



C R A Z Y B U S Y

A (MERCIFULLY) SHORT BOOK ABOUT A (REALLY) BIG PROBLEM

KEVIN DEYOUNG

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B U S Y

SAMPLE CHAPTER
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K E V I N D E Y O U N G

 CROSSWAY

WHEATON, ILLINOIS

Crazy Busy: A (Mercifully) Short Book about a (Really) Big Problem
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1

Hello, My Name Is Busy

I am the worst possible person to write this book.

And maybe the best.

My life is crazy busy. I don't say that as a boast or a brag. I'm not trying to win any contest. I'm just stating the facts. Or at least describing the way my life feels almost every single day. I often make the quip, "I'm supposed to write a book on busyness, if only I could find the time." And I'm not joking.

How did I get this way? How did you get this way? How did we all get this way? I've yet to meet anyone in America who responds to the question "How are you?" with the reply, "Well for starters, I'm not very busy." I suppose there must be a six-year-old somewhere out there who doesn't "have anything to do" and some dear folks at the nursing home who could use a few more interruptions, but for almost everyone in between there is a pervasive sense of being unrelentingly filled up and stressed out.

I do not write this book as one who has reached the summit and now bends over to throw the rope down to everyone else. More like the guy with a toehold three feet off the ground, looking for my next grip. I'm writing this

book not because I know more than others but because I want to know more than I do. I want to know why life feels the way it does, why our world is the way it is, why I am the way I am. And I want to change.

Same Kind of Busy as You

As long as I can remember—which takes us back eons and eons, all the way to the 90s—I have been busy. In high school I ran track and cross-country, played intramural basketball, did National Honor Society, tried the Spanish club, took multiple AP courses, played in our insanely time-consuming marching band, sang in a musical, did church twice on Sunday, Sunday school, youth group, and a Friday morning Bible study. No one made me like this. My parents didn’t force me (though church was not up for discussion). I wanted to do all these things.

In college I did even more. I ran a season of track, played intramural sports, worked part-time for various professors, organized one of the country’s largest Model UN programs (yes, it’s true), signed up to be a DJ at the campus radio station, led our Fellowship of Christian Students group, went to voluntary chapel three times a week, sang in a church choir, sang in the college chapel choir, participated in my church’s college ministry, helped with Boys Brigade on Wednesday nights, went to church on Sunday morning, then Sunday school, then evening church, then chapel back on campus late into the night.

Same story in seminary. In addition to normal course work and wading through my denomination's labyrinthine ordination process, I interned at my church, preached regularly, sang in up to three different choirs at the same time, went to an accountability group every week, did the usual with church twice on Sunday, plus Sunday school, plus a midweek catechism class I taught for little kids, plus leading the seminary's missions committee and attending chapels and frequent prayer meetings. I could go on and on.

And this is before I was *really* busy. The only people busier than single grad students are people who aren't single and aren't grad students. All those years in school, except for one semester, I wasn't married. I wasn't in full-time pastoral ministry. I wasn't blogging or writing books. I wasn't leading elders' meetings. I wasn't speaking anywhere. I wasn't a slave to technology. I didn't have a mortgage to figure out or health insurance to navigate or a lawn to mow or a furnace to fix or a sermon (or two) almost every week. I didn't have to travel. I didn't have Facebook or Twitter. Hardly anyone emailed me. And I wasn't parenting a child, let alone five.

On most days, my responsibilities, requirements, and ambitions add up to much more than I can handle. It has since I was a teenager, and only seems to be getting worse. When someone asks me how I'm doing, my response almost always includes the word "busy." I can think of several moments in just the past couple of months

where I've muttered to myself, "What am I doing? How did I get myself into this mess? When will I ever get my life under control? How long can I keep this up? Why can't I manage my time? Why did I say yes to this? How did I get so busy?" I've bemoaned my poor planning and poor decision making. I've complained about my schedule. I've put in slipshod work because there wasn't time for any other kind. I've missed too many quiet times and been too impatient with my kids. I've taken my wife for granted and fed important relationships with leftovers. I've been too busy to pursue God with my whole heart, soul, mind, and strength.

In other words, I've likely been just like you.

An Idea Whose Time Was Overdue

"So, Kevin, what's your next book project?" my friends would ask.

"I'm doing a book on busyness."

"Really?! But your schedule is a mess. This is one of your biggest problems."

"I know. That's why I'm writing the book."

Some books are written because the author knows something people need to know. Others because the author has seen something people should see. I'm writing this book to figure out things I don't know and to work on change I have not yet seen. More than any other book I've worked on, this one is for me.

Which also means the book will have more about me than usual. I don't know any other way to write on a topic that has been such a personal struggle of mine except to make the book very personal. There is nothing remarkable about my experiences such that they need to be shared. It just so happens they are the experiences I know best. So you're going to get a candid look at some of my faults, some of my struggles, and some of the insights—common-sense and biblical—that have helped me make sense of my heart issues.

I have two hesitations in writing a book like this, and both stem from pride. On the one hand, I'm going to put aside the urge to constantly qualify my struggles with reassurances that things aren't quite so bad as they sound. In one sense, that's true. I have a happy marriage and love being a dad. I'm not burnt out. I'm not fifty pounds overweight. I sleep at night. I have friends. There are people in my life to keep me accountable. This book is not a cry for help.

Except that it is. I want to grow in this area. I don't want to keep up this same pace for the rest of my life. Frankly, I probably can't. My life may not be spinning out of control, but it's probably spinning too fast and a bit wobbly.

My second hesitation is just the opposite. I worry that you'll think I'm parading my busyness as a badge of honor. If you don't think I'm messed up for having these issues in the first place, you might think I'm proud for talking about them at all. "Must be nice to speak at conferences,

Rev Kev. Must be pretty sweet to have people asking you to write books. Nice name drop, Pastor—wish those guys were knocking down my door. Thanks for sharing all your *terrible* burdens with us.”

I understand the sentiment. When some people talk about busyness it sounds like the lantern-jawed zillionaire quarterback complaining about all the photo shoots he has lined up. I really hope I don’t sound like That Guy, the one who expects sympathy every time he tells his sob story about how much worse the Milan airport is compared to Prague. As far as I can discern my heart, I’m not proud to be busy and I’m not proud of the things that make me busy. To be sure, pride is connected in other ways, but not in the sharing of the struggles themselves.

Besides, when it comes down to it, we are all busy in the same sort of ways. Whether you are a pastor, a parent, or a pediatrician, you likely struggle with the crushing weight of work, family, exercise, bills, church, school, friends, and a barrage of requests, demands, and desires. No doubt, some people are quantitatively less busy than others and some much more so, but that doesn’t change the shared experience: most everyone I know feels frazzled and overwhelmed most of the time.

That’s what the people in my church are like. That’s what my friends around the country are like. That’s what I am like. And that’s why I’m writing this book.

Worlds Apart?

I read an anecdote once about a woman from another culture who came to the United States and began to introduce herself as “Busy.” It was, after all, the first thing she heard when meeting any American. *Hello, I’m Busy*—she figured it was part of our traditional greeting, so she told everyone she met that that’s who she was.

It’s what most of us are, and what more of us are becoming. No matter where you live or what your background. Granted, there are important differences in how people understand time. I’m well aware that this book assumes a modernized, industrialized cultural context. I know it assumes a Western view of time, and that an African book on busyness might include different prescriptions and contain many insights I’ve missed. To that end, I trust you will distinguish in these pages between practical application (which may differ across cultures) and biblical principles and diagnoses (which do not). Efficiency and punctuality, for example, can demonstrate respect for others, but they are not absolute virtues. Just ask the man on the Jericho Road.

But we all live somewhere and must swim in the water around us. I can’t help but deal with the realities of life as I experience them in the United States. While it may limit the effectiveness of this book in some contexts, it seemed best *not* to take off my Western lenses, both because I probably couldn’t and because the world, for better or worse, will only grow more globalized, urbanized, and busier in

the years ahead. Many other cultures are not as obsessed with minutes and seconds as we are, but for most of us, that's the world we inhabit. For the rest, it's the world that's coming.

Paint by Numbers

I hope you'll find this book highly practical and accessibly theological. That's the book I set out to write because that's the book I'd want to read. In these pages, I don't plumb the depths of union with Christ, eschatological foreshadowing, and the interpretive history of the fourth commandment. That's not the kind of book you're reading. At the same time, I'm not interested merely in giving time management techniques or tips on how to set your email filter. I want to understand what's going on in the world and in my heart to make me feel the way I do. And I also want to understand how to change—even just a little. Both tasks require theology. And both are begging for practicality.

The outline of this book is straightforward. If you want a poem or a chalk drawing about busyness, you won't find it here. But if you prefer a clear outline with lists, I'm your man. My outline is as simple as three numbers: 3, 7, and 1: three dangers to avoid (chapter 2), seven diagnoses to consider (chapters 3–9), and one thing you must do (chapter 10). I don't promise total transformation. I offer no money-back guarantees. My goal is more modest. I hope you'll find a few ways to tackle your schedule, several

suggestions to reclaim your sanity, and a lot of encouragement to remember your soul.

All of which is to say, I hope you find in reading this book exactly what I'm looking for in writing it.

Deep Calls to Deep

Diagnosis #5: You Are Letting the Screen Strangle Your Soul

The first time I really became aware of the full intensity of the “problem of the screen” was in a conversation with a couple of students training for the ministry. I was speaking at one of our top seminaries when, after the class, two men came up to me in private to ask a question. I could tell by the way they were speaking quietly and shifting their eyes they had something awkward to say. I was sure they were going to talk about pornography. And sure enough, they wanted to talk about their struggles with the Internet. But it wasn’t porn they were addicted to. It was social media. They told me they couldn’t stop looking at Facebook, and they were spending hours on blogs and mindlessly surfing the Web. This was several years ago, and I didn’t know how to help them. I hadn’t encountered this struggle before and wasn’t immersed in it myself. Five years later I have, and I am.

I used to make fun of bloggers. I used to lampoon Facebook. I used to laugh at Twitter. I’ve never been an

early adopter with technology. I've never cared what Steve Jobs was up to. I used to roll my eyes at technophiles. Until I became one. Now I have a blog, a Facebook page, a Twitter handle, a Bluetooth headset, an iPhone, an iPad, wifi at work and at home, cable TV, a Wii, a Blu-ray player, multiple email accounts, and unlimited texting. Pride comes before a fall.

I was born in 1977, so I can remember life before the digital revolution. In college we had to go to a computer lab to get on the Internet, which wasn't a big deal because nothing happened on email and I didn't see anything interesting online. By the time I was in seminary, however, things had changed. Email was a vital way to communicate, and the Internet was how my friends and I were getting our news (and doing Fantasy Football). But even then (in the late 90s and early 2000s), life was far less connected. I only got an Internet connection in my room partway through seminary—one of those loud, lumbering ack-ack dial-up monstrosities. I didn't have a cell phone in high school, college, or graduate school. As little as four or five years ago I didn't do anything on my phone and barely accessed the Internet at home. I'm not suggesting those days were purer and nobler, but my life felt less scattered and less put upon.

Tech Talk Is Tricky

Writing about technology is fraught with challenges. For starters, some people won't have any idea what I'm talk-

ing about. They're probably older and don't understand the attraction with all these gadgets anyway. The Lord bless you. I hope you enjoy the real world as much as we used to.

Another challenge is that some of the particulars I'm addressing will be out of date in a couple of years, and all of it will sound dated in a few years after that. For example, it's crazy to me that college students hardly do email anymore. You have to text or write them on Facebook if you want their attention.

A third difficulty in writing about technology is the propensity for overreaction. The Luddite impulse is strong among Christians, and it's easy to think the best answer for technology overload is to rage against the machines. And yet, it does no good to pine for a world that isn't coming back and probably wasn't as rosy as we remember it. I like that I can carry the Bible on my phone, and have street maps for the entire country in my pocket, and can check the score whenever I want, and can hear from my friends throughout the day, and can text with my wife while I'm at work. There's no doubt that some things are better because we are all wired to everything

The problem is that some things aren't better. We must realize that, as the presence of digital devices and digital dependence grows, with this growth comes new capabilities *and* new dangers. The question is not whether the digital revolution adds to the craziness of our lives or whether

it poses threats to our souls and our sanity. The question is, what are the threats and what can we do about them?

What Are the Threats?

Much has been written and will be written about the dangers of an insatiable appetite for being plugged in. I'll leave it to others to decide whether Google makes us stupid and whether young people are more or less relational than ever before. Let me simply suggest three ways in which the digital revolution is an accomplice to our experience of being crazy busy. For if we understand the threats, we may have some hope of finding a way forward.

First, there is *the threat of addiction*. That may sound like too strong a word, but that's what it is. Could you go a whole day without looking at Facebook? Could you go an afternoon without looking at your phone? What about two days away from email? Even if someone promised there would be no emergencies and no new work would come in, we'd still have a hard time staying away from the screen. The truth is, many of us cannot not click. We can't step away, even for a few hours, let alone a few days or weeks.

In his bestselling book *The Shallows*, Nicholas Carr reflects on how his attitude toward the Web has changed. In 2005—the year he says the “Web went 2.0”—he found the digital experience exhilarating. He loved how blogging junked the traditional publishing apparatus. He loved the speed of the Internet, the ease, the hyperlinks,

the search engines, the sound, the videos, everything. But then, he recalls, “a serpent of doubt slithered into my infoparadise.”¹ He realized that the Net had control over his life in a way that his traditional PC never did. His habits were changing, morphing to accommodate a digital way of life. He became dependent on the Internet for information and activity. He found his ability to pay attention declining. “At first I’d figured that the problem was a symptom of middle-age mind rot. But my brain, I realized, wasn’t just drifting. It was hungry. It was demanding to be fed the way the Net fed it—and the more it was fed, the hungrier it became. Even when I was away from my computer, I yearned to check e-mail, click links, do some Googling. I wanted to be *connected*.²”

I’ve noticed the same thing happening to me for the past few years. I can’t seem to work for more than fifteen minutes without getting the urge to check my email, glance at a blog, or get caught up on Twitter. It’s a terrible feeling. In an afterword to *The Shallows*, Carr explains that after his book came out he heard from dozens of people (usually by email) who wanted to tell their own stories of how the Web had “scattered their attention, parched their memory, or turned them into compulsive nibblers of info-snacks.” One college senior sent him a long note describing how he had struggled “with a moderate to major form of Internet

¹Nicholas Carr, *The Shallows: What the Internet Is Doing to Our Brains* (New York: Norton, 2011), 15.

²Ibid., 16.

addiction” since the third grade. “I am unable to focus on anything in a deep or detailed manner,” the student wrote. “The only thing my mind can do, indeed the only thing it wants to do, is plug back into that distracted frenzied blitz of online information.” He confessed this, even though he was sure that “the happiest and most fulfilled times of my life have all involved a prolonged separation from the Internet.”³ Many of us are simply overcome—hour after hour, day after day—by the urge to connect online. And as Christians we know that “whatever overcomes a person, to that he is enslaved” (2 Pet. 2:19).

Second, there is the threat of acedia. Acedia is an old word roughly equivalent to “sloth” or “listlessness.” It is not a synonym for leisure, or even laziness. Acedia suggests indifference and spiritual forgetfulness. It’s like the dark night of the soul, but more blah, more vanilla, less interesting. As Richard John Neuhaus explains, “Acedia is evenings without number obliterated by television, evenings neither of entertainment nor of education but of narcotized defense against time and duty. Above all, acedia is apathy, the refusal to engage the pathos of other lives and of God’s life with them.”⁴

For too many of us, the hustle and bustle of electronic activity is a sad expression of a deeper acedia. We feel busy, but not with a hobby or recreation or play. We

³Quoted in *ibid.*, 226.

⁴Richard John Neuhaus, *Freedom for Ministry* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1979), 227.

are busy with busyness. Rather than figure out what to do with our spare minutes and hours, we are content to swim in the shallows and pass our time with passing the time. How many of us, growing too accustomed to the acedia of our age, feel this strange mix of busyness and lifelessness? We are always engaged with our thumbs, but rarely engaged with our thoughts. We keep downloading information, but rarely get down into the depths of our hearts. That's acedia—purposelessness disguised as constant commotion.

All of this leads directly to the third threat of our digital world, and that's the danger that we are never alone. When I say “never alone,” I’m not talking about Big Brother watching over us or the threat of security breaches. I’m talking about *our* desire to never be alone. Peter Kreeft is right: “We *want* to complexify our lives. We don’t have to, we want to. We want to be harried and hassled and busy. Unconsciously, we want the very things we complain about. For if we had leisure, we would look at ourselves and listen to our hearts and see the great gaping hole in our hearts and be terrified, because that hole is so big that nothing but God can fill it.”⁵

Sometimes I wonder if I’m so busy because I’ve come to believe the lie that busyness is the point. And nothing allows you to be busy—all the time, with anyone anywhere—like having the whole world in a little black rect-

⁵Peter Kreeft, *Christianity for Modern Pagans: Pascal’s Pensees Edited, Outlined, and Explained* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1993), 168.

angle in your pocket. In *Hamlet's Blackberry*, William Powers likens our digital age to a gigantic room. In the room are more than a billion people. But despite its size everyone is in close proximity to everyone else. At any moment someone may come up and tap you on the shoulder—a text, a hit, a comment, a tweet, a post, a message, a new thread. Some people come up to talk business, others to complain, others to tell secrets, others to flirt, others to sell you things, others to give you information, others just to tell you what they're thinking or doing. This goes on day and night. Powers calls it a “non-stop festival of human interaction.”⁶

We enjoy the room immensely—for awhile. But eventually we grow tired of the constant noise. We struggle to find a personal zone. Someone taps us while we're eating, while we're sleeping, while we're on a date. We even get tapped in the bathroom, for crying out loud! So we decide to take a vacation, just a short one. But no one else seems to know where the exit is. No one else seems interested in leaving. In fact, they all seem put off that you might not want to stay. And even when you find the exit and see the enchanting world through the opening, you aren't sure what life will be like on the other side. It's a leap of faith to jump out and see what happens.

The point of Powers's parable should be self-evident. Like Tolkien's ring, we love the room and hate the room.

⁶William Powers, *Hamlet's Blackberry: A Practical Philosophy for Building a Good Life in the Digital Age* (New York: Harper, 2010), xii.

We want to breathe the undistracted air of digital independence, but increasingly the room is all we know. How can we walk out, when everyone else is staying in? How will we pass our time and occupy our thoughts with the unceasing tap, tap, tap? For many of us, the Web is like the Eagles's *Hotel California*: we can check out anytime we like, but we can never leave.

And the scariest part is that we may not *want* to leave. What if we prefer endless noise to the deafening sound of silence? What if we do not care to hear God's still, small voice? What if the trivialities and distractions of our day are not forced upon us by busyness, or forced upon us at all? What if we choose to be busy so that we can continue to live with trivia and distraction? If "digital busyness is the enemy of depth,"⁷ then we are bound to be stuck in the shallows so long as we're never alone. Our digital age gives new relevance to Pascal's famous line: "I have often said that the sole cause of man's unhappiness is that he does not know how to stay quietly in his room."

Or stay out of the room, as the case may be.

What Can We Do?

So now what? If this is the world we live in and these are the dangers, what's our response? What can we do? Let me offer several ideas, some mainly practical and some more explicitly theological.

⁷Ibid., 17.

Cultivate a healthy suspicion toward technology and “progress.” I’ve already said that technology improves our lives in many ways, so I’m not suggesting we renounce anything with an on/off switch (though that would make flying less annoying!). But we could do with a little more “distance” from technology, a little more awareness that there was life before the latest innovations and there can be life without it. Neil Postman’s admonition is wise: technology “must never be accepted as part of the natural order of things.” We must understand that “every technology—from an IQ test to an automobile to a television set to a computer—is a product of a particular economic and political context and carries with it a program, an agenda, and a philosophy that may or may not be life-enhancing and that therefore requires scrutiny, criticism, and control.”⁸

Be more thoughtful and understanding in your connectedness with others. Not long ago I noticed a friend of mine, after incredibly terse emails, was linking to an “email charter” at the end of his messages. I ignored it for weeks (too busy!) but eventually curiosity got the best of me and I clicked on the link. To my surprise the “charter” had very helpful advice about reducing time spent on email: don’t ask open-ended questions; don’t send back contentless replies; don’t cc for no good reason; don’t expect an immediate response. It’s amazing the way my impatience works. If I text someone, I expect a response

⁸Neil Postman, *Technopoly: The Surrender of Culture to Technology* (New York: Vintage, 1993), 184–185.

in seconds. If I email, I might allow for a couple of hours, but with friends I expect to hear back in a matter of minutes. Cutting back on busyness is a community project. We must allow that slow replies and short replies are not rude. Don't expect with every tap that the other person has to turn his head.

Deliberately use “old” technology. If you don't want to be dependent on your digital devices, make an effort to get by without him. Read a real book. Write a paper letter. Buy a nice pen. Call someone on the phone. Look something up in the dictionary. Drive with the radio off and the iPod unplugged. Go on a run without music. Stop at a bricks-and-mortar store. The goal is not to be quaint, but to relearn a few practices that can be more enjoyable the “old-fashioned” way.

Make boundaries, and fight with all your might to protect them. The simplest step to breaking the tyranny of the screen is also the hardest step: we can't be connected all the time. We have to stop taking our phones to bed. We can't check Facebook during church. We can't text at every meal. Last year my wife and I had one of our biggest fights because she sharply rebuked me for tweeting at the dinner table. She was right to be sharp, and I promised her I would never tweet during dinner again (a promise I think I've kept).

Most families could use a nice basket where all the phones and tablets and laptops go to rest for certain hours of every day (dinner time? devotional time? bed time? when

Dad gets home?). Most of us are long overdue for screen Sabbaths—segments of the day (even whole days!) where we will not be “on the grid” or in front of an electronic device. And most of us would find new freedom if we didn’t check our phones as the last and first thing we do every day. Of all the little bad habits I have that contribute to my busyness, the habit of checking my email right before I go to bed and checking it as soon as I wake up is probably the worst.

Bring our Christian theology to bear on these dangers of the digital age. While commonsense suggestions are always welcome, our deepest problems can be helped only with the deepest truths. Because of the doctrine of creation, we must affirm that man-made artifacts can be instruments for human flourishing and for the glory of God. So we do not dismiss new technologies out of hand. But because we have a God who chose us in eternity past and looks at a day as a thousand years and a thousand years as a day, we will not be infatuated with the latest fads and trends. And because of the incarnation, we understand there is no substitute for dwelling with physical people in a physical place. So we do not accept virtual encounters as adequate substitutes for flesh and blood relationships.

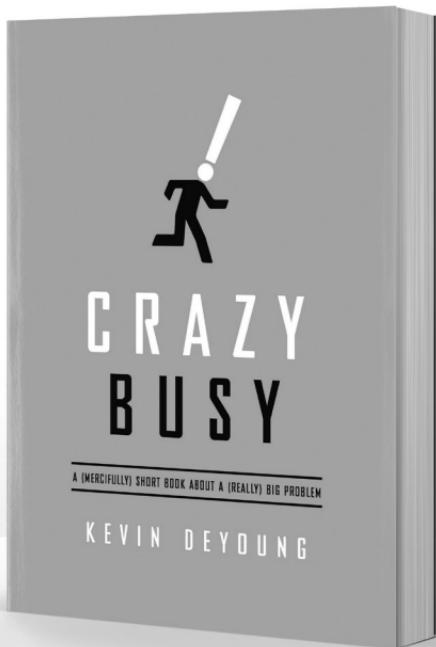
Likewise, because we understand our worth as image-bearers and our identity as children of God, we will not look to the Internet to prove that we are important, valuable, and loved. And, because we accept the presence of indwelling sin, we will not be blind to the potential idol-

tries and temptations we can succumb to online. And because we know ourselves to be fallen creatures, we will accept the limits of our human condition. We cannot have meaningful relationships with thousands of people. We cannot *really* know what is going on in the world. We cannot be truly here and there at the same time. The biggest deception of our digital age may be the lie that says we can be omni-competent, omni-informed, and omni-present. We cannot be any of these things. We must choose our absence, our inability, and our ignorance—and choose wisely. The sooner we embrace this finitude, the sooner we can be free.



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