

### 3 Hacking Time

In the spring of 2016, the radio program and podcast *Freakonomics* concluded its self-improvement month with special guest Tim Ferriss, “a man whose entire life and career are one big pile of self-improvement.” The final question for Ferriss was speculative: If you had a time machine, when and why would you go? After being excused from an obligation to assassinate a historical tyrant, Ferriss said he’d like to have drinks with Ben Franklin. Ferriss appreciated Franklin’s enthusiasm, his contributions across many fields, and for being “a bit of a merry prankster and a bit of a showman.”<sup>1</sup>

Franklin and Ferriss do have a lot in common. Both are self-help authors: Franklin by way of his *Poor Richard’s Almanack* and Ferriss by way of his books, blog, and podcast. Ferriss even likens his books on effectiveness, fitness, and learning to Franklin’s trinity of desired attributes, of being “healthy, wealthy and wise.”<sup>2</sup> Franklin is considered by some the first scientific American, exploring and testing the world around him. Ferriss thinks of himself as a guinea pig, exploring and testing his own body and abilities. And both are famously associated with a concern for productivity and time. Franklin is known for scheduling every hour of his day—“time is money” after all—and Ferriss is known for limiting his drudgery to four hours a week.

Franklin and Ferriss are also the target of common criticisms. Both have been chided for their showmanship. In Paris, Franklin’s charm was the basis of insults from the British ambassador and contempt from John Adams, his American colleague. Even if the British were propagandizing and Adams was an envious prig, their complaints sprang from a kernel of truth. Ferriss’s showmanship, too, has been a topic of complaint. One entrepreneur characterized Ferriss’s early efforts as aggressive, spammy, and alienating in a post entitled “5 Time Management Tricks I Learned from Years of Hating Tim Ferriss.”<sup>3</sup>

Other critics complain about the character of Franklin and Ferriss's productivity. Mark Twain, sire of the ornery Tom Sawyer, cursed Franklin's maxims for the suffering they inflicted on the young. Twain's revenge was to coin his own adage and facetiously attribute it to Franklin, just to confuse things: "Never put off till tomorrow what you can do day after tomorrow just as well." In turn, one critic asks if Ferriss's "ideology of achievement" is nothing more than a "framework for hilarious and pathetic self-delusion, and a distraction from the real substance of life"?<sup>4</sup> Most substantively, scholars see privilege in Franklin's ethic of work and in Ferriss's ability to limit it to four hours a week. Franklin was prolific, but he gave little thought to how his wife, Deborah Read, made it possible for him to live such a productive life. He was also able to delegate much drudgery to his enslaved personal servants—before becoming an abolitionist later in life. In turn, Ferriss has accomplished a lot in his four-hour workweeks but only by outsourcing his tedious tasks to virtual assistants.

Franklin and Ferriss are bookends to centuries of effort toward self-improvement. They are archetypal American men. Franklin was representative of a type of colonial American, as Ferriss is of a Silicon Valley one. They also provide a starting point for considering life hackers' seeming obsession with time and what they may take for granted when they seek to make the most of it.

### Time Thrift

Historian E. P. Thompson argues that European history can be divided into two orientations to work: task and time. In the task orientation, people worked through a cycle of chores corresponding to periods of the day. In the morning, the farmer put the goats to pasture and milked the cows. By the end of the day, the chickens were back in the roost. Time was not a thing to be spent or saved, and there was less of a division between "work" and "life."

The time orientation arose with the emergence of industry: work was now piecemeal and part of a larger process. Work was dependent on the synchronization of labor, and the clock enabled the coordination of a distributed market, from the weaving of cloth to its shipment on the afternoon train. Thompson observes that it did not take long for the necessity of coordination to become an ideology of "time thrift": "Puritanism, in its marriage of convenience with industrial capitalism, was the agent which converted

people to new valuations of time; which taught children even in their infancy to improve each shining hour; and which saturated people's minds with the equation, time is money." To those accustomed to working on the clock, the older task orientation "appears to be wasteful and lacking in urgency."<sup>5</sup>

Such was the case for Frederick Taylor and Frank and Lillian Gilbreth, founders of "scientific management" at the beginning of the twentieth century. Taylor believed that managers, with the help of experts, ought to optimize the efficiency of workers with the aid of a stopwatch. Famously, he optimized the routine of men carrying pig iron and tripled their output—though historians question the rigor of his methods and veracity of his claims. In turn, the Gilbreths are known for their time and motion studies. In one of their filmstrips—viewable on YouTube—a Remington typist works next to a spinning chronometer. Under the tutelage of Frank Gilbreth, the typist improved her technique and won a typing competition on behalf of her employer. Such demonstrations won the influence of Taylor and the Gilbreths among the management class and beyond—even as they feuded between themselves. The Gilbreths' efficient household was even the source of the popular books *Cheaper by the Dozen* (1948) and *Belles on Their Toes* (1950), coauthored by two of their twelve children.<sup>6</sup>

Although Frank Gilbreth coached the fastest typist in the world, he was frustrated with the limitations of the QWERTY keyboard, infamous for its longevity despite its inefficiency. QWERTY was designed to keep the keys of early machines from jamming, rather than increasing the comfort and speed of the typist, and Gilbreth proposed an improved keyboard. His suggestion eventually inspired the development of a simplified keyboard by August Dvorak in 1936. With the Dvorak keyboard, commonly occurring letters and sequences are easily typed from the home keys. The only folks that I know of who use these keyboards are hacker-types, including Tynan and Matt Mullenweg, founder and CEO of WordPress.

Today's creative class is largely beyond the synchronization required by industrial capitalism. Yes, people do still have milestones and deadlines and sometimes make use of shared calendars and scheduling services like Doodle. Even so, accomplishing a single task in a specific moment is less important than juggling multiple tasks at all times. This leads journalist Nikil Saval, author of an extensive history of the workplace, to think of life hacking as Taylorism 2.0. Saval concedes that life hacking "started out as a somewhat earnest response to the problem of fragmented attention and

overwork—an attempt to reclaim some leisure time and autonomy from the demands of boundaryless labor. But it has since become just another hectoring paradigm of self-improvement.” He grants that in life hacking, there’s no one looking over our shoulders with a stopwatch. We are, ostensibly, trying to help ourselves. But something else happened along the way. We surrendered our autonomy to “a stratum of faceless managers, in the form of apps, self-administered charts tracking the minutiae of eating habits and sleep cycles, and the books and buzzwords of gurus.”<sup>7</sup> And the internalized manager isn’t really faceless; it is our own face exhorting us to be *Smarter Faster Better*—the title of a recent book about “the secrets of being productive in life and business.”<sup>8</sup> Other critics observe that productivity gains rarely go to the workers, though the latter do accrue anxiety and a sense that they are somehow to blame.<sup>9</sup>

Yet shouldn’t people be free to experiment with ways to improve their lives? Unlike those working in call centers and warehouses, where the vise of managerial monitoring grows ever tighter, the hacker still has some freedom of movement. If people can make an informed decision, they will no doubt realize some things work for them and some things don’t. We will see life hackers who, in time, temper their enthusiasm and realize their pursuit of “productivity porn” is counterproductive. We will also see life hackers who quit their high-pressure jobs, sell all their belongings, and choose to travel the world with nothing other than what is in their backpacks. But before that, how is it that self-help and life hacking suggest we boost productivity?

### “Schedule Your Priorities”

We should be excused for thinking that life hacking is obsessed with efficiency and time: Ferriss’s 4-hour workweek sounds as if it is about managing time. However, Ferriss chose this title because it tested well on Google AdWords, not because it was the best reflection of the book’s content.<sup>10</sup> In *The 4-Hour Workweek*, Ferriss stresses *effectiveness*, “doing the things that get you closer to your goals,” over *efficiency*, “performing a given task (whether important or not) in the most economical manner possible.” Of course, “Efficiency is still important, but it’s useless unless applied to the right things.” In this view, “Being busy is a form of laziness—lazy thinking and indiscriminate action.”<sup>11</sup> You can *efficiently* paddle a boat in circles, but the *effective* boater is efficient and purposeful.

This distinction between efficient and effective is a powerful insight, but it is not novel: self-help repeats itself every couple of decades. Before Ferriss's book, the best-known productivity self-help book was Stephen Covey's *The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People*, first published in 1989. The title mentions effectiveness rather than efficiency, and Covey's stance is captured in his oft-quoted aphorism: "The key is not to prioritize what's on your schedule, but to schedule your priorities."<sup>12</sup> That same year, Richard Koch published the best seller *The 80/20 Principle: The Secret of Achieving More with Less*.<sup>13</sup> In both, efficiency without priorities is a near enemy of effectiveness. Efficiency appears to be a virtue but can become a vice.

Even Alan Lakein, author of the 1973 classic *How to Get Control of Your Time and Your Life*, asks: "Please don't call me an efficiency expert. I'm an effectiveness expert." Why? Because "making the right choices about how you use your time is more important than doing efficiently whatever job happens to be around."<sup>14</sup> Again, much like Ferriss, he criticizes those engaged with the trappings of efficiency. The overorganized person is always making, updating, and losing lists; the overdoer is always busy and has no time to assess value; the time nut only manages to make himself and others anxious.<sup>15</sup> In this view, efficiency is only a means toward effectiveness.

How, then, can we be effective? Lakein recommends that readers carefully consider and articulate their life goals, then prioritize them into three groups, with the bulk of the day spent pursuing the most important. Given that we are easily distracted and wander away from high-value work, Lakein dedicates most of his book to "how to get back after you've escaped."<sup>16</sup> Many of these techniques are implemented in Lakein's appendix, "How I Save Time." (Effectiveness advocates do muddle their case by slipping into time-saving language.) Without any preamble, Lakein lists sixty-one techniques for enhancing productivity. Some techniques focus on effectiveness: "#23 I always plan first thing in the morning and set priorities for the day." Others focus on efficiency: "#52 I write replies to most letters right on the piece of paper." If you replaced the word *paper* with *email* throughout his list, it would easily be recognized as a list of life hacks, thirty years before the coining of the term. And technique #47, "I delegate everything I possibly can to others," foreshadows Ferriss's outsourcing.

The importance of prioritizing can be traced back to the very first productivity consultant, Ivy Lee. The story goes that in 1918, Lee was summoned by Bethlehem Steel magnate Charles M. Schwab to improve the

productivity of Bethlehem's executives. Lee asked for nothing up front. He needed only fifteen minutes with each executive and, after three months, would accept whatever Schwab thought his advice had been worth. Lee explained his approach to each executive: at the end of the day, write down and prioritize tomorrow's six most important tasks; tomorrow, work through the tasks and repeat the exercise at the end of the day. After the three months, Schwab was so satisfied that he wrote Lee a check for \$25,000 (worth more than \$400,000 today).

Subsequent productivity self-help, including life hacking, is a series of variations on Lee. Each day (1) identify, review, and prioritize goals, (2) plan the consequent tasks, and (3) make progress on those tasks. For example, in *7 Habits* Covey distinguishes between important and urgent priorities. Though Covey does not cite Eisenhower, the former president is famous for his quip about the problems he faced: "The urgent are not important, and the important are never urgent." (Another good Eisenhower quote is that "plans are worthless, but planning is everything.") Covey fashions a matrix from these two variables and encourages his readers to spend more time on important but not urgent issues ("quadrant IV"). He agrees with Lakein on the importance of delegation, which Covey believes is "perhaps the single most powerful high-leverage activity there is."<sup>17</sup>

Turning a prioritized goal into a doable task is helped by clear specification. A classic rubric is that the goals should be SMART: specific, measurable, assignable, relevant, and time delimited. Additionally, tasks are more likely to be done when distractions are minimized and when we start small. It also helps to have a system for staging tasks. Life hackers are especially keen on what they refer to as "workflows." As I noted earlier, David Allen's 2001 tome *Getting Things Done: The Art of Stress-Free Productivity* was an inspiration to the founding life hackers. At GTD's core is a system for processing "stuff," which Allen defines as "anything you have allowed into your psychological or physical world that doesn't belong where it is, but for which you haven't yet determined the desired outcome and the next action step." In GTD, stuff is collected, processed, organized, reviewed, and completed; this is facilitated by moving tasks between various buckets, such as *incoming*, *someday*, *now*, or *waiting*. Allen warns that "as long as it's still 'stuff,' it's not controllable."<sup>18</sup>

As anyone who has experimented with managing their "stuff" knows, jotting it down and making a plan does help. This insight alone makes

productivity self-help worthwhile, and it may be related to what is known as the “Zeigarnik effect,” which is the mind’s tendency to remember and return to incomplete or interrupted tasks. Legend has it that Bluma Zeigarnik’s 1927 research on this was inspired by a waiter in a café. The waiter had a remarkable memory for the orders of active tables but quickly forgot them when the table was cleared. Zeigarnik took her hypothesis into the lab and found that subjects who were interrupted had a better chance of recalling a task than those who completed it. Social psychologist Roy Baumeister suggests that GTD helps reduce the Zeigarnik effect: “uncompleted tasks and unmet goals tend to pop into one’s mind,” and this can be stressful, especially if there are too many.<sup>19</sup>

GTD isn’t the only workflow. More often than not, life hackers adopt methods they use at work. *Personal Kanban* was inspired by Toyota’s just-in-time production system. Tasks are written down on sticky notes and placed in one of three columns, the first of which is the To Do column. The second column is for Works in Progress (WIP), which should be limited to a few focused items. Upon completion of a WIP item, it’s moved to the Done column. To Do items are then reevaluated, and one of them is moved to the WIP column.<sup>20</sup> Similarly, folks adapt software development frameworks, like the “scrum” agile methodology, to their own lives. This, too, often entails moving sticky notes about on a whiteboard.

Naturally, life hackers freely tweak these systems to their own tastes. Gina Trapani, founder of *Lifehacker*, uses a simplified GTD of three lists: next, projects, and someday/maybe. Although there are plenty of sophisticated apps for GTD, she manages it via a simple text file, synchronized via Dropbox, and edited in an app she developed named *todo.txt*. To keep things really simple, entrepreneur Alexandra Cavoulacos coined the 1-3-5 rule. As in the other systems, you write down a “comprehensive list of everything you have to do.” Then, on any given day, you work to “accomplish one big thing, three medium things, and five small things.” Before leaving work for the day, you “define your 1-3-5 for the next day, so you’re ready to hit the ground running in the morning.”<sup>21</sup> This is simple, has built in prioritization, and takes advantage of the fact that it’s easier to get a good start on the day when there is a small, identified, or incomplete task awaiting you in the morning.

Life hackers’ concern with and distinction between effectiveness and efficiency is not novel. Cavoulacos’s “1-3-5” method is not very different from Ivy Lee’s a century ago. What is different is their borrowing of systems

for managing technical projects at work and bringing them home. They also like to experiment, be it with weird sleep patterns or getting slapped in the face.

### Polyphasic Sleep

In addition to traveling back in time to meet Ben Franklin, people fantasize about controlling it: if only we could slow down the precious moments or fast-forward through the more annoying ones. Most pressingly, what if we could have more time in the day? This is the premise of Nancy Kress's 1993 speculative fiction *Beggars in Spain*.<sup>22</sup> In a not-too-distant future, ambitious parents bestow the genetic gift of sleeplessness upon their children. As the genetically modified children mature, a divide emerges between the sleepers and sleepless. Whereas ordinary people continue to spend much of their lives unconscious, the sleepless can study, practice, and work throughout the night. This seems unfair to many sleepers, who impose restrictions upon the sleepless. An ice skater is banned from the Olympics because her daily twelve hours of practice give her an unfair advantage. Resentment and fear widen the rift, and after violence, many of the sleepless retreat to their own enclave, first on Earth, and then in an orbiting space station. The title of the book is based on a debate among the sleepless. Just as a sleeper might ask what she owes to a beggar in another country, what do the sleepless, the most productive segment of humanity, owe to the sleepers of Earth?

We are far from genetically eliminating sleep, but life hackers try by other means, namely, polyphasic sleep. Most people are monophasic, sleeping overnight; some are biphasic, sleeping in two sessions with an intermission in between—it appears this was the natural pattern before the invention of artificial light. Polyphasic sleep is something else altogether. It is an attempt to increase waking hours by splitting sleep into short naps *throughout* the day. In *The 4-Hour Body*, Ferriss asks if giraffes need only 1.9 hours of sleep, why not humans? Given that the “most beneficial phase of sleep” is the one to two hours of REM (rapid eye movement), is there a way to “engineer things” so we “shave off” the six or so hours of less productive sleep?<sup>23</sup> It can be done. WordPress founder Matt Mullenweg wrote most of the code for the blogging platform while napping forty minutes every two-and-a-half hours. Pickup artists Neil Strauss and Tynan experimented with polyphasic sleep during Project Hollywood. They only made it through the first



seven days—the first ten of which are supposed to be hardest. On a second attempt, Tynan managed four-and-a-half months of twenty-one wakeful hours on the Uberman cycle of fifteen-minute naps every two hours.

Although they continue to use their Dvorak keyboards, Mullenweg and Tynan's sleep engineering could not be sustained. Mullenweg ended his experiment, and the most productive year of his life, when his schedule proved incompatible with that of his new girlfriend. Tynan stopped because it was disruptive to others' schedules, and he figured he didn't really need the extra time.

Cultural critic Jonathan Crary argues that we are now confronted with a "24/7" time orientation, one that is indifferent to our needs and "against which the fragility of human life is increasingly inadequate." In *24/7: Late Capitalism and the Ends of Sleep*, Crary laments that our sleep is encroached upon by the tendrils of online work and consumption: screens delay our slumber as we email coworkers and shop on Amazon. The life hacker's dream of polyphasic sleep is an attempt to acquiesce. However, no one does it for long. Even a bachelor will eventually find it incompatible with ordinary life and that missing a nap unsettles his sleep schedule and thinking. As Crary concludes, "Sleep cannot be eliminated. But it can be wrecked and despoiled."<sup>24</sup>

Additionally, we are not giraffes.

### "Quadrupled My Productivity"

In 2012, Maneesh Sethi finally managed to go viral. The blogger behind *Hack the System* paid someone to slap him when he was not being productive. Granted, much of the attention he received was incredulous, but the stunt served as a fulcrum. It was the culmination of efforts to promote himself, like Ferriss, as a lifestyle design entrepreneur. And it launched him on his future course of developing a gadget that was shocking—literally. His story also provides a case study for concerns about exploitation.

Four years earlier, in 2008, Sethi had been a student at Stanford when he read Ferriss's *The 4-Hour Workweek* (4HWW). Sethi found it so inspirational that within hours of finishing it, he bought tickets to Buenos Aires because, as he put it, "I realized that by following Tim Ferriss's ideals I'd be able to do what I wanted to do."<sup>25</sup> He took leave from school and set about becoming a 4HWW guru by creating an absentee business, traveling the world, taking on extraordinary challenges, and teaching others how to

do the same. When, in 2009, Ferriss called for “real-world lifestyle design case studies,” eighteen people submitted videos showing how 4HWW had changed their lives for the better. Ever the hype man, Sethi’s video began with a still picture of himself doing a push-up on the back of an elephant; this was part of a project he documented at Tumblr: “I travel to exotic locations, find exotic animals, and do pushups upon them.”<sup>26</sup>

Sethi portrayed himself as a “digital nomad”: all that he owned could fit in his backpack. Additionally, he created what Ferriss called a “passive income” business. Whereas Ferriss learned he could manage his supplement business from afar, Sethi, like many, turned to Google’s AdSense. Say you have a great web page about doing push-ups; AdSense can pay you to place an ad from a protein shake company, for example, on *your page*. (This is different from AdWords, wherein advertisers pay to have an ad placed on *Google’s search page*.) The company gets visibility for its product, you get money, and Google takes a cut. Once Sethi automated his system, he needed only a few hours a week to find terms for which Google had ads but for which there was not much good content. He then paid others to create web pages with content related to those terms and lived off the ad revenue from that outsourced content. It is fitting that AdSense, a favored source of passive income for life hackers, was prototyped, while he was at Google, by Paul Buchheit, the hacker who sees reality as a “systems of systems, all the way down.”

Sethi did not win Ferriss’s contest, but buoyed by the exposure on Ferriss’s blog, Sethi started his own, *Hack the System*, and announced a crowdfunding campaign that contributed \$5,000 toward getting a small school in rural India online. This crowdsourced philanthropy also follows the Ferriss mold. In Ferriss’s thirties, he began using his birthday for philanthropy. In 2010, his friends and fans raised more than \$100,000 toward sending students in high-need public schools on field trips.

Ferriss held another 4HWW contest, in 2011, with the reward being a “scholarship” to Ferriss’s upcoming \$10,000 Opening the Kimono seminar on how to develop and promote online content. (“Opening the kimono” was resurgent tech industry jargon from the 1990s; fortunately, the creepy expression was put down again in 2014 when Forbes included it in its list of “most annoying business jargon.”<sup>27</sup>) In this video submission, Sethi declared he did not need to work at all; his income was “completely passive and completely outsourced”: “4-hour workweek, screw that, I’m living a 0-hour workweek lifestyle and I’m teaching tons of people to do the same.”

He included two awkward video testimonials about his lifestyle coaching. Next up, he wanted to redefine miniretirement by engaging in ninety-day lifestyle experiments. “Next year, I’m going to live on a desert island, alone, with just a Swiss Army knife and a satellite internet connection.” But right now, he was working on becoming a famous deejay in Berlin. Sethi did this, to his satisfaction, using “The Sex Scandal Technique” of Kim Kardashian: do something provocative and get famous fast. Rather than developing deejay skills, making connections with promoters, and working up the ladder, he and a partner threw their own monthly parties: “Within just a few weeks of throwing these parties, we got to host Tim Ferriss live in Berlin. Our party brought in hundreds of people from countries all around the world.”<sup>28</sup>

Of course, like Ferriss, Sethi wasn’t really working just four (or zero) hours a week or even “semi”-retired. And it’s questionable whether having Tim Ferriss fans at your party makes you a famous deejay. He was traveling and enjoying himself, but he was also hustling as a lifestyle and marketing guru. Sethi was reaching for the success that Ferriss achieved—as well as that of his older brother, Ramit Sethi, author of *I Will Teach You to Be Rich*.<sup>29</sup> He worked on promoting self-help best sellers including Ferriss’s *The 4-Hour Chef* (in which he is mentioned) and books about diet and a “hormone cure” for women. And famously, in 2012, he “hired a girl on craigslist to slap [him] in the face” when he got distracted by Facebook.

I’m looking for someone who can work next to me at a defined location (my house or a mission cafe) and will make sure to watch what is happening on my screen. When I am wasting time, you’ll have to yell at me or if need be, slap me. You can do your own work at the same time. Looking for help asap, in mission, near 16th mission BART. Compensation: \$8/hour, and you can do your own work from your computer at the same time.<sup>30</sup>

Sethi claimed the gimmick quadrupled his productivity, and his analysis on his blog charted the improvement. Yet even with outsourced willpower costing less than minimum wage, shouldn’t a gadget be able to do something similar for less?

In 2014 Sethi announced Pavlok, a wristband that delivers “tiny jolts” of “Pavlovian conditioning” so as to break its users of bad habits. It was a popular idea, which raised \$283,927 (508 percent of its initial goal) on Indiegogo. Traditionally, people use rubber bands on their wrists to snap themselves out of unwelcome thoughts or habits. A rubber band, pulled and then released, snaps you. Pavlok zaps you. Although rubber bands are virtually free, Sethi

believed the \$200 gadget was worth it. Pavlok “integrates with sensors, friends, and GPS to keep you on track with your goals.” It could zap you when you raise your hand to your mouth (for nail biters or snackers), when you visit your favorite fast-food place, or when you spend too much time on Facebook. Additionally, as a result of teaching an online course about breaking bad habits, Sethi claimed “about 5% of people who try to quit a habit cold-turkey succeed in quitting the habit for good. About 25% who used a rubber band succeed. And, about 55-60% of users who used Pavlok succeeded.”<sup>31</sup>

Sethi promoted Pavlok in every way available to Ferriss’s “new rich” entrepreneurs, appearing in newspapers, on podcasts, and in blogs; the gadget was even lampooned on *The Colbert Report*, a useful barometer of popular attention. An especially valuable opportunity was a 2016 appearance on ABC’s entrepreneurial reality show *Shark Tank*, where his pitch was not well received. Sethi was called a con man by one of the judges and much worse after he refused a deal from the most sympathetic investor; he was accused of being there solely to promote his product rather than make a deal for additional funding. This complaint of self-interested behavior is not uncommon among life hacking hustlers like Ferriss and Sethi.

We’ll continue with motivation hacking in earnest in the next chapter, but this gloss of Sethi sets the stage for returning to our question about Ben Franklin’s productivity at the start of this one. What do life hackers take for granted when they seek to make the most of their time? More pointedly, when does life hacking tip over into exploitation?

### Privilege and Exploitation

In Sethi’s 2012 “Sex Scandal Technique” post about how to “achieve any goal, instantly (and party with Tim Ferriss),” he chided his peers for their entitlement: if you believe that because you went to college, worked hard, got good grades and a degree, if you think this means you deserve a job, you are mistaken. There are millions of people in similar circumstances. He asked: What makes you special? Additionally, people overseas will hustle much harder, for much less, than any American college graduate.

Let me tell you a story about one of my employees in the Philippines. I hired Klarc to help me build a habit: at 10:00 every day, he would call me and remind me to floss my teeth.

One day, at 10:32, I received a Skype message. “Excuse me Mr. Maneesh Sir (Klarc always called me sir, even though I asked him not to), I’m so sorry I’m late. We were hit by a hurricane, and the whole village has no electricity! I had to run 8 miles to the next village so that I could call you!”

Would you run 8 miles to remind me to floss? I was paying Klarc \$2 / hr (but gave him a hefty bonus after this incident). What are you doing to make yourself so valuable [that an] employer would pay 10–20x that amount?<sup>32</sup>

Sethi’s answer, naturally, was to “hack the system”: “The shortest path to a goal is not by doing what everyone else is doing. It’s often by doing the EXACT opposite.” To become a deejay in Berlin, he threw his own parties. To raise his own profile, he started a podcast and interviewed better-known life hackers.

Yet in the same article in which Sethi lectures others about the “fallacy of entitlement,” he speaks of paying a Filipino to remind him to floss. It is commendable for people to strive for efficiency, and should they go too far, they have an opportunity to reevaluate their goals and priorities toward effectiveness. Yet just as Ben Franklin’s productivity was dependent upon the elided labor of his wife and slaves, the outsourcer is dependent on the labor of others.<sup>33</sup> For jobs that are local, labor will be performed by those in the “gig economy,” like Uber drivers, who have flexibility but few benefits, and many of whom will soon be displaced by automation. For jobs that can be done remotely, this labor will be undertaken by those overseas who might be desperate for income. To respond to that desperation with honest, if menial, work could be virtuous. Ferriss has noted that “there are people I have outsourced to in India who now outsource portions of their work to the Philippines. It’s the efficient use of capital, and if you want the rewards of a free market, if you want to enjoy the rewards of the capitalist system, these are the rules by which you play.”<sup>34</sup> But when is it exploitative? When are the rules unfair? Such is the double-edged sword of automation and globalization.

The premise and promise of the systems embraced by life hackers is one of effectiveness, of freedom and flexibility. To appropriate outsourcing from corporations for this personal use is a hack, but one that also inherits corporations’ ethical lapses. As kind and accommodating as Sethi might be, was Klarc free to skip a day and help his family after the hurricane, to keep his own time rather than exchange it for two dollars? Or was his family so dependent on his wage that Klarc had little choice but to run eight miles to remind Sethi to floss? Similarly, in the United States, the presumption is

that workers have a choice between a steady job and the flexibility of gig work, but increasingly such work is done by those already at the margins and who have little choice.<sup>35</sup> In turn, productivity hackers sometimes seem to be cheerleading for things that will be abused by corporate regimes. Four years after Sethi launched a wristband said to correct bad habits, Amazon patented something similar for warehouse employees who reach for the wrong item. Amazon's proposal, thankfully, doesn't include a zapper, but there is an unsettling, even if coincidental, reciprocity between those who can choose a regime for themselves and those who can require it of others.

To look at the faces of life hackers, one usually sees white, smart, and technically inclined men with degrees from good colleges. This isn't always the case: some like Trapani are women, some like Sethi are of color, and among the technically inclined, dropping out of a good college is its own accreditation of merit. Silicon Valley billionaire Peter Thiel offers a \$100,000 fellowship to young people to skip or drop out of college and "build new things instead of sitting in a classroom." But critics need not reach far to characterize Silicon Valley "know-it-alls" and life hacking gurus as privileged white dudes who overlook others' circumstances.<sup>36</sup>

*Getting Things Done* is a useful system for remaining productive, for focusing on what's important, and lessening anxiety. Nonetheless, I better appreciate the assumptions inherent in this method thanks to a talk by Heidi Waterhouse on "life-hacking for the rest of us." Waterhouse, a "technical writer, crafter, and working mother," notes that GTD assumes you are the master of your environment, that others do not control your schedule—that you can even delegate tasks—and that you do not have external dependencies like elder or child care. Her preferred system, Unfuck Your Habitat (UfYH), is productivity hacking, but with fewer assumptions, which are often related to gender and class. UfYH is much more fitting for those who want to do something useful in the few minutes after a teleconference and before taking the kids to school.<sup>37</sup> You might not be able to make the kitchen spotless in that time, but you might be able to clear out the dish rack so as to make washing some dishes later that much easier.

For critics, GTD and productivity hacking are individualistic responses to collective problems: in the guise of self-realization and entrepreneurialism, workers seek to escape the 9–5 rut by way of those on the lower rungs. A lucky few do ascend the ladder, but everyone that remains must either serve as a replaceable rung, perhaps in a call center, or continue to climb while parroting the buzzwords of *freedom* and *flexibility*.<sup>38</sup> Perhaps Sethi's

payment of two dollars an hour is a fantastic wage in rural Philippines and Klarc is a successful entrepreneur in his own context, but perhaps not, and this concern is rarely raised.

These critiques of privilege and exploitation don't completely damn productivity hacking. Although gurus do focus on the wealthy, such as in Ferriss's \$10,000 Opening the Kimono event, most life hacking advice is accessible to those who can access the web or a library. Also, aside from the gurus, most life hackers are ordinary geeks attempting to improve their lives. Recall that the term *life hacking* arose among attendees at a tech conference *sharing* tips. This is commendable, as are Waterhouse's and others attempts to expand the scope of life hacking to "the rest of us." More diversity among life hackers should lead to better hacks.

It isn't that life hacking is inherently flawed, only that, until now, it has been too bound to its demographic legacy, something that emerged at a tech conference in California. Alice Marwick, an astute scholar of Silicon Valley culture, writes that Ferriss and his peers "are successful because they uphold the values of the tech community (passion, success, self-improvement, meritocracy) and don't criticize or interrogate any of those values; they reinforce the 2.0 sense of itself as uniquely special, smart, and revolutionary." That is, Ferriss "universalizes a wealthy, white man's experience as a workable method for others" and his get-rich-quick techniques "can only be pursued by a few people before becoming unsustainable; not everyone can game Google AdWords."<sup>39</sup> Similarly, Sethi seems disdainful of those not willing or able to "hack the system" as he does, but the system would be trashed if everyone did so. Exotic animals would go extinct should everyone attempt push-ups on their backs.

Given that hacking seeks to exploit or contravene systems, to bend the rules, the ethical hacker should be careful to hack the system, not the other people caught up in it. Computer hacking has a rich history of ethical concern.<sup>40</sup> We should similarly ask if a life hack is universal (can everyone do it) and beneficial (beyond the lone hacker)? But such considerations are largely missing among life hackers. Ferriss is provocative. He titled his post on his experiments with outsourcing relationships "Mail Your Child to Sri Lanka or Hire Indian Pimps: Extreme Personal Outsourcing."<sup>41</sup> He's also pragmatic. Outsourced tasks should be time consuming and well defined. But he and Sethi say little on how to outsource without exploiting others. Simply put, even privileged geeks have as much a right to self-help and happiness as anyone else, but what do they owe others?

## Beggars in Spain

In Nancy Kress's speculative world in which the sleepless ask what they owe the sleepers, much of the discourse is shaped by a philosophy known as "Yagaiism." Kenzo Yagai, an inventor of an inexpensive cold-fusion power generator, believed that a person's worth is based on what they could do well and that their only obligation was to abide by their agreements. As Yagai's energy technology reshaped the world, so did his philosophy. A wealthy industrialist was a believer and opted to have one of the first sleepless children, hoping his daughter Leisha would be able to do well. As he explained to her: "People trade what they do well, and everyone benefits. The basic tool of civilization is the contract. Contracts are voluntary and mutually beneficial. As opposed to coercion, which is wrong."<sup>42</sup> Nonetheless, as Leisha matured, she remained uncertain about Yagaiism—and fond of some sleepers—despite many of her sleepless friends' arguing for secession. Although Leisha might kindly give some change to a panhandler, her sleepless friend Tony asked, What if there were a mob of them? He asked:

"What do you owe the beggars then? What does a good Yagaiist who believes in mutually beneficial contracts do with people who have nothing to trade and can only take?"

"You're not—"

"What, Leisha? In the most objective terms you can manage, what do we owe the grasping and nonproductive needy?"

"What I said originally. Kindness. Compassion."

"Even if they don't trade it back? Why?"<sup>43</sup>

As Kress wrote in her preface, she wanted to explore the long-range effects of an increasingly polarized society, between the productive and nonproductive, and to work through her understandings of Ayn Rand, a proponent of individual excellence, and the ideas in Ursula Le Guin's 1974 novel *The Dispossessed: An Ambiguous Utopia*. Kress reached her own conclusion near the end of the book, in the voice of Leisha: "what the strong owe beggars is to ask each one why he is a beggar and act accordingly. Because community is the assumption, not the result, and only by giving nonproductiveness the same individuality as excellence, and acting accordingly, does one fulfill the obligation to the beggars in Spain."<sup>44</sup>

The parallels between *Beggars in Spain* and criticisms of productivity hacking are striking. Consider the coupling between Yagai's transformative



technology and his philosophy. I doubt Kress anticipated this, having published her story in 1993, but the internet's own development had a similar cultural coupling: many prominent hackers and entrepreneurs were influenced by libertarianism and Ayn Rand's philosophy of objectivism.<sup>45</sup>

Paul Graham, a famed computer programmer, hacker essayist, entrepreneur, and venture capitalist, sounds as if he could be a Yagaist. In a 2004 essay he wrote that those who are best at something "tend to be far better than everyone else" and that technology serves as a lever, exaggerating this further. Accordingly, in a modern society it's natural for there to be a gap in income just as there is a "gap between the productive and the unproductive." As long as it's the result of creating value, rather than corruption or coercion, "increasing variation in income is a sign of health." And being *relatively* poor isn't so bad in a rich society: "If I had a choice of living in a society where I was materially much better off than I am now, but was among the poorest, or in one where I was the richest, but much worse off than I am now, I'd take the first option."<sup>46</sup>

Graham's take on being poor in a superwealthy society is rational, but it isn't economically plausible or psychologically generalizable. Graham is wealthy, and it's difficult to conceive of a society in which everyone else is better off than he is. Additionally, research shows that people feel discontent in the face of inequality independent of their own absolute income.<sup>47</sup> Coincidentally, this was a significant theme in Cory Doctorow's *Down and Out in the Magic Kingdom*, mentioned in the last chapter.

Graham has a deserved reputation for insight into the hacker mind-set and culture. In his collection of essays on hacking, he explains that the term *hack* can be used for fixes that are clever or kludgy because "ugly and imaginative solutions have something in common: they both break the rules."<sup>48</sup> When life hacking is used to break the rules of our collective systems for personal advantage, little thought is given to those who are affected. Indeed, those left behind may be employed, literally, for menial drudgery by those clever enough to have just escaped it. But what of improving the system itself? Life hacking, simply, has little to say about this. Although life hacking practices could make one a more effective advocate for social improvement, life hacking's focus is on hacking, above all, the self.

