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Theme Essay by William Gray

The Joy of Multitasking Every Second

I'm sitting at my fifth-grade desk at Montessori World of Children in Chattanooga, Tennessee, staring out at the parking lot. It's after lunch, and I'm focused on the side of a silver car, watching reflections of other cars approach, zoom by, and disappear.



[4]"One more car, and I'll get back to work," I tell myself. But it's never one car. Or two. Or three.

When I was diagnosed with ADHD in third grade, there were only a handful of drugs—Adderall, Ritalin, Dexedrine—and I had to re-dose in the middle of the day. This meant thirty minutes, sometimes an hour, where my attention wandered. I didn't sit still; I skipped over words in my reading lessons; I rarely ate my entire lunch.

Ritalin was the only drug that worked: I turned into the "great stone face" and could clear my day's assignments in a few short hours. I didn't notice time passing, but I was *working*. I took Ritalin before martial arts tournaments (but not swimming competitions), extended road trips, and standardized tests.

And yet, I stopped taking medication for ADHD more than a decade ago. Now I'm 28 and work in television, and I've looked away four times in the past two minutes while writing this sentence. I'm on my lunch break: C-SPAN is on a

monitor to my left, the American flag is flying a block away out the window, my coworkers are editing to my right, and I can hear the *clack clack clack* of the keyboard behind me.

But I like it. I love it! These days, this kind of constant multitasking cacophony works for me as a writer and journalist. I get more done in ten hours at the office than I do in three days off at home with my own distractions.

My day job as a C-SPAN producer requires ingesting vast amounts of information and putting the puzzle together for myself and everyone watching. I need to tie together decades of context, story, and testimony; write it on deadline; sit with our "talent"; and put a product on the air. Over and over again.

I don't have time to be distracted. "Just look at what's next," I repeat to myself, and try to unleash my pent-up energy on that.

Anyone who knows me will tell you I don't sit still. I'll talk to anyone about anything to distract myself from the task at hand. Sitting down to write this is the longest stretch I've managed in two days, and it's because I'm on a deadline. I'm counting my heartbeats right now to distract myself.

So, I write this piece while listening to an IRS hearing on C-SPAN with one ear and *Q&A With Crystal Wright* from our video library through a black, uncomfortable earbud in the other. I Google the *IRS Review of Tax Exempt Applications* hearing, read our breakdown, search my Twitter lists, and ask a fellow producer about our schedule this weekend.

I can't turn my brain off. This is how I work, and I don't accept anything but go go go from myself. But I also take the long way to figure out any question. I think I need to set up context for everything because I got there. I want to share this now. That's why writing for broadcast television is the most difficult job I've ever had. I have to keep reminding myself: *Tell 'em what you're gonna tell 'em, tell 'em, and then tell 'em what you've told 'em.*

But my hands and mind want there to be more more more. There has to be more, and everyone else is going to keep up, right?



[4]

I grew up hearing the story of the "ADHD Ice Cream Test." Put a child in a room with a bowl of ice cream and tell him or her, "If you don't eat it when I'm gone, you can have two bowls." Come back in half an hour—and if the ice cream is gone, the child has ADHD. Too simplistic? When I was first tested for ADHD, a psychiatrist told me to circle a four-digit sequence of numbers, on a time limit, with a pencil and no eraser. Because that's what ADHD, this terrible disability, comes down to, right? The inability to focus and complete tasks, a lack of impulse control.

Wrong. In order to succeed, I've had to embrace my ADHD, to let all my manic excitement flow forth onto the page and screen. It makes interviewing people easier and impossibly scary. I never run out of questions—but I *never* run out of questions. An hour-long interview feels like an intimidatingly short amount of time. How can I cover the life and legacy of someone like former Congresswoman Constance Morella or graphic novelist Gene Yang in an hour?

I'm supposed to summarize 400 pages of Marvin Kalb's *Haunting Legacy: Vietnam and the American Presidency from Ford to Obama* in 45 minutes? But we've already spent 10 on introductions!

My best weapon: who, what, where, when, why, how.

And I wouldn't have it any other way. I can't imagine reading books on John D. Rockefeller, World War II, and the economic collapse of Wall Street and not searching for a common thread simultaneously. Do I have to reread the same page three times? Sure. But I've already been down four other roads, and I'm so excited my knees are popping up and down.

Know when I got the idea for this article? On a Thursday night last July, in the middle of a TED-style art show hosted by ThirstDC at U. Street Music Hall in Washington, D.C. I was standing behind the camera, watching bright lights and feeling some amazing vocals from the singer on stage—Margot MacDonald—and all I wanted to do was sit down and

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start writing. I wanted to transport you to that room and say, "This is my space, my writing nirvana. I'm too surrounded by *everything* to *not* feel inspired!"

I'm not disabled. I'm excited, challenged, humbled. I chose a writing career where I learn every second, face my "disability," apply it, and excel.

Do I interrupt people? Yes. But I'll never interrupt anyone else as much as I do myself—and I don't mind interruptions. Ever. Bring on the joy.

Top Ten Great Things About Writing With ADHD

1. I never run out of ideas. (I could write about that.)
 2. Pitch. Everything.
 3. Throw it away? I can write more!
 4. Inspiration is everywhere.
 5. I'll write-tweet-Facebook-edit-carry that!
 6. I move around. A lot. I-write-talk-interview while walking.
 7. I can't have writer's block if I'm not just writing!
 8. I have the power to focus on everything simultaneously.
 9. I never feel guilty for taking a nap between stories.
 10. Success is subjective; I make my own benchmarks.
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Art Information

- ["Eric Schulze, Founder and Creative Director of ThirstDC"](#) [4] © Tony Hitchcock; used with permission.
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William Gray is an assistant editor at *Talking Writing*.

He's also a journalist in Washington, D.C. His opinions are not reflective of those of C-SPAN, but he blames the network for his insatiable appetite for history and public discourse. From large-scale events to startups, he never turns down a project or an opportunity to try something new.

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