

Opinion

BY RICHARD P. MILLS, MD, MPH

Procrastinating? No, It's Just My Circling Time

Vultures don't pounce upon carrion. They circle high above, effortlessly gliding on rising desert thermals, eyeing their next meal. For what, exactly, are they waiting? Perhaps a safe route of entry and exit. Perhaps a sign that the prey is indeed dead, and not just acting that way in

hopes of turning the tables in the encounter-to-be. Perhaps they believe their experience will be enhanced with further aging of the intended prey. I don't know if they enjoy circling, but I am certain that they don't beat themselves up about the delay.

Like most ophthalmologists, I firmly believe that procrastination is one of the deadly sins. Why put off until tomorrow what I could do today? After all, if I wait until tomorrow, an emergency might show up and prevent me from doing it at all. That logic would certainly prevail if it weren't for the hundred other tasks that assert their priority, forcing delay. Delay until the deadline, or past if there is no squeaky wheel to remind me of my responsibility. And so it happens that I lurch from task to task, seemingly behind schedule the whole way.

Certain tasks have natural priority. Patient care is one. The patient can't wait, so I do it now. Family is another. The family gets shortchanged often enough because of what I do that it has to remain a priority. So guess what? The tasks that get pushed to the back burner, and often off the stove, are the creative ones, even though I adore doing

them. Like writing Opinion every month for *EyeNet*. (I do hope that I have placed the topic of writing Opinion sufficiently distant from the opening comments about the vultures to avoid any unintended imagery! After all, this is *EyeNet* not *LawNet*.) Or like writing a scientific paper, if you are an academic. Or painting, sculpting, designing, performing.

I used to worry why it took me so long to consummate big creative projects. That is, until I was chatting with one of my mentors, William Fletcher Hoyt, MD.

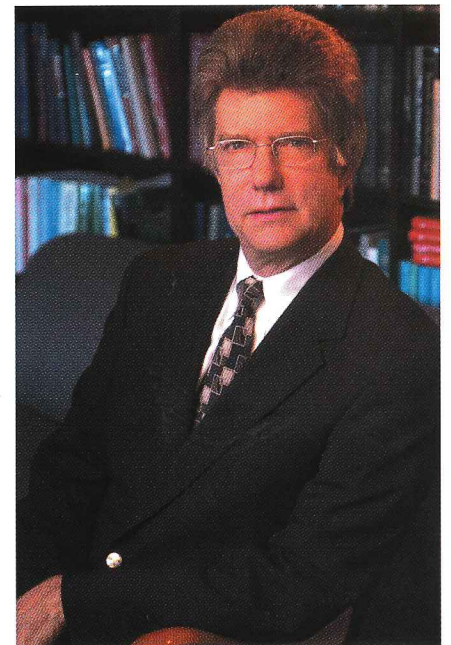
I related the guilt I felt when I had protected time for a creative project, and found myself getting yet another cup of coffee, listening to the weather, staring at a blank piece of white paper (or more recently a computer screen with the aptly named "task bar" staring back at me). He told me that he had once felt that way, too. With the *Walsh and Hoyt* textbook in three volumes a fait accompli,¹ I wondered how he could be admitting to the same procrastination tendency about which I had felt so guilty. He then quoth the epiphany: "It's not procrastination, it's circling time."

Dr. Hoyt's theory was that the mind

takes time to organize itself for a big creative task. This process takes place subconsciously, or at least invisibly to our conscious presence. It's preparation time without knowing that you are preparing. It's research into strategy, just as crucial as a MEDLINE search into the history of evidence. It's circling time, like what the vultures do.

I don't know if the analogy is on target, or if it has any basis in experimental psychology. I just know that I don't feel guilty anymore, and that's good enough for me. Thanks, Bill.

1 Walsh, F. B., Hoyt, W. F., *Clinical Neuro-ophthalmology*, 3rd ed. (Baltimore: Williams and Wilkins, 1969).



RICHARD P. MILLS, MD, MPH
SEATTLE