Disrupt Yourself Podcast

EPISODE 368: CAL NEWPORT

Welcome to the Disrupt Yourself podcast. I'm your host Whitney Johnson, CEO of Disruption Advisors, where we help you build high performing people and teams, –– because organizations don't disrupt, people do. That's right – the fundamental unit of that disruption - it's you.

How many of us have mastered the skill of **looking** busy, at some point in our professional lives? It's an art, really – moving from one tab to another with light speed, peering at the screen and making that face that you think communicates determination, drive, intent. Typing with the intensity of closing the biggest business deal of your life.

Our guest today says that it's nothing to feel bad about. When a portion of the population moved from factories to cubicles, they still brought that factory-floor mentality with them. Look good in front of the boss, keep working, don't stop moving. Cal Newport calls this pseudo-productivity – the art of **looking** busy. It may have worked when we were assembling cars or toasters, but behind a keyboard it's both a waste of time and talent.

Cal says there's a way out, though. He calls it *Slow Productivity* – also the title of his new book, out now. How can we accomplish our dreams without the emotional and physical burnout that so many industries seem to take for granted? I hope you enjoy.

Whitney Johnson: So, Cal, you've written a lot of books, a lot of articles for *The New Yorker* about productivity, which requires a lot of productivity and discipline on its own. So my first question for you is, where do you think this this focus on productivity and discipline came from? Is it from your childhood? What happened that made you or caused you to feel so motivated to write and think about this so deeply?

Cal Newport: Well, you know, I trace it all the way back to my teenage years where I ran a dot-com company right in the 1990s as a teenager, a high school student. This was the first dot-com boom. I had a little dot-com company because back then the internet was new and the business community quite unwisely decided that, well, young people know about new stuff, so we should hire young people with these preposterous companies. So, I had this preposterous company. But the real benefit, long term benefit of doing that is that I got used to reading pragmatic nonfiction. So, I'm a teenager going to the business section of Barnes and Noble. I'm reading these books, the time management books, the marketing books, the leadership books. I'm getting used to that, that format.

Whitney Johnson: Yeah.

Cal Newport: Alright. Then I go to college, I get into writing in college, and I get this idea for a book. I said, you know, what I want to do is write a book for students that's written like a business book. Right? Because I've been exposed to these business books. Then I went to college and I got my first student loan statement and said, uh oh, I got to get my act together. And I went to the bookstore and said, hey, let me get a book on how to be a good student.

Cal Newport: Just like you can get a book about how to be a leader or how to be a good marketer in the business world. And all the books that were available to students in the early 2000 didn't really do this. They had this focus on being fun and kooky, and you don't want to be too serious or you're going to scare off the student. And I was like, oh, that's nonsense. College students take themselves very seriously. So, I had this idea what if I wrote a student advice guide? Exactly like a business book. No nonsense. You want to do well, here's what you should do. I interviewed good students. Here's what they do. Like write the book. No nonsense. So that's how I got started at a really early age. I mean, I was just turned 21 when I signed that deal with Random House at a very early age. I started writing books for students that was trying to codify how good students organize their time, how they studied, how they approached their scheduling. So, it's almost as if such a thing exists. I was a pragmatic nonfiction productivity prodigy in the sense that I was quite literally writing books on this at a very early age.

Whitney Johnson: So, I have a curiosity. What was the dot-com company that you started that led you to go to Barnes and Noble and read all these books on time management, etc.? What was the company?

Cal Newport: Princeton Web Solutions.

Whitney Johnson: Say more.

Cal Newport: It was basically website design, though I wasn't a designer, so we had a team of designers and programmers, largely located overseas. We were sort of early to the IT outsourcing idea, which is kind of crazy because we were in high school. Also, me and my co-founder, Mike Simmons, we were in high school at an age before cell phones. Right? So, we were running a business with real clients, paying us real money, and we were literally unreachable until 4 or 5. Right? So, there was this other really interesting experience I had running that company in the late 90s is that we figured out how to be very process oriented. We realized that if we have a very clear process and a client extranet you could log into and a daily work blog to see exactly what was going on and things you signed off on. If we could be very structured, our clients would be okay that they couldn't reach us. If, on the other hand, we were not, if we were disorganized, our clients were going to quite reasonably be like, you just need to answer my emails when I write you. Right? And so, there's this interesting lesson I learned in the 90s that's carried through to a lot of my future thinking about work that you can trade clarity for accessibility, that actually constant accessibility from like a client or a colleague, that's a second order demand. They don't really want to be in touch with you all the time. They just want clarity on how they get things done. And if you don't give them that clarity, then they want you to answer them right away. But if you give them that clarity, then

they're okay that you are the whatever the modern equivalent is of a high school student who can't be reached, running a project for them. So, there's some interesting insights I picked up during that era.

Whitney Johnson: So good. And necessity is surely the mother of invention yet again. So, did you know you wanted to be a computer scientist from a young age?

Cal Newport: I got into computers pretty early. My mom was a computer programmer, so I knew about that as a thing as early as first and second grade. By the third grade, I was programing computers. You know, by middle school, I was fluent in a bunch of languages. By high school, instead of having a normal summer job like my siblings lifeguarding at the pool, I was going to office parks where I was computer programing for, you know, large companies. That came very fluently to me, that I knew, I said I'm very good with computers. And so, I did know that I am going to study computers one way or the other, but I was also doing a lot of writing. Right? I was known for writing in the elementary school. I was put into an old school gifted and talented program for writing, where you would just write all day. I was a very precocious reader. I did very well on the you take the PSATs as a middle schooler and got invited to the CTY camp, not for mathematics, but for creative writing. Right? So, I also had that other aspect going on. I wrote, I was a good writer, I read all the time, and was considered a good writer. So, I sort of had these two things. I really liked computers, and I really, really liked writing. And I guess I'm not very imaginative because I just like, let's just do that. And that's 30 years later. Those are the two things I'm still doing.

Whitney Johnson: Well, you know what's so interesting, Cal, is I hear you, one of the things that, I think about and have written about in, you know, the idea of personal disruption is that you want to play to your distinctive strengths. And what's interesting, as I hear you say this, is that there may be a lot of people who are very good at computer programing, and there may be a lot of people who are very good at writing, but how many people are very good at being a computer programmer, good at writing, and very, very good at process? You put those together and you now have a superpower and the ability to make an idiosyncratic contribution to the world. So, it's interesting to see how these different talents and skills and passions have coalesced, to be able to help you do the work that you're doing now.

Cal Newport: Well, and I became more explicit about that more recently as well, because there was a while, let's say, like during grad school, where these felt very separate because I'm studying theoretical computer science, I'm at MIT, I moved more towards the math side of computer science for various reasons. I'm studying that, but the books I was writing in my early 20s were these student-oriented books. So, this felt very separate. Right? How to do well in college, how to solve the whatever conjecture. Right? Then I get to my first academic job, hired at Georgetown, right where I still am today, approaching tenure. I write the book *Deep Work*. I realized at some point that book does very well. It's seen as a productivity book. And it is. But also, I realize it's a book in response to technology. Right? It's a book that became necessary because we introduced network computers and mobile computing to the office. We introduced email, we introduced Slack, we introduced you could bring work home, and that created a necessity to start caring about focus because it became scarce for the first time.

Cal Newport: And so, I had this epiphany around the time I got tenure that, you know, I could bring these two worlds together. I could write about the places where technology is disrupting how we work or how we live, or how we relate to each other and explore solutions. So, I could have my academic focus as a technologist be overlapping with my ability to write. And hey, because I'm giving solutions, I can throw in my sort of, prodigious early exposure to like systems and advice in there as well. And that's the way I've seen my writing ever since, in my books and in my role at *The New Yorker*, is the foundation of all of it is technology comes in, disrupts something about our lives. We got to understand how it did that, and then we need to understand how we fix that. So, you know, I I'm seen as a productivity person, but all that productivity work is in the context of the digital, completely changed knowledge work. And it's been a scramble ever since trying to figure out how to make work. So it's all in response to technology.

Whitney Johnson: I love it, which is the perfect segue to talking about your latest book called *Slow Productivity*. You've been writing about this for a while. How did it coalesce to the point that you said, okay, this is my next book, you know, because it takes a lot of work to do this, you know, to write a book. How did this come together where you said, this is my next book.

Cal Newport: There are two things. There's one personal and one broader, and they happen right around the same time, which is always a gift when you're looking for an idea to have the moons align. So, there's a personal aspect, which was, you know, I have three boys and right around 2020, 2021, we're getting to this point where they're all elementary school age, or the youngest was about to become elementary school age. They're hitting that core young elementary school age, and there's a real shift. They suddenly needed essentially, like every minute of time I could give them like the dad time. And I don't know if it's because they're boys or because of the age, but it really felt like a shift to me. And it felt really important, like they really needed as much time with me as possible, and they actually did need it. Right? So, this is I'm reaching the peak at some sense of my professional powers, right when this is happening too. So, I start wondering, here's the question I need to answer. How do I keep producing stuff I'm really proud of? Like I've built up this ability over 30 years and I care a lot about this while still having lots of time for the family.

Cal Newport: More time than I was spending before. Like, how can you produce stuff that matters without also having to have your life be subsumed with work. The exact same time this is happening, pandemic hits and this becomes a constant sort of question I began hearing from my podcast listeners and my book readers. Right? They're reporting a sort of new level of frustration with the reality of knowledge work, this nihilistic sense that they're just talking about work on Zoom and not really producing things. They're reevaluating. What do I even want to get out of my work? And so, I get this extreme frustration from my audience, and I realize, like, oh, we're all dealing with the same issue here. So, we're all looking for the same solution, a new way of thinking about what it means to be productive and knowledge work. We need to first understand how we got here, which is, you know, my specialty, and then understand how we might get out of here, which is my other specialty. So, it became very natural all of a sudden right around 2020. Oh, this is what I need to tackle next.

Whitney Johnson: Mhm. So, tell us what pseudo-productivity is.

Cal Newport: This is the antagonist in the story, right? This is what I think has created all the problems. But to be a little bit more precise, it's going to be pseudo-productivity, plus a character that enters in a later scene. So, pseudo-productivity itself is a concept that emerges mid-20th century. Right? So, what happens in the mid-20th century? Knowledge work emerges as a major economic sector. It's 1959, is when the term knowledge work is coined. This is clearly going to be a major economic sector. So, there's a lot of management theory that begins to the form driven largely by Peter Drucker at the time, who coined the term knowledge work, a way to figure out how do we manage knowledge work. Right? The issue that we faced was that knowledge work was different than industrial manufacturing, and it was different than agriculture. So, in industrial manufacturing, we had a very clear notion of productivity. It's a ratio that Model T is produced per labor hours input. Right? So, you have this ratio. Then you have a clearly defined production process. You can change that process. And if that number gets better, you say this process is more productive. That came out of agriculture. Right? That's where we first thought about this idea on producing this much wheat per acre of land.

Cal Newport: We changed the way we do crop rotation. The number goes up. It's a better way to plant crops that's more productive. Right? So, we were so used to this thinking the knowledge work emerges. We can't do this anymore because knowledge workers, I'm doing seven different things right now, and it's different than the nine things you're doing. And there is no set system to measure or improve, because it's all how we organize and manage our work is all internal and autonomous and obfuscated. There's nothing to measure like we could at a at a Ford manufacturing plant. So, the compromise that emerged out of early management theory in the mid-20th century is pseudo-productivity. We will use visible activity as a crude proxy for useful effort. So, if I see you doing something that's better than not seeing you do something. So, let's all gather at the office. We'll treat it like a factory shift. There's bosses here, and we'll just kind of make sure you're working. If you're doing something that's probably going to be useful. And that was pseudo-productivity, which is not super accurate, but okay, whatever it was okay. Until we get to the late 90s, early 2000. Then we get the front office IT revolution. See I see everything through the lens of technology. We get the front office IT revolution and in particular we get networks, we get mobile computing, we get ubiquitous internet. Now suddenly super productivity becomes scary because we can demonstrate activity at an incredible fine level of granularity now by sending and responding to emails, by sending and responding to Slack. And we can do this anywhere. There is no more, if you're not at the office, there's no way to observe if you're doing labor or not. This is when pseudo-productivity began to spin off the rails.

We see this clearly in the productivity books literature right around from the 90s. Going into the 2000, the tone of productivity books shifts from, really confident to really sort of nihilistic. We see that shift right around, then we get this, this overload explosion. And I think it's entirely a dynamical systems response, student productivity plus this new technology. So, it starts to get worse in the early 2000s and just steadily gets worse. Until we hit the pandemic, at which point the pandemic just pushes the non-sustainability of pseudo-productivity. It just pushes it over the edge. And that's when people start throwing up their hands. So, we get quiet quitting and the great resignation and the hybrid work wars. All of this is people just, this is not working. And that's where we are now.

Whitney Johnson: Yeah. Interesting. And then at the same time that's happening, then you're having this with your children and you're hearing from your readers. So, it's the perfect storm. One of the things that I, actually, before we go to that, palate cleanser - where do you do your writing? Is there a specific spot, say, the lovely cabin on the front of the book?

Cal Newport: Oh, I wish that was my cabin. That would be. Yeah, if that was my cabin. Maybe if the book does. Well, that'll be me. That's my...

Whitney Johnson: That's your goal, your reward.

Cal Newport: I hate to admit it, by the way, but I think they added the cabin.

Whitney Johnson: Oh, AI? Okay. Well, that's fitting right. Technology and nature merges. They added the cabin, oh that's good.

Cal Newport: I think so, yeah. That's a beautiful park. I don't know. But it's a good question. I write in several different places for sure. So, in my own house, for example, and you've seen if you've been to my house before, but we have a library study where we don't keep any of the electronics. Right? So, there's no permanent computer in there. Our printers not in there. Our files aren't in there. It's separate from our home office, which is like where normal office electronic stuff is. So, I write in the library. I had a desk built by a company in Maine that focuses on building desks for college libraries. And so, we had I had them build this oak desk that fits right in there. And I write in there and not in the home office, which turns out to be really common. A lot of writers, I talk about it some in the book. There's a lot of writers who have very nice home offices, and they're very nice homes, but do their writing someplace completely different and often somewhat eccentric and sometimes seemingly pretty terrible. But they want to have a place to write, that's not where they do other things. So, I write there and then I'll sometimes right here, I'm in my, I keep offices near my house where my podcast studio is. And so, I'll come to my podcast studio. They have a room for writing here that I'll sometimes use, and I'll sometimes use the coffee shop right below my studio. I'll use all three of those things. All three of those places.

Whitney Johnson: Yeah. So, it's interesting because one of the things you do talk about in the book is this idea of rituals and places. And so, you have three specific places that you typically go to, right? So that, you know, when you enter that that location, your mind and your body say it is time to write. Okay. All right. So now, one of the things that you talk about in the book is, you wanted to prove accomplishment without burnout is not only possible but should be the new standard. So, let's go to the gist of the book. What do you want the reader to walk away from? I know you talk about three pillars. Where do you want to take us so that people walk away from this book different?

Cal Newport: Well, I mean, let's start with the contrarian, like foundational contrarian conclusion, which is pseudo-productivity, which is a focus on activity, is really bad at actually producing useful stuff that's valuable. Right? And this is different, and I think this is important like to start here because it's a difference between what's happening in knowledge work and other sectors. Right? So, I think we have this mental model from thinking about sort of labor activism in general, that usually we're dealing with a zero-sum situation. The factory owner wants you to work much longer hours because that makes the factory owner more money. You don't want to work much longer hours because it's really hard and draining. And so, you have the zero-sum game back and forth, and maybe we're going to have collective bargaining action that try to gain some leverage against you. It's usually zero sum. Or in the service sector, you know, I run a Starbucks and I'm using an AI scheduler that I squeeze more money out of my staff. But it's worse for the staff because their schedule is unpredictable and it's very hard to

arrange childcare. It's zero sum. This makes your life better, your life harder. Knowledge work, what's going on with pseudo-productivity is much more complicated because pseudo-productivity doesn't produce things very well, so it's not good for the companies, it's not good for the people doing it. It's not good for the managers. It's to no one's advantage except maybe Salesforce because they bought Slack. So, you know, they want people to use a lot of Slack.

Whitney Johnson: I'm working, I sent you a slack message. Working, working, working.

Cal Newport: Exactly.

Whitney Johnson: Okay. Go ahead.

Cal Newport: Right. So, that's the first contrarian idea to get in there. Is that what we're doing now doesn't work for anybody? Right? So, this is not because people often see slow productivity in the first instinct is like, okay, yeah, I'm going to make my life easier, but it's going to make my boss's and my company's life worse. And like, I hope I get away with it. It's like actually it sort of makes everyone's life better, because pseudo-productivity is a terrible way of taking a human brain and using it to create information. It has value in the marketplace. It's just a terrible way of doing it. Right? So, like I start there and then I say, so what should you do instead? And very briefly, slow productivity has three ideas. One is workload management. Do fewer things and more importantly, do fewer things at once is what that really means. So, work on a small number of things at a time. Do them well, then move on to the next thing, as opposed to having lots of your things on the plate at the same time, and sort of frantically jumping between them and doing nothing very well. So, do fewer things at once. Principle number two: have a more natural pace, take longer on projects. Don't try to squeeze it into the shortest possible time. You'll produce much better results in the long run. Have more variation in your intensity. Don't use a factory model of intensity. If I show up every day and it's eight hours all out, all in, and I do that all year long, you need more variation. And then the third principle is you have to couple this all with really caring about quality. Like what do I actually do that's valuable? Let me focus on doing that as well as possible. And if I do that, it's going to make everything else much easier.

Whitney Johnson: Um, so good. You know, it's interesting, this idea of slow productivity, it's deliberate, it's evocative. And I had the experience, and I don't know if other people have said this to you, Cal, is that when I started reading the book and just literally reading those words, slow productivity, I felt calmer. Have you have people said that to you?

Cal Newport: Slow is a powerful word for at least in the English language. There's something about slow, and it's so different than the visceral feel of modern knowledge work, which is like defined by stressful, anxious, frenetic busyness. And it's like the exact opposite, and somehow contrasting that with the word productivity, which people think pseudo-productivity. Right now, there's like a dialectic. It clashes. And I think that really opens up a lot. You know, it's an evocative phrase and an evocative word for sure.

Whitney Johnson: It's interesting because I think I'm having this reflection as we're talking. So, as I think about the S curve that we use to think about what growth looks and feels like, we talk about, you know, the launch point of the curve that, you know, that initial part that feels flat but grows very fast. So, we describe it as slow and then fast and slow. But as I'm listening to you. I think there's an opportunity to really reframe that slow, that feeling of slow or frustration and say, okay, you can feel that way. You might feel frustrated, but what if we reframed it and just said, no, it's slow because you're creating and to have that, have a complete reframe. So, that's something that's coming up for me as I'm listening to you say that, especially because as I was reflecting on these three pillars of doing fewer things, working at a natural place or pace, excuse me, and obsessing over quality, the thought that kept coming to me is, how do you see anxiety and self-trust playing a role in these? Because it seems like that's what's either making it possible for slow productivity, is self-trust, and anxiety is making it so you can't. So, I'm just wondering about some of those qualities or experiences that people are having that make it possible for them to do this.

Cal Newport: It's sort of a choose your poison situation, right? Because pseudo-productivity, is a huge source of anxiety because what it requires is that you have to constantly be negotiating within yourself. Do I do more

activity now or not? Because it's always accessible and it's how you're measured. Activity equals productivity. So, every moment of your day you have a phone, you have a laptop is a moment that I could be performing visible activity that would that would look positive. And this is what I'm supposed to do. This is what someone who's valuable does. And so, you have to constantly have this negotiation. It's anxiety producing. Right. On the other hand. It's very anxiety producing to not be doing that as well. It can be very difficult at first to step away from that, especially if you're doing this somewhat unilaterally. And that's the perspective, by the way, I mainly focus on in the book. Right? You could think about organizationally shifting towards slow productivity, and I really hope organizations do. But I've also learned that organizations rarely shift. So, I'm really focusing on the individual. How do you make this shift internally, even in an organization that still worships at the altar of pseudo-productivity? It's anxiety producing at first. Long term it gets better because, again, pseudo-productivity is not very effective. So, as you subtly begin to shift your own rhythms and habits and systems without making a big splash about it, but subtly or shifting it towards a slow productivity definition, you begin producing better stuff and you begin producing more stuff, and you begin to get noticed of like, well, what's going on with Whitney? Like, this is really like, I'm impressed, and then the anxiety begins to abate because you're like, oh, this is working better. But it's a very difficult transition to make it first.

Whitney Johnson: Did you have to make that transition?

Cal Newport: I think I've always naturally had something like slow productivity going on. Right? It was my newsletter and blog in the very early days, for example, when it was focused on students. Even back then, the motto was, do less, do better. Know why? So, it was essentially the principles of, and this was when I was just trying to help, back then, what I was trying to do was help students who were stressed out and overloaded, do well in school and get opportunities without being stressed out and overloaded. So, this this idea has always been with me. I've always been constitutionally not well conditioned for busyness. I can't be busy. Like a crowded schedule is very hard for me. I don't like doing lots of things. I'm happiest. It's why I'm an academic and a writer. I'm happiest when you say, go away for six months and come back with something good. Like, that's my happy spot. The way I usually put it is like, I love a schedule where it doesn't matter what I do tomorrow, but it does matter what I do this month. You know, that's what I'm, that's what I'm looking for. So, I've always sort of naturally had this inclination. But working on this book was a way for me to say, let me actually isolate what I'm doing here, clarify what matters and what doesn't, so that I can really tune up my game. Right? Because I want to do this at a much higher level. I don't want to be intuitive and instinctual here. I want to really be very good at slow productivity, because it matters now in a way that it didn't before. So, it's always been my inclination. But now it's like I've gone pro with my slow productivity.

Whitney Johnson: And with your children, the pandemic, it allowed you to really have the need to up your game. I love that you've gone pro. Okay, so in the book you have a few really interesting case studies of people who found their groove without burning out. And one of them is Jewel. Very interesting story. Give us a little bit of, of this gem of a story.

Cal Newport: I think Jewel's story it's particularly important because it comes in this third principle about really caring about quality. And I think this third principle really is what holds together the first two. And Jewel's story explains why or at least gives an example of it. So, it really is a critical story in the book. And what I, what I talk about with Jewel is you have to understand that early in her career, she made a really unexpected decision that encoded something very smart. So, as Jewel is coming up, she's coming up from hard circumstances. She grows up in rural Alaska. She's doing musical performances with her family. Her family is like an Alaskan von Trapp family singers, including with yodeling. She was yodeling because her grandmother was Swiss, was a Swiss immigrate to Alaska. So, Jewel was yodeling, which, by the way, is where she learned this interesting vocal control which comes up in her singing style. The mom leaves the family. So, now she's just touring with her, her dad and her siblings and kind of rough places, you know, interior of Canada, biker bars, etc... So, it's this rough, difficult kind of childhood with a lot of music. And she gets discovered, essentially someone from The Interlochen Academy of the Arts in Michigan is visiting Homer, Alaska, and comes across Jewel, sees her sing and says, you should come to this like fancy music school. We have scholarships. I'll show you how to do it, how to do the applications. We'll tape your whatever. So, she gets in, and she goes to Michigan, and the dean has to pull her aside the first day and say, Jewel we're happy you're here. But it's not really appropriate to walk around with a skinny knife strapped to your leg. She never realized, like, oh, you don't, she's just used to it. You wear a

knife, right? It's useful. You don't, don't wear a giant knife as you walk around campus. She learns how to be, you know, a musician. But, you know, again, she has no support system. Soon after graduating school, she ends up she's living in her car in San Diego. And this is where her story kind of takes off because she's this brilliant, intuitive, prodigious singer songwriter. All this training, but no support system. Living out of her car, she starts playing at this coffeehouse in San Diego, The Interchange Coffeehouse. And what she's doing is really amazing. She's doing these three-hour sets. They're very emotional. The crowd is crying, and it begins to, it begins to grow. It's like three people, then six people, then 12 people. It's like this exponential growth. And within a few months there's people outside and they have to put speakers outside so you can hear what's happening inside. There's no more room inside. And the record executives start showing up and they're flying her out for meetings. We think you have something special. And one of the executives finally says we're going to put $1 million on the table. Million dollar signing bonus. Like, come sign with us. She's living out of her car right now, and she turns it down. And that's where her, this is where we get to like, the interesting lesson.

Cal Newport: She turns it down. And why does she turn it down is because she went to the library and got a book about the music business, and she was like, okay, let me read how this works. And she realized like, oh, this money is an advance on royalties, right? They're giving you an advance like a book author gets on royalties. So, until you make that back, you don't make any more royalties. And she discovers, like, if they give me this much money, they're going to need me to be a massive hit right away. And if I'm not, they're going to drop me. And that's my chance to be a musician. And she's like, I'm not ready. Like, I can't just jump into this right now. I've been playing at a coffeehouse as my only adult, you know, experience with this new style of music. So, she turns it down and says, give me a small, small advance. But she does negotiate for more back end, which ended up being incredibly lucrative. Give me a small advance so that you won't care if I'm successful or not at first. And she wasn't because she was right. She was new to it. When she recorded her album, she recorded it with Neil Young's backing band, The Stray Gators, out at Neil Young's ranch in Northern California. And she was nervous and it sort of showed in the songs, and it wasn't really capturing her, but she had like a year and a half where she just toured and figured out how to do this and got better and better, rerecorded some of the key songs, in particular *You Were Meant For Me,* rerecorded it, with people she knew, like Flea from, she was friends with, from San Diego, The Red Hot Chili Peppers bass player. And finally, things came together, and it really took off. And so, I told that story because, what she realized is, if I want to do something really well, I have to slow down. Don't give me $1 million and throw me out on the tour, and I'm not, I need to slowly work on this and get better. So, she had this realization. Her phrase was hardwood grows slowly. She had this realization if I really care about producing music that's going to work, I need to slow down, take my time and be more focused and just getting each of these things better. And that's a key lesson about why you might obsess over quality, is that once you really care about doing something really well, slowing down. So doing the fewer things, working out the natural pace, all that becomes obvious, inevitable and natural. Yeah, it's like a consequence of this one decision of like the main thing that matters is I want to do something really well. So that's why I think her story in some sense is at the is at the core, like you do, that these other things are going to seem like common sense. It's going to feel almost intolerable not to slow down. Busyness is incompatible with producing really good things. So, like the best way to do this is to try to produce really good things.

Whitney Johnson: Oh, it's such a great story. And I one of the things I wondered, and you, you addressed this briefly in the book, is that how do you know when you, as a creator, as a person, as a knowledge worker, how do you know when you're obsessing over quality versus procrastinating? How do you know when you're when you've crossed that line?

Cal Newport: Yeah, the perfectionism curse. It's a big one, right? And like so in the book to get at that issue, I talk about the Beatles working on *Sergeant Pepper* because this was their first album they ever recorded where they knew in advance we're not going to tour. And what that meant was they did not have to record something that they could replicate on stage, which meant every option was on the table. So, you could do anything, any sounds, any like tape loop effects. Right? It opened up all of the doors to anything they could do. And so, I studied that, that story in the book to say how did they balance their need to do something innovative here with also shipping something out the door? And it turned out well, Epstein, Brian Epstein helped here because what they did was, he's like, okay, we're going to let you take your time here. But as soon as they had something that was like a workable single, he released it. So, I was like, okay, yeah, do something really well. But I just released a single.

So, people are now you kind of have to finish this album now, right? So, it's this notion of, you don't want to go as fast as possible, but you want to have stakes in the ground that keep you moving forward.

Cal Newport: So, another example of this was like when Lin-Manuel Miranda was working on his first play, *In The Heights.* He took a long time on this. It was seven years from when he first performed it till it was on Broadway. But what he kept doing was he was working with a production company in New York. They would schedule, we're going to have a read through with real actors in like three months. Right? And so, he had this stake in the ground of, I need something new. I need something new, like I need to work on this. He did a lot of other things in this time. He couldn't just sit down and force it. He was he was, you know, 21 when he first debuted this play, he couldn't just sit down and be like, I'm going to make a Broadway caliber play in the next six months. By just focusing on as hard as I can, he had to grow, have creative maturity, but he didn't also give up on it. So, he kept having these stakes in the ground. Let's come back in six months and try again. So, it kept him continually working on it, caring about quality, but at a pretty slow pace. And he would do other things and come back to it again.

Whitney Johnson: It's so, it's so good and gain, back to that question I asked you about anxiety and self-trust, because I think sometimes anxiety kicks in for people. And I think this goes to your pseudo-productivity is you want to have something to show everybody that you did. And there's that ability and willingness to say, okay, I understand that I could procrastinate, so I'm going to give myself a milestone, but also the self-trust of like, but it's not ready yet and I'll know when it's ready. So, I'm just going to keep going.

Cal Newport: Yeah. And get other people involved. I'm going to show it to someone every three months.

Whitney Johnson: Yeah, yeah.

Cal Newport: So, and when they say this is ready, I'm good. And if they say you did nothing on this in the last three months, then I also I know I'm procrastinating.

Whitney Johnson: Yeah. Oh, there you go. Our truth tellers are so important. All right, so there were a number of really great suggestions of things that you can do in the book, and we've kind of talked about a few, but are there 1 or 2? And then I'll tell you a few that I'm thinking about having read it, that I want to implement 1 or 2 that would get people started in addition to writing your book. That's number one. But what's number two and number three?

Cal Newport: When thinking about your plate of commitments. Right? So, professional things you've agreed to do break them into two categories? Right? So, say here's the things I am, I'm actively working on right now. And here's the things that are queued up waiting for a space to open up. So, here's three things I'm actively working on right now. And as soon as I finish one of these things, I will pull the next thing in from this queue of waiting to do projects. Right now, this might seem purely semantic, but it's not because here's why. This is a big advantage when you're actively working on a project. It brings with it administrative overhead. Right? Emails about it, meetings about it. There's a certain amount of, I call it overhead tax that you have to pay. So, if you just treat everything you've agreed to as active, all of those things are generating overhead tax at the same time. And that adds up. Right? So, if I have ten things and I'm just treating them all as like things I'm working on slowly, that's ten projects worth of emails. That's ten projects worth of meetings and check ins. Right?

Cal Newport: And that's going to begin to incredibly clog up your schedule, leaving you with less uninterrupted time to actually complete things. If you instead say no, just these three. I'm actively working on these other seven. They're on the queue. You're only generating overhead tax from those three. That's leaving you much more time in your schedule to actually work. So, you're going to finish these things quicker and then pull new things in. And how long is it going to take you to do the full ten things? Actually, much less time than if you just started and said, I'm just doing all of these at the same time because you're just having a, like a bifurcated view, active waiting and communicate that to people. Great. Your thing is in my queue. It's like number four that I'm going to pull in. I do three things at a time. I'll even post it. You can look at what I'm working on. Everyone's happy to take a look. I'm being very transparent about it. It seems fiddly, but it can actually transform. It's like the key to my first principle of doing fewer things.

Whitney Johnson: Yeah. One thing I actually really appreciated; I think this this slightly tangential, but I think it's an outgrowth of, of the work. What you just described is that we were scheduled to start at a certain time today. Your schedule was running behind. You didn't just show up late. You said, hey, I'm running behind. I want you to know that I'll be there in ten minutes. And that by doing that, then you were being transparent, you were being clear. And it also then freed up ten minutes, but really 20 minutes for my producer and me to do other things because we knew when you were going to show up. And so, I think that's a really small micro example of that and really useful.

Cal Newport: Yeah. Well, I think that's I want to punctuate that because I think that's so critical. And we talked about a little bit early as well, is that we, we often mistake that what people want from us is like right away, give me everything right away. Do everything as quickly as possible. It's not really the problem. People need you to solve the problem. People need you to solve when they ask you to do something is mental peace. I can trust that this is going to get done. That's what they're looking for, right? So, if you're nontransparent, it's just I emailed you and I don't know and you don't respond or whatever, I have to keep worrying about this. And if I have to keep worrying about this, well, you better get right back to me. Like I want you to get back to me. I need you to alleviate my worry. Right? But if you're very transparent about how work works, it's like, yeah, here it is. It's number six in the queue, and I can watch it. I don't have to worry about this. My problem has been solved. And yes, I'm not going to bother you until I see it gets up there. Great. That's so clear. I don't even have to bother you and do checking emails. You've made my life much easier. That's what people want, the trust that something is going to get done and I don't have to worry about it. They want that. Not the ability to get an email answer from you at 8 p.m.

Whitney Johnson: Yeah, exactly.

Cal Newport: That's just a side effect of lack of trust.

Whitney Johnson: And that goes to close the close the loop. We don't like uncertainty. And that process does both. Okay. Let me tell you a couple things that I'm doing as we start to wrap up. So, I, I'm really thinking about this push versus pull, which is what's something you just described. I've been thinking about my next book, and in my brain, I've been like, it's going to take me a year. And you said, whatever time you think something's going to take, you need to double it. So, I'm like, oh, it's probably going to take two years. I really appreciated that. You said if you add a half an hour meeting onto your calendar, so if you give that you need to take a half an hour back of rest time. I'm going to ask my E.A. to read this. So that will help us help us do this. And two other, docket clearing meetings, I want to play with that. And for all of you, you're going to have to just go read the book. But this sort of meeting once a week. The other thing that came to me that surprised me actually the most, because a lot of these are kind of like process things was, you know, as I work on this next book, you know, I was reading your book last night as I was getting ready to, you know, sort of wind down for the day. And I thought, you know, you know, I think there's something that could be really quite magical and creative of working on writing my next book at night. I've never written at night; I've always only written in the morning. And it was just interesting to me to think. Create that space and allow that. So, there was some element. And I know this sounds very, almost counterintuitive because you're like work on the book in the morning, but there's something about slow productivity, because at night you don't have a deadline. You need to go to bed at some point, but you kind of don't have a deadline, so you can just allow your brain to wander. So that was really curious to me.

Cal Newport: You know who does that, by the way? It's Walter Isaacson

Whitney Johnson: Huh.

Cal Newport: That's how he wrote all those books when he was still, you know, head of *Time* and CNN, especially in that busy period, is he said my kids got a little older. So, they were kind of gone and I just didn't watch TV at night. I would just write every night and, and I'd take, and he would take this is going to take me a while because I'm the CEO of CNN or whatever, you know, whatever like incredibly hard job he had. He's like, just at night. That's what I did instead of watching TV. And if I just did that long enough, a book came together.

Whitney Johnson: Yeah.

Cal Newport: And so, you know, it worked really well for him because I'm sure his mornings were crazy, right? Like everyone was, we need you to jump on this call, and you got to talk to Europe.

Whitney Johnson: There was a lot of there was a lot of pushing, not a lot of pulling.

Cal Newport: Exactly.

Whitney Johnson: So, you talked about C.S. Lewis and inklings in the book and just wondering in terms of your own improvement and seeking inspiration, who are some of the people that are helping shape your craft right now?

Cal Newport: Well, one of the things I've been doing, I mentioned somewhat in the book is cross training in terms of artistic taste. Right? Because sometimes when you're trying to study the people who are doing exactly what you're doing really well, that's very useful, right? You have to learn to craft, and I do a lot of that. But it's also kind of stressful because you have to keep, you're constantly thinking about your work where you fall short. I can't do that. They're better at me than that. And so, I've also been more recently cross training, which means go to a somewhat related but really not overlapping at all artistic pursuit and really study that. And what you purify out of there is abstract ideas about in a really like nice, joyful way of, of creativity and quality and innovation. So I've been doing a lot of study of film recently because I don't do films, I write books, and I'm getting all sorts of inspiration out of it. Not like specific inspiration, like I'm, you know, I'm going to edit with this lens or something like that. But a lot of, I'm finding my creative inspiration and well refreshed by studying people, doing incredibly creative, interesting things in this other field because there's no self-recrimination or anxiety or stress in studying. It's just pure like, this is great. It's great what these people are doing. And yet I'm finding that when I say, hey, what do I want to write next? I'm feeling that that sense of grandeur or ambition or creative inspiration. So, I've been a big fan of cross training recently.

Whitney Johnson: Yeah. It's interesting. I remember reading you saying that and when you said at the very beginning of our conversation, we've got an antagonist and it's pseudo productivity, I was like, that sounds like he's been studying film. So, it was fun to see that influence come through in the conversation as you were describing your work. All right. So final two questions for you. One is as you think about this conversation, what's been useful to you? It may be something that you said, or I said, but it might be just an observation that you made. And I would love to hear in our, our listeners always like to know what's, what you're taking away.

Cal Newport: Well, you know, I haven't done the, this retrospective thinking that much recently. Like going all the way back to thinking about my, my high school years and my early college years and sort of laying these cognitive foundations for this way of thinking. And then those grooves were there. That's useful because I think that's relevant to a lot of people, positive and negative. You lay down these cognitive grooves, early on in your developmental period that really affect what you're doing today. And so I can find positive parts out of that, like, oh, this is great. This way of thinking has been really useful, and I can bring it here. But you could also imagine negative grooves coming out of that as well and realizing like, oh, I don't have to think about, or approach work this way. That's just what I got exposed to in that terrible first job out of college or whatever, whatever event happened. So that was, I think that was nice to be able to go back and be, um, severely retrospective, not just like early in my career, but, you know, when I'm a teenager.

Whitney Johnson: Yeah. All right. So, any final thoughts, takeaways that you would like to leave our listeners with as they, as they walk away or, you know, turn off this conversation. What do you want them to, what do you want to leave people with?

Cal Newport: Slowness is possible. And it's not, not just possible. It is probably better for you, for your company you run, for the company you work for, for your clients. The way we work right now is not synonymous with work. It's a very contingent, specific, contrived approach to executing knowledge work that just isn't compatible with a modern, connected digital world. We need other ideas, and slowness works. And it is possible. It's not something that is, only a rare few can access. I think almost any knowledge worker can find more slowness in their conception of productivity, and it's absolutely worth it. Like when you when you embrace these principles,

you get this transition of work from being this hard to sustain source of stress and into something meaningful, into something that's compatible with human existence and other parts of life. So, it's possible. Have faith. Slowness is possible.

Whitney Johnson: Cal, thank you so much. It's been a delight.

Cal Newport: Thanks, Whitney. Good to talk to you.

Slow is an incredibly powerful word. Just saying it feels antithetical to our modern 10X corporate culture, almost like whispering Voldemort in the middle of Hogwarts. All we want to do is go fast – or more importantly, look like we're going fast in front of our supervisors.

But like Cal said, this factory model of intensity is a terrible way of harnessing the human brain. I'll give you a metaphor from our producer, Alex – he used to row in college, and there were 8 young athletes to a boat. While they were rowing, the coach would ride next to them in a small speedboat, and there were always one or two kids in every boat that just… watched the coach, instead of looking at the back of the person in front of you.

They were so intent on seeing that approval that, well, you get excited, start rowing faster and mistime your stroke with the rest of the boat – **that's** why you should be watching their back. The flat of the oar snaps against the current out of rhythm, and the handle smacks you in the chest, knocking you clean out of the boat.

Our brains are capable of these great feats, rowing in sync with seven others to win gold at the Olympics, for example, or starting that hometown small business you've always dreamed of, or finally writing that book. But when we fall into the trap of pseudo-productivity, we betray our own potential. Is there anything in your life that my conversation with Cal reminded you of? Where are you rowing out of sync with yourself?

For more on learning to value and truly treasure our time and talents, there's episode 286 with Richie Norton. On learning how to say no when your direct supervisors are asking you to be pseudo-productive, I'd point you to episode 322 with Vanessa Patrick. And if you're looking for more on why we betray ourselves for the approval of others, there's episode 359 with Dr. Michael Gervais.

Thank you again to Cal Newport and thank you for listening. If you enjoyed today's show, hit subscribe so you don't miss a single episode. Thank you to our producer, Alexander Tuerk, production assistant Etta King and production coordinator, Nicole Pellegrino.

I'm Whitney Johnson.

And this has been Disrupt Yourself.