— INTRODUCTION —

How I Learned I Wasn't Lazy

I have a reputation as a productive person, but that reputation has cost me a lot. To the rest of the world I've always looked like a put-together, organized, diligent little worker bee. For years, I managed to balance professional success, creative output, and activism without letting anybody in my life down. I never turned work in late. If I said I was going to be at an event, I'd be there. If a friend needed help editing a cover letter for a job application (or moral support as they called their congressional representative about the latest human-rights horror of the moment), I was available. Behind that veneer of energy and dependability, I was a wreck. I'd spend hours alone in the dark, overstimulated and too tired to even read a book. I resented every person I said yes to, even as I couldn't stop overcommitting to them. I was forever spreading myself too thin, dragging myself from obligation to obligation, thinking my lack of energy made me unforgivably "lazy."

I know a lot of people like me. People who work overtime, never turning down additional work for fear of disappointing their boss. They're available to friends and loved ones twenty-four seven, providing an unending stream of support and advice. They care about dozens and dozens of social issues yet always feel guilty about not doing "enough" to address them, because there simply aren't enough hours in the day. These types of

people often try to cram every waking moment with activity. After a long day at work, they try to teach themselves Spanish on the Duolingo app on their phone, for example, or they try to learn how to code in Python on sites like Code Academy.

People like this—people like me—are doing everything society has taught us we have to do if we want to be virtuous and deserving of respect. We're committed employees, passionate activists, considerate friends, and perpetual students. We worry about the future. We plan ahead. We try to reduce our anxiety by controlling the things we can control—and we push ourselves to work very, very hard.

Most of us spend the majority of our days feeling tired, overwhelmed, and disappointed in ourselves, certain we've come up short. No matter how much we've accomplished or how hard we've worked, we never believe we've done enough to feel satisfied or at peace. We never think we deserve a break. Through all the burnouts, stress-related illnesses, and sleep-deprived weeks we endure, we remain convinced that having limitations makes us "lazy"—and that laziness is always a bad thing.

This worldview is ruining our lives.

For years, I fell into an awful pattern where I'd work nonstop for the first five or six hours of the day, running through as many tasks as possible without any breaks. During those periods, I'd focus so intently on the mountains of e-mails I had to respond to or the papers I had to grade that I would often forget to pause and eat a snack, stretch my legs, or even use the bathroom. Anyone who interrupted me during those cram sessions would get a blank and irritated stare. Once those five hours were over, I'd collapse into a cranky, hungry, emotionally drained heap.

I loved being superefficient like that, plugging away at all the items on my to-do list that had given me anxiety the night before. I could get a truly impressive amount of stuff done during those sprints. But when I worked myself that hard, I'd be completely useless afterward. My afternoons were utterly nonproductive, with me mindlessly scrolling through Instagram

or Tumblr for hours. In the evening, all I had energy left to do was flop onto my bed, watch a few YouTube videos, and eat chips in the dark of my apartment.

Eventually, after a few hours of "recharging," I'd start to feel guilty for not using my time in more productive ways. *I should be out with friends*, I'd tell myself. *I should be working on creative projects. I should cook myself a nice, healthy dinner.* I'd start to feel stress about everything I needed to accomplish the next day. And then, the next morning, the cycle of guilt, overwork, and exhaustion would start up all over again.

Even back then, I knew this cycle was bad for me, and yet I found it hard to break out of. As terrible as my exhaustion felt, completing a huge pile of tasks in a couple of hours felt almost equally good. I lived to check things off to-do lists. I would get a rush when somebody would exclaim, "Wow, that was fast!" because I'd e-mailed back sooner than they expected. I would agree to take on more responsibilities than I wanted to handle because I felt a deep need to show I was a diligent, reliable worker. And then, after putting so many tasks on my plate, I would inevitably flame out and become depressed or sick.

For years, I would berate myself for running out of steam. Whenever I didn't push myself to the limit, I felt shame about being stagnant. Whenever I said no to a task at work, I'd worry I wasn't earning my keep. If I failed to help a friend when they needed it or didn't make it to a protest I'd planned to go to or a concert a friend was performing in, I'd feel certain everyone was judging me. I was terrified that anytime I took a break or drew a boundary, I was being *lazy*. After all, there was nothing worse I could be than that. As awful as being tired, overwhelmed, and burned out with no energy for hobbies or friends was, surely being lazy was worse.

I learned at an early age to tie my self-worth to how productive I was. I got good grades, and teachers generally thought I was bright, so they encouraged me to work extra hard and take on more opportunities and responsibilities. Whether it was tutoring a struggling peer in civics class or

running the arts and crafts table at Bible Camp, adults would constantly ask me to take on extra responsibilities, and I would always say yes. I wanted to be helpful, industrious, and successful. After all, working hard and doing a lot was how you ensured yourself a bright future.

I had my reasons for worrying about the future. My dad grew up in Appalachia, in an old mining town with depleted infrastructure. Job prospects were nonexistent. As an adult, my dad was forever fretting about his financial future. He had cerebral palsy, which made it very difficult for him to write or type, so going to college or getting an office job seemed out of the question to him. Instead, he worked backbreaking manual-labor jobs, knowing his body wouldn't be able to handle them forever. My mom was a dental hygienist, but she suffered from scoliosis, which left her able to work only two or three days per week.

Neither of my parents had university degrees, so their professional options were limited. They desperately wanted me to avoid the same fate, so they taught me to plan, and prepare, and work hard. They signed me up for my school's talented and gifted program as soon as I was eligible. They encouraged me to get a part-time job, to take honors classes, and to participate in extracurriculars like Model UN and speech and debate. They believed that if I worked hard, saved money, and took on many of life's "extra" responsibilities, I could get ahead. I could get into a decent school, earn some financial aid, and forge a successful career for myself—as long as I wasn't lazy. Teachers saw potential in me, and they strongly encouraged this too.

This pressure to achieve my way into stability caused me significant anxiety, but the alternative struck me as far worse. I was already beginning to notice that not all kids were encouraged to thrive the way I was. Some kids were seen as lost causes, because they were disruptive or too slow to master a subject. When those kids were still young, they received some support, and some sympathy. But the longer they struggled, the less patience and compassion they got. Eventually people stopped talking about those students' needs or limitations. Instead, the conversation became about how *lazy* they were. Once someone was deemed lazy, they

were much likelier to get yelled at than they were to be helped. If a kid was lazy, there was no fixing it. It was their fault they were missing assignments, failing to grasp hard concepts, and not putting time into anything "productive" after school. Lazy kids didn't have futures. And, the world seemed to be telling me, they deserved what they got.

Max also learned to tie her worth to her productivity. Like me, she came from a family that spent multiple generations in poverty in the rural South; like me, she went on to achieve academically and professionally at a high level. And like me, her commitment to overwork started to eat her alive.

Today, Max is a writer at an information technology firm, where she puts together applications and proposals, as well as blog posts about the firm's work. In order to do her job well, Max needs a lot of support from her coworkers. They're supposed to provide her with detailed information on each project, completed application forms, and clean, well-written drafts. Often, though, Max doesn't get that information on time, leaving her scrambling to assemble what she needs herself, while a looming deadline and an impatient boss breathe down her neck. She regularly works eighty- to ninety-hour weeks, and seems constantly to be at her wit's end.

"These proposals have to be perfect, but I can't rely on anyone else to check them carefully enough," Max says. "Every government agency that we work with has different requirements. Sometimes it will be something as specific as requiring that we sign our forms in blue ink, not black. But the people I work with miss this stuff all the time, and my manager doesn't actually manage them. So then I'm in the office from 6:00 a.m. until 10:00 p.m., fixing everybody else's work so we have a chance at getting the contract."

I knew Max had problems with overwork and overcommitment when I heard her complaining, for probably the tenth time, about having logged fifty hours at work in a span of three days. I noticed how frazzled she always seemed to be, how irritation about her job had turned to anger and despair. Her typical workday involves writing and editing proposals

for hours, then coming home, ordering takeout, and collapsing in front of the TV. Often, she's so exhausted that she forgets to eat the dinner she's ordered. Her once-beloved hobbies, like witchcraft and embroidery, often go neglected. On weekends she sleeps in until 4:00 p.m., just to recharge her batteries and recover from the stress she endured during the week. She sometimes schedules massages and vacations to help herself decompress, but on a day-to-day basis she's irritable and short-tempered, and often remarks on the joylessness of her life.

I figured Max's intense lifestyle must have damaged her health, so I asked her about it. She said, "This fucking job ruined my health and my personal life. Last year I had an inflamed gallbladder, but I didn't take any time off work because I knew my manager would pick apart my reasons for needing it and guilt me into coming in to the office. By the time I went to the hospital, I was vomiting constantly and had to crawl on my hands and knees to the toilet instead of walking. They opened me up and found out that my gallbladder was completely dead. The surgeon told me it was the most decayed one he'd ever seen, and asked me why I hadn't come to them a month earlier. Then he gave me a big lecture about how I needed to take more sick days at work. I wanted to scream."

When I met Max, we were both aspiring writers, sharing little snippets of stories and essays with each other on Tumblr. The beauty of Max's writing immediately made me want to get to know her better. There was a calmness and sense of perspective in her work back then, which I just don't see in her life these days. She's an intense person (a quality I admire), but her job has made her cranky and brittle. She doesn't have patience for inefficiency or anything that strikes her as foolish. Her temper can flare at something as simple as the pizza delivery person forgetting to bring ranch dressing. She hasn't written a short story in years.

Max knows her work is consuming her life. She can see the toll it's taken on her relationships, her health, and her capacity to enjoy her hobbies. Max is also very aware that she places unfair expectations on herself, and that she shouldn't force herself to regularly work twice as many hours as her job supposedly requires. Still, she doesn't know how to stop.

Like Max, I used to work to the point of exhaustion and illness, and had no idea how to make myself stop. Intellectually, I knew I was doing too much, but my fear of missing a deadline or seeming lazy kept me plugging away without breaks. I didn't learn to change my ways until overwork utterly destroyed my health.

It was February of 2014, and I was putting the final touches on my dissertation. I'd known since I was a teenager that I wanted to get a PhD in psychology, and I was finally close to attaining it. I couldn't think about anything else. I spent hours and hours in the lab, analyzing data long after my peers had gone home to their partners and children. I found an apartment two blocks from Loyola University, where I was studying, so I wouldn't waste any time commuting to the office. I spent so much time there that I never bothered to buy furniture for my home or set up a home Internet connection.

Then, about two weeks before I was scheduled to present my dissertation, I caught a nasty case of the flu. I didn't let it slow me down. I trudged into the office every day and stayed late into the night, the same as always, ignoring how sick I felt. I didn't even stop exercising. Since I didn't give myself any time to heal, the flu wouldn't go away. On the day of my dissertation defense, I was still running a fever and shivering in my suit jacket, trying desperately to hide it as I presented the results of my research.

I graduated. The flu was still there. I started applying to jobs. I was still sick. For months, the flu stayed with me. I'd do my best to ignore it all day, for the sake of remaining productive, but every evening I'd start shaking and would feel so weak and faint that I'd have to lie on the ground, wrapped in blankets, until morning. This continued for months. I spent that summer bundled in electric blankets feeling absolutely freezing cold, even on ninety-degree days.

Still, I kept working. I tried to hide from my employer that I was debilitatingly sick. I felt shame over being so frail. I spent all my free time

sleeping but berated myself for being so lazy. Doctors couldn't figure out what was wrong with me. I was tested for rheumatoid arthritis, lupus, and mono, but nothing came back positive. Then, a cardiologist found I'd developed a heart murmur, and a hematologist found I had severe anemia, but neither could pinpoint why. I was still sick when winter came, nearly a year after the flu had started.

No medical test or treatment could help me. No doctor could cure the mysterious disease that was plaguing me. The solution, which I finally discovered in November of 2014, was that I needed to rest. *Really* rest—no faking I was fine, no pushing myself to exercise and write and go to work. It was excruciating to sit around doing absolutely nothing. I skipped work meetings and forced myself to relax, because by then I had no other choice. My illness kept getting worse, and denying my body's needs wasn't working. I spent the next two months being completely unproductive: no juggling work and illness, no apologizing for being "lazy" by doing more work than was healthy for me.

Slowly, my energy began to come back. The fever disappeared. My red blood cell count went up. My heart murmur went away. Once I was fully healed, it was time to reenter the world and find a new way to live that wouldn't destroy my body the way my old life did.

In the years that followed my illness, I've focused on building a tenable life for myself. I had to learn to budget time into my day for relaxation and recovery. I abandoned my dream of becoming a tenured professor, which would require countless hours of research. Instead, I taught classes part-time as an adjunct, and sought out online teaching options as often as I could. This allowed me to have a more relaxed schedule. I took breaks and defended my free time fiercely. I taught myself, slowly, that I deserved to be comfortable, relaxed, and happy.

That's when a funny thing happened: The more my health and well-being improved, the more I noticed that my students, colleagues, and friends exhibited the same kind of self-punishing attitudes toward work

that I once had, and just like me, they were beginning to pay a price for it. I realized that burned-out, sick, overcommitted people were all around me. There was Max, with her eighty- to ninety-hour workweeks; my friend Ed, whose mental health was put in jeopardy by their commitment to the domestic violence hotline they worked for; and my colleague Alyssa, who is forever having to juggle the demands of parenting with the pressures of a full-time research job, all while being judged by her in-laws and neighbors for her child-rearing choices. Then there were dozens and dozens of my students, each of whom had been told at some point in school that they weren't doing enough to get ahead—that they were "lazy," and therefore not deserving of happiness or success.

I realized then that my struggles were part of a much bigger social epidemic, something I'm calling the Laziness Lie. The Laziness Lie is a deep-seated, culturally held belief system that leads many of us to believe the following:

- Deep down I'm lazy and worthless.
- I must work incredibly hard, all the time, to overcome my inner laziness.
- My worth is earned through my productivity.
- Work is the center of life.
- Anyone who isn't accomplished and driven is immoral.

The Laziness Lie is the source of the guilty feeling that we are not "doing enough"; it's also the force that compels us to work ourselves to sickness.

Once I began noticing the Laziness Lie all around me, I used the skills I'd learned as a researcher to delve deep into the history of laziness, as well as the most recent psychological studies about productivity. What I found brought me both massive relief and deep frustration. Research on productivity, burnout, and mental health all suggest that the average workday is far too long, and that other commitments that we often think of as normal, such as a full course load at college or a commitment to weekly activism, are not sustainable for most people.

I also came to see how the thing that we call "laziness" is often actually a powerful self-preservation instinct. When we feel unmotivated, directionless, or "lazy," it's because our bodies and minds are screaming for some peace and quiet. When we learn to listen to those persistent feelings of tiredness and to honor them, we can finally begin to heal. I spoke with therapists and corporate coaches and learned about the steps a person can take to establish limits in their professional and personal lives. I found that by advocating for our right to be "lazy," we can carve out space in our lives for play, relaxation, and recovery. I also discovered the immense relief that comes when we cease tying our self-image to how many items we check off our to-do lists.

The laziness we've all been taught to fear does not exist. There is no morally corrupt, slothful force inside us, driving us to be unproductive for no reason. It's not evil to have limitations and to need breaks. Feeling tired or unmotivated is not a threat to our self-worth. In fact, the feelings we write off as "laziness" are some of humanity's most important instincts, a core part of how we stay alive and thrive in the long term. This book is a full-throated defense of the behaviors that get maligned as "laziness" and the people who have been written off as "lazy" by society. It contains practical advice for how to draw better boundaries in all the areas of your life where you might run the risk of overcommitting, scripts for how to defend your boundaries and limits to other people, and tons of reassurance that your worst fear—that you are an irredeemably lazy person—is entirely misplaced.

When people run out of energy or motivation, there's a good reason for it. Tired, burned-out people aren't struggling with some shameful, evil inner laziness; rather, they're struggling to survive in an overly demanding, workaholic culture that berates people for having basic needs. We don't have to keep pushing ourselves to the brink, ignoring our body's alarm bells and punishing ourselves with self-recrimination. We don't have to deny ourselves breaks. We don't have to fear laziness. Laziness does not exist.