MAKING TIME

A New Vision for Crafting a Life beyond Productivity

MARIA BOWLER

MAKING TIME

A New Vision for Crafting a Life beyond Productivity

MARIA BOWLER

BakerBooks
a division of Baker Publishing Group
Grand Rapids, Michigan

Published by Baker Books
a division of Baker Publishing Group
Grand Rapids, Michigan
BakerBooks.com

Printed in the United States of America

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data
Names: Bowler, Maria, 1985- author.
Title: Making time : a new vision for crafting a life beyond productivity / Maria Bowler.
Description: Grand Rapids, Michigan : Baker Books, a division of Baker Publishing Group, [2025] | Includes bibliographical references.
Identifiers: LCCN 2024015767 | ISBN 9781540904072 (paperback) | ISBN 9781540904706 | ISBN 9781493449071 (ebook)
Subjects: LCSH: Time management. | Motivation (Psychology) | Self-actualization (Psychology)
Classification: LCC HD69.T54 B68 2025 | DDC 650.1/1—dc23/eng/20240514
LC record available at https://lccn.loc.gov/2024015767

Cover design by Lauren Smith

The author is represented by Alive Literary Agency, www.AliveLiterary.com.

Baker Publishing Group publications use paper produced from sustainable forestry practices and postconsumer waste whenever possible.

25 26 27 28 29 30 31 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

For Nate and Ingrid,
who do not need to do anything to be pure magic.

In another way, for:
The judging, tsk-tsking, punishing, "well isn't that cute,"
"just try harder" voices within me and in the world,
who mistook producing for creating.
Thank you for the inspiration.

CONTENTS

PREFACE

This is not the kind of book that will tell you what to do. I assume you're tired of other people's formulas, instructions, and hot tips anyway.

Read it then not as a user manual but rather in the same way you would read a message in a bottle washed onto the shore: just let the words land with you wherever you are.

Read it from front to back, following the journey from mere doing to making. Or open it to any page.

Who am I to instruct you anyway?

The writer of this manifesto is first and foremost someone who was once sick from the pressure to produce, though I had every social opportunity. I'm the child of the white Canadian middle class, born in the "me first" 1980s. The unspoken motto in my social sphere was "If you want it, you can make it happen if you work hard enough for it. As long as it's reasonable." Reasonable things to want included good grades, clothes from the Gap, a mortgage, and framed accomplishments to decorate the walls.

But I was also born a girl who loved to sing, a builder of cardboard castles, the first to don a cape from the dress-up pile. I had the same gift held by every child: a living imagination in which the logic of wonder makes the most sense.

Fast-forward twenty years. Picture me paralyzed from overwhelm, alone in a basement apartment with too many mice and no furniture, struggling to roll off the floor mattress (a loan from my landlord) to arrive late to work at a coffee shop serving bored tourists. Doctors called it depression. Counselors called it "overthinking." My parents called it "Maybe you should go back to school and become a lawyer." Privately, I called it "the grayness"—a dull, ambient feeling that each day was a repeating task in which I rearranged dead objects for maximum efficiency.

From the outside, I was not producing the so-called value that society expected from someone with my privileges. I simply could not, and I felt deeply ambivalent about trying. After nearly being fired multiple times from my barista job for being generally apathetic, I did the only thing I knew how to do at the time: attack the problem with the mind.

All I knew at that point was this: the opposite of "the grayness" was the multicolor of making with the world around me—making beauty, making meaning, making a life. I remembered that much from my days of childhood play. With that breadcrumb, I crawled back to my hometown to finish my bachelor's in art history, studying photography, history, and philosophy. I found my way to a fancy Ivy League graduate school to study creativity and theories of meaning-making. For two years, I studied under Benedictine nuns to learn the mysteries of the contemplative life and how to accompany others.

This granted me the great gift of sitting across from seekers and people wondering how their inner life might feel more alive in the day-to-day. Over and over, I heard their stories of trying and failing to do enough—to meditate enough, write enough, spend time with their kids enough.

I moved to New York to rub shoulders with fancy cultural types and took my seat in a cubicle as a magazine editor in a tall building in Manhattan, discussing Big Ideas. That all looks acceptable on a CV.

I went on to teach the creative process to university undergraduates as an MFA candidate in poetry and studied coaching—the inner game of outer accomplishment.

As I clawed my way out of my own pit, I set out to understand what the pressure to produce was doing to me, my clients, and my students, and how it differed from making something real, like a life that felt alive.

Then I had no choice but to stop producing. I was about to give birth as the world shut down in the spring of 2020.

You may remember that the world was beginning to freeze in response to the global pandemic. In the weeks between checkups with my ob-gyn, borders closed and best practices changed by the day. In a locked-down hospital, my husband and I celebrated baby Ingrid's entrance into the world as the nurse declared that she had a "well-shaped head." As I was wheeled out of surgery, I held her, singing, "You are my sunshine, my only sunshine."

My half-drugged self who chose that song must have known what was coming, since that was the beginning of a time filled with darkness. Night and day blurred together since my daughter didn't care for sleep. My husband worked long hours and overnights, so having any semblance of a blissful newborn cocoon was laughable. With my family living on the other side of shuttered borders and quarantines keeping friends and help at a distance, I had little human contact except this new soul. I called my own mother over and over—"I don't know what to do. I don't think I can do this." I had truly come to the end of my doing. A new way of being had to emerge.

Every day I sank into the nursing chair in the darkness as my colicky newborn daughter lay on my chest, wailing with life. There was nothing to do but be with her. There was nothing to do but be with myself. The old grayness returned with new urgency as if to say "Remember me?" as my tears fell on my baby's head. The grayness raised its eyebrows at me every evening to question what the point of all this inconvenient sitting was.

The nurses and doctors tasked to follow up with me called it postpartum blues, but I knew this was not simply a hormonal dip or just the undesirably isolating circumstances of her birth. It was a confrontation demanding an answer: "Who are you *being* when you are not out there doing? How alive can you stand to be exactly where you are, as you are?"

This baby was so terrifyingly alive. I wrote in my notebook: "The baby insists. She insists on insisting. Shushing makes screaming. She will take the warmth she wants and no warmth she does not need. She is done when she is quiet and no quiet until she is done done done. Milk, my heartbeat, and darkness."

New life starts in the dark. With nothing to do in these wee hours, I could feel my producing self hang back for long enough that memories surfaced to form a picture in my mind's eye. I could sense in my body—not just "know"—how my days studying contemplation with the nuns and creative craft with the poets and professors were showing me the same thing: what it looks like to be intimate with the creative process of life itself, not the result. The capacity to make rich meaning did not live in the artist's studio, the meditation practice, the university classroom, or a well-organized desk. Maybe everything I needed to wake up was confronting me as my pain, my *stuff*, my *problem to be solved*.

Loving attention to the process means the good, the true, and the beautiful we long for arises from whatever is unfolding now. Could it be that simple? Maybe the sparks that make the spiritual life alive, a piece of art alive, and my own plain life in this mire of isolated new motherhood feel alive all fly from that creative collision between love and reality.

That thread leads me to you and others who have also felt blocked, who know there is something more than productivity to measure the days, who long to express the truth of who they are—makers in the broadest sense of the word. When we collaborate with reality, we are makers. We are makers when we act in response to life from our true *being*, instead of merely doing. On the making

path we remember we are in relationship with a living world, not just conquering things on our to-do list or molding the world to our utilitarian purposes.

Like my daughter, and much like the force of her presence I felt in those early days, we are all born makers. We are all born to make a life, after all. Yet we are conditioned to become producers, and that is where our work of unlearning begins.

We can unlearn how to "produce" a good life, good work, good art, good kids, whatever the distant prize.

As a coach, teacher, and spiritual director I have sat across from hundreds of faces as a guide, helping people unlearn roles defined by the churn of production, to build relationships to what is actually happening in themselves. Past the right schedule, past the checkboxes and gold stars, past my "best self now," to my actual self in this moment.

The more you pour in to the relationship with your natural creative process, the way you inherently make meaning with your time and effort, and the more you turn away from arbitrary checkboxes and gold stars, the more flexible and energetic your capacity for making grows.

It's no different from any other relationship; your loving attention creates intimacy, trust, and strength. I cannot "fix" my wailing baby girl, but I can learn who she is becoming. As I watch and respond to her as she is, and not as a problem to be minimized, I become a person who can respond to more of life. New colors appear on my palette.

When I was studying poetry in my MFA, we were taught to read any "I" in the poem as a hypothetical speaker, not the poet literally confessing as in a legal document. What follows are notes addressing "you," which is really a part of myself addressing another—my being speaking to your being. I trust that the "you" I speak to will find you as it needs to.

Doing, the first section, explains the insidious problem of our producer identity: how it sneakily shapes our efforts, our thinking,

our relationships, our time, and how we treat the world. The next section, called Undoing, shows how to strip away the layers of doing. Finally, the Making section invites us into creative action: what it looks like to act from our deep identity as makers, not producers.

I am a student of life's ongoing process, forever and always. I offer this meditation from my deep conviction that when we forget our natural creativity, we are not well—individually or collectively.

And I am so delighted this found you.

INTRODUCTION

A great weariness haunts our days that no amount of bubble baths, life hacks, sleep solutions, nutritional supplements, or correct opinions about the news can fix.

The institutional structures we relied on to provide both security and a promise of success continue to erode before our eyes, and our collective trust in their authority crumbles with it. Those 24/7 banks, leather-bound laws, and secular and religious leaders with shiny teeth simply can't reliably tell us what to do with our lives.

These dissolving social structures leave a blank space in front of us, and our culture's habit is to fill this space with doing enough.

After all, humans are meaning-making creatures who want our time to count. How? We're not sure, but we are burdened by the sneaking suspicion that we must have something to show for our hours, our efforts, our years alive. So we buy activity trackers and read books with secrets and steps to give us clear direction, each promising that if we maximize effort, or do it the "right way," we will scratch the deeper itch. When that doesn't work, we settle for soothing ourselves. There is plenty to distract us.

But we're left with this restless set of unspoken questions. When do I get to the *after* part of the story—when do I get to coast and

be who I want to be? When will I stop worrying about running out of time, money, energy, and love so I can do what I *really* want to do? (What is it that I really want to do again?)

Even those of us who have the luxury of ample time for rest find ourselves outrunning the ghost of mere doing. Did I rest well enough? Did I do chilling out right? Did I do leisure—I must never forget to be *grateful*—in a morally correct way? And why do I still feel tired after plenty of couch lounging?

This all grows from an identity problem—the hidden belief we whisper to ourselves—"I am merely what I do." When we believe that, of course we don't just *stop all our producing*, because then who would we be?

And there are so many well-meaning management strategies: time-blocking, micro habits, waking at 4:00 a.m., deliberate delegation, better boundaries, less time at work, more time at the farmer's market. If only we could get the tasks right, we could live as who we really are.

While we may have once primarily defined ourselves by our class, our religion, or our social status, we see ourselves now as producers, operating solo. Producers of "value," of content, of righteousness, of the right image, of experiences for our family—of enough, enough, enough. Enough what? It's not clear, but "it" never seems to arrive.

But of course we are not producers for some faceless boss in the sky evaluating our value, our input-output ratio—even if the aim is noble and of service to others. The point of our days was never a return on investment, as if our bodies held the same purpose as an asset in a financial portfolio.

Every spiritual and philosophical tradition worth its salt says so.

This book is an invitation to practice your inherently creative nature ahead of your impressive ability to "get stuff done," to ask "Who am I being?" before asking "How do I fix this?"

The difference I'm proposing is subtle at first, because it's not about what you do at all: doing more, less, or better. That would

only reinforce our false identity as *doers first*. The difference is remembering who you already are: a maker, a human crafting meaning from your very being. *What you do* is no longer the focus, since the doing will follow naturally as you connect to who you are as your birthright.

The truth is, it is conventional for a self-help book to promise an "after" in which your life is better. After all, why would you read the book if you did not want something to look at least a little different than it did before? So I'm in a bit of a pickle because I am not offering an "after" as much as a "now" and "meantime"—a way of seeing your life as a creative process before any result, in the middle of the mess, and when your work is over. That is creative living.

Being in your life as a creative process will not free you from the challenges of the human experience—What life would that be?—but it will connect you to reality as it lives and breathes in you. This aliveness is not a reward for your production, it is simply the truth of who you are.

I'm inviting you to evaluate your time and effort *creatively*, not *productively*. As a maker, a fully alive collaborator in a vast web of creation, effort takes on a whole new meaning. When life is not a series of deliverables toward an end result, entirely new possibilities appear, as the pressures to produce lift.

Creative action is a very different animal than productivity-bound action. The results of creative action always draw out more life. The result of our productivity is simply more doing.

Compare an oak tree growing acorns that it surrenders to the ground, which creates more trees, to sending more emails from your inbox, which makes more replies you have to answer in return.

One is creative, the other "productive."

Producing is simply moving objects around the board. We will know the difference by the resulting satisfaction, the life that's made in the aftermath of creating.

To create is to cooperate with the raw materials of reality—the good, the bad, the gnarly, the extremely imperfect working

conditions. It is a never-ending relationship with every season of growth, including silent hours in which it appears no new life will sprout, when nothing is happening.

When there is loving attention to how the process of life unfolds, the human heart yearns to join in.

These pages are a call to the kind of action that makes whole lives and new worlds, an invitation to make your days reflect what you know to be good, true, and beautiful instead of abiding by inherited rules that perpetuate doing and death.

Feel free to rip these pages up and make your own principles with the same reckless conviction. Every time we practice a way of being beyond mere doing, we make it easier for others to practice with us.

After all, that's our job as natural makers: to play with what is possible. No need to white-knuckle your way to an abstract idea of an ideal life, you only need the presence to allow the life that wants to move through you right now.

PART I

DOING

How Productivity Has Shaped the Way We See Everything, for the Worse

PRODUCTION STARTS NOW

We are born with the imagination and profound capacity to *make* with life itself. This is who we are deep down.

So how did we become producers instead? How did productivity become the measure for making meaning in our lives?

The problem starts with clocks.

There was a time when time itself was a response to the sun's height and the moon's face, to birth and death, to how life bloomed and decayed by its own measure.

Your personal time simply could not be understood outside your relationship to your environment, nor could it be saved, bought, sold, or leveraged. Time was a flowing place you inhabited, not an object to manage.

After all, the dawn after the first frost is a very different kind of hour than noon on the summer solstice. The herd must graze when it needs to graze and the crops won't wait to grow.

Your interior seasons, the movements of your soul, were no different. The time to mourn came when someone died, so there was always time to mourn. That is, mourning could not become an inconvenience, standing in the way of another more important task, because there could not be a more important task. The same goes for rest and celebrating: feasting came after the harvest, which came after the growing season.

But the clocks kept getting sharper, louder, and closer to home.

In Europe, monastics left the world of agriculture and commerce to live behind walls and adopt a life of measured action within eight canonical "hours" heralded by the ringing of bells that noted the time for set prayers. The goal was to chant all 150 psalms within the week. All other monastic activities—eating, sleeping, chores, reading—were fitted in between the "hours."

Saint Benedict, the founder of the Benedictine monastic order, argued for the necessity of vigilance of time:

> If at all times the Lord looks down from heaven on the sons of men to see whether any understand and seek God, and if every day the angels assigned to us report our deeds to the Lord day and night, then, brothers, *we must be vigilant in every hour*.[1]

It might be easy to miss since we take it for granted today, but there, in one sentence, your efforts, your time, scrutinized by God, an ultimate source of meaning, are braided together as one great demand.

Timekeeping evolved from watching the stars, to water clocks, to the mechanical gears behind school bells.

In the same spirit with which your phone reports your daily steps, screen time (up 25 percent from last week), and GPS location, ever-more-accurate measurements became necessary as markers for our earthly status.

Outside the monasteries, early Protestantism nurtured a hatred of idleness and a love of time awareness. Sociologist and historian Max Weber would famously link this industriousness and the "Protestant ethic" to the need for Calvinists to display worldly prosperity as a sign of their divine election (the question of whether they were "saved" and destined for heaven, which was otherwise unknowable).[2]

Benjamin Franklin, progenitor of the productivity hack, in the late eighteenth century stretched his philosophy of advantage-seeking into the realm of time management, creating a detailed

daily planner in which he assigned himself tasks and tracked his progress on acquiring new virtues.

How were early Americans to know how they were doing, in the cosmic sense, unless they were *doing* efficiently, visibly, and successfully? The question sounds familiar.

As Enlightenment-style thinking like Franklin's sought to treat our efforts in the world ever more "objectively," outside our direct experience of reality, the orderly ticking of the clock became a way to order our thoughts. And as much of the world grew disenchanted, God no longer seemed to watch the clock that called the people to worship. Instead the clock was like a god in itself—felt but unseen, ever present and impossible to refuse.

This was good for business.

In the late nineteenth century, Frederick W. Taylor, a steel industry foreman turned management consultant, looked around America's growing industrial sector and saw thousands of hours of lost productivity that could be reclaimed through a sharper focus on doing. "Of all the habits and principles which make for success in a young man," Taylor argued, "the most useful is the determination to do, and to do right, all those things which come his way each day, whether they are agreeable or disagreeable; and the ability to do this is best acquired through long practice in doggedly doing."[3]

Since turning everything into a science was the fetish of the day, this feverish talk of "doing" required a set of methods.

The result was Taylor's famous 1909 text, *The Principles of Scientific Management*. It envisions work as a series of micro tasks done in micro units of time. The scientific manager "specifies not only what is to be done but how it is to be done and the exact time allowed for doing it."[4]

Where the monks and the Calvinists used such obsessive time-vigilance for self-discipline, Taylor and his friends used it to discipline others.[5]

It was an open secret at the time that proponents of scientific management drew inspiration from the industrial model

pioneered in the US South that relied on the enslavement of Black Americans.

A congressional committee hearing on scientific management in 1911 concluded that parts of the system functioned "the same as the slave driver's whip."[6]

Scientific management luminary Henry Gantt, who grew up in a family that enslaved more than sixty people, acknowledged that the system was "disliked by many men" because of its connection to slavery.[7]

Despite this, and despite a very mixed record in actually lifting productivity, Taylor and others believed it could be used to improve the running of "all social activities," and the system spread far and wide.[8]

What was good for business must be good for everyone.

Not only was it adopted at Ford Motor and in Soviet five-year plans, it was also imposed upon pastors in American Protestantism. Ministers were often expected to become "efficiency experts" and each church made into a "General Efficiency Board for the Kingdom of God."[9]

When they dragged the notion of scientifically managing time into the office, "efficiencies" were not only physical and cognitive but emotional as well.

As C. Wright Mills put it in the 1950s, "When white-collar people get jobs, they sell not only their time and energy but their personalities as well."[10] This led to annoyingly human complaints about both physical and mental ailments, including muscle strain, irritability, digestive trouble, and depression.[11]

And that was not good for business.

Partially in response to this, the Austrian-American professor Peter Drucker's 1954 work, *The Practice of Management*, created a broader, more white-collar-friendly theory of management. He would popularize the term "knowledge worker" and "information society" and urge more respect for the value of employees.[12]

This "respect" gave workers the supposed freedom to be their own time manager. Where Taylor drew a clear line between workers and management (the workers were the doers, the managers were the deciders and evaluators), now you are probably both—in every area of life.

In addition to your actual job descriptions, paid or unpaid, you must decide what it is to do—since you swim in endless options and opinions about the one best way. We are now all project managers, all the time.[13]

And worse, if your work is less tangible than shoveling iron, you have to come up with elaborate ways to count your efforts under the clock. Unless you use your hands to make or fix things (and fewer and fewer jobs give us such touchable results), your work feels ephemeral.

Such are the weather conditions in the land of productivity. The time you manage is clock time, which counts every minute as a unit from which to extract the most value for an invisible judge, a unit of debt owed to an invisible bank. This leaves the sticky question "What happened today? Did I do anything valuable? Does this even matter?" As the accounting historian H. Thomas Johnson put it, "What you don't (or can't) measure is lost."[14]

So you are earnestly debating with yourself about the best uses of time: whether weekends are best spent with family, whether morning or evening is better for cardio, or whether it's selfish to write poetry instead of fighting climate change.

Each option points to the same clock under which time is for using. In this poisonous producer's life, the hours will never be enough as the existential question looms: Did I make today *count* by an invisible measure?

Even as we live in the land of productivity, it's time to remember who we really are.

THE OTHER PATH

Your sense that the way you're working is not working means you are awakening from the spell of the producer.

Do not rid yourself of that nagging hunger for more aliveness, because you would not feel it if you could not be fed. It is, as Martha Graham said to Agnes de Mille, the artist's "queer, divine dissatisfaction, a blessed unrest" to keep creating. While Graham thought this "divine dissatisfaction" was what makes the artist "more alive than the others,"[1] I'm pushing the premise a step further to insist that it belongs to everyone, that there are no "the others."

Whether you have ever thought of yourself as "a creative," a noun that didn't exist until recently, the ambient restlessness that has you reading this book is the same impulse that leads to all acts of beauty, truth, and goodness: your sneaking suspicion that more life is available here.

A maker is someone who cooperates with reality to draw out more life: someone who receives the stuff around them not as objects to extract value from, but as an unfolding world to playfully connect with. You're a maker as you turn a terrible date into a funny story you'll tell for years, broker peace between arguing friends, invent sneaky ways to hide all the power cords in your

living room, and listen to someone long enough that they lean back in their chair, breathing deeply as they have been heard.

You mend, whether it's wool socks or past mistakes. You disturb stagnant places, draining standing water so it can flow again or speaking up to city council.

You invent. You imagine. You are on the maker's path, which is a very different way of being than the conveyer belt of production. The path of making says "Yes, I exist" to the heights and depths of your humanity, from your dreamiest imagination to your most shadowed thoughts and deeds.

All the inefficiencies that get in the way are not obstacles to eliminate but a maker's material to work with. Not good, not evil, simply reality that beckons your attention.

A maker does not simply do more but makes more meaning from every act, which your soul cannot help but do when you let it.

You can fail to follow a five-step plan, but you cannot fail to be a maker, because your life is making *you* all the time. You can only forget that, or drag your heels.

There is nothing more to do, and you're already doing it. You can't fail to make because making is who you are. You can only temporarily forget, putting on production's clothes.

If that's true, your only "task" is saying yes to conscious collaboration, turning every part of the process into a live conversation.

For your cooperation, you are not given a different set of to-dos but a clear pair of eyes with which to see how beauty, truth, and goodness are always giving themselves form, even now. In your fluorescent-lit office. On your couch. Through the pings on your phone.