



X + Alpha

Do you know that short (and famous) quotation from one of Charles Dickens' novels? Paraphrased, it runs something like this, "Given an income of X, an expenditure of $X - \alpha$ = happiness, an expenditure of $X + \alpha$ = misery."

I've been thinking about this concept recently, but not with regard to money. I'm interested to see if the same relationship applies to how we use *time*. And let's face it, I don't mean 'we', I mean 'I'.

I can't speak for childhood years, but ever since I 'grew up' and became responsible for how I use my own time, I have had a problem with it. To put it very simply - I always 'overspend', and not only do I never have any left over, but I am always in 'debt'; there simply isn't enough time on hand to do the things that need doing.

Now I have to admit right up front, that this is completely a self-inflicted problem. In the original example of money, a person who shows lack of self control might perhaps give at least a part of the blame to the surrounding society. After all, we are bombarded with nonstop advertising encouraging us to 'buy buy buy', so it should be no surprise that many people end up chronically overspending.

But I can't find anybody to blame for my problem with time.

Let me try and explain the situation; back in the early years of my printmaking 'career' here in Japan, the way that I used my time was not something I had much control over. I was working on the long *Hyakunin Isshu* series, running an English school in our home, helping care for my children, and doing a lot of re-writing of English translations. The days were jammed from early morning until late at night. 'Free time' did not exist, and I collapsed into bed each night for the sleep of the dead.

Fast forward a few years; the English teaching was gone, the re-writing was gone, and the children were older and had become less demanding of constant attention. I was becoming more fluent at the printmaking work too, so I sometimes found myself in a situation where I had 'nothing to do'.

What did I do with that 'free time'? Why, I immediately spent it! I bought a computer and began to build a website; I picked up a keyboard synthesizer and began to learn how to use it for musical composition; I established an international printmakers' group on the internet, which soon grew to hundreds of members; I accepted an offer from one of Tokyo's English language newspapers to write stories, and then a column. (I didn't do all these things at once of course ... simply they came 'on board' one at a time as my daily schedule absorbed each new activity in turn, resulting in a bit of 'free time'.)

Over the decade or so that has elapsed since then, the pattern has remained the same. Some of those activities have fallen by the wayside (I don't touch the synthesizer at all these days), but many others have taken their place: writing and publishing books and eBooks, recording soundscapes of the world around my workshop, creating the A Story A Week series (internet, audio, and books), programming software for my Macintosh, doing all the construction on the studio downstairs, and etc. and etc. and etc.

And all of this is taking place in the 'extra time' aside from running my printmaking business, which alone is a very Full Time Job (in capital letters) for anybody!

Now please don't misunderstand. I am not telling you these things to leave an impression that I am full of stress and collapsing under some vast work load. My days are peaceful and completely stress-free. But what I

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have lost - due to my own 'greedy' habits, and my own inability to say 'no' to any interesting idea that wanders by - is ... free time. Time to just sit ... and do nothing.

Does this matter? As long as I'm happy, then what's the problem?

Well, this story is entitled 'X + α '. Next week, let's have one titled 'X - α ', and see what we can come up with!

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