

## In favor of putting it off



Professor Pannacker promotes procrastination.

Some of his students at Hope College might be surprised to learn that Professor William Pannacker's upcoming book, "On Procrastination: A Cultural History," actually promotes procrastination.

His book will explore the history of procrastination and how its evolution as a cultural phenomenon is linked to the development of capitalism.

"There are plenty of books and motivational speakers reinforcing the negative view of procrastination," said Pannacker, whose views have been featured on CBS News. "My project is to show how procrastination is a calling to creativity, productivity and personal happiness."

Not surprisingly, the book has fallen behind schedule. In 2005, Pannacker signed a contract and committed to completing his manuscript by 2006. He now says the book will be released sometime in 2010 — "probably."

His editor has been patient with him, in the spirit of the topic. He's offered Pannacker several extensions on the project, saying he "didn't want to mess with Pannacker's procrastination mojo."

And just how does Pannacker justify the benefits of putting things off?

His book advises a "structured procrastination." In his view, productivity is increased when a person takes on an overwhelming (or preferably impossible) number of tasks. Anxiety about falling behind can then be used to motivate oneself to work faster and get more done.

In other words, committing to a grueling, time-consuming project allows you to procrastinate constructively by working on the smaller tasks you'd have to do anyway. Avoiding the impossible project becomes your excuse to get the rest of your work done.

"In my line of work, that project is usually a book manuscript," Pannacker said.

His book also explores the idea that procrastination can be helpful in unlocking creative potential, in that procrastination often pulls us away from something we don't want to do (or aren't good at) toward what we really ought to be doing. He cited several exemplary procrastinators — Abraham Lincoln, Albert Einstein, J.R.R. Tolkien, Bill Gates — as examples of those who have thrived on procrastination.

On the other hand, he cited Benjamin Franklin as a driving force behind the anti-procrastination movement. Pannacker was hesitant, however, to cite any of the contemporary "purveyors of productive mediocrity."

"I'm not going to name names," he said. "Yet."

Pannacker sees Leonardo da Vinci as perhaps the model procrastinator. Da Vinci invented several flying machines, a steam cannon, the parachute, and the viola organista; he did groundbreaking work in optics and anatomy; he painted the "Mona Lisa" and "The Last Supper" — and still, da Vinci is rumored to have spent his final moments brooding over all of his unfinished work.

The Hope professor's theories on procrastination spring from personal experience: Procrastination led him to his own creative work.

"I started writing about procrastination to avoid working on something else," he said.

His theories have been published in such journals as "The Chronicle Review," and featured on national TV.

"If we pay attention to procrastination, we can learn what it is that we really want to do," Pannacker said. "And then we can begin to build a life to make that possible."

— MATT BAKER