

A Procrastination Cascade

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I sat down to write this thoughtpiece during 3rd period on Monday morning. I played cards with my roommate. Tuesday's homework was to pick out quotes. I hung out in the Student Center. Wednesday's homework was to have a draft of the body paragraphs. I watched a couple episodes of Friends. Thursday's homework was to have a full draft. I went back to the text, starred a few passages, and gave myself a pat on the back. Friday's homework was...

"Wait. What?"

The final draft, to be submitted before the start of class 1st period. I had asked for too many extensions. I had watched too many episodes of Friends. I wished I had started my paper the day it was assigned and worked on it a little each day, but there I was with a blank document and what looked like an all nighter and a B- paper at best.

Most high school students have found themselves in this same place at one time or another. Procrastinating, even outside of academic assignments, is not uncommon; it is so easy to put off tasks for our "future selves" to deal with that certain catch phrases appear frequently on coffee mugs or Instagram posts: "Diet starts Monday." "I'll go to the gym tomorrow." "Just one more episode."

Our society has been plagued by a culture of procrastination and developed an addiction to short term pleasure, willing to sacrifice our long term well beings for temporary happiness. Even if we know something is the right decision or will benefit us in the long run, if it seems hard in the moment, we tend to put it off and opt for the easier choice.

We do this to the extreme when it comes to environmental stewardship. We throw away things that can be recycled because the recycling bin is too far away; we print 50 pages single sided rather than 25 double sided because printing double sided requires us to press a few extra buttons; we keep the lights on when we leave a room because we are too lazy to turn them off. We've all been told these are environmental sins, but they're the easier choices, and in reality what happens when we commit them?

Does the world explode? No. Do all the polar bears suddenly go extinct? No. Does a hole open up in the ground beneath you and make you fall millions of miles down into the underworld? No. There are no direct or immediate consequences. Thus, though we know our actions are wrong, we justify them in our heads: what are a few plastic bottles, pieces of paper, or running light bulbs really going to do in the grand scheme of things? I have heard this phrase an uncountable number of times, but what's scarier is that even I—a proud environmentalist, a co-head of my

school's sustainability board, and a green proctor in my dorm—have had this thought creep into my mind.

I have a confession to make. For three years, I kept a mini fridge in my dorm room. When I bought it freshman year, I was clueless to the amount of energy refrigerators use and the fossil fuels that are burned to generate that energy. However, after joining the Sustainability Board sophomore year, I learned how much energy fridges use and even found myself speaking up at a Sustainability Board meeting junior year about ways to make the dorms more sustainable. “We should try and reduce the number of mini fridges on campus. They use up so much energy and so many people have them,” I paused and looked around sheepishly. “Including me.” Everyone started laughing. But was it really that funny? I was aware that fridges were bad for the environment and knew I could survive without mine, but I kept it anyways because it was just so nice to have. I reasoned with myself: in reality, what was one little fridge going to do in the grand scheme of things?

I could look around and say the world was the same whether my fridge was plugged in or not, so procrastinating on getting rid of my fridge was even easier than procrastinating on writing a paper. When procrastinating on writing a paper, the consequences were clearly on the horizon and I knew exactly what would happen if I waited until the last minute to write that paper, but with my mini fridge, the consequences seemed millions of miles farther down the horizon and nobody even knew what would happen when we got there. It barely felt like procrastinating. Even when I'd hear about global temperatures rising, ice sheets melting, or coral reefs dying—clear evidence of the consequences of environmental procrastination—it didn't feel like consequences for my own actions, but rather consequences for the whole human race. In this way, environmental accountability is like that team building game where everyone lifts someone off the ground using two fingers. When everyone works together, the weight is evenly distributed and the person is held up steadily. One or two people can think they're not carrying much weight and decide to let go and step away without much of an effect, but the more people who have this mindset and step away, the more weight will be placed on those remaining until their fingers cannot take it and the person falls to the ground. Like one or two people stepping away, one or two mini fridges are not going to significantly impact our planet, but if everyone has this mindset, millions of mini fridges certainly will.

I got rid of my fridge junior spring. I'm not sure what it was exactly that triggered me to actually pull the plug. It may have simply been a moment of liberation after months of my guilt building up; I may have finally registered that it was contributing to my own ecological footprint, and that footprint was contributing to a much greater whole; I may have realized I was setting a bad example in my dorm. Whatever it was, I'm glad it happened because that task I thought would be so hard to do gave me relief, and that appliance I thought would be so hard to live without, I don't even miss.

The world has been procrastinating—some countries more than others and some people more than others—but as a whole we have not come to a resolution. We have known about climate change for hundreds of years, but the problem has only gotten worse. Massive populations of people don't even believe in climate change, and too many of the people who do don't feel the urgency of the issue. Many see the global temperature rise in 0.7 degrees in the past decade as negligible, but this rise is roughly ten times the average rate of ice-age recovery warming, and models predict that temperatures will rise an additional 2 to 6 degrees celsius in the next century, a rate twenty times that of ice-age recovery warming. Furthermore, the earth system works in a web of positive feedback loops (1). For example, as temperatures rise, sea ice melts, leaving darker sea waters exposed to absorb more solar radiation, making temperatures further rise, so more sea ice melts, and so on. The longer we procrastinate and let temperatures rise, the more permanent damage will result, and our problems will be harder and harder to fix (2).

The consequences for procrastinating on environmentalism may not be as direct or immediate as procrastinating on an English essay, but once our procrastinating catches up with us we will have more on our hands than just a bad grade on our transcript. Sustainability, defined as the ability to maintain something, is not procrastinating all week and then pulling an all nighter the night before a paper is due in the same way that it is not abusing our planet until it is on the brink of destruction. If we wait that long, it would not just mean staying up late one night to finish an assignment. It would be like pulling all nighter after all nighter, a constant stress, a stream of failing grades, tears, worries, and distress for every single person on earth until the earth is gone.

Sources

1. <http://earthobservatory.nasa.gov/Features/GlobalWarming/page3.php>
- 2 http://climate.nasa.gov/nasa_science/science/