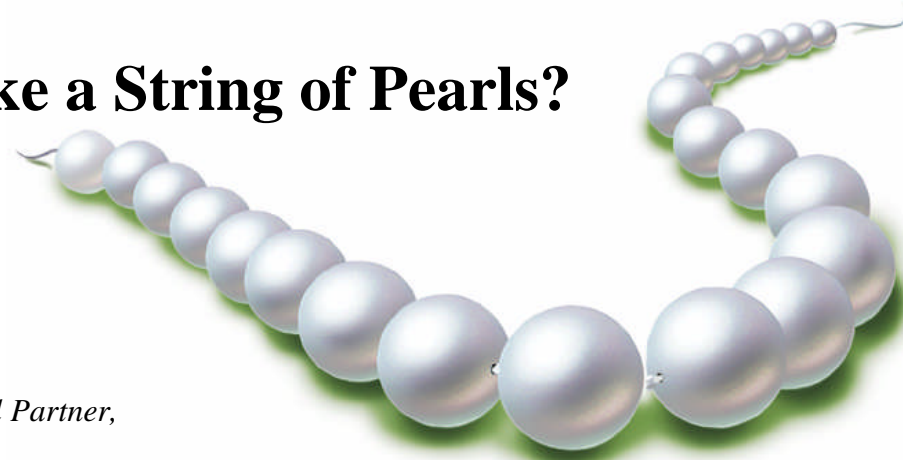


## Is Your Life Like a String of Pearls?



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It's my observation that many Malaysian office employees work longer hours than they should. Many reach home around 8 or 9 o'clock, tired, spend a little bit of time with the family and then get back on the treadmill as they head to the office early the next morning. They say that their families are the most important parts of their lives, but they somehow get to spend very little time with them to demonstrate this.

I sometimes wonder whether people have to work late due to workload, or whether they leave late because "it's the done thing". Parkinson's Law says that "work expands to fit the amount of time available". I recently had dinner with a recently retired senior executive of a major Malaysian company. He said that he would leave work at 5pm each day. He told the people in his section that he did not want them working long hours. As a result, people left between 5 and 6. Once in a while he would say, "Let's all meet at Coffee Bean at 5.30." As a result, people made sure that they finished their work to meet the boss at 5.30. And the funny thing is that this was a highly productive section!

When we teach time management, we tell people that we are teaching them how to get more out of life. We tell participants that some people's lives are like a string of pearls...one pearl is for when the husband was there for the birth of his first child, and another one is when both parents were there to see their child stand up for the first time...and then there are other pearls for good family times, holidays and laughter. People whose lives are like a string of pearls enjoy the moment. They plan for the future, they learn from the past, but *they live in the moment, for it is just this moment that you have*. The senior executive that I just spoke about can look back at his life as a string of pearls. I know this as he told me of his many holidays and his close family.

However, there is another type of person. This person is always too busy. He or she comes home late, misses birthdays and significant events. This person keeps thinking of the future, but somehow doesn't seem to live in the present to a great deal. When people like this look back on their lives, they don't see a string of pearls. Rather, they see an empty string with a very occasional rock, perhaps a stick and, once in a while, a tarnished coin.



A lot of it has to do with how we judge success. For most people, "success" is judged in material terms. I came to realize that material wealth is not the key to success when I visited India with my daughter just 4 years ago. We spent most of our time outside of the major cities. We found that the people in rural India were incredibly happy, even though they didn't own all that much. I recall a life changing conversation that I had with the driver that we had hired in India. I said, "Munna, life in my country (Australia at the time) is different." He looked at me with a quizzical look on his face. "You see," I continued, "In my country, people want bigger things. They buy a TV, then they want a bigger TV, and then a bigger house to put their bigger TV in. And then they need a bigger car to go with the house. So, husbands and wives work long hours to pay for their houses, and TVs and cars. But in your country, people have time - time for each other." Munna looked at me and said, "Well, George, it sounds like people in your country don't know how to live." This simple but profound sentence from Munna had a major impact on my life.

When I returned to Australia I said to my wife that I wanted to own less and experience more. We lived in a "blue ribbon" suburb in a beautiful house that we built. If it was not for my time in India, I would not be in Malaysia today. For I would have been focused on doing what just about everyone else focuses on - maintaining a big house and all of the trappings. I didn't realize it at the time, but it took a lot of courage to leave Australia, with no contacts and no business. Two people, two suitcases, one laptop and two boxes of books (I have to have my books!). The end result has been a time of great adventure in Malaysia. I look back on my two years in this country and I see many pearls. These are relationship pearls, many, many pearls savouring Malaysian food (including chilli padi!), travel pearls, pearls with lots of different people. And, yes, I have experienced many more pearls in these two years than I would have had in Australia.

Getting the most out of our lives and getting the most out of our time are totally intertwined. It's as much about attitudes to life and time as it is about skills. In this article, I have spoken about attitudes. These attitudes govern how we prioritise the use of our time. If we believe that material wealth is the most important thing in our lives, then we will give this a higher priority over all else. This is not to say that this focus is wrong. It is important, however, to understand that life is full of choices. There are consequences for every action that we take. In plain man's terms, if we focus on long hours at the office, then something has to give way!

In my next article, I will talk about some of the things that you can do to manage your time better. The aim is to help you achieve more in less time. Hopefully, the result will be that you get more out of your life. But in the meantime, do a bit of reflection. Look back on the last year of your life and ask yourself whether your life is a string of pearls, or a string of sticks and rocks. Let's continue with this theme next month.

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