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CHRIS DAVIS: Hello and welcome to the *Career and Academic Resource Center Podcast*, the *CARC Podcast*, at the Harvard Division of Continuing Education. I'm Chris Davis, the associate director of the Career and Academic Resource Center.

And today, it's my great pleasure to be speaking to Oliver Burkeman, who is an author and a journalist formerly writing the weekly column "This Column Will Change Your Life" for *The Guardian* from 2006 to 2020. In 2021, he published *Four Thousand Weeks, Time Management For Mortals*, a book about the philosophy and psychology of time management and happiness. And that's the subject that I'm going to be speaking to Oliver about today.

His previous books include *Help! How To Become Slightly Happier and Get a Bit More Done* and *The Antidote, Happiness For People Who Can't Stand Positive Thinking*. I'll note, also, that Oliver was shortlisted for the Orwell Prize in 2006. Oliver, thank you so much for being here today.

**OLIVER
BURKEMAN:** It's my pleasure. Thanks for the invitation.

CHRIS DAVIS: So I wanted to speak to you today because, when I read your book, I thought to myself, this is so relevant to -- I mean, it's relevant to everyone, but particularly for our student population. And the subject of time management is one that's always been of great interest to our students. And I'm very familiar with the time management productivity industrial complex, as you kind of make reference to in the book.

And you know, it's quite natural, I think, for people to want solutions to be able to maximize their time. There's certainly no shortage of people who talk about that or techniques that one can try or life hacks, productivity hacks, as you make reference to in the book. But when I read your book, I was struck by how thoughtful and contemplative it was about not just making the most of your time, but very much stepping back and saying things that we've also, I think, all hopefully learned a bit more about in the last three, three and a half years, but the finite amount of time that we have, how the search for time management or productivity hacks is in some cases not helpful or, in fact, can actually breed anxiety. So I wanted to talk a little bit more about the subject of your book if you wouldn't mind.

**OLIVER
BURKEMAN:** Sure, absolutely. I love this stuff. And it's been a huge sort of psychodrama in my own life. So you're talking to someone who wants to talk about it. Yeah.

CHRIS DAVIS: I very much wanted to learn a little bit more about the subject of the book because I think it would be helpful for our students who just by the nature of their lives they're professionally kind of pushed to the edge. They often have personal commitments, family commitments, children. They're getting a degree later in life.

So just by the nature of all they have taken on in their lives, I think there's a big feeling that they have to maximize every hour of their lives in a lot of cases to get the most out of it. You talk about the plethora of time management tips and hacks that are out there. And you say the problem isn't exactly that these techniques and products don't work.

It's that they do work in the sense that you'll get more done, race to more meetings, ferry your kids to more activities, generate more profit for your employer. And yet, paradoxically, you feel only busier, more anxious, and somehow emptier as a result. I'm wondering if you could elaborate on that.

OLIVER

BURKEMAN:

Yeah, absolutely. I mean, and you're totally right, OK? This is not a book and I'm not a person who wants to say there's no point in trying to grapple with time and try to do more things in the way that sounds like the audience for this conversation are doing, you know. It's rather that there is a mismatch going on in the psychology that we bring to this as against the reality of the situation.

So the point is that one way of putting it is that we are just surrounded. We live in a world of just infinite inputs, right? The supply of things that you could do, experiences you could have, business ventures you could launch, demands that you could feel from your family or from your boss or all of these things, emails, the whole thing, they're basically limitless.

It's fine if you want to do more of them. But the hidden agenda, I think, the psychological agenda that we bring a lot of the time to time management and productivity is that there must be a way of doing so many of them that you can finally feel like you're in control of your time, like you're the master of your time. You've got your arms around everything.

And what I kind of repeat endlessly throughout this book in many different forms is just the message that there will always be systematically more to do, more that feels like it matters than you actually can do. And I think that a lot of our time management efforts go wrong because we're trying to psychologically avoid confronting that truth. We're trying to make ourselves feel like there is -- it's never quite now. But just in the future, maybe a few months time with a bit more self-discipline and a few more 5:00 AM starts, I might finally get to that point where I was sort of in control of things and my life was in full working order.

And I want to say that's actually a deceptive goal. That's going to make you more stressed. If all you do is create more capacity in your life for new work and new opportunities, then more work and more opportunities are going to flood into your life. And you're going to be as busy as you were.

So the real art of time management, I think, lies in sort of facing up to this fact that there are more things that feel like they matter than we will ever have a chance to do and then consciously deciding which ones to focus on and which ones to neglect either forever or just for this season. We can talk about how that manifests on the level of email inboxes and to-do lists. That was a pretty abstract introduction.

CHRIS DAVIS:

I think what's so impactful about your book is that there's very much a philosophical, I think -- I don't know if you would call it that, but a kind of larger picture view of it all -- the title of your book, *Four Thousand Weeks*, is the average human lifespan. But yes, I think one of the very concrete examples that you give, and I think it's relatable to whatever field one is in, but the Sisyphean task of cleaning out your email inbox as an example of an activity that someone who's conscientious may want to do.

But what that ultimately does is create more work. Because, eventually, you'll be responding to the responses of the messages that you make. You talk about getting the wrong things done in terms of how we choose to spend our time and how we should or can be more selective about what effort we're putting into what tasks we're doing, the email being potentially one example of that. And I just want to quote one thing because I think this is something I want students to take away from this.

"The fundamental problem is that this attitude toward time sets up a rigged game in which it's impossible ever to feel as though you're doing well enough. Instead of simply living our lives as they unfold in time, it becomes difficult not to value each moment primarily according to its usefulness for some future goal or for some future oasis of relaxation you hope to reach once your tasks are finally out of the way."

You talk a lot in the book about how there's this pervasive ideology or perception of we're planning for the future. We want everything in the future to be perfect. And that's why we have to be as efficient as possible in our day to day. But as you talk about here, it's kind of an illusory concept. The future will always be like a carrot that's out there kind of never reached.

**OLIVER
BURKEMAN:**

Our culture very strongly values thinking prudently for the future. And nobody would ever suggest that we shouldn't do any of that in our lives. But there's a kind of person -- I think I'm the kind of person. And I think pretty much anyone who's listening to this is likely to be the kind of person who they have that down, right?

They're doing things. They're very, very good at being judicious about their time, trying to get more out of it, trying to improve themselves and reach new levels. They're not going to be the people who could do with a bit more of that kind of instrumental attitude to time.

There are going to be people -- and I think I've definitely been this person -- for whom it can go too far. You can get to the point where you're so focused on getting to the next place that you sort of come to define real life as beginning at that point, right? So it's like everything else has just been a sort of a dress rehearsal.

It's when you finally get this degree, or when you get this particular promotion, or maybe for some people it's things like when I get married, or when I have kids, or when the kids leave home, when I retire, right? There's this constant desire to project into the future the moment of truth.

And there's a lovely quote from John Maynard Keynes, the economist that I mentioned in the book, who really sort of understanding what's going on here as a sort of denial of mortality, right? Because if you can always feel like the real thing is coming, it's in the future, it's a little bit like you're convincing yourself that you're always going to go on. And if you can sort of take a deep breath and see what's actually going on, which is that you're not going to go on forever into the future, then it sort of orients you more towards seeing that there has to be some value in life now.

At some point, if you're going to have a meaningful life, that's got to cash out in a present moment. It doesn't mean you shouldn't also use those present moments to do things that will benefit you in the future. And obviously, the ideal would be you're working towards some qualification and finding the process really, really interesting and meaningful and enjoyable. But it's just that sense of seeing that actually it is a kind of a pathology of our relationship with time to be totally instrumental, to be totally focused on using it well for future goals.

And yeah, it's something that's a little easier to think when you're maybe 18 than, speaking from experience, once you're into your 40s. The idea that the good stuff is all coming in the future gets progressively harder to maintain belief in. And you're like, oh, actually maybe I need to reorient my life at least in some ways so that there's a sense of meaning and of aliveness to what I'm doing right now.

CHRIS DAVIS: I guess one of the pieces of advice you're giving or one of the insights that you share in the book is kind of having some level of comfort or acceptance of the fact that there never will be a period where you get everything done and that everything that has to be done is also full of things that are much less useful or important to you. You talk about the real measure of time management techniques is whether or not it helps you neglect the right things.

OLIVER BURKEMAN: Yeah. And I think the real point -- and I think this goes for everything I'm saying in the book, right? I'm really just calling attention to something that on some level everyone knows. So you know your time is limited. You just perhaps don't -- you could do with acting a little bit more in recognition of that knowledge.

And likewise, you're already making these trade-offs. And you're already neglecting things through the simple non-negotiable fact of having finite time in a day and finite time in a life and being in the world that we exist in where there's just limitless possibilities of good kinds and bad kinds. It could be duties and obligations. It could be thrilling ambitions and places to travel. It's all just sort of limitless.

So you're already making choices. And the question is really whether you're going to do that a little bit more consciously and without this kind of inner tyrant that tells you you've got to find a way to not have to make those choices by driving yourself harder and harder and harder and burning out. And obviously, you're not going to get your arms around the infinite quantity. That's not how infinity works.

And it's still a challenge for me, absolutely. But it's that sense of saying, OK, there are 100 things I could use the next seven hours for. And any one of them would be kind of, in some sense, legitimate. It wouldn't be time wasting. But obviously, I can only choose maybe one, maybe two or three depending on the nature of your work and your life.

And the crucial skill to develop is actually the kind of anxiety tolerance to enable yourself to let all the other ones wait outside the door in the corridor while you focus on these few. And unfortunately, I think a lot of conventional productivity advice -- not all of it, by no means all of it. And I'm not the lone person saying this.

But a lot of productivity advice is actually fueling that sort of promise always just out of reach, but that there is a way of not having to make those tough choices, that you can get everything done that matters. There's a lovely line I think I mention in the book from Elizabeth Gilbert, the writer and novelist who says that we talk so much about the importance of saying no and how you've got to learn how to say no. That's a cliché. But we still secretly think that that just means saying no to tedious stuff or to stuff we didn't really want to do anyway.

And she's like, no, it's harder than that. It means saying no to things you do want to do just because there are too many of them. And it's not a problem that's going to go away. If you're lucky enough to do well in life and to have success and to obtain a reputation or promotions or whatever it is, this is only going to get worse. Because the quality of the opportunities that are coming your way is going to get better. And it's going to be more painful to choose among them.

But it's just called being human. So one of the great things that we can try to do with that is not keep imagining that there's going to come this point sometime in the future when these issues don't arise, but just see that these issues are part of our lot and our gift as finite humans. And then, firstly, it's a huge weight off your shoulders because you don't need to manage to do this impossible thing of never disappointing anybody, never dropping any balls, never failing to realize any aspect of your potential. No, that ship has sailed.

And then, secondly, I find it very motivating and empowering. It's actually not a recipe for passivity at all. It's a recipe for saying, great. Now, that I'm not trying to do 100 things today, because I understand that wouldn't get me any closer to doing the infinite quantity, I can really focus on these two or three things. I can take them through to completion. I can do them as well as I can. And I can be absorbed in doing them. And I think it's just that combination of relaxing and energizing.

CHRIS DAVIS: You talk about worry as a concept in the book and then also patience and impatience. But you also talk about planning. And I thought that was very interesting because it kind of related to all this. And you certainly say the active planning is an important one. It's something that you have to do well.

But planning is so often, I think you call it-- "we treat our plans as though they're a lasso thrown from the present around the future in order to bring it under our command," the idea that we're trying to assert a level of control on our future which is, in most cases, impossible. If you could talk a little bit about that, I thought that was very compelling.

**OLIVER
BURKEMAN:** Yeah, sure. I mean, I think this is a subset of the general point, which is we're trying to get this kind of control, sense of a kind of control over our lives that we just can't have. You get each moment at a time. You don't get to control the whole quantity of time at once.

And so sure, yes, absolutely. Certain kinds of planning are very useful. But the emotional intention behind planning a lot of the time is this sense of wanting to feel totally reassured about what is coming down the pike when it's built in to the human predicament, that anything could happen at any moment. I mean, of course, you can make sensible forecasts and less sensible forecasts. You're not completely ignorant.

But basically, I'm just here. And not me, not you, not Joe Biden or Elon Musk or anybody has any certainty about what's coming 2 minutes from now. Also, there's this great democracy when it comes to the fact that we're all just on this leading edge of the present moment.

And I think planning often serves as an attempt to try to avoid that fact, which is then very stressful because you can't ever achieve what you're going for. And then worry, I think, very similarly, ruminative worry, repetitious worry is very often -- certainly in my experience. And I think there's some good psychological work to suggest I'm not alone.

You know, it's almost like your mind is trying to grab on to reassurance about something that's in the future, failing to get that reassurance because it's in the future and we cannot know, and then just doing it again and again and again. So it's almost like, well, at least you're doing something.

There is a kind of amazing liberation in stopping and seeing that there's nothing you can do to bring the future under your total dominance in that way. And it's not just because you don't have enough self-discipline or you didn't discover the right productivity system yet or something. It's just because of the situation that we're in.

And then it becomes a lot easier to see that your responsibility in any given moment is only to do what seems like the wisest thing in that moment, and then the next, and then the next, and then the next. And sure, sometimes that might involve drawing up multiyear project plans and schedules. It's not like you can never do that, but relating to all of them as actions done in the present to navigate yourself through the present.

CHRIS DAVIS: I was just, in fact, thinking of, I think, one of the examples that you give in the book, the idea of planning, let's say, your arrival at the airport. And that's successfully executed. You're at the airport on time.

But immediately afterwards, you're worrying about, OK, what happens when we arrive at our destination. The concept of this is kind of a great treadmill where planning is important, yes. But there's also kind of a cycle of feeling that there will be ever a point where we'll feel complete or at rest. And meanwhile, there's always going to be the next kind of hurdle or the next obstacle and kind of picking and choosing.

**OLIVER
BURKEMAN:** And I think just to dive in there, another version of this is it's the same thing in a different costume, I think, is this notion that at some point in the future you're going to get to the phase of your life where you don't have problems to deal with, which is extraordinarily seductive as a fantasy given how obviously stupid it is, right? Of course, that's not happening.

Absolutely, there are bad problems and lesser problems. And there are some problems I wouldn't wish on anybody and hopefully one doesn't encounter in one's life or not very much. But problems, as in things that need addressing or that get in the way of life just being completely plain sailing, that's just called life.

And so we make our problems double. Because we not only have whatever's on our plate, but we also feel like it's a problem that we even have to have anything on our plate. There's a quote that I use in the book from a French poet called Christian Bobin, who refers to a sort of a moment of spiritual enlightenment almost when he suddenly realized that life was only ever going to give him a sequence of wonderfully insoluble problems to solve-- to address, I guess.

And he says something like, at that moment, an ocean of profound peace entered my heart. It's like there is such relaxation in just being able to alter the lens on life a little bit and see-- we're not trying to get to the point where there isn't stuff to deal with and stuff that kind of gets in the way of some perfect notion of how life should be. That's just living. And then you can always relish it.

CHRIS DAVIS: Well, on that note, I'll say, Oliver, thank you so much for joining us today. As I said, I really hope that people do explore your book. I think it's relevant for so many people. But again, I think, specifically thinking about our student population, I can't think of something more relevant or more helpful. So thank you so much.

**OLIVER
BURKEMAN:** It's my pleasure. Yeah, I hope it can be of use.

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CHRIS DAVIS: You have listened to the *CARC Podcast*. This is the podcast for the Career and Academic Resource Center here at Harvard Extension School. And I hope you will join us again.

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