

THE PROCRASTINATOR'S GUIDE TO THE GALAXY, AND OTHER IMPORTANT  
SPOTS IN THE UNIVERSE

by

Deirdre V. Lovecky, Ph.D.

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*A Procrastinator's Guide to the Galaxy* is vitally important since otherwise few of them would ever get there, having left it to the last moment to find out where they are going. Oh, they have the general big picture. They are going somewhere in the vicinity of Betelgeuse. It's just the details that escape them. Somehow Procrastinators fail to appreciate that it's a big universe out there, no matter how many times they are told. So, they never make a plan.

Procrastinators actually come from an alternate universe, one in which time is elastic. In their universe, time infinitely expands to allow them to complete things whenever they get to them. It also contracts allowing them to actually experience little pain from negative consequences. In this universe, there is always reward and never much punishment. Thus, they can play the day away, confident that they will be able to get that report finished before bedtime and will suffer absolutely no agony in doing it. The Procrastinators Universe is a happy one.

When Procrastinators emigrated to Earth though, they found very different conditions. Time here is laid out in a linear sequence. Things take a long time to accomplish. Elasticity is different too. Instead of infinite expansion when there is a deadline, time instead speeds up. It also speeds up when there is anything fun happening. Time only slows down when something distasteful or negative is going on, like actually doing a report, or suffering a consequence for not doing a report. Naturally the Procrastinators took a long time to cotton onto this state of affairs. Sadly, they were unable to adjust because the Procrastinators' sense of time is built into their genes. So, while they were able to note that everyone else got their reports done on time, and

handed in, the Procrastinators, despite massive efforts to become linear thinkers just could not do it. More unfortunately, there was no going back. They were stranded on Earth, having to live among the efficient people, and make the best of it. Worse still, they could intermarry with the Earth people. The gene was dominant, so a high percentage of children in succeeding generations of Procrastinators were also so afflicted. And so, it is today.

People from the Procrastination Universe always put off what they should do today. They are both short sighted and long sighted. That means that they cannot give up the immediate pleasure of the moment to engage in work that would be useful later on. This is shortsighted. On the other hand, they can see the end point of a project, envision the whole thing, and have great passion about the meaning of the project. Some are able to parlay their thoughts into new and useful insights. This is long sighted.

There are many ways in which the Procrastinators differ from more conventional Earthlings. They still believe that time is elastic. Because of their genetic endowment, they continue to feel like they live in a universe where time will infinitely expand to allow them to do the task required after they have spent all their time doing other things. They are always surprised when time runs out.

Some learn to work well at deadline. The pressure helps them organize their energy and overcome the time barrier. Then, they work quickly and well. However, they only can produce a first draft. Each time they tell themselves that if they had started earlier, they would have done a better job. Teachers and parents recognize this too. Unfortunately, it is not easy to do a better job because doing so requires learning a whole new set of principles. In effect, Procrastinators need to set several deadlines and convince themselves that the smaller deadlines are the real ones and so can react with more energy. Teachers can help these students by actually setting smaller goals and mini deadlines. Over time, the teachers help the Procrastinators to modify their thinking,

so they meet these deadlines more or less accurately and begin to see how to break up big projects and tasks into smaller ones.

Procrastinators feel that details are less important than the vision they have formed of the whole. In fact, the details interfere with the vision, so it is best not to focus too much on them. Details require a painful maneuver called attention shifting.

Procrastinators have trouble shifting attention from one aspect to the next. Instead, they get fascinated by one detail and try to go further in exploring it. Thus, they also miss the main point of the project or task. These Procrastinators tend to do projects that are approximations of what was needed. Larry, for example, a 10-year-old Procrastinator, turned in an original science fair project two days late. He just made the science fair, but he didn't have the required poster, and his report was sketchy. He had put all his time into a working model he had developed the final weekend. His model showed a spectacular new concept; nevertheless, he received a grade of "C" and was outraged, especially when the winner of the science fair had a mundane project that was not original but had all the required parts.

It would have helped Larry to have worked with an adult who could have added some structure to his work on the project. Another thing that might help Larry would be to have him complete the project even though he was late and allow him to improve his grade by doing so. Getting a "C" did not teach Larry what he needed to know: how to divide his time to get all the parts done. Fortunately for Larry, taking a long view, coming up with an original project and building a working model is going to matter a lot more than having a poster. In middle school, though, the Procrastination gene suffers.

Procrastinators have difficulty sustaining attention for any period of time on material that is not fascinating. Doing an ordinary, mundane task, like taking out the trash, is not fascinating so it isn't done until the deadline: for example, as the trash people are already coming down the block. Because they are big picture people, Procrastinators need to find unique ways to stop and remember to do small, mundane,

but necessary tasks. In these days of hand-held computers and calendars, making lists of such chores is easier than it used to be. Indeed, one can even set an alarm to remind oneself to do something. Procrastinators like technology because it is stimulating, and they are good at figuring it out.

Procrastinators feel negative vibes from projects that ordinary Earth people can tolerate, and even find pleasurable. To the Procrastinators, the negative vibes come from the task like an evil miasma. It takes so much effort to overcome the negative vibes and focus on the task that even when it is done, there is little satisfaction in it. All Procrastinators feel is relief that it is over. Other people feel rewarded by the combination of using skills and meeting a challenge. The accomplishment of the goal is rewarding and pleasurable. Because painful effects come from doing the task for the Procrastinators, the consequences of not doing the task are much less painful. There is a nagging guilt, or a sense of impending doom when the moment of judgment comes, but these are so much less painful than the negative vibes of doing unstimulating tasks, that Procrastinators never learn from their mistakes. Consequences rarely teach them anything positive.

Dealing with the negative vibes that emanate from unstimulating tasks is very difficult because ordinary Earth people do not feel them. It seems to the ordinary people that the Procrastinators are blaming the task for being unpleasant instead of themselves for not getting it done and over with. Ordinary Earth people have absolutely no appreciation for how bad the actual doing of unpleasant tasks feels. Some of them, in fact, try to convince Procrastinators that the tasks aren't so bad, and even are "fun". Maybe they are to Earth people...

Sometimes, it helps Procrastinators if the task is changed in some way. Giving them some choice about how and when to do it in a short time frame can decrease the negative vibes. Making the task more of a game or more of a challenge can also help. Procrastinators love novelty, so if a novel aspect can be introduced, they may respond.

For some tasks though Procrastinators need support and structure to learn to get through the negative vibes. Lisa, for example, hated doing homework and put it off as long as possible. Her homework was somewhat boring, but it also felt extremely negative to her. When she thought about doing the social studies questions, she actually felt sick to her stomach. Math, on the other hand wasn't so bad. It was more like a puzzle which she liked doing. She could convince herself that math answers were like murder mysteries, and so she could try to find out who did it. The social studies questions though required that she look for the information in the book and write out a whole sentence or more. Some required her to think up an original answer or to find information in two different sections These made her feel like throwing up. So, she rarely did any social studies questions. It would have been more helpful to Lisa if she had a different type of social studies, more hands on and visual, without the need for integrating all that information in written form. Over time, Lisa could be taught to dictate answers that incorporated opinions and facts. Having a different type and less homework might have helped Lisa to procrastinate less because it would not have felt so negative to her.

Some Procrastinators feel so anxious about the task: getting it done, doing it well enough, dealing with the obstacles, that they are overwhelmed by anxiety. This also keeps them paralyzed from action, and they do not do the task. Instead, they worry or do a lot of other things to use as an excuse, "Well, I didn't get the room cleaned up, but see I did all this other stuff, so I really am not lazy or anything." Anxious Procrastinators worry secretly that they are not good enough, that they will fail to measure up, and so they don't try unless they are absolutely sure they can do the task. This type of Procrastinator only wants to do easy, short tasks that require little effort and little organization. Then they feel less overwhelmed, less afraid and can try.

Anxious Procrastinators may also be perfectionists. They want to do short, easily accomplished tasks perfectly to reassure themselves that they are in control and are

really smart. Look, after all, they just did a perfect paper. This sort of Procrastinator waits until the last moment to do the project, but then panics. They use up so much emotional energy there isn't any left for the task. Then, this Procrastinator refuses to go to school or feels sick enough to stay home. Often the panic that results from no longer having enough time to complete the project actually does make the child sick. Given the reprieve of a day at home, they finish up and bring the project to school a day later, but perfectly done, and with a perfect excuse too. They were sick, so it took longer.

Helping an anxious Procrastinator requires that teachers and parents decrease expectations by giving smaller goals and building up to the bigger end point. As with the time-is-elastic Procrastinators, introducing smaller deadlines and more structure is helpful. Parents also need to set limits on when tasks can be done. That is, they need to set a homework time, dividing it into ordinary homework time and project time. When the time is over, the child must stop. Naturally this will bring meltdowns at first as panic ensues, but eventually the Procrastinating child will get used to the structure and work more easily and well. Panic will decrease.

There are Procrastinators who put off certain tasks because they don't like them and refuse to do them. This is not a form of procrastination so much as defiance in a passive resistant form. It is easier to say, "I forgot." than to admit one had no intention of ever doing the task. It can be difficult to tell if a Procrastinator is really a refuser in disguise because many Procrastinators refuse tasks they cannot do. One clue is how the Procrastinators feel when the task is not done. If they feel guilty or upset, they are likely from the Procrastination Universe and need help. If they feel they outsmarted the adults, or that they shouldn't have to do things they don't like, they may be refusers.

People who came to us from the Procrastination Universe are special. They have many gifts they have given to humanity. For one thing, they allow us to understand the preciousness of the moment, and to see that we need not be productive and efficient all the time. They have also given us an appreciation of how time can feel different to

different people. Some cultures on Earth have differing ways of thinking about time. It is not linear to everyone. Thus, those from the Procrastination Universe remind us to be tolerant and helpful. People from the Procrastination Universe are creative. They are apt to go off on an interesting tangent and see things in a new way just because they are not so overly focused on getting the job done. Indeed, if all we Earthlings ever did is finish jobs, we'd still be scurrying around in the mud, never having made any evolutionary advances. Change happens because of those who deviated from the accepted path, not because of the plodders.

Nevertheless, despite the advantages of Procrastination, it is a big problem when trying to live on a planet like Earth, especially in the United States. Because of that, people from the Procrastination Universe need a Guidebook so they can navigate the customs of our strange world where time is different, and things are done because someone said so. Maybe writing such a Guidebook will help us when we are the explorers into outer space, and we are the ones who have to adjust to strange ideas and customs.