

I don't know why, but the other day, I remembered that I used to chew on my pencils when I was in grade school. I used to love taking a brand new #4 pencil, especially forest green pencils with "Duquesne Light Co." stamped on the side (my dad would bring these home from work) and crunch down on them leaving teeth marks up and down its sides. Maybe the thought was subliminal – kids starting school, tax free shopping days, my distant learning paper due – and it surfaced in thoughts of new packs of pencils lifted from a company storage cabinet.



This thought made me wonder if those pencils were coated in lead based paint, prompting me to think about recent problems with Chinese toys, making me think about shrimp and cat food imported from China, causing me to think about the food I buy and eat, leading me to think about higher priced organic vegetables – in the grocery store anyway – with this chain reaction terminating in thoughts of lesser spend for my dollar, the volatile stock market and it's unpredictable peaks and valleys, the resulting effects on my 401K, the slumping housing market, people defaulting on their home loans and my gratitude for a fixed rate, 15-yr mortgage from Bank of America. That's what too much NPR and Nightly News will do to you but is that really the issue?

Do you find that it is really hard to keep your mind on just one thing? Imagine you are comfortably lounging in a beach chair, strategically placed in an isolated spot at the shoreline, summer novel in hand. You look up and out at the breaking waves considering your book, when your mind moves to your job, what needs done at home, the hurricane preparation you've been putting off all summer and maintenance issues for the car, boat and house.

See what I mean? It's hard to focus. It's hard to truly do one thing at a time. Be in the moment. Who works in one Window at a time when more than likely an Excel spreadsheet, a Word document and the Internet are all buzzing on your computer in unison as you plow through daily tasks on multiple programs? Hardly anyone.

I don't live in a big house. Maybe 2000 sq. ft. Piles of papers, books and magazines stacked in forgotten purpose and crying out to be filed, read or discarded compress the limited space. It is distracting. Lately, I've fallen into the practice of tossing financial articles and clothing catalogs into a small, messy stack on the floor of the guest bathroom. This "rest" room is closest to my home office and as the need arises, I make my way to the john, plop down to release effluent and pick up a Charles Schwab article on target funds, a new offering available to improve my investment portfolio for retirement. Can't I just retire to the bathroom and focus on my anatomical urges? No. If I don't pick up a magazine, it's a given that I'll scrutinize the bathroom floor to discern if it needs vacuumed, look at my feet to review the condition of my toenails or stare out of the window to see if deer are peacefully munching on wetland shrubbery. This always leads to that.

Even in our sleep our minds move to the abstract in dreams we don't understand or forget, as we dust the sleep from our eyes, waking to the dawn of a new day. My mind is most clear in the early morning. I find answers to things that confused me the day before in the quiet lifting of the night. My most productive writing is in the still, soundless dawn. I turn on my laptop – pixels lighting up a clean sheet of virtual paper – and let my mind wander in creativity. Maybe this is a healthy distraction. Thoughts become written words as birdsong filters through the walls and windows of my home in homage to daybreak. It's why the random thought of chewing on a pencil can give rise to a litany of ideas that somehow share a common thread. Not much of one, but a strand at the very least.

Nonsense. This little essay is probably nothing more than a snapshot of an obsessive-compulsive packrat with a bad childhood habit of gnawing on her pencils and not cleaning her room. If you go to the beach and your mind wanders, so be it. If you have four programs open on your laptop at any one time, you are multi-tasking, efficient and wasn't that Bill Gates' intention anyway? Doing more, doing it faster with the potential opportunity to do it anywhere in the world – even in your guest bathroom?

Yesterday, the Dilbert comic strip depicted the boss telling an employee that he gives her far too much work and that there was only one solution. He had hired a “coffee swilling beaver” to show her how to work faster. Don't beavers gnaw on wood? I wonder if they like pencils? (Coincidentally, Scott Adams answered “Yes” in the next day's strip.) Maybe there is a connection between coffee swilling beavers and me? I'm not sure but the sun is up, I'm going to make a pot of coffee, get the morning paper, head to the bathroom and see how the stock market did yesterday. Maybe I'll even do some clothes shopping while I'm in there.