

Disrupt Yourself Podcast with Whitney Johnson

Episode 60: Laura Vanderkam

Welcome to the Disrupt Yourself Podcast. I'm Whitney Johnson. I think, write, speak and live all things disruption. My guest is Laura Vanderkam, an expert on time management, whose TED talk 'How To Gain Control of Your Free Time' has been viewed more than 5 million times. She's the author of the forthcoming book *Off the Clock: Feel Less Busy While Getting More Done*.

Whitney: First of all, welcome, Laura. I'm so happy to have you.

Laura: Thank you so much for having me.

Whitney: I thought it was really interesting looking at your background and seeing that you went to Princeton, and to see what you do now because I suspect that you did not go to school to study time management.

Laura: (laughs). I think I probably needed some help on the time management front while I was in school, so yeah (laughs).

Whitney: So what was, what was the plan when you started college?

Laura: I'm not sure if there was a particular plan. I've always been interested in writing, so that has been a constant through my life. And so, when I went to Princeton all these many years ago, I was thinking I would probably go into journalism, um, on my way out of school.

And so I did a lot of journalism stuff while I was there. I did summer internships in the journalism business, I freelanced for area publications just as a way to make spending money while I was in school. I did a year-long internship at USA Today right out of college, but quickly learned that, um, freelancing was, um, more secure in its own way, and, um, definitely better paid than most in-house journalism jobs.

So I've been out on my own actually since a year after school, just writing for various different places. And then the books came out of writing. I knew that I enjoyed writing articles, so I wanted to try my hands at books.

Whitney: You just said something that I thought was really interesting that I wanna pick up on. You discovered that freelancing was more secure than a regular gig. Say more about that.

Laura: Yeah. I know. That does seem a little bit paradoxical there, that if you're not getting a paycheck every two weeks from somebody you're more secure, but that ... I mean, the truth is, as all your listeners know, is that any job can end. And when you have multiple streams of income, you are cushioned against that in a way that you aren't when you have one job.

And so, you know, I started writing on the side for various places, and I basically kept writing on the side for various places, um, while I was doing my internship. And then when I was, you know coming out of the internships, I'm like, now I got to need to find a job.

I realized that I had tripled my intern salary through freelancing, which suggested to me that it was probably gonna work to not work for somebody. And it was from enough different places that, you know, if one disappeared, I'd find another one. And, and that's pretty much what I did.

Whitney: So did you know when you started college that you wanted to be a journalist? I, I guess maybe backing up, when did you first discover that you really enjoyed writing?

Laura: Pretty much when I was five years old and learned to read (laughs). That was, that was a, a pretty early thing for me. Um, we have somewhere in my parents' house perhaps buried in an attic, um, books that I wrote as a five-year-old, and I attended a writer's conference as a five-year-old and um, showing off my little books that I wrote there.

But it was always to me like, well, how does one make a living in that? And I knew enough to know that like writing, um, experimental novels was unlikely to be a steady paycheck. So, um, journalism seemed like the, the way to go.

So, I started writing for, um, my high school newspaper and did a lot of stuff with them. You know, wrote articles then for a local college newspaper that was nearby too. So, that's sort of when I really got into it.

Whitney: So you go to college, you graduate from college journalism, and you get a one year internship at the very prestigious USA Today. What was the first article that you wrote that you remember thinking, "Wow, this is really good. Like, I'm good at this." Do you have a recollection of when that was?

Laura: Well, I think for me the, the big breakthrough for me was, um, my first column that I wrote for USA Today because I was hired on the op-ed page and was basically hired to do fact checking of other people's columns and such like that. You know, help out with anything that needed to get done on the op-ed page.

And so, you know, I was reading all the other columns that were coming in. I was kind of like, "Well, you know, I wonder if I could do this." So I wrote one and gave it to my editor and she liked it. Um, so, it ran.

And that was kind of a cool thing for me, 'cause I was, I mean, literally seven weeks out of college, um, in this, in this, you know, internship where, um, my job is, is fact checking and they're like, "Well, we will run your columns." And, and so I kept writing for them and, um-

Whitney: Seven weeks out of college-

Laura: Yeah.

Whitney: ... you're 21 years old (laughs).

Laura: Well, um, 22 (laughs). I guess ...

Whitney: Oh, okay. All right, excuse me. You were 22. Yes. Please

Laura: ... I graduated just before I turned 23. Give it an extra week there.

Whitney: That's pretty heady stuff. Do you remember what the column was about?

Laura: Oh yeah. It was about college hook-ups. Um, an- and so that's the thing of course, is it was a topic that no other, older columnist was gonna write about. But being seven weeks out of college, um, I could write about a study that had just come out about this, you know, scintillating topic (laughs) lots of people might be interested in reading about.

And so you know, as a, a lesson, having a good news hook and, and saying something with a different voice than what other people might have. And so yeah, that ... once, once that ran I was just like, oh. Okay. Well, I guess, you know, maybe I can write for big places and see my stuff in print.

Whitney: So what happened after that? So you, you were fact checking. Now you write this article. It does really well. What happened?

Laura: Oh, well, I mean, I kept fact checking 'cause that was my job. They let me continue writing. They ran quite a few that year, and then when I left at the end of that next summer, USA Today continued, um, running columns of mine for ... I think I wrote for them for about 10 years. It was a great introduction to seeing how that world works and, and how ideas get shared.

Whitney: So, when did you hit upon this idea of time and time management? When did this start being something that you found yourself wrestling with and wanting to write about, and just curious about?

Laura: Well, as I look back on my life, I probably always had an interest in productivity. I mean, I read books like the [Seven Habits of Highly Effective People](#), I had seen the in crucible of my own attempts to be more productive when I'd come up against various challenges at different points of my academic career and having to learn how to manage my time.

I think that the real impetus for it though was, um, when I had my first kid in 2007. People who are new parents, you know that a lot of the literature that's aimed at new parents is very much like, "Oh, you'll never have time for anything in your life ever again." There's this certain, dire warnings about, you know, you'll never sleep, you'll never see your friends. Like if you attempt to build your career at the same time as you're raising children, you will, you know, be this harried mess, the various things that have been out there claiming that as the narrative.

And I kind of wondered, well, was that true? And I certainly hoped it wouldn't be true because I was attempting to build my life, build my career, raise my kids at the same time, and so I started looking at how people spent their time.

I came across a bunch of really cool time diary studies looking at how people spend their time. Found some counterintuitive findings, one of which is that mothers spend more time interacting with their children now than they did in the 1950s and '60s, um, which is fascinating in the sense that there're far more women who are working for pay now than were then.

But in fact, people think that work and childcare are inevitable trade-offs, but they're not, because women do more than just those two things (laughs) in their lives. And so it wound up being housework that women stopped doing.

Whitney: Interesting.

Laura: So that ... I took that nugget of an idea and it went through many, many, many, many versions. Anyone wants to write a book you should know that, um, it is rare that something springs to mind perfectly formed in marketable fashion. It went through many, many proposal ideas, and finally, I got a meeting with the folks at Portfolio, which is still my publisher now, and they looked at this m- mess of material and said, "You know, this 168 hours idea on how people spend t- 168 hours in a week, that might make a good book." So I was like, "Okay."

And then I wrote a quick proposal on that, and they bought it. And so that-once you write on book on a topic, you kind of become known for it.

Whitney: What year was this, that you did this?

Laura: So I got that contract in 2009, and I, um, to- my first book on time management, which was called [168 Hours](#) came out in 2010.

Whitney: You know, it's interesting I- not too long ago I interviewed, um, [Dan Pink on this podcast](#) and asked him what his favorite book was, and he quipped, um, "You're asking me to tell you about my favorite child, which of course I can't do." So I won't ask you that question, but I will ask you, what is meaningful to you about that book, [168 Hours](#)?

Laura: Well, I think what was meaningful to me about it was feeling like I was hopefully writing something that would be helpful to people, but that would also challenge a lot of those narratives that were out there, that, you know, we don't have time for doing things in all spheres of life that we want to do.

And I really enjoyed writing it. It was the first time I'd written a book that I really felt like I had a lot of the pieces sort of together. I had actually ghost-written a fair number of books before this, so I was familiar with the book writing process, um, but to feel like I was at a place sort of in my writing life that I felt I could do a really good job on it, and under my own name as well was, was kind of cool to have all those pieces come

together, and to really feel, you know, passionate about it too. I mean, that was exciting as, as well.

And so, you know, when it came out it was, it was also sort of a learning experience on how to launch a book.

Whitney: Hm.

Laura: I mean how to s- you know, get it out to an audience, how to get press, how to, um, be on TV for instance. Um, that was an interesting experience, and being interviewed about a topic.

You know, but it's, it's, it's been good because I feel like that book, um, it had a slow start, um, which, which happens sometimes when you are a new book author. And in fact, it probably sells as many copies per week now as it did when it first came out (laughs), which is-

Whitney: Fascinating. So for 10 years...

Laura: Yeah. It's kind of a fascinating thing, but ...

Whitney: Yeah.

Laura: ... um, it just, you know, it took a long time to find its audience, but I, I feel like it kind of has now, which is good.

Whitney: Well, wow, Laura. That's amazing. So almost 10 years, or let's call it eight years later, right?

Laura: Yeah, yeah.

Whitney: Since when you wrote it, it's selling as many copies per week today as it was eight years ago? That's, that's impressive. Um, kudos to you.

At a very high level, what's the big takeaway that you would want people to know today if, if I were to say to you, "Hey, should I read this book?" What would you, you know ... so you got four books now. You've got your fourth one coming out shortly, is that correct?

Laura: Um, something like that. I lose track (laughs).

Whitney: Okay. All right. So you got this portfolio of children, and you incidentally have four children, right?

Laura: That's true. I have a portfolio of other children as well.

Whitney: Yeah, exactly. So if you were to say ... if I were to say to you, um, what, what job should I hire [168 Hours](#) to do, what job could that do for me?

Laura: I think it will convince you that you have more time than you think you do. I don't know if Whitney herself feels like she doesn't have time, but for busy people in general, I think if you read this book, um, and are open to the message, it can change your life because many of us walk around with this narrative in our heads that, oh, I'm so busy, oh, I never have time for anything, and this book will lay out in numbers ... now, that is not the case ... and by showing people sort of how to invest their time in the things that are important to them, and that they do best both at work and at home, it can help people truly, you know, feel less busy and be more productive at the same time.

Whitney: Is your TED Talk based on that particular book?

Laura: It's kind of based on all my books honestly (laughs). Well, you know, the thing about writing several books on time management is that all the messages are, are ... they are in different forms.

So the, the TED Talk was, was a really cool experience. But kind of hones a lot of the time management message down into 12 minutes. But trying to convince people that, again, we, we have time for what matters to us, and it's really about looking at time for a more slightly different perspective.

Whitney: So after you wrote the first book and, and, and maybe this isn't fair 'cause you might not remember 'cause it's been eight years, but what did you do differently in your life as a consequence of having dug into this material and analyzed all the research and had your own lived experience? What did you do differently as a consequence of, of that study that you did?

Laura: Well, I think I tried to become better about my own time as well, and certainly as I continued to add children to my family, felt like I really could manage everything. That it was really just about sort of keeping the big picture in mind and asking what my goals were, both professionally and personally, and making sure that the important stuff happened first.

It took a little bit to recognize that truly time management was going to be the direction we were going. After that book came out I actually wrote a money book that was kind of trying to take sort of counterintuitive approach to money in the same way I had for time. And it was fun to write and interesting for me, but it, it just didn't feel quite the same like I was on, um, as firm footing with it. And I think it's partly, you know, people have different amounts of money, but we all have the same amount of time (laughs).

And so I think time has this element of, of choice to it that, that money I think does, but it's, it's harder to necessarily see that.

Whitney: Oh, that's interesting.

Laura: Yeah. And, and so I wrote a short ebook in the ... while I was writing the money book, that just had the catchy title of [What the Most Successful People Do Before Breakfast](#). And it came out shortly- again, through Portfolio, but we released it as an ebook, solely as an ebook, shortly after this money book came out. And it was immediately obvious to me sort of the difference in demand for things that ... this ebook, um, went up to, you know, very high on, on the Amazon list. I think it was number three for non-fiction overall on Amazon for a while. The audio book I recorded actually was the, the number one audio book on iTunes for a while. So it was like, this-

Whitney: The demand was just high.

Laura: The demand was there in a way that I cou- had never seen on like this, the money topic. And I was like, "Ah, well that is interesting. This is a sign from the universe perhaps that this is maybe what I should be more talking about." So everything since then has, has pretty much been about time.

Whitney: I love that you shared the discovery that took place here. So you write this one book and you think, "Okay, well maybe let's experiment here," and you did this experiment and you're running another experiment, and then you compare the results of those two experiments and said, "Huh, okay. I think we're going with time."

Laura: Yeah.

Whitney: And, um, an- an- and it's interesting because it's so easy when someone starts to craft the narrative of Laura Vanderkam and you know, she started on time management, and now she's this guru. You know, and we think it happened overnight without any iterations, without any pivots, et cetera, and what you're saying is, oh no. You really did play with this.

And, and by the way, you were a journalist for probably 10 years before you even wrote your first book. Is that correct? If I'm getting my numbers correctly-

Laura: Yeah. Yeah.

Whitney: Okay.

Laura: There is no straight narrative that, that goes with one theme in mind the whole thing, and, and ... you know, people ask me this all the time, like, "Well, how did you come to write about time management?" You know, there is no good story, honestly. I mean, it's a topic I was interested in that was marketable enough that other people were interested in as well.

As you said, it's not like I went to college saying I'm gonna be a time management guru.

Whitney: What's interesting about it is I think I rem- remember reading, um, a, a quote from David Brooks, which I think actually is included in my first book [Dare, Dream, Do](#), about how when you come out of college there's this sense of what's ... you know, what am I

going to do with my life? What should I be? And he made ... and I'm paraphrasing, but he said that basically a problem finds you and then you gradually craft your life in trying to solve that problem.

And it sounds to me a little bit like this problem found you. You had your first child, and you're like, "I gotta figure this out." And in the figuring it out, you discovered that in fact this is something you care deeply enough about that you want to talk about it and are willing to write about it and be invested in it for probably a couple decades of your life.

Laura: Yep. That sounds about right. And I like that quote from David Brooks too. I mean, circling back to Princeton here, I did some work with the alumni association. We've done surveys of people on, you know, their thoughts as they approached major reunions. And we found that, yeah, basically what you do in college and in fact your first job, like winds up having very little to do with what you do later.

If, if you go to grad school for something, you do wind up generally doing that, but, the first few years, who knows? We're all sort of figuring out our way in the world at that point.

Whitney: Right. As I would describe it, you're at the low end of your career learning curve and you're just ... th- things are messy, um, and you're, you're sorting through things.

Okay. So you've got a book coming out. The end of May, May 2018, and there are a couple things that you promised that we will learn in ...in reading this book.

Laura: I hope I can deliver on that (laughs).

Whitney: So, um, I'd love to just talk through them briefly, and have you give us a couple of tips or pointers around them. So one of the, one of the promises of the book is that we will know how to clear our calendar of activities that are boring, stressful, or just not the best use of your time. Could you give us one or two thoughts or tips around that?

Laura: So I think that many of us fall into this temptation of filling time just because time is there to be filled. So, like when somebody asks for a meeting, people are often looking at their calendar to see, is, you know, is that time open, or is there another time I suggest. They're not sitting there and pausing like in, you know, really asking, well, is this the best use of my time? I mean, 'cause you're comparing it to nothing, but you won't wind up doing nothing in that time. Like, it could be something incredibly important that you'd wind up doing if this space was open. I mean, I really do think that open space invites opportunity into our lives in a way that a cluttered calendar just can't.

I think being very judicious with the word yes, as you are scheduling things in. One idea I have people think about is doing a, a time amnesty. Like, sort of looking at everything that's on your life and asking, well, you know, what can I wind down in the next few months ... if my schedule was blank, would I add this into my life now?

Whitney: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Laura: And if the answer is no, well, how could you start winding it down over the next few months. Get yourself free of these things to be more accepting of open space, like having open space doesn't mean that you don't have a lot to get done (laughs), which is what people are walking around in their heads with, is this idea.

If we value being busy as a sign that we're important, well then you accept things that you wouldn't if you're walking around with this idea that actually I want a lot of open space 'cause I know I'm gonna do amazing things with it.

Whitney: It's a really interesting observation that you've made there is this idea of, of I'm busy therefore I am, and that we tend to have, and there's almost fear of not necessarily having something that we've set out to do.

And I was just thinking earlier I was, um, on the phone and someone said, "Can we set some time?" And I didn't pause and say, "Is this even a meeting that it makes sense for me to have?" If I'm hearing you correctly, that's what you're saying to do, is just pause and decide, is it even a meeting that you should be taking, not do, do I have an opening on the calendar, but should I even do this in the first place.

Laura: Yeah. I think, I think that's the, the first question to ask. And one way you can sort of back into that with people who have a hard time sort of making those hard choices like that, is asking yourself if you do whatever it is that somebody's asking you to do tomorrow. Because tomorrow we have that sense of like, oh, my time is valuable, I've ... um, it's full already with all this stuff. Like, do I really wanna add one more thing? Whereas if it's further in the future, things aren't as booked up at that point so you're more likely to say yes 'cause it seems like, I don't know, there'll be different in the future somehow (laughs) you won't be as busy.

So, you know ask yourself if, if you'd do this thing tomorrow, and if the answer is like absolutely not, no way would I ever even attempt to do this tomorrow, then, you know, perhaps that should be answer for the future as well.

Whitney: That's such great advice. I love that.

All right. So next question, um, next promise of the book is why tackling your top priorities during the hours when you have the most energy will change your perception of what it means to be productive.

Laura: I did a time diary study to, um, do this book, where I basically had 900 busy people, and I'm using that word, busy, here, but they had full-time jobs and full personal lives too. I mean, you know, had them track their time for a day, and I asked them all these questions about how they felt about their time.

And then I could assign scores to the people who felt like they had the most time, um, and people who felt like the least time. You know, we all have the same amount of time, but, um, some people feel like they're more relaxed about it than others.

You know, it's probably not surprising that people who felt the most relaxed worked slightly less than the people who did not. But it was only about an hour difference. Um, you know ...everyone was into- within this like full-time range, um, but there was about an hour difference between the people on the top and the bottom. And I started looking at schedule and just say, well, if people were a bit more sort of focused about what they're doing can often work an hour less in a day and still get the same amount done, because they have planned for their energies, right? They have booked in, you know, focused stuff, um, for big things that take a lot of energy during the time when they have it, which for most people is the morning.

So if you get to work at eight o'clock and, you know from eight to ten you execute on whatever is priority number one for the day, and then you start doing all your meetings and phone calls and the things that require a little bit less energy, proactively building in breaks so you don't wind up going down some internet rabbit hole for an hour in the afternoon because, you know, you're just frazzled and that's what your brain will let you do, you know, you can actually get out earlier (laughs).

And it's not that you're doing anything less. It's that your work is more planned and focused, and you've built in breaks where you need a break, um, so that the day is intentional and then it can fit within a certain quantity of time instead of continuing on because you realize it's six o'clock and you haven't gotten to that one thing that you really needed to do.

Whitney: Will you tell the story about the water heater?

Laura: (laughs). Yeah. So my story, um, I al- you know, I still use this story in speeches, which always then feel like I need to apologize 'cause I know that like s- some chunk of people have probably Googled [my TED Talk](#) before I'm at the speech, so then I'm like, oh, I'm repeating the same story, but I think it's a good one (laughs), which is that-

Whitney: It's a good one, which is why I, I've heard it and I'm asking you to share it-

Laura: Yeah.

Whitney: ... 'cause I think it's a really, it's a really, um ... poignant is not the word. It's, it's, i- it makes the point.

Laura: It makes the point, which is that I've had, you know, thousands of people track their time for me now over the years, and I remember this, um, one woman, very busy woman, um, two kids, b- big job, whatever.

She, she goes out for Wednesday night for something. Um, comes home to find that her water heater has broken and there's now water all over her basement. And so she was tracking this week where this happened for me, and so I could see this on her time log and I could see the time that she then needed to devote to this problem of there being water all over her basement. So, um, you know, she's got the plumbers coming in, she's

got, a, a professional cleaning crew, 'cause again, there's water all over her basement, so it's not really a quick mop up job.

And, and so all this is being recorded on her time log. It takes about seven hours of her week. And if you think about it, like if you think a lot of the time management literature that we read, um, it's all structured on this idea, well, we're gonna help our readers, or we're gonna help our listeners or our viewers find an extra hour in the day.

I'm like, well, wow. She found an extra hour in the day, all seven days of that week, right? She found an extra seven hours in her schedule, um, to, to deal with this water heater. If we'd ask that at the start of the week, like, could you find seven hours to train for a triathlon, or find seven hours to actually set up those seven coffee dates with the seven people who are asking you to mentor them at work. Like, you'd be like, um, no. I, I cannot find time for those things. Like, look how busy I am. But when she had to find seven hours in her schedule because there's water everywhere, she found seven hours.

And, sort of the takeaway from this is that time is elastic. Like, we can't actually make more time, but time seems to stretch to accommodate whatever we need or want to put into it.

And so I challenge people to think about whatever is important to them, um, treat their priorities as the equivalent of that broken water heater, right? That we choose to put in those seven hours, that hour a day, first. Say, "You know, well, I would find the time if my water heater exploded, so let me find the time now." We might surprise ourselves with how we would be able to find that time if we really needed to. Um, so tell yourself you need to.

Whitney: What I love about this is that so often the insights come in the anomalies, right? Thank, you know, thank goodness that her water heater broke because she gave you such a ... I mean, not for her, but you can tell you thank you...

Laura: Sorry about her basement! I've been cashing in on this basement (laughs) for two years now.

Whitney: She may, she may need a royalty for that.

Laura: I know, exactly.

Whitney: So the thing that I'm having in my head as I'm listening to you talk about this is that I really love tennis. I'm not very good at tennis, but I really like it. At the same time, I find in any given week, oh, I don't have time to do that over, and over, and over, and over again.

And so I wonder, you know, and as I'm listening to you I'm thinking, hm, maybe I need to do something a little differently, um, or, or it's maybe not as important to me as I think it is, or I say it is. Maybe it's just a fantasy that thing that you like to do.

So my question for you is, is there something that since, again, that you've elasticized around that you've made time for, because of this learning that you had, or this observation that you made?

Laura: Yeah. Well, I think a couple of things. I mean, you know, I've noticed this in my own life. Like, I'm not sure where I thought a fourth child would fit into my life but somehow we've managed to make it work (laughs)

Whitney: That's a good one. That's a good one.

Laura: I seemed plenty busy with three and yet somehow there turned out to be space for four, so go, go figure.

I think one of the things I've chosen to do, I run every day. I'm one of those crazy streak people. I've run every day since late 2016. And, it turns out that pretty much any day can accommodate a run. I say, I, I can get to run at least a mile a day and sometimes I only run one mile (laughs), so that is like 10 minutes.

But, you know, how- I would be pretty silly to say like I cannot find 10 minutes anywhere in my life to, to run on any given day. And so it turns out that I have been able to find 10 minutes on any given day.

Whitney: When you say it like that, wow. Who can't find 10 minutes? That's a great one.

Laura: Yeah.

Whitney: So you talked a little bit about, um, what is your performance review. At the end of the year, or the Christmas card, or the holiday card that you write, what's on your performance review for 2018 that you are going to look back and you are going to write about in that imaginary fictitious holiday card?

Laura: Yeah. Well, 2018, is shaping up to be a great year already. Um, I'm certainly gonna write about the launch of [Off the Clock](#), this next book in May.

Um, one other exciting little bit of news, um, I got a contract for my next book after that. Um, it won't be out until 2019, but, um, most of the work has been done in 2018 so, I'll-

Whitney: Already?

Laura: Yeah.

Whitney: You have another book in the hopper.

Laura: In the hopper. Um, so-

Whitney: Oh, great.

Laura: ... so that's. Yeah. So that will, will be on the list as well. And, um, you know, I've, I've set some, um, speaking income goals that are, are happening based on, on what's been contracted at this point, so that's great. So those will be the professional goals.

On the personal front, um, I, um (laughs), this will sound somewhat frivolous, but, um, we recently completed this renovation project of our, our kitchen and master bathroom and, boy it was a pain to get done but I'm really glad we did it. It looks so much nicer, and that was really cool, um, to get that done and, you know, there's been some fun trips too. We took our big kids to, um, the UK over spring break, um, so that would probably make the, the Christmas card letter as well if I were writing such a thing.

Whitney: Those top five. Okay. Got it. Um, all right. Just a few more questions for you. You mentioned, um, the third promise of your upcoming book is how to linger in great experiences while they're happening and why good memories seem to make time expand.

Laura: Yeah. So I think this is one of these kind of advanced time management techniques that, um, may be second order from sort of like getting a grip on everything that's going on in your life, but I think is really kind of what separates the, the pros from everyone else.

So, you know, with time, the issue, it keeps passing, whether we think about where in-where it's going or not, and, and when we often feel like time is passing so quickly, it's because we're not really making the most of the good stuff that does happen to us.

But you can learn to sort of stretch the experience of time when you have something really awesome that is happening, this idea of lingering in a really good thing. You notice that it's happening, you do certain things to make the experience more intense, um, to commemorate it afterwards so that you have this memory, um, that then fills up more mental space and makes your time seem more rich and full.

Whitney: So what w- what might that look like? Can you give us-

Laura: Well-

Whitney: ... a practical-

Laura: So, um, you know, one thing that I did a couple week ago, um, there is this particular Bach, um, alto solo, that I love, um, from the B Minor Mass, the Agnus Dei if you have any music nerds listening to this. And I sing in my church choir, and we have a fabulous, um, professional alto soloist, um, and she was gonna sing it, um, during a church service.

And so I knew this was coming up, like I'd seen it on the, the music calendar for, for the service. So I was like, okay, I, I thought about this, I thought about listening to it as a priority for the week, like one of my personal things, like, you know, as I'm planning my week, like, know this is coming up, think about it.

I looked at the music beforehand to sort of refresh it for myself. I, you know, made sure obviously when it was happening that I was paying full attention to it going on, really absorbing the sounds as, as she was singing it. Then I wrote about it afterwards.

So there're all these things of making this, you know, four minute piece of music take far more than four minutes in my mind. Like, I don't remember most four minute chunks of my life, um, but I've definitely still have this m- memory in my head of that four minute chunk of time from, you know, a couple months ago now. And, you know, that's what I mean by lingering in, in an experience, um, that you can you can make it seem bigger.

Whitney: That's beautiful. So you thought about it, you planned for it, you reviewed the music, you listened to it, you wrote about it, now you're talking about it again and it's just a four minute nugget of your life, but by emphasizing it, memorializing it, then the good moments are taking an expanded percentage of your brain, which is really powerful and positive.

What else do we need to know about this upcoming book? What job will this book do for people who buy it?

Laura: Well, so the subtitle of this one is Feel Less Busy While Getting More Done (laughs), and I honestly think that it will do that for people.

I know that writing it has sort of changed how I approach time. I guess I feel more relaxed about time. I'm more cognizant of building in memories. I mean, that whole knowing that I should anticipate and revel in that alto solo came out of the research I did for this book. So I think it's really helped me stretch the experience of good moments.

It has helped me have a more holistic perspective on my own time. I wound up tracking my time for, um, three years (laughs), which I'm not gonna bore your listeners on the recitation of that, but suffice to say that having a really, really good sense of where my time goes has helped me feel more free about it. Like, I know where the time goes and, and I know that I have the power to change things if I don't like them. And I think that that-

Whitney: What was your biggest a-ha for you, Laura, about your own time?

Laura: Well, honestly, one that turned out to be the most practical for changing my life, um, was how much time I was reading and yet how much crap I was reading within that time (laughs). So, I tracked my time the first year and I realized that I had read 327 hours in that first year, which sounds, you know, pretty good. Like, that's 50 minutes a day roughly. Not bad at all.

But I couldn't think of a whole lot of really good books that I had read at the end of that. And I realized that I was reading a lot of magazines. And there's good stuff in magazines, but there's also a lot of junk in magazines. Like, I, I mean I didn't need to read that story

in yet another one's magazine like how air popped popcorn is a great low calorie snack. Like, I've read that story 20 times. I don't need to read it again.

And so that was my reading. 'Cause I was telling myself, oh I'm so busy, like I, I don't really have time to go get great books, like I don't have time to read long meaty novels, or anything like ... maybe that will be a later stage of my life, you know, when my kids are older I'll get back to that. I only have time for is these little magazines when I'm tired or whatever. Um, I realized 327 hours, I could've read *War and Peace* about six times over, um, in, in that time. More than that (laughs).

And so, you know, I said, okay, I do have time to read. Let me stop fooling myself about it. Um, let me just be more intentional with this reading time. And so I started making time to choose good books to read, like read re- book reviews, to read, um, suggestions, to pick up books, to order books, like not be so gosh darn cheap about it.

The number went up and I was reading a lot of really cool stuff too. Like I, I think the books I've read in the past, like 14, 15 months or something, I mean it's ... I, I feel like I'm reading almost like a graduate student and it's great.

Whitney: What are you reading right now?

Laura: I am reading Wallace Stegner's [*Angle of Repose*](#).

Whitney: Oh. That's a good one.

Laura: Yeah. I'm, I'm, I'm close to the end. I've only got about 80 pages to go, which I'll tell you, a 600+ page book, so that's a (laughing) ... I'm getting there. It, it, you know, takes some time, but I am getting there

Whitney: All right. Last question for you. What do you want your children to learn about time?

Laura: I think what is cool about time is, is how much control we do still have about it. There's ... I mean, there's plenty of things in life you can't control, and I certainly don't want to, you know, minimize anyone's struggle if you're dealing with, um, you know, illnesses, job lost, disabilities, like family difficult situations. Like, there's all kinds of horrible things that can happen in life that we just cannot control. But there's still so much of life that we can. And so I think it's about, you know, taking those fears that we can control and doing our best within them, and trying to expand them as we can, and ...

So I think one of the skills that I really hope my kids will learn is this idea of envisioning the life you would want in the future, thinking about what would make me feel happy and satisfied, and really thinking about what those things are, what steps it might require to get there, and then to sort of build in those steps into your life, and into your schedule, and making time for them like we would make time for a broken water heater, and, and then hold yourself accountable to achieving them.

Whitney: Thank you, Laura Vanderkam, for being with us today. I have learned a lot, and I'm sure that our listeners will find your advice very valuable. And best of luck with your new book [Off the Clock](#).

Laura: Thank so much for having me. I really appreciate it.

10 minutes. You can walk for 10 minutes a day. When you break things down into small enough increments, what seems ridiculous, so much more seems possible. Loved her story about the water heater. I needed to hear that. I'm getting ready for a three-week speaking trip, including to India, I feel like I have no time. But after listening to Laura, and before I recorded this, I scheduled a tennis lesson that I've been saying all week long, I don't have time for this.

Oh, and that David Brooks quote that I bungled during the interview. It's "Most people don't form a self and then lead a life. They are called by a problem, and the self is constructed gradually by their calling."

Practical tip: The next time someone asks you to schedule something, ask yourself, would I put it on my calendar for tomorrow? Such great advice.

Today's review is a [book review on Amazon](#) from Jamie Larsen. She says -

Managers of any organization will find Johnson's stories and provocative questions a recipe for success, even down to the micro unit of society and the challenges parents face in managing basic households. I'm just coming off a week of college tours and you don't have to visit too many of the Ivy League schools to ask yourself how parents raise these A Team kids. I'm giving this as Mother's Day and Father's Day gift as I'm convinced this methodology will work at home as well as in the boardroom.

Thank you so much for that review, Jamie! Send us an email at wj@whitneyjohnson.com, and we'll send you a copy of Laura Vanderkam's new book, *Off the Clock*.

Speaking of reviews, if you've read *Build an A Team*, would you take a moment and leave a review on [Amazon](#), [Barnes and Noble](#) or [Goodreads](#)? Every review helps new people find the book.

Thank you again to Laura Vanderkam for being our guest, thank you to sound engineer Kelsea Pieters, manager / editor Macy Robison, content contributors Heather Hunt, Emilie Davis and Libby Newman, and art director Brandon Jameson.

I'm Whitney Johnson
And this is Disrupt Yourself.