

Lichtenbergianism

procrastination as a creative strategy

by Dale Lyles

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To VHL, whether she likes it or not

Let him who has two pairs of trousers turn one of them into cash
and purchase this book.

— Georg Christoph Lichtenberg, Notebook E.16

Cras melior est.

— The Lichtenbergian Society

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Foreword

This really should not exist. It doesn't actually matter whether I am referring to the book you hold or the foreword you are currently reading. The same logic applies to both. Foreword and book alike are the product of a group of people that hang their hopes on the dubious notion of putting off until later what you had claimed you would create today. And yet, here we are with a creative work that was (at least eventually) not postponed.

In truth, that is only the first of the improbabilities surrounding the situation. You might also ponder the reality that any insight contained herein all started as a smartass response to an email. I'll not spoil it here, as our author recounts it better than I could, but that is the truth of the matter. In many ways, this book is merely another chapter in what started as a humorous exchange none of us was particularly willing to bring to a proper end.

If you are killing time in the bookstore perusing the dust jacket, or dare one hope, this foreword whilst your significant other shops for something you find incomprehensible, you are probably wondering why a book that should not have happened, that began as a joke, might be worth your time.

Oddly enough, the answer is that the ideas you will find here seem to work.

Wait. What? What do you mean, "work"?

The reality is that what is presented herein does make a meaningful difference. Our merry misfit band has experienced a transformation since that fateful initial email now so many years ago. We have published, written, composed, acted, led, and transformed careers.

Don't get me wrong. This book does not unlock the dark secrets of creation and success. These things are still hard work, and this road is still only one of many. This is not *THE* way. But it is *A* way.

You may be asking yourself if the topic even pertains to you. Perhaps you don't think of yourself as particularly creative, or maybe your creative endeavors are more of a side-line. If so, then that means you and I (your friendly foreword person) have something in common. While I consider myself creative, others don't typically think of my day job as an overtly creative one.

There have been times in the past when I even questioned if I had credibility within the core group of Lichtenbergians. Their book authoring, play writing, symphony composing, museum curating ways left me with a significant case of Lichtenbergian impostor syndrome. As a guy that wrote software and, later, led other engineers, I found my work schedule left me with less and less time for my passion for acting and the occasional drawing. Had I worked my way out of the club? Had I become an interloper? A poseur? Had the time come to recuse myself?

No and no. First, while my overtly artistic endeavors had certainly been encumbered by my career stage (as opposed to stage career), this invalidates neither their influence nor importance. Further, as the formalism being crafted for Lichtenbergianism continued to take shape, I found more and more unexpected utility for it within my "day job."

I found with increasing frequency that I was recounting to software engineers insights developed in conversations around the fire with my ash-bound brothers.

Sometimes resonance was revealed while providing coaching to those struggling with the switch from a monolithic or big-bang software development approach to an iterative one. The Lichtenbergian notion of **ABORTIVE ATTEMPTS** is not so different from minimal valuable product and incremental delivery of customer value. Both emphasize getting something on the canvas and both recognize that learnings generated from the imperfect make the eventual product better.

Other times, the overlay was far more personal. When seeking meaning for myself and those around me, I reflected on our many conversations about the creative urge. As in art, engineers are, at root, creators. As with a gifted artist, the work of a gifted engineer will inevitably reflect the artist/engineer. And as also with art, an engineer must eventually **ABANDON** his or her work and move on.

Ultimately, correlation doesn't equate to causality, and the sample size of our cadre falls well short of statistical significance. Those are all nerd words meant to point out that it is your own experience combined with the resonance you find in these pages that will determine if Lichtenbergianism means something to you. I

invite you to consider the ideas you find here. Try them on. Consider taking this unlikely less-travelled road. It has made all the difference to me.

**Kevin McInturff: innovator, actor,
engineer, artist, creator**



Precept 1: Task Avoidance

The sure conviction that we could if we wanted to is the reason so many good minds are idle.

— GCL, K.27

A parable: He always wears spurs but never rides.

— GCL, J.127

Cras melior est.

— motto of The Lichtenbergian Society

The core value of Lichtenbergianism is procrastination, *not* doing All The Things.²⁸

Our society tells us that procrastination is generally supposed to be a bad thing. “Never put off till tomorrow what you can do today” is the sturdy, Puritanical maxim. Clean that house, compose that song, write that chapter, update that website – and do it now! After all, won’t you feel better when it’s done?

²⁸ This is one of those “memes” you’ve heard tell about. I will be using lots of similar pop culture allusion. I may be old (spoiler alert: I’m old) but I try to stay aware of all internet traditions. ²⁹

²⁹ That’s another meme.

Well, yes, of course you'll feel better when it's done, but first you have to *do it*. Ugh.

To a Lichtenbergian, procrastination is a core principle. Avoiding that symphony, that second draft, that new series of photographs... *That's* a lot more comfortable. *Cras melior est*. Tomorrow is better.

Avoid that task.

But why is TASK AVOIDANCE considered to be a critical Precept of Lichtenbergianism?

Part of the joke is that we think that the world would be better served if artists of all stripes thought twice before releasing their works on an unsuspecting public. It's a matter of quality control, really. It's one thing to crank out the ABORTIVE ATTEMPTS; it's quite another to assemble them and release them as your band's CD. Or book of poetry. Or Southern gothic novel.³⁰

We call it the "Better as a T-Shirt Rule," *i.e.*, a witty t-shirt vs. the permanence of a snarky tattoo. Don't commit to permanence when there's still SUCCESSIVE APPROXIMATION to be done. You can always peel a t-shirt off; you can always go back to an unpublished poem and take another look at it. Not so much with a hastily-considered tattoo, nor with a published collection of unrevised diary entries posing as poetry.



It is good when young people are in certain years attacked by the poetic infection, only one must, for Heaven's sake, not neglect to inoculate them against it. – GCL, L.69

Let's face it: 90% of everything is pure dreck. Dreck is fine – see "The Bad Penny" in the previous chapter – because without people having the courage to put their dreck out there, we'd never get the 10% that's actually worth something. God bless all the lesser but nevertheless competent composers that dotted the musical landscape of the Age of Enlightenment, as Professor

³⁰ We call these premature releases CORROBORATIVE EVIDENCE and we shake our heads sympathetically – there but for the grace of Apollo – as we consign them to the flames. [see AUDIENCE]

Peter Schickele called them – without them, Mozart wouldn't have had a market for his perfection.³¹

But if we, as creators, can hold back our dreck until it's worth at least as much as the bottom 90%, then let's do that. *Cras melior est!*

I want to make it clear that I am not telling you *not* to write bad poetry. On the contrary: you *should* write bad poetry, the more the better. You *should* write execrable death metal music. You *should* make uninspired pottery. That's the whole purpose of Lichtenbergianism: MAKE THE THING THAT IS NOT.

But, I hear you ask, how do we transition from "create a lot of bad dreck, but don't publish it *for the love of humankind*" to "create successful dreck by putting off publishing it"?

Here is the secret to successful TASK AVOIDANCE: because you are an artist, you have more than one TASK to AVOID, each one nagging for your attention. The trick is to play them off against each other, avoiding one by working on another.

This very book (at least at the time of writing this sentence) is being written to avoid the pain of writing music.³² Not only that, but in the process of writing every section of this book, every other section proved a suitable distraction. Stuck on the AUDIENCE chapter? Jot down that note in your head on GESTALT that has been doing its best to distract you.

The very first full year of the Lichtenbergian Society I failed to achieve a single goal, mainly because I got distracted and built a labyrinth in my back yard instead:

In fact, often the Lichtenbergians find that while we are avoiding our actual creative goals in any given year, we end up achieving something else of value. That's one reason we are offering our quirky philosophy to the world at large: you can actually accomplish more by deliberately doing less.

This is what John Perry calls "structured procrastination" in his charming and perfect *The Art of Procrastination*. I would say that Dr. Perry had beaten me to the draw on the concept, but as I said in Chapter One, none of this is new – Perry



31 *The definitive biography of P. D. Q. Bach*, p.23.

32 The opera *Seven Dreams of Falling*. (Still unfinished – I win!)

himself quotes a 1930 Robert Benchley column as defining the concept even earlier: “Anyone can do any amount of work, provided it isn’t the work he is *supposed* to be doing at that moment.”

As Dr. Perry puts it, “The key idea is that procrastinating does not mean doing absolutely nothing... The procrastinator can be motivated to do difficult, timely, and important tasks... as long as these tasks are a way of not doing something more important.”³³

In 2003, for example, I was given permission by poet Nancy Willard to set her Newbery Award-winning *A Visit to William Blake’s Inn* to music. Since there was some interest in performing this piece as part of an international sister city thing, you would think that I would have gotten right down to it. Instead, I spent 2004 writing a children’s opera for a competition in Germany – which needless to say I did not win. The good news is that I went on to finish *William Blake’s Inn* with an increased confidence in my abilities to orchestrate, and the final result is still my proudest achievement.³⁴



The other secret of TASK AVOIDANCE is that *gestation* is a necessary part of the creative process in any model worth the study – and a smart artist uses TASK AVOIDANCE to let ideas form fully. For the Lichtenbergian, it is part of the joke – procrastination is a key to creativity – *Cras melior est* – but make no mistake: we know when we’re wasting time and when we’re allowing an idea to mature or a problem to percolate unseen.

It is a mistake to think that “creativity” is somehow limited to the actual actions involved in *finishing* a work. Planning – working out the kinks – developing a framework – sketching, doodling, warming up – daydreaming about possibilities³⁵ – these are as responsible for the quality of the finished product as are the actual acts of painting or sculpting or composing or writing.

33 *The Art of Procrastination*, p. 3

34 And if you’re looking for a world premiere piece for your organization, call me.

35 This is of course distinct from daydreaming about appearing on The Late Show with Stephen Colbert to promote your book.

As Danish mathematician/poet/designer Piet Hein put it in one of his aphoristic poems he called *grooms*:

TWIN MYSTERY

To many people artists seem
undisciplined and lawless.
Such laziness, with such great gifts
seems little short of crime.
One mystery is how they make
the things they make so flawless;
another, what they're doing with
their energy and time.³⁶

It's also true that simply walking away from a project³⁷ will sometimes allow your subconscious to work in the background on a solution to whatever has been puzzling you. History is replete with examples of great thinkers whose biggest ideas came upon them when they weren't directly thinking about the problem. So absolutely, put down that sonnet and go get in the hot tub. You can thank me for it later.



Another important benefit of TASK AVOIDANCE is *slack*. Slack is that extra bit of rope that allows you to make adjustments in whatever it is you're doing with that rope – in Lichtenbergianism, slack is extra time, and it is critical to any adaptive system like creativity.

One of my favorite fables about the importance of slack concerns a secretary in a large firm who was a wonder: she could schedule meetings, make calls, make copies, organize – you name it, she could get it all done for you at the drop of a hat. Then the company hired an efficiency consultant who found that the secretary often had nothing to do, large stretches of time which were not productive. The consultant advised the company to schedule her workload more tightly so that she could get more done.

36 Grooms 3, p. 12

37 *see also*: ABANDONMENT

To everyone's astonishment, her usefulness to the company plummeted. She couldn't get to all the things she was asked to do and was often behind. No one could understand it.

They had taken her Slack. All that time she was observed doing nothing was actually her being *available* to take on any task that was asked of her. When her whole day was scheduled, she was no longer able to pivot from one task to another and get them all done.³⁸

In Lichtenbergianism, whenever you feel over-structured, rushed, or swamped, it's time for a little TASK AVOIDANCE. Clear out some time for reading, or thinking about another project. Or, if worse comes to worse, clean your house. Ugh.

Just remember that filling every moment with work is not actually being efficient.



There are many ways to manage TASK AVOIDANCE.

You can use some kind of online task management, or an app.

You can do the tried-and-true method of piling all your projects in a pile, or scattered in piles around the house.

You can bullet journal.³⁹

You can make a vision board. You could start a Pinterest page.⁴⁰

However, my favorite way of making sure that my TASK AVOIDANCE is productive (and not just laziness) is the Japanese system known as *kanban*.

Kanban was originally developed at Toyota as an inventory control system and has been adapted for use in other areas, such as software design. Jim Benson and Tonianne Demaria Barry have developed a "personal kanban," and I highly recommend their website (personalkanban.com) and their accompanying book.

Kanban involves writing down your tasks and subtasks on cards or sticky notes, then subdividing them into workflow stages such as Ready, Doing, and Done. (Benson/Barry emphasize that the system is ultimately adaptable to your workflow, terminology, and needs.)

38 *Slack*, p. 8

39 <http://bulletjournal.com>

40 Because *that* won't suck up all your time.

The first key concept is called “visualizing your workflow,” and the first time you do a kanban dump it’s scary: all those sticky notes with all those *things to do*! But take a deep breath and remember: you’re going to procrastinate on most of this. You’re just getting organized about it.

The second key concept is “limit your work-in-progress.” Decide on how many of the sticky notes you’re going to actually work on at a time. The usual number is three, certainly no more than five.

As you complete a task, move the sticky note over to the Done column.

That’s all there is to it. (Of course there’s more to it, but that’s it for the basics.)

As Benson/Barry describe the process, the rest of the value of kanban manifests itself through these two key concepts. You start to pay attention to what you’re paying attention to. You’ll begin to get an idea of the tasks you’re avoiding and why. You’ll begin to examine your work practices as you watch the flow of sticky notes.⁴¹ You’ll begin to adapt the system to your needs.

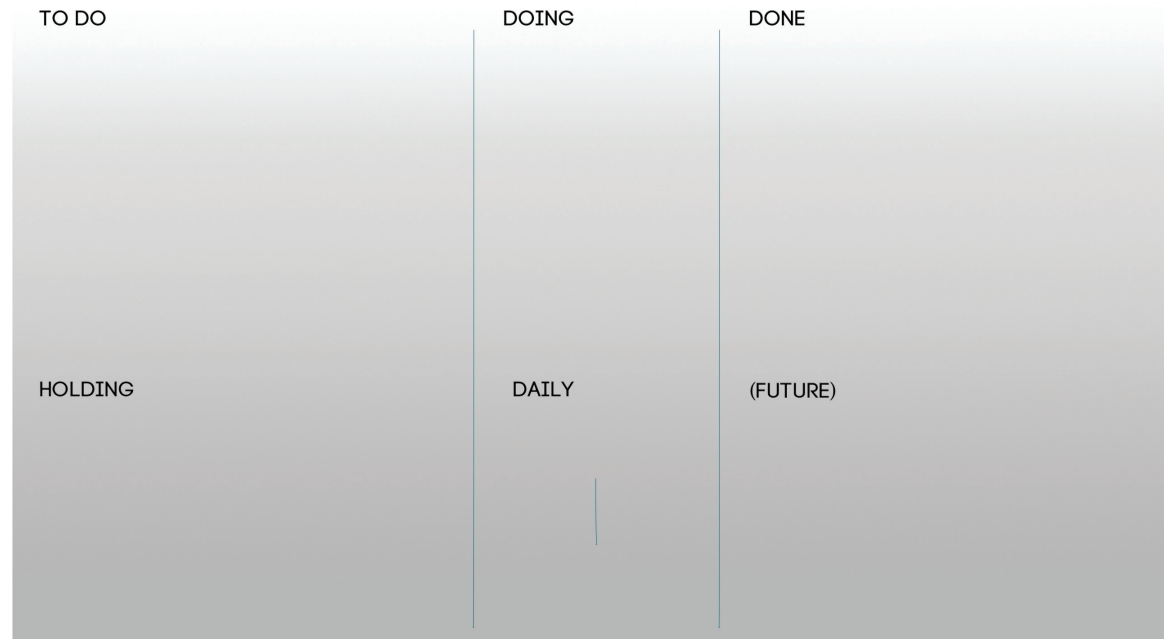
There are a lot of ways to implement a kanban. The easiest way is simply to take a white board and stick sticky notes on it. (The important thing to remember is that your kanban has to be where you can see it as you work.)

There are of course software versions, including free add-on apps for Google Drive.

For a while, I used my laptop, creating a desktop image and using Apple’s Notes app to create sticky notes there.

41 see RITUAL

Let's take a look at this for a moment and see how I modified the three-phase model for my own workflow.



Across the top are the three standard columns: To Do, Doing, and Done.

Across the bottom are the modifications I made to the kanban to fit my workflow: Holding, Daily, and Future.

Holding is where I'd put the tasks in the Doing column that I couldn't work on until someone else did their thing, e.g., budget figures or travel plans or something they had to get done before I could move on with the task.

In the Daily section, I put things like *blogging* that I did on a daily basis, stuff that it didn't make sense to keep creating in To Do and then move across the screen every single day. Notice the small vertical line: the Daily section was like a mini-kanban loop inside the Doing column. I could move my *blogging* sticky from one side of the line to the other to check it off – then move it back.

The Future area was stuff I knew I needed or wanted to work on – just not right now.

Your mileage may vary. It *should* vary.

Nowadays I use a system of small cards that sit in a wooden contraption that looks like a small amphitheater. Every once in a while I will look up at it and realize that I really should get busy on one project or another. (Every once in a while I will look up at it and realize that I have either finished a project or ABANDONED it, but hey – that means I get to move a card.)

Note that kanban is not a to-do list. I still have my to-do's on my phone: mow the lawn, do the laundry, prep the labyrinth. My kanban is for MAKING THE THING THAT IS NOT and keeping my TASK AVOIDANCE on track.



The Lichtenbergians are not pioneers in TASK AVOIDANCE/structured procrastination. Artists have been doing this forever. Da Vinci was notorious for not finishing work on time or even finishing it at all. It took him fifteen years to finish the "Mona Lisa"; he dragged it along with him as he moved around Italy and even to France. It took him *twenty-five* years to finish "Madonna of the Rocks." Compared to Da Vinci, Lichtenbergians are the Energizer Bunny®.

Giaochino Rossini was just as bad, although he was more lazy than dilatory. The day came for the opening of his opera *La Gazza Ladra* and he still hadn't written an overture, so the producer locked the composer in a room with some burly stagehands. They were given instructions that as Rossini wrote the music, they were to toss the pages out the window to waiting messengers, who would rush them to the copyists. If Rossini didn't write the music, they were to toss *him* out the window.

A brilliant contemporary example of successful structured procrastination is the German artist Anselm Kiefer. Kiefer is known for his often gargantuan paintings that incorporate materials such as dirt, straw, clay, and sheets of lead. They're enormous and enormously beautiful, and they take time for their layers of material to settle in.

Kiefer has several facilities – warehouses, abandoned factories – that he uses as studio space, and he will leave his paintings or sculptures in place for years, even decades, as he works on them. He moves from piece to piece, from studio to studio, rotating his focus and attention from this series of paintings to

that body of work. He builds up layers of material as he goes until he is satisfied with the work and declares a painting finished.⁴²

Thus, although Kiefer never starts and finishes a painting in what you or I would consider a reasonable amount of time, he's always working and he's always producing. And he does it by *not working* on most of his work.

links & overlaps

How does TASK AVOIDANCE link to the other Precepts? You can put off a project only so long before you're no longer in TASK AVOIDANCE: you've moved into ABANDONMENT. Whether the ABANDONMENT is permanent... well, that becomes a future decision. (You should ask Da Vinci about the difference.)

Remember that the Lichtenbergian mantra *Failure is always an option* is not meant to be a threat to impel you to get to work and MAKE THE THING THAT IS NOT *today*. It's there to remind you that "someday" may never arrive if you don't have a firm grasp of structured procrastination, so it's just as well that you move a project from TASK AVOIDANCE to ABANDONMENT.⁴³

TASK AVOIDANCE is also linked to GESTALT through Gestation – a good reason to *not* work on a project is because you're stepping back to see if you can tell what's missing. Some might say that this is actually working – but I say it's a perfectly cromulent example of TASK AVOIDANCE. Any time you're not actively engaged in MAKING THE THING THAT IS NOT, you're safely in TASK AVOIDANCE. No one can blame you – you're not working on it.

Finally, any strategy you use to manage your TASK AVOIDANCE (bullet journals, kanban, scattered piles) should have one major goal in mind: they should leave you with no artistic choice for any given project but to realize that it's time – that project that has hung about, perhaps for years, is now at the top of your list. It's time to move it from the Some Day column to the Doing column. It's time for your first ABORTIVE ATTEMPT.

42 You can see him at work in the documentary *Remembering the Future*, <http://art.docuwat.ch/videos/art-of-germany/anselm-kiefer>

43 It's also permission simply to fail.

and so...

- Practice “structured procrastination” by alternating your projects – avoid working on one project by tinkering with another.
- Kanban⁴⁴ your projects – know what you’re putting off and why.
- Don’t be afraid to let projects simmer.
- Learn the difference between TASK AVOIDANCE and ABANDONMENT.

LICHTENBERGIAN ANECDOTE

At the end of each chapter, I will try share an anecdote written by one of my fellow members of the Lichtenbergian Society, explaining how they have used the Precept in their own creative processes.

However, when I sent out the call for TASK AVOIDANCE, every single Lichtenbergian replied that they were working on something else.

Very funny, these Lichtenbergians.

44 Start with <http://personalkanban.com>