

Ways to refresh  
mind, body,  
and spirit

## It's All About Focus

Giving your full attention to the here and now is the key to creating all the time you need.

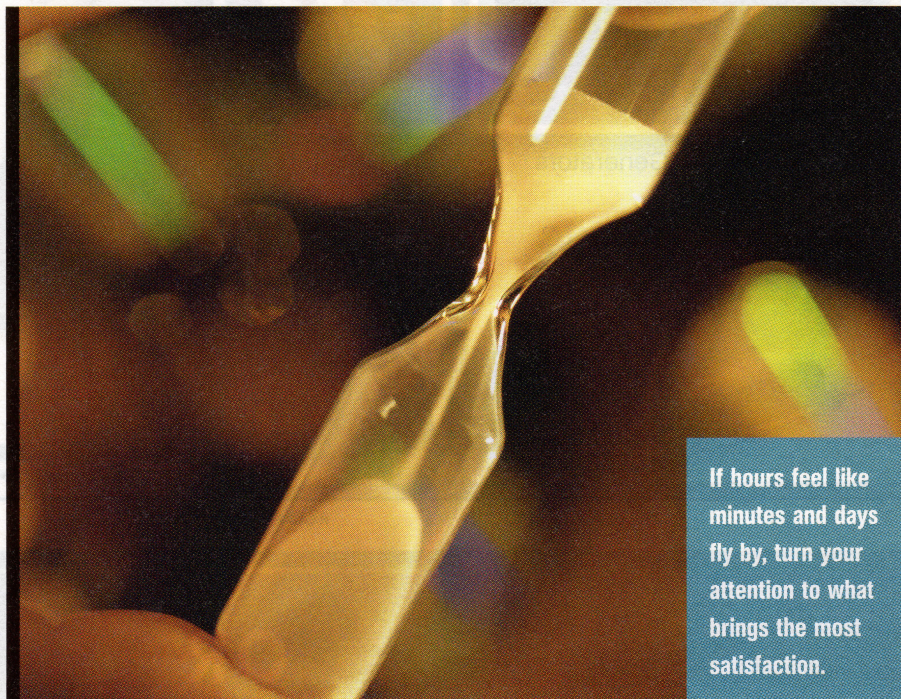
BY NANCY ROSS-  
FLANIGAN

What if one day your schedule, usually packed tighter than a commuter train at rush hour, suddenly lost pressure and allowed you to relax, breathe comfortably and discover possibilities not demanded by your schedule. What if the stress gave way to free time—hours, even whole days of free time? What would you do with your unexpected gift? Would you amble through a park? Curl up with a book that had been collecting dust? Call a friend? Or would you fritter away the time in a tizzy of restless indecision, unable to choose among all the options clamoring for your attention.

Me, I frittered.

In 2004 I found myself with entire weeks free of deadlines and appointments. Early in the year I had started collecting a small pension from a previous job and after crunching the numbers, realized I could afford to work part-time for at least half the year. Thanks to a flexible schedule, I could work every-other week, with seven whole days of freedom between every stint in the office.

As I planned my semisabbatical,



If hours feel like minutes and days fly by, turn your attention to what brings the most satisfaction.

I imagined days spent meditating, practicing yoga, exercising and taking steps toward my dream of writing a book. My first free week was just like that. I slept later, meditated and did some yoga asanas before breakfast, went for hour-long bicycle rides, and sat on the deck writing longhand in a spiral notebook or tapping on my laptop. Ahhhh, heaven.

But by my second week off I began to feel agitated, even rushed. Time—instead of expanding the way I had expected it to—seemed to be contracting. Even more than when I was working full time, I resented interruptions and obligations and felt frustrated that I couldn't fit in everything I wanted to do.

How could it be that all my extra time—a treasure that I'd dreamed about for months—still wasn't enough?

It turns out that time—whether measured in long, luxurious stretches or blink-of-an-eye moments—is only part of what we need to make progress toward our goals and dreams. So says life coach Cheryl Richardson, author of *Take Time for Your Life* (Broadway, 1999) and other books on life balance. The other need is focus, the ability to concentrate on just a few activities or ambitions.

I thought I knew that. After all, I'm pretty good at prioritizing when I'm at the office. But there my choices are dictated by deadlines and institutional priorities. Away from work I'd learned to say no to things that didn't seem important, but not to things I wanted to do. Sure, I'd told myself that my time would be well spent if I did nothing but write and reflect during my days off. But



at the same time, I was scribbling long lists of other things I wanted to do: dance classes, monthly massages, motorcycle trips, playtime with my retiree husband, and a tempting list of creative projects—from landscaping the hill behind our house to making a mosaic for the bathroom wall. Even if I narrowed my focus to writing, I still had an abundance of options; ideas for at least ten projects were ricocheting around my mind.

So each time a free week rolled around, I found myself flitting from project to project, always feeling drawn away from what I was engaged in at the moment—planting black-eyed Susans on the hill, taking a motorcycle ride—doing anything other than finishing that essay I had started two weeks earlier. Flit, flit, flit. Fritter, fritter, fritter.

After a few weeks, I began to see that the only way to make the most of my time off was to say no to lots of things I'd fantasized about doing and turn my attention to the few that would bring the most satisfaction. Richardson says, "We're afraid of letting things go, especially



things we want or think we want. But a big part of learning to focus is saying, 'Yes, I feel pulled to do all of these things, but I'm going to tell myself no.' "

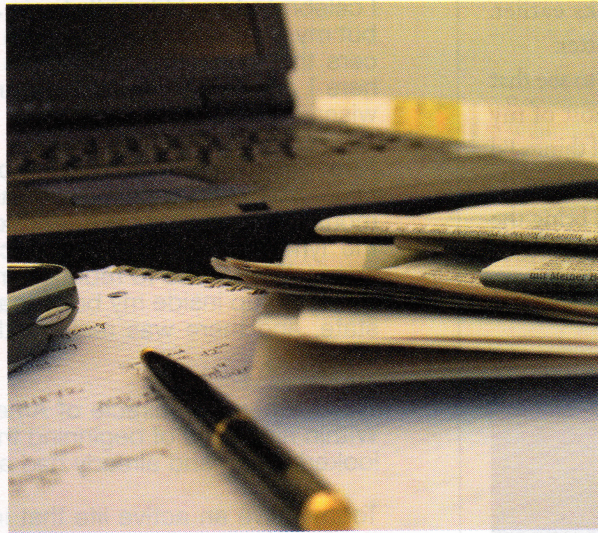
My fear was that crossing something off my list for now meant I'd never get around to doing it. But I finally realized that some things could wait; the bathroom mosaic, for instance, would be a better project for a snowy winter weekend than a summer day. And spending afternoons poking around in



nearby small towns really didn't interest me as much as the writing projects I had in mind.

If you're like I was—having trouble figuring out what to focus on in your precious spare moments—Richardson has a solution that seems paradoxical: slow down and stop trying to accomplish anything at all. She says, "I often recommend that clients make boredom the only goal for their down time.

"It's physiologically very challenging when you're used to living a busy life. But as you finally reach that sweet spot of boredom, suddenly your head and your heart are re-engaged, and you start to feel more instead of thinking. That's



when you start to get a sense of what's really important and what you want to focus on."

Richardson even advises that if you still find yourself too flooded with fantasies to zero in on just one, go ahead and pick one anyway, even if it feels like an arbitrary choice. In time, "it will let you know whether it's the one," she says.

I can vouch for that. One day—when I felt uncharacteristically bored—I picked what seemed like a brilliant book idea from my list of possible projects and decided to devote the rest of my free time to it. For the next week I thought about it, made notes, researched and, to my surprise, felt myself becoming increasingly resistant to working on it. It was a

good idea, I finally realized, but not the right one for me. So I let it go. And as soon as I did that, I suddenly knew that what I really wanted to write was a completely different book, one that hadn't even been on my list but that had been brewing in my brain for decades.

At last I felt focused instead of scattered. But surprise! My days still weren't as leisurely and spacious as I'd dreamed they'd be. Even without work assignments filling my hours, appointments and obligations of daily living ate away at time that was supposed to be free. There were still groceries to be bought, clothes to be washed, doctors to be visited and countless other details of daily life to attend to.

Then a friend would call, my husband would need help finding something and I'd discover I was out of an ingredient I needed for dinner. Each interruption was trivial, but together they fractured my days and nibbled at my energy.

Experts will tell you to anticipate and plan around interruptions. Nancy Gerber, an Atlanta-area personal coach, advises to not be shy about

telling the people in our lives when we need an undisturbed hour or evening.

That's good advice, but sometimes it's hard to follow without hurting people's feelings, and not every interruption can be anticipated. What then? I took a cue from a professor I used to know, a world-renowned scientist who cranked out research papers by the ream but never turned away a student who needed his time. He would stop whatever he was doing, concentrate intently on the conversation, and the moment it ended, return to his microscope or manuscript as if he'd never been disturbed.

I decided to try that myself, giving my full attention to interruptions. The result was amazing: my irritation evaporated



and, because I wasn't seething with resentment, I found it easier to focus when I got back to whatever I'd been doing. Apparently I had stumbled upon another secret of using time and focus effectively, one that Omega Institute founder Stephan Rechtschaffen writes about in *Time Shifting: Creating More Time to Enjoy Your Life* (Main Street Books, 1997). It's all about learning to be present with whatever is going on, moment by moment, he says. Stress, he maintains, comes from resisting what's happening right here, right now. Let go of the

A big part of learning to focus is saying, 'Yes, I feel pulled to do all of these things, but I'm going to tell myself no.'

resistance and you let go of the stress, freeing yourself to focus more clearly.

And when you're present and focused, you feel flooded with creative juices and guided by an almost magical force.

At least that's how I felt when I finally figured out how to narrow my scope and keep my focus. For the last months of my time off, the book project engaged my attention and gave me a sense of satisfaction that seeped into every corner of my life. I still had interruptions, but I worked around them. Now, working full time again, with a to-do list that seems never ending, I'm still so focused on my dream that I automatically pick up my manuscript and work on it, completely absorbed, whenever I have free time.

Somehow those minutes and hours seem to expand, bubble-like, into all the time I need. **A**

**Nancy Ross-Flanigan** is a contributing writer to *Alternative Medicine*.