



Photo: John Savin@designfolk.com

Just one more cycle of Minecraft

THE late Cape Breton writer Alasdair MacLeod (*No Great Mischief*) spent a lot of time teaching his art. One technique he was known to use was to write the final line or two of his story at – or near – the start of most any writing effort. This finish line, resolution, story-ending – call it what you want – would tie a figurative bow on any story and stand as a beacon to the way the story would ebb and flow. The early composition of his closing words would effectively guide him as he made his way through a story's telling.

With a *Piping Today* deadline burning a hole in my calendar – a target date I've known for weeks – I'm going to tap into MacLeod's final-line technique. I don't know where this story's going, but with 24 hours to cut-off, the last line of this talk has been noted. Now. So here goes.

The always-quotable author Dr Norman Vincent Peale said that if you put off everything till you're sure of it, you'll never get anything done. Who's to argue with the guy who helped generations with his trillion-selling *Power of Positive Thinking* – the gramps of all self-help books. I think of many of the things I have done in my life, projects that I am most pleased about and that have been the most positively memorable. When I ponder a few, I know fine well I unknowingly followed Peale's advice. It was all about just doing it and so there was more Nike than Nietzsche to most of the efforts I recall. And when it comes to things I'm passionate about, that's how it usually goes. Music projects, band expeditions and concert commitments: damn the torpedoes. Hoping not to sound like I've been breathing too deeply and too long from the angel's share, I do believe R W Emerson when he wrote that once you make a decision, the universe conspires to make it happen.

The tricky thing about the transcendent idea of universal engagement in the delivery of an intention is one small – but important – detail. Before the cosmos can connect, a decision needs first to be made. What's needed is the



firm commitment to action. What could be easier? Just do it.

Maybe in part to prevent any kind of quantum-mechanical overdrive, the universe has also given us procrastination, the opportunity crusher. Any leisurely hours I may've had today are right out the window as I wrestle with ideas that must lead me to the touchstone that sits among words at the 974 count. What might've been different – or better – had I duly, meticulously chipped away at my task?

Procrastination is the yin to the yang of drive and determination. Nothing good seems to come of it, so why is it so common? It chips away at one of the most important and valuable gifts we have – time. Picasso offers up some particularly stark and powerful advice: only put off until tomorrow what you are willing to die having left undone. Yikes.

Psychologists generally see procrastination as a kind of avoidance behaviour. No surprise there. Timothy Pychyl, a professor who studies procrastination at Carleton University in Ottawa says it's a coping mechanism gone awry in which people "give in to feel good", meaning they do anything – but the task – in order to feel anything negative connected with the job at hand. He says this usually happens when people fear or dread a task. "I'll just play one more cycle of Minecraft before I get to memorising that new band set," might be one example of task avoidance.

Invariably, avoidance is successful and one Minecraft cycle turns to two and nothing is accomplished. In the case of our Minecraft

man, he is only successful in embarrassing himself at band practice and letting down the rest of the team. Professor Pychyl tells us procrastinators often feel shame and guilt. For an extreme procrastinator, feeling bad about procrastinating can be just another reason to put the task off. And so it goes: an unwanted cycle of procrastination.

Let's keep it real: everybody procrastinates; even the most successful people. We all prioritise what stuff must get done. Think "task postponement". In fact, one of history's most famous time-fritterers was Leonardo Da Vinci. It took him an eye-watering 16 years to complete his masterpiece *Mona Lisa*. It's known, too, that one of his benefactors had to threaten him with bankruptcy to light a fire under him to complete a commissioned work. It's clearly not always the unpleasant task that sits in the face of procrastination.

Anxiety, fear of judgement, fear of failure and associated lack of self-confidence can all weigh in as part of the procrastinator's task-avoidance state of mind. And when it comes to anxiety, fear of judgement, failure and shaky self-confidence? Well, these words sound like pretty fair descriptors of the most common elements of any human's condition.

For me, "task postponement" can be fuel for the completion of a job or chore, forcing a seriously tight focus on an awaiting challenge. But it's not for the faint of heart and absolutely not for just any task. Procrastination is also not for anyone wanting to drink deeply and meaningfully from the time-limited cup of life.

I have a good friend who's a great and talented multi-instrumentalist musician – plays the pipes, too. He's been thinking – "thinking" – for years of putting together his own combo. You know, a band. I ask him nearly every time I talk to him: "When's it happening?" "Not sure, still thinking about it," he says. I say to him what I say to you – especially in this season of fresh starts and New Year's resolutions, think of the great Jewish proverb:

If not now, when? ●