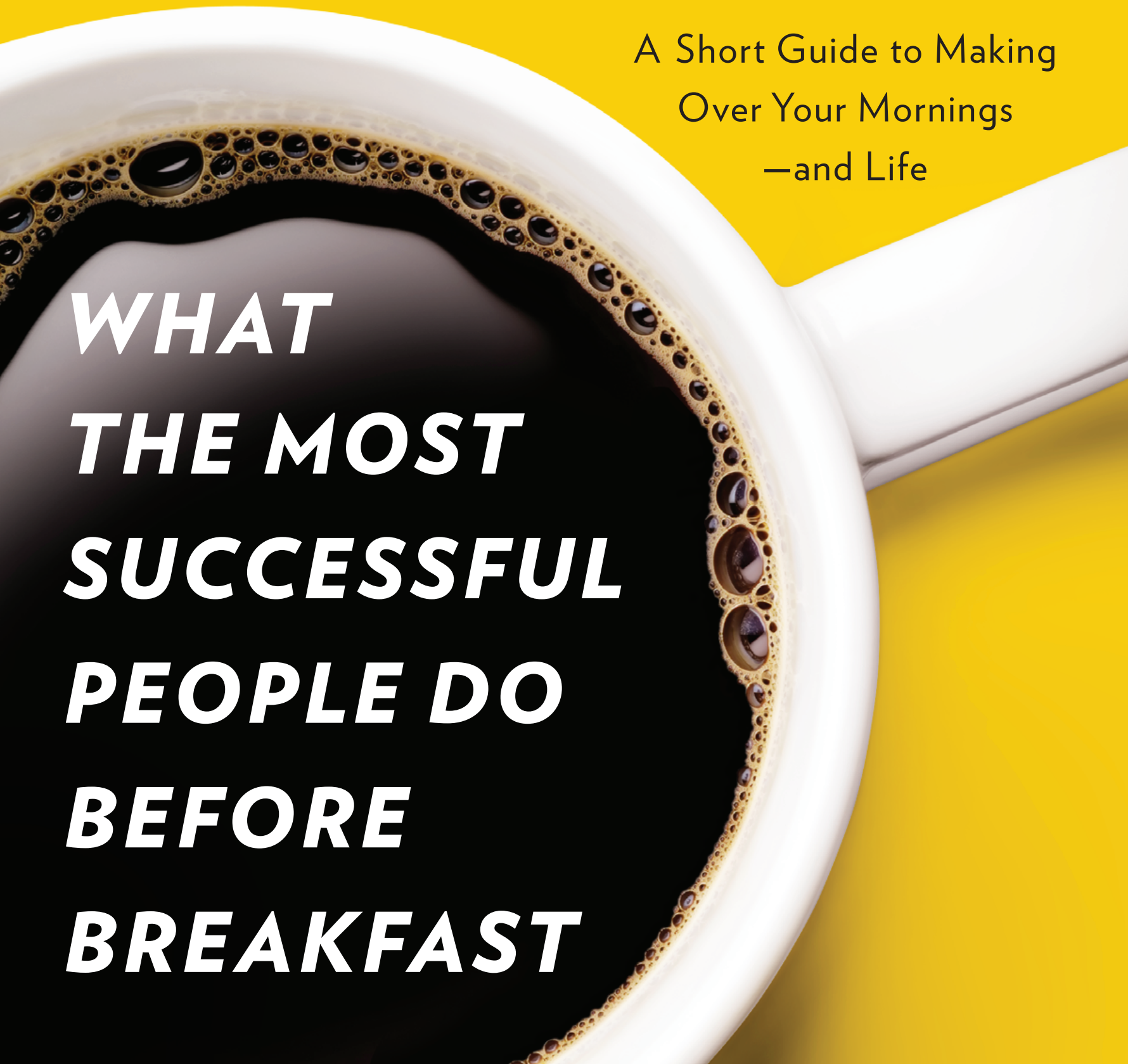
LAURA VANDERKAM

AUTHOR OF **168 HOURS**

A Short Guide to Making Over Your Mornings —and Life



WHAT THE MOST SUCCESSFUL PEOPLE DO BEFORE BREAKFAST

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PORTFOLIO/PENGUIN

WHAT THE MOST SUCCESSFUL PEOPLE DO BEFORE BREAKFAST

LAURA VANDERKAM is the author of *168 Hours: You Have More Time Than You Think* and *All the Money in the World: What the Happiest People Know About Getting and Spending*. Her work has appeared in the *Wall Street Journal*, the *Huffington Post*, *USA Today*, *Scientific American*, and *Reader's Digest*, among other publications. She lives outside Philadelphia with her husband and their three children.

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Also by

Laura Vanderkam

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GRINDHOPPING:

Build a Rewarding Career Without Paying Your Dues

168 HOURS:

You Have More Time Than You Think

ALL THE MONEY IN THE WORLD:

What the Happiest People Know About Getting and Spending

WHAT THE MOST SUCCESSFUL PEOPLE DO BEFORE BREAKFAST

A Short Guide to Making Over Your Mornings—and Life

Laura Vanderkam

An eSpecial from Portfolio/Penguin

About the Book

Mornings are a madcap time for many of us. We wake up in a haze—often after hitting snooze a few times. Then we rush around to get ready and out the door so we can officially start the day. Before we know it, hours have slipped by without us accomplishing anything beyond downing a cup of coffee, dashing off a few emails, and dishing with our coworkers around the water cooler. By the time the workday wraps up, we're so exhausted and defeated that any motivation to accomplish something in the evening has vanished.

But according to time management expert Laura Vanderkam, mornings hold the key to taking control of our schedules. If we use them wisely, we can build habits that will allow us to lead happier, more productive lives.

Drawing on real-life anecdotes and scientific research that shows why the early hours of the day are so important, Vanderkam reveals how successful people use mornings to help them accomplish things that are often impossible to take care of later in the day. While many of us are still in bed, these folks are scoring daily victories to improve their health, careers, and personal lives without sacrificing their sanity. For instance, former PepsiCo chairman and CEO Steve Reinemund would rise at 5:00 a.m., run four miles, pray, and eat breakfast with his family before heading to work to run a Fortune 500 company.

What the Most Successful People Do Before Breakfast is a fun, practical guide that will inspire you to rethink your morning routine and jump-start your life before the day has even begun.

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WHAT THE MOST SUCCESSFUL PEOPLE DO BEFORE BREAKFAST

THE MADNESS OF MORNINGS

Mornings are a madcap time in many households. Like mine. On mornings when I am responsible for getting my three children fed, dressed, and in the car by 8:45 a.m., I can be up before 7:00 and, if I'm not careful, feel like much of that time is spent dashing around. My eye is on the clock. I line up boots and coats to stave off last-minute disasters. Even so, it's always possible that one child will make a stand against some tyranny—like being forced to wear socks—and we inevitably cut things close at the end. After I drop them off at two different schools, I usually get back to my desk around 9:15, when, instead of commencing my workday, I'm often tempted to just pour a cup of coffee and goof around online.

Having spent the past few years examining how people use their time, I know such orchestration—spending two or more hours each day getting ready to face what lies ahead—is nothing unusual. Magazines teem with stories on how to tame morning chaos. According to the National Sleep Foundation's 2011 Sleep in America poll, the average 30–45-year-old claims to get out of bed at 5:59 a.m. on a typical weekday morning, with 46–64-year-olds rousting themselves at 5:57. Yet many people don't start work until 8:00 or 9:00 a.m. And by "start work" I mean "show up at the workplace." When people are frazzled from wrangling small children, battling traffic, or even standing in line for twenty minutes at Starbucks, it's easy to seize that first quiet stint at the office as unconsciously chosen me time.

We read through personal emails and peruse Facebook and headlines totally unrelated to our jobs until a meeting or phone call forces us to stop.

In the end you can spend three to four hours a day on mindless tasks or barking at a petulant child to get in the car *now* or we are *driving off without you* instead of on your core competencies. These are your highest-value activities: nurturing your career, nurturing your family beyond basic personal care, and nurturing yourself. By that last category, I mean activities such as exercise, a hobby, meditation, prayer, and the like. The madness of mornings is a key reason most of us believe we have no time. We have time, but it's consumed by sound and fury that culminates in few accomplishments beyond getting out the door.

But mornings don't have to be like this. Studying my own, even on those madcap days, I see how they could be better. They can be productive times. Joyous times. Times for habits that help one grow into a better person. Indeed, learning to use mornings well is, in our distracted world, what separates achievement from madness. Before the rest of the world is eating breakfast, the most successful people have already scored daily victories that are advancing them toward the lives they want.

At least that's my conclusion from studying time logs and profiles in which high-achieving people talk about their schedules. Perusing the *Wall Street Journal* over coffee the other morning, I learned that while I was still sleeping, the Rev. Al Sharpton had already done a workout. "He has a gym in his Upper West Side apartment building, where he's usually the only one working out when he arrives around 6:00 a.m.," the paper noted. He warms up for ten minutes on a stationary bike

and jogs thirty minutes on a treadmill. Then it's on to the stability ball and crunches. "On days he can't get in his morning workout, he uses the gym at NBC Studios. He travels to two to three cities per week and says he makes his staff call ahead to ensure the hotel has a gym." Exercising in the wee hours, he never worries about what he looks like. "I usually wear an old track suit and Nikes," he told the *WSJ*. "It's so early no one sees me." Coupled with dietary changes, however, this early-morning ritual in grubby clothes has made the reverend look quite spiffy. He's lost over one hundred pounds in the past few years.

James Citrin, who coleads the North American Board and CEO Practice at the headhunting firm Spencer Stuart, is also often exercising by 6:00 a.m. He uses that early-morning quiet to reflect on his most important priorities of the day. One day a few years ago, he decided to ask various executives he admired about their morning routines for a Yahoo! Finance piece. Of the eighteen (of twenty) who responded, the latest any of them was up regularly was 6:00 a.m. For instance, according to the interview notes Citrin later shared with me, Steve Reinemund, the former chairman and CEO of Pepsi, was up at 5:00 a.m. and running four miles on the treadmill. Then he had some quiet time, praying and reading and catching up on the news, before eating breakfast with his then-teenage twins. When I asked Reinemund, currently the dean at Wake Forest University's Schools of Business, about his schedule, he said that he'd been running those four miles pretty much daily for decades. "I don't stay in a hotel that doesn't have a treadmill," he said. The exception to the routine? Sundays he starts a little later, and Thursdays he hosts "Dawn with the Dean," when the

Wake Forest students can meet him at 6:30 a.m. to run three miles.

Others of Citrin's survey respondents started even earlier. One executive told Citrin, "There is a diner in town ('Louie's'), where I go most every day for papers and coffee. . . . Opens at 4:30 a.m., have papers by 5:00 or so. . . . They know me there so when they see me through the front window it is time for Conway's large coffee, and four papers. . . . Billy is usually behind the counter, and it is amazing how many regulars he can keep straight."

Whatever the ritual, though, there is a reason for these early-morning routines. Successful people have priorities they want to tackle, or things they like to do with their lives, and early mornings are the time when they have the most control of their schedules. In a world of constant connectivity, of managing global organizations, the day can quickly get away from you as other people's priorities invade—sometimes even those of the people you love dearly and share a home with. As I've been talking with people about their mornings, the phrase I hear repeated is that "this is the time I have for myself." As Reinemund told me, "I look forward to my mornings. I cherish my mornings, my personal time." An executive might never be able to relax in Louie's diner for an hour at 2:00 p.m., but at 5:00 in the morning, he can. I can't write in my journal quietly at 8:15 on those preschool mornings, or lift weights, but I can at 6:15. Parents can also use some of that breakfast time more consciously for nurturing our children, rather than keeping our eyes on the clock. Seizing your mornings is the equivalent of that sound financial advice to pay yourself before you pay your bills. If you wait until the end of the month to save what you have left, there will be nothing left over. Likewise, if you wait

until the end of the day to do meaningful but not urgent things like exercise, pray, read, ponder how to advance your career or grow your organization, or truly give your family your best, it probably won't happen.

If it has to happen, then it has to happen first.

A MATTER OF WILLPOWER

If the world is filled with night owls and larks (like Reinemund, who reports that he was waking up around 5:00 a.m. even as a student), I would be inclined to put myself in the former camp. In college I worked some late-night jobs like manning a café until 1:00 a.m. I studied then, too. Even after college when I got a "real" job, at *USA Today*, that required me to be up at a normal hour for an epic commute, I tended to do my creative work in the evenings. That was my habit, and I still like to work at that time on occasion. Ironic as it sounds, I wrote most of this missive—on what the most successful people do before breakfast—in a coffee shop at night.

Doing that at this stage of my life, however, with small children and work that more than fills normal business hours, required various logistical feats. I had to arrange additional babysitting coverage and answer to the smaller members of my family, who, quite reasonably, expected the hours after school and work to be family time. Consequently, these are not hours that I often take for focused work, let alone for exercise or other such pursuits.

And so I have begun to see the benefits of getting a jump on the day. We all have 168 hours a week, but not all hours are equally suited to all things. I certainly noticed this when I started tracking my time for my book on time management, *168 Hours*. As I kept time logs, writing down what I was doing as often as I remembered, I noticed patterns. Namely, during

normal business hours, I would have one really good burst of productivity in the morning, when I could focus for ninety minutes or more on a single project. Later in the day, I became more easily distracted. Not only was I tempted to click over to email or surf the Web, but things started piling up that I had to answer. I saw this on the time logs other people kept for me as well. As the day went on, the time spent on each individual task began to shrink.

As for exercise, I saw a few folks who managed to exercise after work, but these tended to be young, single sorts. Those of us who work at home could squeeze in a workout during the day, since the lack of cubicle mates meant it didn't matter if we didn't shower afterward (or ever). But the sweat factor was a major deterrent to people with conventional jobs, as was the desire not to be seen walking out with a gym bag in the middle of the day, and the shockingly regular nature of work emergencies. Work hours had a way of stretching into evenings as deadlines loomed, and that planned workout never happened. People who were serious about exercise did it in the mornings. At that point, emergencies had yet to form, and they would only have to shower once. As Gordo Byrn, a triathlon coach, once told me, "There's always a reason to skip a four o'clock workout, and it's going to be a good reason, too."

Logistically, it makes sense that mornings are a good time for exercise or focused work, but as I made a few tune-ups based on my time logs and started pushing phone calls to the afternoon in order to take advantage of my morning productivity burst, I wondered if there were reasons beyond logistics that mornings seemed to be made for getting things done.

It turns out there are. New research into that old-fashioned concept of willpower is showing that tasks that require self-discipline are simply easier to do while the day is young.

Roy F. Baumeister, a professor of psychology at Florida State University, has spent his career studying this topic of self-discipline. In one famous experiment, he asked students to fast before coming into the lab. Then they were put in a room, alone, with radishes, chocolate chip cookies, and candy. As Baumeister and science journalist John Tierney write in their 2011 book, *Willpower: Rediscovering the Greatest Human Strength*, some students could eat what they wanted, and some were assigned to eat only the radishes. Afterward, the participants had to work on unsolvable geometry puzzles. "The students who'd been allowed to eat chocolate chip cookies and candy typically worked on the puzzles for about twenty minutes, as did a control group of students who were also hungry but hadn't been offered food of any kind. The sorely tempted radish eaters, though, gave up in just eight minutes—a huge difference by the standards of laboratory experiments. They'd successfully resisted the temptation of the cookies and the chocolates, but the effort left them with less energy to tackle the puzzles."

What Baumeister and his colleagues took from this experiment is that "willpower, like a muscle, becomes fatigued from overuse." This is a problem because, while we think of our lives in categories like "work" and "home," the reality is that, as Baumeister told me, "You have one energy resource that is used for all kinds of acts for self-control. That includes not just resisting food temptations, but also controlling your thought processes, controlling your emotions, all forms of impulse control, and trying to perform well at your job or other tasks.

Even more surprisingly, it is used for decision making, so when you make choices you are (temporarily) using up some of what you need for self-control. Hard thinking, like logical reasoning, also uses it." Over the course of a day, dealing with traffic, frustrating bosses, and bickering children, plus—more insidiously—electronic temptations that are as alluring as fresh-baked chocolate chip cookies, a person's supply of willpower is simply used up.

"There seems to be a general pattern that major self-control failures and other bad decisions occur late in the day," says Baumeister. "Diets are broken in the evening, not the morning. The majority of impulsive crimes are committed after 11:00 p.m. Lapses in drug use, alcohol abuse, sexual misbehavior, gambling excesses, and the like tend to come about late in the day."

In the morning, though, after a decent night's sleep, the supply of willpower is fresh. We're more inclined to be optimistic; one analysis of Twitter feeds from around the world found that people are more likely to use words like "awesome" and "super" between 6:00 and 9:00 a.m. than at other times of the day. In these early hours, we have enough willpower and energy to tackle things that require internal motivation, things the outside world does not immediately demand or reward—the things we'll get to later in this essay.

That's the argument for scheduling important priorities first. But there's more to the muscle metaphor. Muscles can be strengthened over time. A bodybuilder must work hard to develop huge biceps, but then he can go into maintenance mode and still look pretty buff. Paradoxically, with willpower, research has found that people who score high on measures of self-discipline tend not to employ this discipline when they do

regular activities that would seem to require it, such as homework or getting to class or work on time. For successful people, these are no longer choices but habits. "Getting things down to routines and habits takes willpower at first but in the long run conserves willpower," says Baumeister. "Once things become habitual, they operate as automatic processes, which consume less willpower."

Take, for instance, brushing your teeth. Most of us don't stand there arguing with ourselves every morning about whether we want to brush or not, whether it's worth the effort of getting to the sink, whether the sensation of toothbrush bristles scrubbing around one's mouth is particularly pleasant. It's simply a morning ritual. Likewise, successful people turn high-value tasks into morning rituals, conserving their energy for later battles—those annoying colleagues, traffic, and other willpower sappers that make you want to drink a Mason jar full of wine in the evening rather than hit the gym. The jar of wine is still a bad idea, but if you do work out in the morning, at least you'll know you already hit the gym hours before if you decide to imbibe later. Through these daily habits, you make slow, steady progress—laying the foundation for happiness, health, and wealth. As Tierney and Baumeister write, "Ultimately, self-control lets you relax because it removes stress and enables you to conserve willpower for the important challenges."

IMPORTANT, BUT NOT URGENT THINGS

So what are the best morning habits?

You can, of course, make a habit of anything you like. You could make a habit of doing laundry before most people are eating breakfast, or watching television before your children wake up. You could schedule a twenty-person conference call for that first precious hour of the workday. But most people don't need willpower to watch TV, and laundry tends to get done because it has to get done. Conference calls already rise to the top of the priority list (whether they deserve it or not) because they involve other people and show up on our schedules at certain times. The best morning rituals are activities that don't have to happen and certainly don't have to happen at a specific hour. These are activities that require internal motivation. The payoff isn't as immediate as the easy pleasure of watching television or answering an email that doesn't require an immediate response, but there are still payoffs. The best morning rituals are activities that, when practiced regularly, result in long-term benefits.

The most successful people use their mornings for these things:

1. Nurturing their careers—strategizing and focused work

2. Nurturing their relationships—giving their families and friends their best
3. Nurturing themselves—exercise and spiritual and creative practices

We look at each in turn:

1. Nurturing Your Career

Debbie Moysychyn started a new job about a year ago building a division of health-care education at Brandman University. She kept a time log as part of a workshop I did at the Healthcare Businesswomen's Association national convention and, after a few days of writing down what she was doing, she noted that "some things are painfully obvious!" Most notably, she kept getting interrupted. Her days were full of ad hoc meetings and short chats and thirty minutes on one thing and then thirty minutes on another. Part of this was by design. She was trying to establish a collaborative culture and had an open-door policy with her team. So, viewed from that perspective, these "interruptions" were the most important part of her day. The problem was that she had other projects she needed to do, too, and the disjointed nature of her schedule meant she never got very far.

The answer to this dilemma turned out to lie in a quirk of her personal life. Her teenage daughter played water polo and often needed to be in the pool well before 7:00 a.m. Sometimes after taking her, Moysychyn would go back home and watch TV, or she'd go into the office and spend those early hours cleaning out her in-box. I noted that there were plenty of other

times she could deal with her in-box—in those five-minute spurts between drop-in visits, for instance—but that no one was dropping into her office at 6:30 a.m. So that was a time for focused work. She could choose a top priority for each day, do that in the quiet wee hours, and then relax when colleagues visited her later on.

She agreed to give it a try and found the change pretty easy. She was already awake. She just had to make a habit of respecting this "project time" by not answering emails. A few days in, she told us at the workshop, she was getting so much done that she was sold. I checked in a few weeks later and learned that she was "still using early-morning time to do the heavy lifting." She told me, "I can accomplish more before breakfast than I used to do in a day. Maybe not quite, but I am checking long-standing things off my to-do list."

This lack of interruptions is a key reason that people cite for doing focused work early. You can crank things out; novelist Anthony Trollope famously wrote, without fail, for a few hours each morning. Charlotte Walker-Said, a history postdoc at the University of Chicago, uses the hours between 6:00 and 9:00 a.m. each day to work on a book on the history of religious politics in West Africa. She can read journal articles and write pages before dealing with her teaching responsibilities. "Once you start looking at email, the whole day cascades into email responses and replying back and forth," she says. These early-morning hours are key to managing her stress in a suboptimal academic job market. "Every day I have a job," she says. But "in the morning, I think I have a career." She's on to something; one study of young professors found that those who wrote a little bit every day were more likely to make tenure than those

who wrote in bursts of intense energy (and put it off the rest of the time).

Of course, some people do find that dealing with the rest of the world in the morning works for them, particularly if they do it on their terms: sending emails that they need to think through and deciding on social media messages for the day. Gretchen Rubin, author of the bestselling book *The Happiness Project*, gets up at 6:00 a.m. so she has an hour to herself before the rest of her family gets up at 7:00. "I used to try to do heavy writing then, because I've read so often that people do their best thinking in the early part of the day," she says. "But after a year of frustration I realized that I need to spend an hour catching up with email, social media, scheduling, and logistical things before I can settle down to concentrate—so now I use that 6:00–7:00 hour for that kind of work." She deems this ritual "very satisfying."

In that same vein of building a professional network, I've long thought that the "networking breakfast" concept is massively underappreciated. Parents and teetotalers often skip boozy cocktail parties, and even if you do attend, the presence of alcohol and the end-of-day mindset means people are in social mode, not work mode. You forget to collect business cards, or you collect them and forget why you wished to speak to these people again. In the morning "people will roll up their sleeves and get to work," says Christopher Colvin, a partner at the law firm Kramer Levin Naftalis & Frankel, who often wakes up at 5:30 a.m. to walk the dog and read for work before giving his kids breakfast. To take advantage of that, he started IvyLife, a networking group for Ivy League alums that (among other things) holds weekly breakfasts on Wednesdays in New York City. "I find I'm fresher and more creative in the

morning. I'm more open to being inspired by stories I hear around the table," he says. "By the end of the day my mind is a little more cluttered." Any veterans of the happy-hour scene can sympathize—and know that cluttered feeling just gets worse after a few gin and tonics.

2. Nurturing Your Relationships

I first realized that families could treat their mornings as something other than a death march out the door when speaking with Kathryn Beaumont Murphy, a corporate tax attorney whose time makeover I featured in *168 Hours*. A first-year associate when I met her, she had a hard time getting home in the evenings early enough to spend much time with her daughter. This was a source of great frustration for her, even though she was with her daughter a lot on weekends. I looked at her time log and noticed that she puttered around for an extended period at night, then got up, went to work, and puttered around there. She got coffee and checked personal email or read headlines before settling into work. So I suggested she go to bed on time, get up with her daughter, and use the mornings as Mommy-and-me time before starting her commute. She liked this idea. "It would be so easy to do, I wonder why I didn't think of it," she said. She particularly liked the idea of planning what they'd do together in advance, so she could wake up looking forward to it. Over the next few months, they started making breakfast together, cuddling, or reading stories before her daughter's nanny walked in the door. Given that Murphy's office rewarded late hours, not early hours, I

doubted anyone would notice if she came in a little later—closer to the time she truly started working.

It was a nice way to start the day, a nice way to give her daughter her best, rather than what was left over. Indeed, the mornings became so appealing that, when I checked in two years later, Murphy reported that her husband had taken over the mornings as *his* special time with their daughter and the son they had in early 2010. "Breakfast is now a *huge* production in our house," Murphy told me. "I think they all love it!"

This idea of using mornings as positive family time really stuck with me as I looked at my own life. While my kids tend to get up later, many small children wake up at the crack of dawn. So if you work outside the home and don't see your kids during the day, why not take advantage of this? You can keep your eyes constantly focused on the clock, as I have a tendency to do, or you can set an alarm to give yourself a fifteen-minute warning, and then just relax. People always pontificate about how important family dinner is, but this is just not a reality in families with young kids who want to eat at 5:30 or 6:00 p.m., especially if one or both parents works later hours. But there's nothing magical about dinner. Indeed, if the research on willpower is to be believed, we're more crabby at dinner than we are at breakfast. Family breakfasts—when treated as relaxed, fun affairs—are a great substitute for the evening meal. So these days, I'm trying to say yes to making pancakes more often. I try to put off paging through the paper and instead talk to my kids about what's going to happen during the day, or anything they happen to be thinking about.

This is what Judi Rosenthal, a New York–based financial planner and founder of the Bloom network of Ameriprise financial advisors, does. Her husband handles primary

parenting duties, but "my morning routine includes special time with my daughter, unless I am on the road," she says. "I always prepare her breakfast (bacon is a key ingredient) and set a beautiful place for her at our table. We sit together and chat about whatever. If we have time, we will do some coloring or 'scissoring' with construction paper and glue. Then we make her bed together and I help her to get dressed, singing songs and brushing hair and chatting away. It's about forty-five minutes of the most precious moments I have in a day."

Even if you don't have kids at home, morning time can be great for nurturing your relationship with your spouse, other family members, or your close friends. One of the most disturbing "statistics" I read while researching how people use their time was that dual-income couples could find only 12 minutes a day to talk with each other. If that's all they can find, they're not looking very hard. A week has 168 hours; if you work 50 hours and sleep 56 (8 per night), that still leaves 62 hours for other things. We can probably find more than 84 minutes (12 × 7) in there somewhere. Nonetheless, couples often feel like ships passing in the night, docking in the same port only when they both land on the couch in front of the TV at day's end.

But some couples manage to get plenty of quality time. By 9:00 a.m. each weekday, Obie McKenzie, managing director in BlackRock's Global Client Group, and his wife have already spent close to 84 minutes chatting to each other, because they drive into New York City from their home in Englewood, New Jersey, together. This turns what could be an aggravating rush-hour trip into a daily date. "It keeps us connected all day long," says McKenzie. They talk through various household details

(like repairs after a recent pipe-bursting fiasco), their finances, and life.

Or, as one poster wrote on my blog, describing his ideal morning, there is always "sex at dawn." Not a bad way to fill the time before breakfast, if you think about it.

3. Nurturing Yourself

Most of the executives James Citrin surveyed about their morning routines exercised in some way in the morning. Frits van Paasschen, then president and CEO of the Coors Brewing Company, aimed to be running by 5:50 a.m. and home by 6:30. Ursula Burns, then senior vice president (now CEO) of Xerox, scheduled an hour of personal training starting at 6:00 a.m. two times per week. Steve Murphy, then CEO of Rodale, blocked out ninety minutes for yoga three days a week.

These are incredibly busy people. If they make time to exercise, it must be important, and if they do it in the morning, there's probably a reason. Indeed, some research has suggested that morning exercise has more beneficial effects than exercising at other times. One study, from Appalachian State University, found that people who work out first thing in the morning doze off faster and have less disrupted sleep than those who exercise at other times. One possible explanation is that the body releases stress hormones when you wake up, and working out in the morning counteracts those hormones. Working out later in the day gives the stress hormones more time to take effect. Another study found that early (prebreakfast) vigorous exercise counteracts the blood glucose effects of a high-fat diet, though other research has found better

performance after a light breakfast. Regardless, several studies have found a less medically complex reason that morning exercise is more effective: people who work out in the mornings are more likely to stick with it, probably for the same willpower and logistical reasons that we talked about earlier. A one-time run does little for you. A lifetime commitment to run five times per week, on the other hand, will transform your health.

I quite like running already, but in the summer of 2011, I decided to see if running at dawn made me like it more. The answer? Yes. After we moved from Manhattan to the more bucolic wilds of suburban Pennsylvania in June, I began running in the early mornings on the days when my husband was home. I'd lay out my exercise clothes down to the ponytail holder and set my alarm for 6:20. I could be out the door by 6:30, and I'd spend the next forty-five minutes running on some nature trails by our new home. The thick green leaves provided shade, even during days that would eventually rise to one hundred degrees—important, since I was pregnant at the time and didn't want to overheat. I watched earthworms crawl along the pavement, and I startled deer waiting there in the woods. One particularly glorious morning I saw a rainbow, just as I was turning toward home. Running the same routes many mornings, I started to see progress, like being able to run up a switchback hill without stopping. It was a great time to be alone with my thoughts, to think about the book I was trying to finish at the time, and to ponder my hopes for the little girl merrily kicking inside me as she came along for the ride.

Perhaps recognizing the mood-boosting effects of early-morning exercise, plenty of gyms have classes catering to the a.m. crowd. Julie Delkamiller, an assistant professor of special education, deaf education, and sign language interpreting at the

University of Nebraska at Omaha, does a jazzercise class at 5:30 a.m. four to five days per week. "The class is about ten minutes from home and with superlight traffic, it is really easy to get there," she says. "I love the community of other women, who help with accountability, and the instructors are so motivating. It's funny, but it is almost a meditative time for me as well. Also, honestly, the class is smaller and I like having more space." She gets home by 6:35 a.m. "Everyone else is sleeping so I don't feel like I've missed out on anything 'important' and yet I am taking care of myself, which has an amazing impact on my productivity throughout the day."

If the prospect of improved productivity isn't enough to get you out of bed, there is always the precommitment strategy—particularly, paying a trainer to meet you and make sure you exercise. When he was in business school at the University of Pennsylvania and trying to buff up for his wedding, David Edelman had the reigning Mr. Baltimore work him out at the Philly Sports Club several mornings per week. He was used to the early-morning workout routine; he and his wife got together after bonding in an excruciatingly tough 6:00 a.m. sweatfest called Barry's Bootcamp in Los Angeles when they were both working at Bain & Company. "We were just friends at the time, but taking that abuse together led us to start dating," he says. After meeting Mr. Baltimore three to four times a week at 7:00 a.m. for several months, Edelman cut quite a dashing figure for his beach wedding. Now, even as he runs Reel Tributes, a personal history documentary company, and has more flexibility, he still likes to work out first thing in the morning. "I like getting it over with," he says. If you exercise later in the day, you may spend time dreading it. If you exercise

before most people are eating breakfast, you don't have to think about it long.

Of course, exercise isn't the only thing you can do to nurture yourself. Spiritual practices—praying, devotions, studying scripture, or meditating—are all popular, too. Christine Galib, who used to work in Morgan Stanley's private wealth management practice and who's now a Teach for America corps member working at Boys' Latin school in inner-city Philadelphia, wakes at 5:00 a.m. on weekdays. She does a few biceps curls and plank poses, takes a few minutes to review her tasks for the day, then reads a Bible verse and reflects on it for a few minutes before fetching her breakfast. "Anything I did on Wall Street did not prepare me to teach classes of twenty-five to thirty boys," she says. This ritual "makes my days more manageable."

Wendy Kay, whose work has involved turning around several plasma collection centers (including bringing one that had been shut down back into FDA compliance), says that "my morning ritual of spiritual connection and meditation has been the key to my professional success in my adult life." Through her years working in the pharmaceutical industry, she would wake up two hours before she had to leave the house, and she'd spend a big chunk of this time talking with God, expressing gratitude, asking for guidance, and being open to inspiration. Then she would write down ideas. "When I arrived at work, my vision was always clear, the goals were always clear, and I was able to convey them to my staff and assistants in a clear plan of action," she says.

Manisha Thakor, a portfolio manager turned personal finance guru, sings the praises of Transcendental Meditation. This consists of two twenty-minute meditation sessions every

day. During these sessions, she focuses on breathing and repeating a mantra in her head. She does the first session before breakfast and the second as she's transitioning back to home life in the evening. She began the practice when she shifted from executive to entrepreneur. "The demands were so different, I felt like my work was in my head 24/7/365 and my mind was just never quiet enough for me to create at the level I wanted to." She signed up for training with her husband and has "found it to be one of the most life-enhancing practices I've ever experienced. I think more clearly. Creative ideas 'pop' into my head with more frequency. I am able to look at my day's to-do list with a much calmer and more strategic eye." As a result, it's "made this triple-type-A-driven work junkie a lot more fun to be around."

HOW TO MAKE OVER YOUR MORNINGS

From studying people's morning habits, I've learned that getting the most out of this time involves a five-step process.

1. Track Your Time

Part of spending your time better is knowing exactly how you're spending it now. If you've ever tried to lose weight, you know that nutritionists tell you to keep a food journal because it keeps you from eating mindlessly. It's the same thing with time. Write down what you're doing as often as you can and in as much detail as you think will be helpful. There's a spreadsheet you can download from http://lauravanderkam.com/books/168-hours or you can just use a little notebook or Word document on your computer.

While you may be thinking specifically about your mornings, try tracking a whole week (168 hours). The reason to do this is that the solution to morning dilemmas often lies at other times of the day. You may be too tired in the mornings because you're staying up late. But if you look at how you're spending your nights, you'll notice that you're not doing anything urgent or particularly enjoyable. Jon Stewart's show can be recorded and watched earlier—possibly while you're on

the treadmill at 6:30 a.m. Most of your colleagues wouldn't expect an immediate response to any emails sent between 11:00 p.m. and 8:00 a.m. anyway, so why bother checking your inbox? If you're spending time tidying the house, keep in mind that it will just get dirty again the next day, but you'll never get that time back. If you can't sleep in a mess, try just cleaning your bedroom, and closing the doors to the rest of your home.

As for the mornings themselves, you can be spending them in a very organized fashion and still not be spending them in a way that aligns with your values. Track them carefully and question your assumptions. What absolutely has to happen, and what does not? You may believe that "a good mother makes her children's lunches" but I bet you could find several women you believe are incredible mothers who give their kids lunch money. You may believe that "a man who wants to keep his job gets into the office before his boss" because this is what your father believed, but your boss may be disappointed that he doesn't get the place to himself for an hour first! Does your personal care seem overly fussy? Are your kids demanding that you do things that they are plenty old enough to do on their own? This has been an issue in my house, and part of making over my mornings has been investing time in teaching my children to be more self-reliant. Time not spent chasing down backpacks is time you could spend talking with the kid herself. If you decide that making lunches or being the first person into your office is a top priority, then do it, but understand that this is a choice and not something you "have" to do.

2. Picture the Perfect Morning

After you know how you're spending your time, ask yourself what a great morning would look like for you. For me, it would start with a run (or, perhaps, sex at dawn per my reader's suggestion) followed by a hearty family breakfast with good coffee, then, after getting people out the door, focused work on a long-term project like a book, plus writing on my personal blog. Here are some other ideas for potential morning habits:

> painting, sketching, photography (if it's light out), scrapbooking, crafts, writing poetry, practicing a musical instrument (if you live by yourself), reading through a religious text verse by verse, yoga, Zumba class, walking, training for a half marathon, biking, swimming, working out with a trainer, weight lifting, prayer, reading through a book of devotions, looking through your photo albums or contact list and praying for people by name, meditation, making a gratitude list, writing your own blog, writing "Morning Pages" (per Julia Cameron's *The Artist's Way*), writing one thousand words in a novel, writing in a journal, writing thank-you letters, reading articles in professional journals, attending a regular networking breakfast, having family breakfast, making pancakes, baking, etc., with your kids, reading together for a family book club, reading kids' stories, reading through all the plays of Shakespeare, reading through the best novels of the twentieth century, listening to challenging music like Wagner's Ring Cycle, playing with your kids, doing art projects with your kids, gardening, exercising with your spouse, trying a new recipe every morning, strategic career thinking, planning long-term employee career development,

brainstorming new business lines or sales prospects, coming up with new projects or initiatives, studying, taking a self-paced online class

3. Think Through the Logistics

How could this vision mesh with the life you have? How long will your ritual take? Don't assume you have to add it on top of the hours you already spend getting ready or that you'll have to get in to work earlier. The good thing about filling the morning hours with important activities is that you'll crowd out things that are more time intensive than they need to be. Give yourself fifteen minutes for a shower and you'll take fifteen minutes; give yourself five and you'll be out in five. Unless, of course, your ideal morning ritual is a contemplative shower, in which case stay in there as long as you can. Map out a morning schedule. What would have to happen to make this schedule work? What time would you have to get up and (most important) what time do you need to go to bed in order to get enough sleep? Can you get to bed by that time? People who are used to staying up late may find that counting back eight hours from the time they'd like to get up suggests an improbably early bedtime, but there are plenty of ways to wind down so you won't toss and turn. Stop watching TV or checking email an hour before bed (there's some evidence that screen light can interfere with sleep patterns). Make sure your room is dark and a little cool. Wear earplugs if others are still up and about. Try taking some deep breaths, meditating, praying, writing in a journal, or reading something relaxing to calm yourself down.

As for the mornings themselves, do you need to trade off child-care duties with your partner or hire a sitter some mornings or get your kids to school or day-care earlier? Do you need exercise equipment? Can you work in a home office and buy back your commute time? Can you carpool with a family member or friend?

What would make your ritual easier? Do you need to set your easel next to your bed? Can you find a more cheerful alarm clock, or one you can't turn off so easily?

Come up with a plan and assemble what you need, but whatever you do, don't label this vision as impossible. It's easy to believe our own excuses, particularly if they're good ones. For instance, maybe you're telling yourself that you can't use your mornings to exercise because you're a single parent of small children (or a single parent during the week, a challenge I sometimes face). But, for a moment, forget financial constraints. Pretend you had all the money in the world and list as many options as you can think of, which you'll soon see involve varying costs and degrees of difficulty. You could, for instance, hire a live-in nanny or au pair or bribe a relative to move in with you. You could get a housemate—perhaps another single parent you would in turn cover for when she wanted to work out. You could hire an early-morning sitter on the mornings you planned to exercise, or ask a relative or friend to come over on those mornings. You could find a day-care or before-school program with early hours, or a gym with child care. You could buy a treadmill (new or used) and put it in your basement in front of a television and run before the kids get up. You could buy a double jog stroller and take the kids with you. Looking at the list, the used treadmill seems most cost-efficient

and least logistically difficult to me, but maybe you'll decide one of the other options sounds appealing instead.

4. Build the Habit

This is the most important step. Turning a desire into a ritual requires a lot of initial willpower, and not just for the first few days. The first few days you have enough motivation to move mountains at 5:30 a.m., but then, around day thirteen, you're wavering, and your bed will start to seem pretty enticing. What should you do?

One answer is to start slowly. Go to bed fifteen minutes earlier and wake up fifteen minutes earlier for a few days until this new schedule seems doable.

Monitor your energy. Building a new habit takes effort, so you want to take care of yourself while you're trying. Eat right and eat enough, take breaks during your workday, and surround yourself with supportive people who want to see you succeed.

Choose one new habit at a time to introduce. If you want to run, pray, and write in a journal each morning, choose one of these and put all your energy into making that activity a habit before you try something else.

Chart your progress. Habits take several weeks to establish, so keep track of how you're doing for at least thirty days. In his writings, Ben Franklin described how he scored himself for practicing various virtues (temperance, modesty, and the like). It's an idea Gretchen Rubin ran with in *The Happiness Project*, noting victories on her Resolutions Chart when she made progress toward her goals. Once skipping a day feels like you

forgot something—like forgetting to brush your teeth—you'll know you've got a habit and can take your ritual up a notch.

Also, feel free to use bribery at first. Eventually daily exercise will produce its own motivation as you start to look better and have more energy. But until then, external motivations, like promising yourself tickets to a concert or a massage, can keep you moving forward. And keep in mind that your morning rituals shouldn't be of the self-flagellation variety. Choose things you actually enjoy. Shawn Achor, author of *The Happiness Advantage* and a self-proclaimed night owl, trained himself to become a morning person by creating rituals that make him excited to get out of bed. He starts the day by writing down things he's thankful for. "The reason we stay in bed in the morning is because our brains get fatigued by thinking about all the things we have to do that day. We're thinking about tasks rather than things that are making us happy," he says. But the reverse of that is also true. "If you're thinking about things you're looking forward to, that makes it easy to get out of bed. What your brain focuses on becomes your reality."

In addition to listing things he's grateful for, Achor also uses a few of his morning minutes to write a quick appreciation email to a friend or family member, or even a thank-you note to a high school English teacher. This puts him in a loving, connected frame of mind. "It's usually my favorite part of the whole day," he says. With that done before breakfast, it's not hard to face the morning.

5. Tune Up as Necessary

Life changes. Rituals can change, too. My morning ritual of running with the sunrise disappeared with summer as I finally became too pregnant to do so comfortably. After Ruth's birth, I chose to run in the early afternoons again, when it was light out and warmer, and since I never knew exactly what time she would wake up in the morning wanting to eat. I've started working, instead, on eating a relaxed breakfast with my kids and maybe reading them a few stories before using my morning burst of productivity to tackle one of my longer writing projects. But after my baby grows up a little, I look forward to returning to those morning runs, when the fresh morning air makes you feel like every day is full of possibility.

Because that is ultimately the amazing thing about mornings—they always feel like a new chance to do things right. A win scored then creates a "cascade of success," says Achor. "Once your brain records a victory it's more likely to take the next step and the next step." Believing that your actions matter is how the human mind learns optimism or, to use a better word, hope.

The most successful people know that the hopeful hours before most people eat breakfast are far too precious to be blown on semiconscious activities. You can do a lot with those hours. Randeep Rekhi of Colorado works full-time in a financial services firm. But by the time he shows up at his office at 8:00 a.m., he's already worked out and managed a side business, the website of his family's wine store, WineDelight.com. He wakes at 5:00 a.m. and heads straight to his apartment gym to exercise until 6:00 or so. Then he spends the next ninety minutes on his computer, checking the site's

incoming traffic and answering customer emails. "After work usually quickly books up with networking events, happy hours, etc., so the morning is really the only guaranteed time I can have to myself without sacrificing other opportunities," he says. I cringe thinking about getting up at 5:00 a.m., but the reality is I'm rarely doing much of consequence after 10:00 p.m. Whenever I'm tempted to say I don't have time for something, I remind myself that if I wanted to get up early, I could. These hours are available to all of us if we choose to use them.

So how would you like to use your mornings? As with any other important question, this one repays careful thinking, spending time figuring out what is truly meaningful to you. But once you decide, small rituals can accomplish great things. A habit, Anthony Trollope once said, "has the force of the water drop that hollows the stone. A small daily task, if it be really daily, will beat the labors of a spasmodic Hercules."

When you make over your mornings, you can make over your life. That is what the most successful people know.

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