

# School and the Art of Juggling

by Laura Ann Kay

ILLUSTRATION BY KATHLEEN HERN

If you're old enough to remember The Ed Sullivan show, you might remember those acrobatic acts sandwiched between Topo Gigio and Elvis. Whenever I think of time management, I think of one act in particular. Imagine four guys pedaling unicycles while balancing five-foot poles on their foreheads and palms. And on top of each pole, they have a dinner dish.

Every now and then when a plate crashed, I secretly grinned. I used to worry that my reaction was perverse, but now I realize that it was just relief. Despite all their hard work and talent, these jugglers were real, vulnerable, and imperfect. They gave me permission to accept my flaws, a lesson that continues to comfort me to this day.

When I decided to return to college after a 16-year hiatus, I remembered that acrobatic act. I felt a lot like one of those guys, only somewhat less talented. On the floor, surrounded by broken dishes, I began to figure out ways to get back on—and stay on—the bike. Little by little, I gathered time management tips. And now, eight years and a master's degree later, I've had the opportunity to fine tune and share those strategies.

## Prioritizing Time

Many of us have unknowingly become members in what social critic Barbara Ehrenreich terms "The Cult of Busyness." We chant "Don't have time" and "Got to run" as our heads spin and our tasks remain undone.

One way to deprogram ourselves is by tracking our days, in 15-minute intervals, for an entire week. This gives us an idea of just how we spend our time. Then, when the week is over, review the tracking. Ask yourself if you did all that you needed to do? Did you meet your deadlines? Did anything/anyone get in your way? When are you most/least productive?

Use this information to clarify your tasks and habits. Some tasks are obviously fixed: working, dropping your kid(s) at school, attending classes, and fitting in your therapy appointment. Others are more flexible: sleeping, eating, and studying.

Prioritize and eliminate what you don't need. Then get a monthly calendar and mark the fixed tasks in ink. Keep an ongoing to-do list and schedule errands geographically. When you feel overwhelmed, keep your eyes on the prize and celebrate your imperfections.

## Taking Care of Yourself

When I went to graduate school, my life consisted of reading, writing, and eating. A lot. True, it isn't easy when you're balancing so much, but if you take one day a week to cook up a batch of soup or chili and freeze individual portions, you'll have something yummy and nutritious to eat.

You also need time to decompress. Guilt-free, clock-free time off. Take a hike, fly a kite, or see a movie. In fact, schedule social time on your calendar. And use ink!

## Enlisting Allies

By now, you've announced your intentions. Your family, children, partners, and pets know that you're back at school. Some may be supportive, while others may be resentful. Regardless of their reactions, continue to announce and post your schedule.

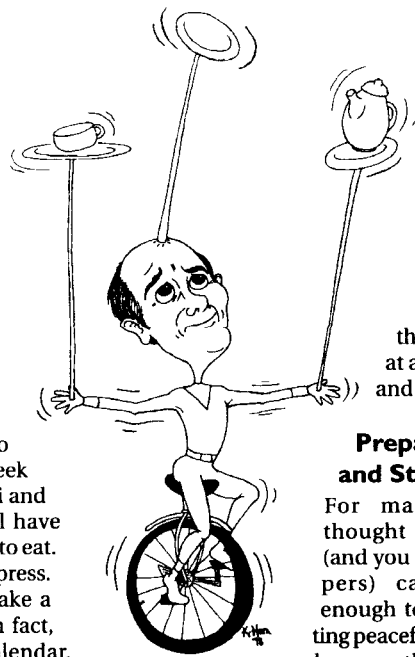
This lets those around you know you're serious and when they do have access to you. Let your children know your routine and ask them to cooperate. Reward them with quality time. And beware of crazymakers, the types who keep you on the phone for hours when you have 50 pages of Freud's *Civilization and Discontent* left to read.

You can also enlist support at JFKU's Academic Support Center. The instructors at the Center will help you at any stage of the writing process, from brainstorming to final edits. It always helps to have a pair of objective eyes look over your work, even if you're an experienced writer. In addition to one-on-one instruction, we offer hands-on workshops in reading, writing, and critical thinking. All of our services are absolutely free to students.

## Making Wise Academic Choices

Choosing your courses carefully is another way to keep your plates in the air. Most syllabi are filed in binders in the JFKU library. Take a look before you register for four courses with a paper due each week. You can also ask your fellow students for feedback on classes. Although they may be somewhat subjective, you'll have a better chance of making an informed decision.

And remember that learning is not a race. Make this your mantra. If you take too much on, you may just keel over long before you see



the finish line. Start at a manageable pace and then build.

## Preparing to Write and Study

For many people, the thought of writing papers (and you *will* be writing papers) can be daunting enough to crack dishes sitting peacefully in a cabinet, let alone on the end of a stick.

Hopefully, however, making informed academic decisions will quake-proof your psyche.

Your monthly calendar will help too. Break your assignments into *do-able* pieces and schedule them in. Write your paper due dates on your calendar, and then backtrack and schedule in enough time for the full process of writing—brainstorming, drafting, and revision. This helps you see the big picture, and somehow getting your deadlines on paper can give you a greater sense of control.

If your schedule is flexible, experiment with reading/writing at different times of the day to see when you are most productive. Use your less productive times to do errands or tasks that don't require as much concentration. And use a micro-tape recorder to be productive in bank lines, laundermats, supermarkets, and even traffic jams.

For tasks that do require concentration, set up a distraction-free study zone. Keep everything you need in one place all within arm's length: computer, course materials, syllabi, dictionaries, and schedule. And don't forget to give yourself breaks. A good rule of thumb is to take 10-minute breaks for every hour of reading or writing.

## One Final Tip

Give yourself a couple of quarters to get a rhythm going. Do not expect equilibrium. Returning to school is often a huge adjustment. Remember that those jugglers probably started off with one plate at a time.

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