

## **Draft Part 2: Lessons in Emptying**

I sat at the bar in the Memphis airport drinking my rum and coke, thinking about the call I had just made to Sandy.

Once again, I had failed.

I had promised my daughter that I would call before she went to bed, to find out how her school play went.

My mind went back to the sequence of events that lead me to the point where I had once again disappointed someone who I cared about.

I had written down the reminder on my paper pad. I had gotten quite good at doing that, I thought, even since my first set of meetings with G. I had fully developed the habit of using different Capture Points to make sure that I wasn't trying to use my memory to do the impossible.

I had become a "capture fool" if such a thing existed, and my colleagues were making fun of my newfound practice that had started out as a bit of an obsession, but now felt as natural as brushing my teeth every night.

The problem was that my simple paper pad that rarely got longer than a page in the old days had now expanded to anywhere between 10 and 15 pages, depending on what was happening in my life. It felt as if things were getting out of control, as more and more stuff was apparently making its way to me through a variety of channels.

This even included stuff my parents were asking me to do, which I had always thought was inconsequential.

"Well," I thought to myself, "it was."

Six months ago they were active and engaged senior citizens. Today, Dad had been reduced by a stroke to a shadow of his former self, and Mom seemed to have lost something also, as her aches and pains multiplied with his growing disability.

Fortunately for all of us, their mental faculties were as sharp as ever.

Unfortunately for me, it meant that they had more requests than ever for me to run errands, spend time with them and take care of stuff around their home

Each visit would fill up a half page of new stuff to do, I realized. It seemed as if they would wait for me to come in order to give him more stuff to do... stuff that I couldn't delegate, or deny.

The truth was that each and every one of the Capture Points that I had set up was under water. Too many time demands coming in too quickly meant that my list of unread emails had grown to over 450. My voice mailboxes on my \$500 cell phone and office phone were full, and were giving callers that annoying message announcing to the world that I was unable to handle all my obligations: "this voice mailbox is full."

My boss, Mary, had commented on it jokingly, and I had a feeling that her hints would become more than just that if the situation persisted.

The study at home that I used to be so proud of was now closed off to visitors. It looked as if a bomb had been denoted inside it, with paper lying around everywhere.

And I felt haunted, because I knew that somewhere within those lists, emails and piles there lurked monsters waiting to wreak damage. I knew they were there because I had started waking up late at night wondering what happened to items that I knew that I had seen or written down at

## **Draft Part 2: Lessons in Emptying**

some point, but were now buried under the growing avalanche of lists, emails, messages and paper.

This wasn't right, I thought. Someone needs to turn off the spigot!

Why was I suffering? Part of me blamed G and that damned seminar, and how he had convinced me to establish this new practice of Capturing. Lots of people just ignored stuff that was given to them in meetings, or in email or on written memos.

Their lives seemed so simple. They just did what they were told, and made their boss make the tough choices.

Why couldn't I be like them?

Deep down, though, I knew that G wasn't the one who signed up for the massive reengineering project at work – the one that now had me some 1000 miles away from home. No-one had forced me to head up the Design Sub-Team, after all. I knew it would be hard, but I didn't think that it would be an avalanche of meetings, emails and conference calls.

I started to feel a little sorry for myself. But I stopped myself before I got myself into a funk.

No-one was pushing me to become an executive in the company, I thought. It was what I wanted. But I couldn't remember any executives I had worked with getting buried like this. Maybe it was because they had good secretaries, I wondered?

I had had enough. After a long search through my email, I found G's number and left him a message, asking him to call me back.

Later that night in my hotel room, my cell phone rang, breaking into my thoughts.

It was G, who agreed to talk with me later the following evening. I dutifully wrote the appointment down, and noticed that I was once again starting my eleventh page of items to do later. I thought to myself "When is all this later-time supposed to come!?"

The next evening, my cell-phone rang within a minute or two of the agreed time. I grabbed up the cell phone, glad to get the chance to talk with him again.

To my surprise, after saying hello, I babbled on for five minutes non-stop, complaining about how many things I had coming into my life, and not having time to deal with all the different time demands on lists, in inboxes and arriving on paper to my desk.

I didn't exactly feel like a total victim because I had a feeling as if I were facing a problem that did have some kind of solution. But I think I did blame G for where I now found myself - efficiently driving myself crazy.

"Congratulations," he said, when I paused after giving him the last of my complaints.

I stopped a bit, and said "What?"

"Congratulations," he repeated. "It sounds as if you have come a long way in improving your skill at Capturing. It's astonishing what you have been able to accomplish in such a short space of time, with little or nothing except an idea."

I started to protest. "But what good is it, as I'm still suffering, just in a new way."

## **Draft Part 2: Lessons in Emptying**

"Yes, but the problem that you now have is a better problem to have than the one you had before. In fact, the problems you are experiencing now only exist because you are so successful at Capturing.

Other people who attend my lecture on Capturing don't get this far - in fact, I think only 5-10 percent get to this point. They might make a few changes here and there to their inbox or try to carry a pad now and again, but few get the point, and start with a commitment to not use memory.

Those how understand the principle, use it all over their lives, just in the way that you do.

The problem is that developing this skill is only one element in a functional time management system.

It's a little like having a car with equipped with an accelerator but no brakes. It's OK for doing some things, and it's better than having no car at all, but a fully equipped car consists of several systems, all of which need to work together."

I started to recall some of what John had shared with me from the parts of the lecture that I missed. Something about Capturing being only a single component of every time management system. I also recalled the word "essential" and the word "fundamental."

He interrupted my thoughts -- "At this rate, you'll be Capturing perfectly, and nothing will fall through the cracks once you decide that it should enter your system!"

He seemed genuinely impressed and I could feel some of the acknowledgement beginning to seep in. After all, he was the expert and he was telling me that I was doing a great job. That wasn't to be taken lightly, I started to think.

Before I started to feel too good about too little, I remembered why I had called.

"And now I feel as if I am worse off than before!"

"You very well might be," G confessed. "As you reinvent your time management system from the ground up, you are bound to find that things get worse rather than better at first."

"Are you a golf fan?" he continued. "Ever see what happened when Tiger Woods re-tools his swing?" he asked.

I nodded my head.

I remembered seeing footage from films of Tiger spraying the ball around the course in his first outing after an extensive overhaul of his swing. I vividly recalled him explaining that he built his swing from the ground up, from a blank sheet. That explained why it looked so bad in the beginning. A good swing was a complex maneuver to undertake, and the speed of his club meant that when it went bad, it went spectacularly bad.

I liked the comparison with Tiger Woods, I had to admit.

He asked me what else had changed in my life in terms of its time demands.

I shared with him the fact that my parents were now ill, and that responsibilities at work had increased dramatically.

He explained "Tiger does more on his swing than most professional golfers, and he's always striving to do more. You just increased your own expectations for your time management system, but you haven't realized that you need a new system."

## Draft Part 2: Lessons in Emptying

I was a bit startled to hear him say this, because no-one I know had ever said them before with such obvious clarity.

"So you mean, that when I added on these new activities I needed to re-tool?"

"Exactly," he said.

"Where do I start?"

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"Let's look at what you are currently doing," he began.

"What eventually happens to the all those items in your pad, email inbox and voicemail box?"

"When they come in I try to scan them all, before working on them one at a time," I explained.

"That," he said dryly, "is a recipe for disaster.

Capture Points are meant to be temporary areas of storage -- staging areas for further action."

"Staging areas?" I struggled a bit, and sensed that G was allowing me come to my own understanding, because he was watching me closely.

I struggled to think of an analogy, and finally blurted out "Like a shipping or receiving dock in a warehouse?"

"Right" he said.

"A staging area is meant to be an area of temporary storage. A place to put things for a short time until you do something else with them."

"A Capture Point is a staging area, right?" I asked.

"Unless it's being mis-managed, or abused. "

"Take the human body," he went on. "The mouth is a Capture Point. So is your stomach. And so is the palm of your hand.

Leaving food in your mouth for longer than a few seconds sometimes creates problems with your teeth and even your breath."

I thought for a minute and asked: "How about the surface of my desk -- isn't that a staging area also?"

"Exactly -- so is a kitchen sink."

I paused..."are you saying that I have been misusing my Capture Points?"

"Have you?"

I nodded, mostly to myself, answering my own question.

I asked -- "I guess the solution means learning a new practice of clearing out my Capture Points?"

## Draft Part 2: Lessons in Emptying

"We call it Emptying" said G. "But it involves much more than simply removing a bunch of time demands. What complicates Emptying is that you have to decide what to do with the time demand, and this makes Emptying the most challenging of the 11 fundamental practices."

"I looked at him warily -- 11 practices?" I repeated.

"Don't worry about that for the moment," said G, when he realized that I was hearing this for the first time. "I'll let you in on them before we end our call. For now, just appreciate that time demands enter your system via your Capture Points, and they do so from all parts of your life, without being tagged with any useful information as to how to deal with them."

"Such as?"

"Well for example, let's look at an actual item that's in one of your Capture Points."

I opened my paper pad, and picked an item that had been on the list for several months.

"Lose 15 pounds" I said, with a touch of remorse. This one had been bouncing around in my head for years, but at least I now had it written down for a change.

"OK," G said, "what are the reasons why that item remains on your list and has not been scheduled into your calendar, or added to a list of some kind?"

I thought about it for a moment, and admitted: "It's because I don't know where to start. I'll glance at these three words once a week at least, but have no idea what to do, so I just move on to the easier items like "pick up groceries.""

We both laughed.

I recalled that G was quite trim.

"So, for this item, you need to spend some time to figure out a few things before you take it off the list. Often this happens when we don't know what first step to take, or what day to start, or whether we are truly committed or not, or whether we have everything we need to start, or want to consult or involve other people.

The net effect is that the item remains in the Capture Point, as every time we glance at it, we notice how much work it would take to get to the point where it can be removed from the list. Crossing it off is easy, but making sure that we keep it alive someplace else is hard."

I nodded. How did he know?

"Each item on your list is a mini-case of what I just said. They stay on your list because you don't or can't decide what to do next with them. The confusion causes us to stall, and the item remains in the Capture Point.

Imagine a receiving dock that accepts thousands of items per day, and what happens if all of a sudden the guy who decides where everything goes gets the flu and can't come to work. All the items on the dock get stuck, and it's not long before the dock is full and can't accept new items.

The warehouse has lost control of its incoming items, much in the same way that you have lost control of the items in your Capture Points."

I could see where this was going, I thought.

## **Draft Part 2: Lessons in Emptying**

"It sounds like the only way to solve this situation is to Empty regularly, and completely."

"Right" he smiled. I think he liked how well I was picking this up.

"When you capture a time demand, you must be prepared to spend the appropriate amount of time to Empty it. That's the first rule of thumb. Think of it like not putting more food in your mouth if you don't have the time to eat it."

I smiled to myself, because I was seeing an image of one of my kids trying to stuff more food into their mouth faster than they could swallow. It just created a mess!

"Are you saying that when my Capture Points are full, I should stop accepting new time demands?"

"Right" he said. "To do anything else is to create problems for yourself."

I paused for a moment, as this seemed to make sense.

"Does that mean that I need to spend more time Emptying?"

"Yes, but you also need to understand how to Empty."

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I sat patiently listening over the phone. This was a long call, but I had to find a way out of my predicament.

"I imagine that you are doing your manual Capturing almost automatically at this point?"

I nodded -- I had become quite good in fact.

Emptying is anything but automatic, and it requires that you give yourself time and space in order to make the right decisions. As you move through your captured items, you're likely to find items at the opposite ends of the spectrum sitting beside one another. As you Empty, you change gears from life-changing items to mundane items, long-term to short-term, critical to mundane, interesting to boring etc. You'll find a motley stew of items that reflect real life concerns that aren't sorted in any particular way in your Capture Points.

This is tough work -- and it's best done at quiet times when you are not likely to be disturbed.

At the same time, it's best to Empty as often as possible, so that your Capture Points remain as free as possible."

"But I can't spend the whole day Emptying!" I protested.

"No, you can't. but you need to have enough time in your calendar set aside for Emptying, or else you will have items falling through the cracks as they stack up in your Capture Points."

I groaned, but of course I could see that he was right. If I never created the time to Empty, then I would never have anything other than ballooning Capture Points. That's what I had now.

I knew I had to make a change.

"How often do you Empty?" I asked G, hoping to copy his lead.

## Draft Part 2: Lessons in Emptying

"I wouldn't work from my example, to be honest. Instead, ask yourself how much time you need to Empty all your Capture Points on a given day, and how often you need to schedule appointments with yourself to Empty."

I spoke out aloud as I worked it out for myself -- "I think I need to Empty 2 or 3 times per day."

"Good" said G.

"Try that out, and then adjust it as you learn more about your work patterns."

"OK, but what do I do when I sit down to Capture?"

"To understand that, you need to learn what happens to time demands after they are Emptied."

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I waited with bated breath as I had a feeling that he was about to tell me to work on everything that I was Emptying, which just seemed impossible as I would never get through the average day at that rate.

G continued: "Emptying is also about deciding how to dispose of a time demand. Let's go back to our warehouse analogy. When an item is deposited on the receiving dock by a truck, someone must decide where it gets placed in the shelves.

When it comes to you and your time demands, you are the decision-maker. In time management, you have 5 choices: Tossing, Acting Now, Storing, Scheduling and Listing."

I felt a slight feeling of overwhelm as I heard these new terms for the first time. Would each of these require a 2 hour phone call with G to understand?

"Here is what happens in each of these fundamentals."

When you Empty you decide how to dispose of a time demand, and your choices are: **Tossing** -- this involves deleting a time demand or getting rid of it or voiding it. In other words, you take no further action. Think of what you do to Spam.

"Or what I do to a voicemail message that confirms something I already know" I added.

"Exactly.

The next choice is that of **Acting Now**, which means taking an action immediately. When you reply to an email without hesitating, you Act Now."

I see -- I did a lot of this. Were there really other alternatives?

Then there's **Storing**, which means placing critical information in a safe place for later retrieval. In your capture points you have information such as account numbers, tickets for upcoming events, invoices for payment, phone numbers, meeting minutes and others.

The information is not trivial stuff, but is likely to consume time in the future if you can't find it, or must replace it.

Some of it might be used for single time demands, and then tossed, and some of it may have to be saved indefinitely.

The key is to store the information in a location that allows for easy retrieval at the point or moment of use."

## **Draft Part 2: Lessons in Emptying**

"OK," I said, this makes common sense.

"Uncommonly applied, I am afraid" replied G. "Lots of people keep an email message in their inbox because it has one critical piece of information. It easily becomes lost under the pile of thousands of other items.

"Then, five minutes before it's needed, finding the phone number or the time for the meeting becomes a time consuming search for the proverbial needle in the haystack."

I thought about my haystack, and the number of needles I had hidden for later use. I had spent too much time looking for G's number, I recalled.

"I need a secretary to do my filing," I finally blurted out when I pictured my office.

"Maybe," G said. "We'll see."

He continued, speaking quite deliberately, and in a cadence that sounded like the one he used in the seminar.

"The final two options you have when you Empty is to either Schedule or List.

Scheduling means transferring a time demand to your calendar for it to be executed at a later time. Many items that you capture can't be done immediately, and need to be allotted a time-slot in the future. Actually, for most people, most of their time demands can't be executed immediately."

"How about time-slots that don't involve other people?" I asked.

"Those are the ones that we really need to pay attention to" he replied. "When we only keep a mental schedule, we are unlikely to manage it well. Paper is better, but there are so many good electronic schedules available on laptops, cell-phones and PDA's that there are now good, but not great, alternatives."

I was stunned -- was he suggesting that I keep a calendar in which I planned out all the activities for the day? "But wouldn't such a schedule become impossible for me to keep?" I stammered.

"I can already see myself failing. My day changes so much, and so quickly, that there is no way I could keep to a schedule."

G said quite patiently: "If your mental schedule works for you, and gives you peace of mind, then stick to that technique."

I wasn't satisfied with this explanation, and resolved to return to several questions that were already forming in my mind.

I looked at the time, and while I was feeling like I had just filled myself up at a buffet, I pressed on, because I wanted to know what my last choice was when I Emptied.

"Tell me more about Listing," I asked.

"Listing means adding the time demand to a list of items that are grouped together so that they can be managed together as a group. I have a list of countries I'd like to visit, for example."

That seemed simple enough, and my mind started to wonder how I could put together Scheduling and Listing in a way that would work for me.

