



The White Space of Life

Terry Barber

I hate being crowded.

Shoulder to shoulder. Pressed up next to people on a jam-packed train—or worse, in the middle of July in Atlanta on the commute home. It's 5:30 p.m., and I can read the lips of the guy on his cell phone in the car next to me. Not because I'm a good lip reader. No, the interstate is bumper-to-bumper, and I'm going nowhere anytime soon.

I get home, and as I'm hanging up my suit and tie, I notice my crammed-full closet, and I think to myself, Wow! This is a picture of my life. For a man, I have way too many shoes. Shoes sitting on top of each other. Shoes still in the boxes. Shoes for running, shoes for tennis. Golf shoes and walking shoes. I look to the right and I see neatly arranged dress shirts—blues, whites, and others—all packed in very tightly. They could use a little breathing room. So could I.

Just before I go to bed, I look at my calendar for tomorrow. It looks a lot like my closet, and that sardine-can train, and Georgia 400 during rush-hour traffic. It's crowded.

I hate being crowded, but I love what I do. I love that surge of energy that wells up from inside me as I reflect on the group I just spoke to and the people who affirmed that I've made a difference in their lives. I press on, thinking through the next round of travel plans I need to make. The bags I need to pack. The ensuing deadlines for proposals, articles, team reviews, budget submission—and follow-up on proposals, articles, team reviews, and the last budget submission. Whew!

Most of my career has been in advertising, branding, and writing. Over the years, I've seen hundreds of ads, letters, proposals, and commercials. In the past, I would judge these creative renderings based on their message and intended audience—still not a bad consideration within the process. But now, as I begin passing judgment, I find myself critiquing something else: the white space. Does it have enough white space? I can't say it enough: I hate being crowded, and I really despise crowded letters, crowded ads, crowded 60-second spots. They try to say so much that I can't hear anything. Like the train, like the highway, like my closet, these communiqués and radio spots are all calling out in one accord, "MORE WHITE SPACE. PLEASE!"

But I love my work. I want people to hear what I have to say, so I can't slow down. Not now . . . maybe later.

Yet some days, I have to wonder . . . with so much to say, to so many people on so many fronts, is it possible that the right people aren't hearing the right message at the right time . . . because there is not enough white space in my presentation—or my life?

When you love what you do, white space quickly becomes a rare commodity. But without it, even that thing you love to do can become burdensome. It has been written over with excess words and activities. You need to pause . . . and create some white space for yourself before you take another step, especially if you're considering doing something different in your life or your career. It's so much easier to edit in the creative development phase than to try to change what has already been published. Widen your margins. Pull back on all that you think you have to say and do. Take some time to get comfortable with some white space. Allow the chatter to fade. It's just not that important. You are. And so am I. We're important.

Being important is important . . . to me. Maybe that's why I fill my agenda to overflowing. The more crowded my life becomes, the more important I feel. People need me. They look to me. I sign checks. I bless those I choose to bless, and curse those I choose to curse. And if I am treated poorly by a client, I can still reflect on my busy life and think, Hey, it's OK, because I have the calendar of an important person. When my wife and kids don't appreciate me like I think they should, one look at my calendar and it all comes back to me: I am still important—to others. (I can tell that, you see, because my life is crowded.)

My wife and my colleagues have sarcastically diagnosed me with OCOED (Obsessive Compulsive Over E-mail Disorder). That bothers me. If they were as important as me, they would understand that I need to give my divided attention to e-mail while I'm in meetings, eating out, or playing with my kids. It's what I do—and I love what I do.

Besides, I am the only one who can do what I do.

I recently attempted to delegate some of my projects to a few very capable people. I know they are capable, because I hired them. But when one project came back to me, I gave it a B+. I could tell my staffer had put his best effort into it, because it took him twice as long as it would have taken me, so I did not want to appear critical. But I wasn't satisfied—so I fixed it myself. Now I am really happy with it.

But in the reverse delegation in the pursuit of excellence, my life just got more crowded. Somewhere between frustration and exhilaration, I thought, *Déjà vu*. It was the train and the commute and my closet all over again. Now I will have to compromise my commitment to coach and train people because my life is so crowded with work that only I am capable of doing! *Sigh . . .*

But finally, I'm on a plane. No one next to me. End of a long day. It's quiet, and I find some white space. I choose not to unpack my Kindle reader. I choose not to look at my calendar. Instead, I just let my mind go. I'm extending my margins.

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But just as I start to click Save on this template with these wide margins, I am suddenly overwhelmed with self-pity. Why should I be the only one I know with such a crowded life? Why don't others care as much as I do? Why can't I find at least one truly capable person? Why do I have to get so much e-mail? I can feel my blood pressure rise. I sense my energy being drained. But I know better than to stay on this track and squander what little bit of white space I have.

So instead of double-clicking on Self-Pity, I close the page and open a brand-new one. A page that is refreshing and energizing, with enough white space to make notes and observations, and to capture fresh and exciting insights. This page is not crowded, and it is good. Now, what can I do to keep it this way?

Widen your margins. Pull back on all that you think you have to say and do. Take some time to get comfortable with some white space.

Before I allow the margins on this new page of my life to crowd out my precious white space, I plan to take ten minutes in the morning when I first wake up to get my moral bearings by reading a chapter from the book of Proverbs. There are 31 chapters in the book. One for each day of the month. Perfect.

I'll also invite someone I trust, someone who knows me well, to hold me accountable for keeping this white space in my life. There is something powerful about doing life with someone else. You are no longer left to your own rationalizations.

And finally, I will harness the power of my will. The power to choose. “To choose what?” you say? To not be a victim of a crowded life.

So, how can you choose not to be a victim of the Curse of the Crowded? Here are seven ideas that can change your day-to-day from ballistic to balanced.

1 → Go for impact versus impulse.

It’s tempting to allow e-mail and meetings to set our compass for the day, but how much margin would there be if every activity in the course of a day served to get you closer to high impact? Let this principle be a filter for what gets on your to-do list and what does not.

2 → Duplicate yourself.

If you knew you were going to be hit by a truck today, who would you want to take your place tomorrow? If no one comes to mind, it’s a good time to begin to look for that person. If you can’t equip, empower, and inspire at least one other to do what you do, you’ve ceased to be a leader and started just being a doer, and the bad news is, there will never be an end to the things you are presently doing. There will never be any meaningful white space to enjoy. Right now, find someone who could capably replace you, begin to train that individual. Then give her or him at least one of the critical tasks that you’re currently doing. Coach and encourage them to success.

3 → Watch out for “life suckers!”

Be wary of the person who says, “Can I have a few minutes to pick your brain?” This is usually code for “I want to infringe on your white space and get something out of you for free.” Stand guard against the emotionally needy, who want to attach their emotional umbilical cords to you to borrow some of your energy.

4 → **Be emotive versus emotional.**

Appealing to one's emotions can be a powerful form of communication, and applied to the right set of circumstances, can create white space for you. Being emotional, on the other hand, will eat away at your white space every time you allow negative emotions to rear their heads and rule the day. Nothing eats at productivity like destructive emotions caused by quarrels and misunderstandings. There can be a significant difference between what a person meant and what you thought she meant. So before you interpret a response as a personal offense, get clarification by saying something like, "I want to understand what you meant by . . ." Then choose not to be offended until you learn more about what was behind the person's words or actions. This simple step could potentially keep you from squandering a lot of time and emotional energy (read, white space).

5 → **Strive to be profound versus perfect.**

The problem with striving for perfection is that you never get there. Perfection is overrated anyway. This is not an argument for being sloppy. It's about finding balance between what was promised and the time and space available to create it. Whatever it is that you think you lack in perfection, you can more than make up for by communicating and designing profoundly.

6 → **Choose faith, not worry.**

Worry and fear are usually not things that you schedule into your day. But just like five-pound weights on your feet while you try to walk, worry and fear will slow you down and quickly eat away at the margins of your life. However, remember that the opposite of worry is not calm. It's faith. Faith that things will indeed work out whether you know exactly how or not. Faith that even if the worst happens, it's still going to be OK because you are part of a more global "canvas," and God has already seen the final painting. Faith is not mere intellectual assent. Neither is faith a feeling. Faith is a verb. It's being sure of what you hope for and certain of what you do not see. With it, you will increase your life's margins exponentially. Without it, you will surely live a crowded and preoccupied life.

7 → **Call 411 for the 911s.**

Even after having conquered our own worry and fears through faith, we often have to deal with “911” people in our lives, lest they scribble loudly in our white space. Why do 911 people feel that unless we get enraged like they do, we don’t really care or even hear what they have to say? Take one step into the ring with a 911 person and say good-bye to your white space for that day.

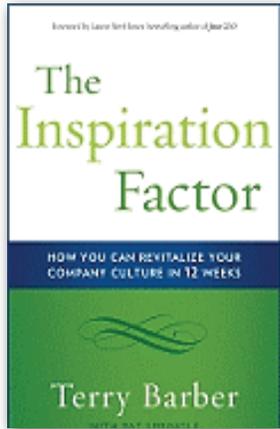
It’s not even worth trying to provide possible solutions for 911s, because they just want to vent and hopefully enlist others into their cause. So what can you do instead? Turn the 911 call into a 411 experience by asking defusing kinds of questions.

- What’s the worst that can happen?
- If the worst does happen, can we still be OK?
- What will we learn from this?

With this 411 information, you can now respond with a potential game plan to deal with the issue and get those 911 monkeys off your back.

Oh, that swarming train. The jammed highways. My teeming closet. They are all still there, and I bet you have your crowded spaces too. But now, instead of letting the pages of your life become equally cram-packed, why don’t you try the seven suggestions above to create and maintain some big, wide margins of white space? You need it. So do I.

Because I hate to be crowded. 🙄



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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Terry Barber is the founder and CEO of Most Inspiring, LLC, a company dedicated to helping companies, nonprofits, and leaders become truly inspiring from the inside out. Some of the organizations he has consulted with include John Hopkins Sidney Kimmel Cancer Center, Duke Cancer Center, AARP Foundation, the ALS (Lou Gehrig Disease) Association, and The National Parkinson Foundation. Over the life of his career as a professional speaker, Terry has been face to face with well over 500,000 people. A noted media resource, he has been interviewed on ABC News Now, FOX News, and CNN Radio, and featured in Forbes, BusinessWeek, the American Management Association, and on HR.com. He can be reached at tbarber@inspirationblvd.com and www.inspirationblvd.com.

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