When two-thirds of your breath is inhaled, the stomach will lower. This is because the diaphragm pushes down on the stomach, as you breathe in. Gently and slowly breathe out. (In this way, the breath seems to originate in the navel and terminate in the nostrils.) By focusing on the breath for 2, 5 or 10 minutes (when you start), your stray and fleeting thoughts and worries “will have quieted down, like a pond on which not even a ripple stirs” (21). When first starting, be careful not to do practice this exercise for too long, since Hanh reminds us that that can be dangerous for lungs that have been weakened from many years of “incorrect breathing.”
- When you have practiced exercise one for some time, **relax each muscle** as though it were sinking down through the floor. Keep your attention only on your breath and half-smile.

In these exercises, breath unites body with mind and, Hanh writes, “opens the gate to wisdom.” He stresses not to try to get rid of negative thoughts or to view them as the enemy, but only to notice and release them.

- **Mindfulness for everyday tasks:** when making tea, washing the dishes or taking a “slow-motion bath,” make each movement slowly and mindfully. Do not let one detail of your movement go by. Any object (soap, wash cloth, etc.) that you may use is an object of contemplation. Do not hurry “to get the job done.” Be mindful of the stream of hot water flowing over objects or over one's own body, so that in the end you feel peaceful and light.

Hanh recommends reserving one day each week to devote totally to the practice of mindfulness. On such a day, you conduct basic activities, but do so with the kind of calm awareness of breath and time that will leave you feeling “light and refreshed,” rather than dispersed to the winds and waves.

- **Compassion for the person you despise:** sit quietly and breathe. Contemplate the image of a person who has caused you great suffering. (And these days, let's face it, almost everyone has such a person in their lives.) Regard the features of that person whom you “despise the most.” Next, try to examine what makes this person happy and what causes him/her suffering in daily life. Contemplate what pattern of thought and reason this person follows, what

motivates his/her hopes and actions, whether his/her thoughts have been influenced by narrowmindedness, hatred or anger. “Continue until you feel compassion rise in your heart like a well filling with fresh water and your anger and resentment disappear” (93).

Nhat Hanh says it is necessary to understand the spiritual truth that “Those who are without compassion cannot see what is seen with the eyes of compassion.’ That more inclusive sight makes the small but crucial difference between despair and hope” (108).

Hanh’s commentary powerfully persuades even a novice like me that the purpose of mindfulness and meditation is to view oneself and others with compassion and peace. Mindfulness is a state of mind that frees one, he says, to “make it possible to live fully each minute of life. Mindfulness enables us to live” (15).

Do you practice mindfulness exercises or practices? What have you found helpful about them? Please write me through the “contact” page of my website. I’d be delighted to continue this conversation.

Article Two: Article Two: "Ask an Expert"--Taking Control of Procrastination with Caroline Webb

Everyone who is honest will admit at least once to procrastinating on a project or task that they didn’t want to address. Do you find yourself putting off work, when it comes to addressing the large, complex tasks on which your job or career depends? In a recent article of the “Harvard Business Review,” writer Caroline Webb (CEO of a coaching firm and an advisor to management consultants McKinsey & Company) discusses how we can beat procrastination.

She writes that “our brains are programmed to procrastinate,” because we want quick gratification, instead of “tasks that promise *future* upside in return for efforts we take *now*.” A part of that desire for gratification is that the human brain finds it “easier . . . to process concrete rather than abstract things”: so the short-term effort of answering several non-urgent email messages will appeal more to us than analyzing closely (and at length) what budgetary cuts we need to make, to reduce our company’s deficit in the next quarter.

Webb says that you can gain the upper hand with procrastination by “**mak[ing] the benefits of action feel bigger and more real**” than the immediate hassle or “pain of tackling it.” She suggests **three ways** to do so:

- Visualize the satisfaction we’ll feel when the project is done.

If we imagine the benefits of completing this unattractive task, that may help to actually do it. She suggests even imagining “the look of relief on someone’s face as they get from you what they need.”

- Commit to doing the unattractive task publicly.

Because our brains like the prospect of increasing our social standing, Webb recommends telling others that we’re “going to get something done.” We want to be respected by our peers and even by

strangers. So, by promising “I’ll do that by the end of the day,” the social benefits to come when we meet the promise are a helpful incentive.

- Consider the downfall of avoiding the task.

Webb writes that research shows that we may “weigh the pros and cons of doing something new,” but are “much less often [to] consider the pros and cons of *not* doing that thing.” This means that we ignore some of the positive benefits of addressing a task. If we force yourself to consider how we’ll only have enough time to complete the project on time if you start *now*, that may help you to get your proverbial nose to the grindstone.

Webb also suggests **three ways “to make the costs of action feel smaller,”** when we feel lazy, unmotivated or intimidated by something we need to do:

- Identify what step to take first. By “chunking” or breaking down “big, amorphous tasks into baby steps” that don’t feel so intimidating, we can actually start to get work done. Instead of writing three articles for an online newsletter all in a one hour span, we might do some necessary background research to determine if the topic you’ve brainstormed for one of those articles is viable and interesting enough.
- Give ourselves small rewards, as we start. Webb says that we can make the cost of the effort we’re making seem even smaller, if we link it to something we look forward to, such as drinking a favourite cup of coffee or reading a “lowbrow” magazine.
- Remove the block that’s holding us back. If we find ourselves returning to a task but feeling unable to get started, we should patiently contemplate why we’re resisting the work and why it feels so undesirable to take needed action. We may find that another project or activity is competing with it is reducing your motivation. (She uses the example of a worker who is torn between the desire to eat breakfast with family and that to get to work early to assess the next goals they have ahead.)

Webb insists that putting off work is a fundamentally human weakness and is best met by having some compassion for yourself: “Try taking at least one step to make the benefits of action loom larger,” she concludes, “and one to make the costs of action feel smaller. Your languishing to-do list will thank you.”

What are some of the tasks that you have recently procrastinated over? Can you select a couple of the strategies that Webb recommends to make a change? Please update me on the contact page of my website. I’d be delighted to hear from you.

WORD NERD’S CORNER: The case of “healthful” vs. “healthy”



In his July 21st blog posting, American etymologist Bryan Garner addressed the difference between the adjectives “healthful” and healthy.”

(1) “Healthy” refers to a person or personified thing that is in good health. (E.g. "Buddhist monk Nhat Hanh has a healthy body, mind and spirit.")

(2) “Healthful” refers to whatever promotes good health. (E.g. “You take healthful dishes to the potluck party.” Or: "Mindfulness exercises are healthful for us all.")

Garner notes that many writers use “healthy” when they mean “healthful,” even to the point of threatening the existence of the latter term. In spoken language, insisting on the distinction may earn others' bewilderment or censure.

Do you use the word “healthful?” Do you find the distinction Garner makes here to be useful or pedantic? Please send me your feedback through the contact page of my website. I'd be delighted to continue this conversation. And next issue's "Word Nerd Corner" will address Dani vanDriel's bugbear of "prioritize" vs "priorize." Sorry that I postponed it, Dani (was it procrastination--haha!!)

SHOP NEWS



Every busy writer and editor is glad to have a mentor who shares from their online library. So once again, special thanks to Saskatoon editor and writer Wilf Popoff for reading so discerningly and for sharing so generously.

Thank you this month also to Monica Kreuger, Co-founder and Chief Visionary Officer of Praxis School of Entrepreneurship and Praxis International (entrepreneurial training programs). Monica continues to discuss business strategy with me, which inspires and re-energizes me. I'm keen to see her adapt and translate the Praxis curriculum that I edited (2015-2016) for international markets!

Another nod of appreciation to watercolour painter Bob Pitzel (and COO of Failure Prevention Services in Watson, SK). Bob's paintings have been reproduced in Portage Mutual Insurance's 2017 calendar (Congratulations, Bob!). It's been a pleasure to assist him with writing promotional material for it. To view some of Bob's extraordinary work, please visit www.bpitzel.com.

Thank you also (in no particular order) to fellow women of the Freelancers' Roundtable Group which I co-convene--Ashleigh Mattern, Katherine Duncombe, Julie Barnes and Leanne Bellamy. When not

plotting the overflow of the publishing world (haha!), we share highs and lows, tips, best practices and troubleshooting in our work. We are planning a collaborative writing project for future months and Ashleigh will be one of the subjects of my upcoming second eBook. Meantime, I'm deeply impressed by the quality of these women's writing and editing!

And I encourage you to attend what will be three excellent workshops from Editors SK October 4-5 at the Western Development Museum. (See <http://www.editors.ca/branches/saskatchewan> for more details.) Topics are proofreading, style sheet usage and the art of querying. All will be offered by Editors SK, and will be led by veteran Editors Canada member, Ruth Wilson (of West Coast Editorial Services, in BC), who is outstanding! To be added to Editors SK email list (free of charge), send a message to saskatchewan@editors.ca, stating in the body that you'd like to be added to its list.

ABOUT US

Since 2011, Elizabeth Shih Communications has provided B2B marketing and communications services on the Prairies and across Canada.

Do you need help writing your “marcom” materials?

Please contact me through my website, via the CASL-compliant email form, on the right-hand side of each page (www.elizabethshih.com).

After I have received your permission, I'll be pleased to discuss projects with you!

I help small-businesses and non-profits create success stories (case studies) and eNewsletters that position my clients as experts, enable them to communicate authentically and to leverage new and existing relationships to find better clients.

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