

PODCAST TRANSCRIPT

# Episode 180:

## Making Time for the Things You Love with Laura Vanderkam

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J: Hey everyone, I'm talking with Laura Vanderkam today, and she's the author of several time management books including 'Juliet's School of Possibilities', 'Off the Clock', and 'I Know How She Does It'. She's the host of the podcast Before Breakfast and the co-host of the podcast Best of Both Worlds. She lives outside of Philadelphia with her husband and 4 kids and blogs at [lauravanderkam.com](http://lauravanderkam.com). Laura, so happy to have you here, welcome.

L: Thank you so much for having me.

J: So tell us a little bit about your podcasts. I know my listeners are always looking for a great podcast, tell us about both of those.

L: Yes. So I have 2 that your listeners might be interested in. One I co-host with my friend, Sarah Hart-Unger, she's a practicing physician and mom of 3, it's called Best of Both Worlds. And each week, we talk about topics related to work and family from the perspective of people who really love both. We both really enjoy raising our families, we've enjoyed building our careers, and we want to share that message that it's really possible to enjoy both in your life. And so we've had wonderful guests on that. My other podcast is quite a bit different, it's an every weekday morning short podcast called Before Breakfast. And the idea is you get a little productivity tip that will help you take your day from great to awesome. You can listen to it while you are making your coffee, while you're waiting for the bus, while you're driving kids to school, but it's just something that you can try today that will give you a better a day.

J: And that's every weekday?

L: Every weekday morning, 5 days a week, yeah.

J: So sweet, Before Breakfast, check it out, everyone. Well, I already know everyone's excited now because they can hear we're going to be talking about time management among many other things, but let's pull back a little and hear your favorite quote or motto before we dive in there.

L: Well, one of my favorite quotes came from one of the busiest people I ever interviewed. So I've, you know, talked to tons of people who have a ton going on, as I'm sure you do. And like you, this woman had 6 children, she was running a successful small business, you know, 12 people on the payroll, so a lot of stuff going on. And I was talking with her about how she managed her life and the way she ex-

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plained it to me is that, "You know, listen, Laura, everything I do is my choice." And rather than say, "I don't have time to do X, Y or Z," she'd say, "I don't do X, Y or Z because it's not a priority." And so in my mind, I've sort of compressed that statement to be, "I don't have time," means, "It's not a priority."

J: Mm-hmm.

L: And I think that that is, you know, sometimes a little harsh (Laughs) to think about, but it's probably more accurate language. I mean, people say ridiculous things like, "I don't have time to floss," like that's so not true.

J: (Laughs)

L: You don't want to floss.

J: Yes.

L: Like, let's just own up to this fact. Using this language just reminds us that time is a choice. And I'm not saying there won't be horrible consequences to making different choices like, you know, you probably should go to work tomorrow, that's a good idea.

J: Mm-hmm, mm-hmm.

L: But over the long run, we have the power to fill our lives with the things that deserve to be there, and I think that quote really gets at that.

J: I love that, I love that. Well, tell us about your low point and I assume, you know, you had to go through the process of learning what your priorities are, and just walk us through what you want to share with us today.

L: Yeah. So, I mean, I've had many low moments (Laughs) it's like sometimes it's hard to identify one; which I think is true for anyone's life. I mean, nothing is ever all daisies and rainbows, even if we like to tell stories that way in retrospect. You know, one thing that really comes out to me, it's kind of difficult to get started as a writer. It's one of those jobs where there's not like, "Here, I apply for a job where I'm a book writer who gives speeches on a topic," it's very much that you have to build it yourself, and so there were fits and starts with that. Many years ago, I wrote a career book that was about the rise of self-employment among young people, and I was very excited to get a, you know, book contract for this and I did a lot of research, wrote my book. It sold terribly, like I mean, literally almost no copies whatsoever. So that was a little bit disappointing and then I was like, "Well, but I still want to write another book, you know, let me see if I can... my publisher has the option on the next book, I'll come up with another topic and send in a proposal." And meanwhile, I was in the process of starting my family so I'm expecting my first kid, I got the news that they were turning down my next proposal while I was in labor in the hospital. (Laughs)

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J: Oh, great, oh. What, were you check an email through your contractions? (Laughs)

L: Yeah, well, you know, labor can take a while.

J: (Laughs) Oh gosh.

L: You know, it's... especially the first one, so I figured, you know, I got to break here...

J: Yeah, right.

L: ... I'll look at my BlackBerry; we had BlackBerrys back then.

J: Right.

L: (Laughs) So, you know, I was like, "Well, that's great." And so on some level, I... you know, if I had wanted to, I think I could have interpreted it as the universe is sending me a sign, just like focus on building my family for a while like, "You don't need to keep, you know, whacking your head against the wall of trying to do this stuff," but I was like, "No, I want to keep whacking my head against the wall, like this is what I love to do."

J: Mm.

L: And so it took a long time after that to, you know, build up a new platform, build... get up new ideas of what to write books about, get another publisher to meet with me and take me seriously, but I finally did. And I wrote my first time management book a couple, you know, years when my son was about 2 years old, it came out, and that's what I've been writing about since. It turns out that I just needed a different topic, I needed a different publishing home, and once I got those pieces in place, it was, you know, more that we could keep the journey going.

J: I love that you shared that idea of, you know, "Oh, this is too hard, the universe is sending me a sign I should just quit," but you chose to interpret it as, "Okay, what do I want? I'm just going to do it because I want to." Do you have advice for anyone else who comes across the same thing? How do you know when it's the universe saying to quit or when you should push on like that?

L: Well, I kind of think if it's something you want to do, the universe is not telling you to quit (Laughs). I mean, that's like...

J: Oh, that's true.

L: (Laughs) There may be other people in your life who are telling you to quit, but I don't think it's necessarily the larger forces of the universe or God or whatever you want to call it, because I generally think that we're called to live our best lives where we're making the biggest possible difference. And part of that is about knowing what we are good at, knowing what we are passionate about, and really throwing

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ourselves into that kind of work, whatever it happens to be. So, you know, I think if it's something that you truly want to do and you actually don't really care if there are people saying, you know, "Don't," or, "It's not right," or if you get, you know, obstacles thrown in your way and you say, "Well, you know, I'm kind of interested to see how I can move around these," if it's not like, "Oh well, you know, actually I don't care that much. Let me go find something else that I am more interested in." I mean, if you don't care, there's our own stubbornness, but I think that things that we really enjoy doing energize us and tend not to feel like, you know, oppressive, they tend not to feel like really hard work. I mean, it may involve hard work, but it doesn't necessarily feel that way.

J: Yeah. So if it feels good, do it; nice and easy, I like that. Well, tell us more about how you became a time management expert and what it looks like in your life, deciding your priorities and all the other things you teach.

L: Yeah. So, I mean, as I talked about my story of needing a new topic, needing a new platform, I wrote about a lot of things in those, you know, first year or so after I became a parent and after I realized this, you know, publishing career route thing was not working out quite as I wanted. So I wrote a lot of different topics and I paid attention to what I was interested in, I paid attention to what other people were interested in. And one of the things I was writing about was how people were spending their time. I've been fascinated by studying people's schedules, it's just always something I enjoyed asking people about. I'd asked about a day in their lives, you know, how they manage different aspects of their lives, and when I write articles about people, that's what I'd often deal with.

J: Mm-hmm.

L: And so, you know, in retrospect, I can see these threads coming together, but I was not officially a time management expert until I wrote the first book about it, it was called '168 Hours', and that was put together with my current publisher, Penguin Random House, their portfolio division. We met together, I had been sort of circulating a proposal that was vaguely time management oriented and they helped me figure out that that was the right angle for it. And so, yes, so once you write a book on a topic, I guess you become an expert on it and then you keep writing more about it. And I really enjoyed getting to learn about it, that's the great thing about being, I guess, a time management 'expert' (I'm putting 'expert' in air quotes here), but I get to study so many amazing wonderful people's schedules and I get to ask lots of people about how they spend their time. And from that, I learned wonderful things that I can put into practice in my own life as well.

J: Awesome, that's really, really great. And you were interested in it and you followed it and it led somewhere, and now you're helping other people. So let's say someone's listening and they have the belief like you said that they don't have enough time, and what would you say to them about priorities?

L: Well, I think that the first thing you need to do is figure out what truly matters to you. We have all kinds of things filling our heads that we assume we should spend time on, but often these assumptions don't come from anywhere in particular that is, you know, truly matching with our lives. People spend all kinds of time on housework for instance because they have certain stories. One that I see all the

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time on time logs for instance is this story we're telling ourselves that there's like an 11:00 PM home inspection, right? If your house isn't picked up by the end of the night, I don't know, somebody's going to come do an inspection and give you demerits for having toys on the floor or the kitchen not be complete, you know, clean and sparkly and your things aren't put away. Like, no, there's no 11:00 PM home inspection, like where does this idea come from? So whereas, you know, I know (and I'm sure you know too) those toys are just going to come out again the next morning, but you'll never get that time back. So maybe we can let go of this idea of the 11 PM home inspection. We do this at work as well, I mean, people will have a story of like, "Oh, I need to be in my desk when my boss walks by, you know, I must be responding to all emails within 10 minutes or else I look like a slacker," or, "You know, nobody here takes a lunch break, therefore I can't either," you know, there's all sorts of things...

J: Mm-hmm.

L: ... we tell ourselves. And it's important to examine, "Are these true? Do I know this to be true? What evidence have I seen? Is this really how I want to be spending my time?"

J: Mm, that's so true. How do you get people to figure out what their stories are around time?

L: Well, I think one of the first things we do... you know, I always suggest people do is actually track their time.

J: Mm.

L: Because the worst stories we tell ourselves are ones that are just based on these broad ideas that have no basis in fact. You know, I've had thousands of people track their time for me, I usually have people track a whole week, but sometimes I've had it, you know, be less than a day or something. You know, people generally have a tendency to overestimate how much they work; curiously enough.

J: Mm-hmm.

L: Because work stands out in the mind. It's structured, it's orderly, you have things you have to do, you're accountable for it in a way that we often aren't in our personal life, so it's very easy for our personal lives to seem smaller compared to how we spend time at work. But, you know, there's 168 hours in a week. If you work 40 hours (so a standard full-time job) and sleep 8 hours a night (so that's 56 hours per week), that leaves 72 hours for other things.

J: Mm-hmm.

L: So even with a full time job, you are not working and awake for almost twice as much time as you are working. And yet people, they will say, "Oh, I have a full-time job, it's the full amount of my time, therefore I don't have time for anything else," clearly that's not true. Curiously enough, people, especially women who do have full time jobs or particularly demanding jobs will often underestimate how much time they are spending with their children.

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J: Mm-hmm.

L: And I think it's because they have this story that, "Oh, well, you know, if I'm succeeding at work, I must be neglecting my family; that's what, you know, culture tells me," and then they track their time and they realize that they're around their children like for gobs of time. (Laughs)

J: Yes.

L: You know, 168 hours a week, it's like, "Oh, I only see my kid for 2 hours at night," oh, and there's also like 2 hours in the morning (Laughs) when he's up at the crack of dawn and you don't leave for work until 8:00, yet somehow...

J: Mm-hmm.

L: ... it's like it never even happened because it isn't Tuesday at 10:00 AM, so therefore it must not count.

J: Yeah.

L: But, you know, people track their time and they see these things. I've had the wonderful experience of people telling me like, "Oh, I used to feel guilt, I don't feel guilt anymore," like that's what I'm in this business for.

J: Yeah. Well, you know, how do you recommend people plan their free 72 hours when they do have kids? Because I've found with my kids, you can't really plan as easily as you think. I mean, you can't just schedule all the things and make it work, or can you? What do you think?

L: Well, I wouldn't say you can schedule all 72 hours, and of course they're not free in the sense that they're, you know, unconstructed incompletely, there's probably some hours that are unconstructed that you could schedule in different ways, probably not all 72 because you're caring for the children and have various household responsibilities. But you could sort of make a list of like, "Well, what are the things that I would most like to do for myself? What are the things I would most like to do in my relationships?" and then, you know, "How can I fit some of those in each week?" I really suggest people look at the whole week as opposed to any individual day because, you know, there aren't enough hours in the day to get to everything we want to get to, that's totally true, but we don't live our lives in days, we live our lives in weeks. So maybe it's that, you know, you want to do one thing with your spouse in the course of the week. Maybe, you know, you're trying to spend a little bit of quality time with each of the kids in a course of a week, figuring out when that can happen. Maybe it's that you want to exercise 3 times in the course the week. Okay, well, we look at the whole of the week, we see when would be the best time for those 3 times to occur, and then here's a real pro tip, we look for a backup spot. Because if those 3 times can't happen at those times for some reason, well, that doesn't mean it can't happen at all, just means you need a backup spot. So what is that backup spot? And so you do that with all your priorities and, you know, keep the list short. You're not going to do 50 things, but can you do 3? Probably.

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J: Yeah, yeah. So what are your top priorities?

L: Well, you know, I... in the work front, I am always trying to do a good job on the major aspects of my media empire as it were (I am laughing about that because it's a 1 person show) but, you know, my podcasts, my speeches, I do a lot of speeches, and then I also do writing, mostly it's books, but I also keep a blog and occasionally write articles for places. On the relationship front, I definitely try to do something with each of the kids each week that feels like quality time with each of them. It doesn't always happen, but I sort of look at the calendar and make sure that broadly, it's been balanced that each kid gets something that's helping to fill them up. Try to do something fun with my husband every week or so. On the self-part, I exercise every day because that makes me feel like I have the energy to do everything else.

J: Mm-hmm, mm-hmm. And what kind of exercise do you like or how long?

L: I run.

J: Oh, runner, yeah.

L: I'm one of those crazy people who runs every single day, by which I mean a streak that's been going on for several years now. It's good for me in this sense that I don't have to run far and I don't have to run fast, but I've told myself that I will run each day. And the upside of having it be daily, it doesn't have to be daily, I'm certainly not saying anyone else, but for me, it changes the conversation from, "Am I going to run today?" to, "When am I going to run today?"

J: Ooh, that's good.

L: And I think the... yeah, the 'when' is a question of logistics, like the motivation doesn't really matter. And it doesn't honestly matter because, you know, exercise is good for you and I'll feel better once I start. So (Laughs) better to just do it, find a spot, do it, and I'll feel better afterwards.

J: Hmm, that's really great, "When am I going to exercise today? When am I going to cook my healthy meals this week?" all of it, yeah.

L: Yeah, not, "Am I going to do it?" like, I don't know, that's sort of an existential question, but 'when' is very practical.

J: Yeah, yeah. Well, what does your morning routine look like?

L: So one of the things I always say to people, there are no typical days; and this is certainly the reality if you have children that days change. And so I can tell you what sort of the standard mood of a week-day is, but I would say this usually, you know, only happens 3 or 4 days a week because there's always something that turns it off. I tend to wake up around sometime between 6:00 and 6:45 which is, you know, whenever the 4-year-old gets up. He's reached the point where we can just put him in front of

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cartoons and go back to bed; which is a blessing (Laughs). Maybe it's not winning me parenting awards but, you know, 4 kids and I'm tired. So he does it for a while. I get up for sure by about 6:45, take my shower, come down at 7:00. And so 7:00 to 7:50 is like this ongoing breakfast shift...

J: (Laughs)

L: ... where I get to spend time with all the kids in different stages whose schools start at different times in sequence. And, you know, for a while, I was sort of like, "Gosh, this seems like a really long time to be hanging out in the kitchen," but now, I've sort of decided, "You know, it's cool, it's time to chat with all the kids before they start the day." And most of them can get themselves ready at this point, so it's just the time when we chat and have their breakfast.

J: Mm-hmm.

L: And 7:50, I either drive the middle schooler to school or a carpool takes him. Our babysitter comes at 8:00, so that's sort of when I generally go into my office to do a couple things. I try to do a little bit of weight lifting in my...

J: Mm-hmm.

L: ... office just to get that in. 8:30, do the bus run, come back in; that's for the elementary school kids, come back in about 5 minutes later, and that's when I start my workday by about 8:35.

J: Ah, perfect. What kind of weight lifting do you do? Heavy?

L: No, no, kettlebell, resistance bands, you know, just equipment I can have in the home office. But...

J: Yeah.

L: ... it's more about just trying to do something. For years, I was saying, "Gosh, I need to weight lift, you know, I need to lift weights, need to lift weights," never really doing it. But I think it's because of my mind, it was like I needed to go to the gym to do it, and I was like, "Well, you know, I know there's a lot to be said of lifting heavy and the people who get into it look amazing, but I think I'm fine with the kettlebell for now (Laughs)..."

J: Mm-hmm.

L: "... and just doing a little bit most mornings. And maybe later, I will get into the heavier lifting, but for now this is fine."

J: Do you do a bunch of different kettlebell swings or have some ones that you like? Because I also have kettlebells so...

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L: Oh yeah.

J: And I don't often find people who use them. So... (Laughs)

L: Well, I mean, I have a couple different things I do. I mean, I do the kettlebell squats, I do where there's like a 1 leg deadlift that's kind of a good one, you pick up the kettlebell from the ground if you're balancing on one leg and then, you know, pick it up.

J: Mm-hmm.

L: That's a good one for balance and for weight. I do some, you know, sort of overhead kind of throws, like bring it down from the bottom to up over my head and...

J: Mm-hmm.

L: ... you know, switch sides and do some... so there's like a figure 8 one you can do around your legs that ...

J: Ooh, I haven't done that one, wow.

L: ... works your lower back, which is...

J: I bet.

L: ... really good. Yeah, that's a muscle you probably should... more often, most people don't because we're so obsessed with our abs, but...

J: Mm-hmm.

L: ... you know, your lower back is what's going to make you happy or unhappy in your life. So...

J: Yeah.

L: (Laughs) ... good to work that.

J: Yeah. Do you have a favorite kettlebell app or a person you follow that...?

L: No. I mean, occasionally, I get bored with what I've been doing and then I Google like to see kettlebell exercises and I find something else that looks cool. That's how I came up with the 1... you know, 1 leg deadlift and how I came up with a figure 8 one. So I just, you know, move on to new things as I get bored with what I'm doing.

J: And what, you spend like 5 minutes a morning on that?

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L: Yeah, it's 5 to 10 minutes...

J: That's great.

L: ... it's really not that much.

J: Awesome. Well, let's have a quick break for our sponsor and then come back and see if you want to share a few time-saving tips with us.

Alright, welcome back, Laura. Share with us a few of your favorite time-saving tips, especially geared towards busy working moms or stay-at-home moms probably. I feel like we struggle the most with time.

[Laughter]

L: Yeah. Well, I mean, you know, we've talked about tracking time and how important it is to be honest about where the time truly goes, because then when you see it, you can make changes if you want. You may decide, "Everything's awesome," and that's great, we should celebrate that, but, you know, if you're making a business decision, you'd want to work from good data, and it's the same with our time; we want to make sure we're working from good data. So, I mean, 1 thing... you know, 1 point that comes up a lot is how we spend the time before bed, because this is time... you know, if you have younger children, they're often in bed, if you have teenagers, this is a totally different matter and then you may need to shift it around. But if we're talking sort of, you know, stay-at-home moms of younger children for instance, this is kind of the time you could to yourself and you could do things, but the question is, "What?" because it tends to be sort of a lower energy time too. So, you know, make yourself kind of a short list of like, "What would be fun for me? Maybe I'd like to just read 50 pages in a book and then I will collapse on the couch and watch TV. Or, you know, maybe I've been saying I want to paint or something. Well, I'm going to challenge myself to 2 nights a week after the kids go to bed and paint, and then... then watch TV or collapse on social media," or whatever. By having something we do just to use that time, it can make, you know, life feel a lot more doable. I would also say don't spend too much time at night getting ready for the next day. This is one of these things that I get called for or articles. I swear, like every month, somebody's writing an article, they're like, "Well, what should I do before, you know, the night before in order to have a good morning?" And I totally get where this is coming from because, you know, mornings can be crazy. Like, if you're trying to get people out the door, you know, if you're adding your own work into the mix too, that adds elements to it as well. But even just getting kids out the door to school, it's always like, "Well, let's, you know, pack everything, let's have everything lined up, like everything put out, my outfit, their outfit," you know, then you've just spread you're getting ready over the night in the morning too, so you haven't actually saved any time.

J: Mm-hmm.

L: This keeps being presented as a time-saving tip, it's not. Now, if you feel horrible in the mornings and you hate finding things in the mornings, like sure can be a sanity saving tip, but it's not a time-saving tip. I think in general, just, you know, figure out ways you can put things on autopilot or do less of them.

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Like, you know, you don't have to make kid lunches, like the school lunch could be there, could be great, kids might like that. If they're old enough to go to school, they might be able to make their own lunches, that's something they can do. And so that doesn't necessarily have to be on your plate. You know, kids' outfits, again, if they're old enough to dress themselves, probably doesn't need to be, you know, your deal. You control what comes into the house, but after that, it's sort of, you know, their own expression. So I think looking for ways to take yourself out of things can save a lot of time.

J: So smart, yeah. And my husband is really good at this, he had our kids dressing themselves, even shoes by 2 years old... (Laughs)

L: Wow, that's...

J: ... not in a mean way.

L: ... that's impressive. (Laughs)

J: Yeah, yeah, not tying shoes of course, but velcro. And that's really paid off, our kids still have always managed that well. So, yeah, I agree with you, get it off your plate; that's great advice.

L: Yeah. Or even just making things automatic. I mean, we have the rule in our house that backpacks, coats, and shoes come off in the mudroom and they cannot go anywhere else. Like, if 1 of these items is ever found elsewhere in the house, like it must be returned immediately to the mudroom. But the result is that we're never hunting for stuff in the mornings, like the backpacks, the coats, the shoes are always there. And so that saves time, it means I don't have to lay things out the night before either because, you know, there's just no other place it can be.

J: That's smart.

L: Yeah. So, I mean, it's been... I guess we've just never done it any differently so the kids don't even know that like shoes could go elsewhere (Laughs), like this is just not a concept that like...

J: Mm-hmm.

L: ... some people keep shoes in a closet, "Well, didn't know that." (Laughs)

J: So all the shoes of your whole home are kept in the mudroom at all times?

L: For the children, the children, yeah.

J: The children, okay, wow.

L: But they don't...

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J: That's great.

L: ... they don't have many shoes, you know? The boots were down there during the winter, but now it's summer so the boots have been put away.

J: Mm-hmm.

L: So it's basically just their daily shoes that they wear to school, you know, and then sports, like cleats, are put in a basket in the mudroom.

J: That's fantastic, that is a great tip. Well, any other tips that you want to share with us?

L: Well, I think that actually that's sort of paring it down, I mean, I guess there are people who have many, many shoes for children (Laughs), I guess I just... just that's been a place I haven't wished to go in my life. But I sort of have that same philosophy for myself too, I try to limit my outfit choices. I think most of us can waste incredible amount of time getting ready. We're better off investing a little bit of time upfront in choosing smaller number of outfits that we know work for us, maybe getting some professional styling help if that's an option or if you have a friend who's really good at that thing who can, you know, take you shopping or look through your closet and match up outfits. And then just have those outfits, like go through them and like, you know, just get... put one of those on, like don't make a big deal about it. Because I think it's the hunting through 100 shirts, some of which no longer fit, some of which have holes, that's what drives you crazy.

J: Yeah. Are you really good at decluttering?

L: You know, I'm not the world's best, I know some people are definitely better at that. I sort of... my problem is more I'm an under buyer. I tend to not even bring stuff into the house in the first place, it can be... there's this huge barrier to get me to spend the time to go shopping for instance. So...

J: Yea. Oh, that's good.

L: So there's not as much to declutter after the fact.

J: Yeah, and you have more in your bank account, perfect, yeah. Well, tell us a time when you followed intuition or gut instinct or God, the universe, whatever words you want to use and how it turned out. Because I've been talking a lot about that on my podcast and I made it a question recently.

[Laughter]

L: Well, I think deciding to continue to write even when I was getting a lot of rejections was good, because it's the more stuff you put out there, the more likely it is that something will happen.

J: Mm-hmm.

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L: And a lot of the wonderful things that have happened in my life have been seemingly random opportunities that come to me, but they're not in the sense that, if you put enough stuff out there, people will see you, people will find you; if you make yourself accessible, they will come to you. So, I mean, one sequence of rather wonderful events that happened for my career for instance, a couple years ago, I decided to track my time for a year. And, you know, I tracked my time for various weeks here and there over the years and it was just... you know, I'd asked other people to track their time so it seemed fair for me to try it too, but I never tracked it like continuously. I was like, "Well, you know, I bet if I do it for a long period of time, like a year, I will find somewhere to write about it," right, like that's kind of... you know, "And I'll write about it as I'm going, I'll write about it after the fact, it'll be great." So, you know, I'm tracking time for a year, I'm letting people know about the stuff on my blog, I post in, you know, after a year of this on my blog, like, "Oh, yeah, I've got some interesting things that came out of this, you know, I can't wait to write about them." I got an email a couple days later from an editor at the New York Times who asked, "Hey, if you haven't written for it somewhere else, would you like to write about it for us?" (Laughs)

J: Ooh, yeah. (Laughs)

L: I'm, like, "Uh..." like wait 2 seconds to respond to that one, "Yes, I would like to write about it for you." So I did, I wrote an essay about tracking my time for a year. And so I was like, "Yeah, this is great, get a lot of attention for it, yay, wonderful. You know, byline in the New York Times hard, to see a downside of that." Then a couple days after that appeared, I got an email from one of the curators at TED Women, which is one of the major TED conferences, and it turned out that their theme for the next year was going to be time. And so they saw my essay and had I guess Googled me and seen a few videos of me speaking various places and asked, you know, I could be considered for this. And so, you know, I talked with them and that was able to eventually get an invitation to speak at this TED conference, which was an amazing opportunity as a speaker. Like, once the video of the TED talk appeared, I was, you know, probably able to double what I charged overnight, and like the volume of requests coming in was... you know, had gone from like 2 a month to like 4 a week.

J: Mm-hmm.

L: (Laughs) So it was just like, you know, amazing opportunity.

J: Mm-hmm.

L: All of this is just... I mean, you could say it's totally random, but it's also that you put stuff out there. I mean, I put many other things out there, I've written many other blog posts that led to absolutely nothing. But, you know, you do enough stuff and you get lucky.

J: Yeah, I agree. It's like throwing spaghetti at the wall, some of it is going to stick, for sure.

L: Some of it's going to stick.

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J: Yeah.

L: And some of it doesn't too, but like, you know, it's if you're reaching out to like 100 people, somebody's got something, right?

J: Mm-hmm.

L: Like, that's going to happen, something wonderful will come of it. So...

J: Exactly.

L: ... you know, just keep putting yourself out there.

J: Yeah. Well, let's talk about a few of your favorite things. What is your favorite book currently; or books plural?

[Laughter]

L: Yeah, I have so many favorite books that it's hard to even say. Probably my favorite self-help book (since that's the genre I write in), I... many, many years ago, I read 'The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People' and I found it very useful. Like, I found it more about trying to be a good person as opposed to like, "Here's how to get a great parking spot," you know? (Laughs)

J: Mm-hmm.

L: So it was like one of the best books I've read in that regard for that. And in terms of fiction, I reread Virginia Woolf's 'To the Lighthouse' like every other year. For some reason, I just love her prose, and it's a sort of slow book, but it kind of builds and you see all these amazing things she's doing in the book, so that's one I've reread many, many times.

J: And what's that one again? Say it 1 more time.

L: Virginia Woolf and it's 'To the Lighthouse'.

J: Virginia Woolf, okay, great. And what's your favorite happiness tool?

L: Well, let's see, I mean, exercise is definitely a happiness booster for me. And, you know, I mean, even if I don't feel like going for a run, afterwards I feel much happier than when I started. So, I mean, it's gotten to the point where if I feel stuck on anything, I feel like, well, just put on my shoes and go outside and run, or if for some reason I can't run, I will go outside and walk. And almost inevitably, whatever I've been stumped on will come to me while I'm walking around, but if not, I'll feel better about it when I come back. So that's often good too.

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J: Mm, I find that to be true as well. When I want ideas, walking is the best, and then dictating into my phone while I walk is so easy to get it down, so thank you for that. And your favorite easy meal.

L: I think, you know, I'm a big fan of like salmon with vegetables because...

J: Mm-hmm.

L: ... it's like healthy. Like ooh, you know, salmon and broccoli, that sounds like so virtuous, and yet it takes no time at all. You can put a piece of salmon in the oven and it can be done in like less than 20 minutes and you put whatever you want on it, olive oil and salt or some sort of marinade if you want, or nothing, lemon, I don't know, it's all pretty good. And then just steam the veggies and it's like a real dinner.

J: Exactly.

L: And it's literally a 20 minute meal. (Laughs)

J: Yum. And your favorite life hack. I mean, not that you didn't share a bunch, but maybe something non time-management related.

L: So I plan my weeks on Friday afternoons, and I think that this habit has really been helpful with keeping me on track. And other people might find it useful too, which is Friday afternoon is really good time to think about the future because most people are not doing much else on Friday afternoon, sort of sliding into the weekends at that point. It's really difficult to start anything new, but you might really be willing to think about what future you should be doing.

J: Mm-hmm.

L: So I take a few minutes on Friday afternoon, make myself a 3 category priority list, career, relationships, and self, and then just, you know, a couple items in each, like, "What are my top priorities for the next week in each of these?" and then look at my calendar, figure out roughly when they can go and then hold myself to it over the course of the week, and then the next Friday, make another list. And, you know, it's just a really simple way to check in and say, "Well, am I doing what I think is important?" you know, "Am I spending time on the things that matter to me?" Because it's so easy to just get busy in life and then not do stuff, but, you know, if you take that moment to pause and check in, then you probably will do it.

J: Yeah. Well, this is an interesting question I want to ask and I've never asked it before, but I think you can do it. Think of 10 things you say no to to make sure have time for those priorities and important things.

L: Well, I say no to all kinds of things, I'm sure there's more than 10. I would say my guiding principle for it is always like I ask myself when I'm asked to do something, like, "Would I do this tomorrow?" Because,

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you know, often when we're asked to do things in the future, it's sort of like, "Oh, well, my calendar's open, you know, for November (Laughs), like sure, I guess I could do it in November." But then come November, like the calendar will be filled and I'll be just as busy as I am now, it's not like I'll be a different person in November. So I think that asking ourselves like, "Would you do it tomorrow?" helps make clear what the opportunity costs are. And if I would feel like very resentful about having to do this thing tomorrow, well, that's how future me is going to feel about doing it, so better to be kind to future me and just say, "No, you know, I won't be able to take that on."

J: Mm, yeah, that's a great one. And so do you like volunteer or do PTA stuff?

L: I do. I'm the class parent for one of my kid's classes. You know, I try to focus on stuff that I will enjoy or I think that I could be good at. So I, for instance, come in to kids' classes to do presentations on writing, that's something that I think I could talk about, whereas, you know, other things, I might not be as good at. I've certainly done crafts with kids' classes, but they have to be very patient with me...

[Laughter]

L: ... about the...

J: Yeah.

L: ... the crafts. So, you know, focus ...

J: Gifts and talents, yeah.

L: Gifts and talents, focus on our core competencies.

J: Right, right, that's awesome. And what does it mean for you to be a vibrant happy woman?

L: It means that I am making time in my life for the things I love. I mean, that could be running, I sing in my church choir, which is actually required a fair commitment of time versus like a secular choir because we actually sing every Sunday. So, you know, it's not only that we rehearse, we also sing for church. So it's been about, you know, 4 or 5 hours a week that I need to commit to this. But as we mentioned in 168 hours a week, if you work 40, sleep 8 a night, so 56 a week, we have 72 for other things. So in fact, I could find 5 hours in my 72 hours to sing. And so that's made me feel wonderful to have this in my life that, you know, even with the work and the kids, there is space for these things I enjoy doing. So, to me, that's what makes me feel vibrant and happy.

J: Perfect. And let's have a challenge to our listeners and we'll say goodbye.

L: Well, I would challenge people to try keeping track of their time. I mean, I know it sounds kind of not fun. I tracked my time on weekly spreadsheets, so I know that sounds even more not fun.

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J: (Laughs) Oh, wait, you're still tracking your time?

L: Oh, I'm still tracking, like 4 years later, I find it fascinating, probably not fascinating to anyone else, but...

J: When...

L: ... it's a good record of my life.

J: ... when in the day... yeah, when do you do it, in the moment or at the end of the day?

L: I usually check in about 3 times a day and write in what I have done since the last time I checked in. So it's by no means perfect, like I don't have, you know, every time I get up and get a glass of water, that's not recorded on the time. Like it's in half hour blocks and I sort of roughly right what I did and that half an hour.

J: That's cool, like a journal.

L: Yeah. If it's more than 1 thing, I'll put a slash, but, you know, often, it's just like, you know, 'hang out with kids' or, you know, 'read' or 'work' or, you know, it's... things like that. So it doesn't have to be perfect, broad strokes are okay, but the goal is to see where the time really goes. And if you like it, awesome, and if you want to change something, now you know where it goes so you can make sure you're changing the right thing.

J: Ah, that's really good. Do you also track your finances and your food as well?

L: I don't. I recently did lose a little bit of weight, but it was more by just being more careful with treat foods, I decided that that was what I was going to do. Finances, obviously we make sure there's more money in the account than there is going out, so that in that sense, it's tracked, like it's recorded for balance like that. But I'm not one of those people who enters everything like into...

J: Yeah.

L: ... a Mint app or something like that, yeah.

J: Yeah. I'm just curious if there's, you know, this type of personality that tracks everything, but maybe... have you seen people succeed in doing that, even if they believe they can't track something like that?

L: I think it's a habit like anything else, and it is a skill. Many people are not used to turning time into words, but I thought... I mean, most people have had some job in their life where they had to keep track of their hours, right, like you... you know, when they punched in and punched out right, but like you had a record of the fact that you worked those 8 hours. You know, people who've had to bill time to clients have had that experience. So it's really just about taking that a little bit more broadly and thinking about

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all your life is like projects that you're billing to some code or another.

J: Mm.

L: And, you know, it's only for a week, I guess, a week would be amazing. If you can only do a few days, that's okay. And one way to sort of get a start on this is to just think about what you did yesterday. Most people can actually remember yesterday with... I'm going to go a geeky here, there's... it's like 80 to 90% accuracy in terms of reconstructing yesterday...

J: Right.

L: ... after yesterday is gone. So you cannot recover recall 2 days ago, you will have no recall of that, but yesterday, you can still get. So why don't you record what you did yesterday and now have, you know, today up to now and then just check in at night and what you did between now and tonight. And, wow, you've got 2 days of data already, like, you know, so maybe you'll just do 1 more day and see what you can get from that. So...

J: Wow.

L: ... it doesn't have to be hard.

J: It's funny, I'm thinking about what I did yesterday (Laughs) and I'm like, "Oh, do I want to track that?" because then it forces you...

L: (Laughs)

J: ... to face the truth of what you did with your time.

L: Yeah, well, it's... I mean, it's... it is like tracking calories...

J: Yeah.

L: ... and food in that sense. So people are like, "You know, I only ate grilled chicken and veggies; and of course those 6 chocolate macarons that I grabbed... (Laughs)"

J: Yeah.

L: "... over the course of the day," like, we just don't want to know. But it's okay because everybody wastes time.

J: Right.

L: Like, it is fine to find out that you had like the 2 hour Instagram bender the other night, like...

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J: (Laughs)

L: ... so you did. Like, it doesn't change whether you did or not, like if you record it or not, like...

J: Mm-hmm.

L: ... you may as well just know. And then you'd say, "Well, was I happy about it? Did I need that? Was it a stressful day and I got some sort of happiness out of it?" if so, awesome, but if not, you know, then maybe do something different next time.

J: Yeah, maybe adding that caveat of to write down what you did without judgments, 0 judgments allowed.

L: No judgment.

J: Yeah.

L: No judgment.

J: Yeah, I like that; okay, I can do that (Laughs). Well, this has been so awesome, Laura, and where can people find more about you if they want to learn more?

L: Yeah. Well, I hope people will come visit my website, which is [lauravanderkam.com](http://lauravanderkam.com); it's just my name. There, you can learn about my various time management books or check out my 2 podcasts, Before Breakfast or Best of Both Worlds.

J: Cool. Well, thank you so much for being here, I love all the tips you shared today.

L: Thank you so much for having me.

J: Take care.

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