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Why Conventional Productivity Systems Fail the Multi-Passionate (and What Actually Helps)

Living with More Ideas Than Time

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1. You're Not Broken. Your Systems Are.

There is an unstated assumption at the heart of most productivity systems: they assume that the number of things you care about can be made reasonably small. For multi-passionate people, this is simply not true. I've tried numerous such systems, and for me the result has been a persistent sense of failure. Dealing with that has required both a mindset shift and a pragmatic approach to how I manage my time and energy.

This is not a criticism of any particular method. Systems like David Allen's Getting Things Done have helped many people, and for those who can comfortably manage their lives with a limited set of projects and responsibilities, such systems can work very well. But when the number of things you care about — responsibilities, aspirations, dreams, areas of interest, etc. — exceeds what any single list or app can realistically hold, the "friction" experienced when using such systems can begin to outweigh their benefits. The problem isn’t that these methods are poorly designed; it’s that they were never meant to scale to a life driven by many parallel interests.

2. Why Apps and Lists Collapse Under Volume

In many systems, you are encouraged to attach *metadata* to a task when you create it: extra information such as due dates, priorities, and time estimates. All of that *can* be useful. In practice, however, entering this metadata takes time — and more importantly, it takes mental energy. Even a simple question like whether something is “low” or “medium” priority requires a moment of judgment. When tasks occur to you in the middle of doing something else — which is frequently the case — that extra friction is often enough to make capture feel too burdensome in the moment.

Yet capturing tasks as they come to mind is crucial. A task is really just an idea, and ideas have a way of slipping from memory, leaving only the uneasy recollection that there was *something* you were supposed to remember. If you're lucky, your subconscious will keep trying to hold onto what that was, and it may surface again later. But as long as it remains uncaptured it becomes what David Allen calls an *"open loop"*: a loose end that continues to pull at your attention. Writing a task down lets you set it aside, at least temporarily — but only if you trust that what you’ve captured will be meaningfully revisited. If capture feels laborious, or if captured tasks disappear into a system you don’t regularly engage with, that sense of relief never really arrives.

Once tasks *are* captured, the question becomes what to do with them. You might incorporate them into a plan, though that's often not what you want to be doing at the moment the task occurs to you. More commonly, you need somewhere to place tasks so that you can look at them later — either when you're trying to decide what to do next, or when you've deliberately chosen to plan. In any case, those tasks eventually need to be laid out in front of you in some form.

This is where volume becomes a problem again. Without some kind of organizing structure, tasks accumulate into a flat, undifferentiated mass — a mountain of equally viable possibilities. Faced with that, choosing what to do next becomes its own burden. Ideally, you want to be able to see *everything you're choosing from* at once, unless the tasks in view can be meaningfully sequenced or prioritized among themselves. Metadata can help with filtering, but it comes at a cost: it takes up space on the page or screen, reducing how many tasks you can see at once, and it adds overhead both when tasks are created and when they're reviewed.

At this point, a natural question arises: *are there systems that take these tradeoffs seriously?* If there are, I haven't found any yet. Many existing systems address parts of the problem — reducing capture friction, encouraging regular review, or imposing constraints to limit choice. What seems to be missing is a way to accommodate a high volume of hopes and intentions *without treating that volume itself as a failure mode*.

Sidebar: Existing systems worth looking at

- **David Allen's Getting Things Done addresses open loops and largely separates capture from execution, but it does not handle choice density particularly well as task volume grows.**
- **Gary Keller and Jay Papasan's The ONE Thing aggressively addresses choice density, but it does so by treating a multiplicity of passions as something to be corrected rather than accommodated.**
- **Oliver Burkeman's Four Thousand Weeks advocates acceptance of the finitude of life within a permissive mindset, but it largely neglects the practical mechanics of day-to-day task management.**

3. Why "Pick One Thing" Makes It Worse

Advice to “pick one thing” is often presented as a way out of overwhelm. By narrowing your focus, you’re supposed to reduce complexity and regain a sense of control. For multi-passionate people, however, the opposite often happens. Choosing one focus doesn’t quiet the noise; it *amplifies* it. The more time you spend on the chosen thing, the more viscerally you become aware of all the other things you care about that are being left untouched.

What emerges is a low-level but persistent emotional pressure. Even when you are making progress, it’s difficult to enjoy it, because your attention keeps being pulled toward everything you’re *not* doing. The problem isn’t indecision so much as divided loyalty: too many meaningful directions, and no way to honor them all at once.

One way to understand this pressure is in terms of *choice density*. When you care deeply about many different things, the problem is not just that there is too much to do, but that there are too many *reasonable* options at any given moment. Each choice carries opportunity cost, not in the abstract, but in terms of neglected interests that still matter to you. Choosing one thing over another feels less like a tactical move and more like an emotionally loaded judgment about what deserves your limited time.

What makes this especially difficult is that these choices can often feel as if they were permanent. To choose one thing feels like deciding who you are, rather than deciding what to do next. In my own experience, however, the moments of greatest relief have often come not from completion of something significant, but just from *movement* toward something that matters to me. Even small steps taken in a meaningful direction can loosen the pressure, simply because they create a sense of *momentum*.

4. Progress as Emotional Regulation

I suspect that progress plays an outsized role in emotional regulation, especially for people who live with more ideas than time. This isn't because progress solves anything in a lasting way, but because it changes how it *feels* to be inside the question of what to do. When you are stuck, every unresolved possibility presses in at once. When you are moving, even imperfectly, that pressure eases. The relief comes not from having chosen correctly, but from having chosen *at all* — from being in motion rather than suspended.

What matters here is not the size or significance of the step. A small action can have a disproportionate emotional effect, because it reassures you that you are still *capable* of acting on what matters to you, even if you cannot act on everything that matters at the same time. Making progress often requires acknowledging that some parallel tracks will not be pursued *right now* — not because they don't matter, but because you have consciously decided where to place your attention *in the present moment*. In that sense, progress functions less as a measure of achievement and more as a way of stabilizing your relationship to an uncertain and unclear future.

Unfortunately, this sense of agency is fragile, and easily undermined by our tendency to fall into ruts — reacting to the immediate and acting *by default*. Distractions intrude, urgency displaces, attention drifts, and some tracks advance while others quietly stall without ever being explicitly set aside. Over time, this creates a familiar unease — not because we are doing too little, but because too much of what matters is being neglected by accident rather than by choice. What's needed, then, is not more resolve or better priorities, but a way of making tradeoffs visible and intentional, so that focusing on one thing does not require pretending the others don't exist.

5. The Two Real Problems: Overwhelm and Paralysis

At this point it helps to separate two problems that are often treated as one. *Overwhelm* and *paralysis* are related, but they are not the same thing, and they arise from different pressures. Overwhelm is about how much you are carrying — the sheer volume of open loops, responsibilities, and intentions competing for space in your mind. Paralysis, by contrast, is about choice: too many viable options, with no clear basis for deciding what to do next.

Overwhelm is primarily a problem of *load*. It arises when there is simply too much to hold in mind at once. Even when tasks are written down somewhere, the *awareness* that there is more to be done than can reasonably be addressed does not disappear. Instead, it lingers as background pressure. Attention is repeatedly pulled away from whatever you are doing by the sense that there is something else you ought to be remembering, tracking, or worrying about. The result is not necessarily inaction, but a persistent cognitive and emotional strain that makes sustained focus difficult.

Paralysis tends to be most acute when you are forced to choose among options that are dissimilar. To be sure, some of us have difficulty choosing a color for a shirt or an appetizer from a restaurant menu, but at least those offer some basis of comparison. When the choices in front of you correspond to different values, interests, or possible futures, selecting one does not feel like a small tactical decision — it feels like a judgment call about what deserves your time and attention. In that context, hesitation is not a failure of will, but a reasonable response to an overloaded decision space.

Paralysis is often made worse by the belief that the “right” choice should somehow reveal itself if you think hard enough. When it doesn’t, you can end up cycling through options, hoping for clarity that never arrives. The problem isn’t a lack of information or motivation, but the absence of a way to *temporarily* narrow the field without treating that narrowing as a permanent commitment. Until that happens, the safest-feeling option is often to do nothing at all — not because nothing matters, but because *everything* does.

If paralysis arises from having too many meaningful options in view at once, then addressing it requires constraining the decision space. More precisely, it requires having *multiple constrained decision spaces*, each with its own context, rather than a single undifferentiated list. Any workable approach must find a way to carve those contexts out of the larger collection of tasks and intentions you’ve accumulated, while minimizing cognitive load rather than adding to it.

6. The Only Viable Direction Forward

Taken together, overwhelm and paralysis place strong constraints on what can actually work. Any viable approach has to reduce the load of what you are carrying *without* forcing you to prematurely decide what matters most, and it has to enable movement *without* treating temporary choices as permanent commitments. That combination rules out many familiar strategies. What remains is not a particular tool or system, but a direction: one that respects cognitive limits, preserves the multiplicity of your interests, and makes progress possible without requiring clarity you cannot yet have.

Axiom 1: Separate Planning from Execution

Planning and execution place fundamentally different demands on attention. Planning is an activity of comparison, imagination, and judgment. It requires holding multiple possibilities in mind, weighing tradeoffs, and acknowledging uncertainty. Execution, by contrast, works best when choice has already been constrained — when attention can be directed toward doing one specific thing without reopening the question of what else might matter more.

When these two modes are allowed to blur together, each undermines the other. If you try to plan while executing, every step risks reactivating doubt: *Is this really what I should be doing? What about everything else?* And if you try to execute without having planned — even lightly — then every action feels provisional and fragile, easily displaced by the next urgent or interesting alternative. In both cases, progress becomes unstable, because movement continually reintroduces choice, and choice continually reintroduces load.

That said, separating planning from execution doesn't necessarily require eliminating *all* choice at the moment of action. Often, it's enough to narrow the field until the remaining options are close enough that it genuinely doesn't matter which one you choose. That kind of planning creates room for spontaneity without reopening the entire decision space. The resulting flexibility supports a sense of agency, because it allows action to feel free *within* constraints you've already chosen.

Separating planning from execution does not mean committing to a rigid plan, nor does it mean suppressing awareness of other possibilities. It means giving each mode its own time and context, so that decisions can be made deliberately *without* demanding immediate action, and action can proceed *without* requiring repeated justification. This separation is what allows choice to remain temporary and revisable, while still making sustained movement possible.

Axiom 2: Planning Must Be Cheap

The cost of planning matters enormously. Any planning process that is cognitively expensive, time-consuming, or emotionally taxing will quickly recreate the very overload it is meant to relieve. When planning feels heavy, people naturally avoid it — not out of laziness, but out of self-preservation. The result is a familiar pattern: intentions remain vague, decisions default, and execution is repeatedly interrupted by unresolved questions.

For planning to function as a support rather than a burden, it must be *cheap*. This doesn't mean careless or rushed; it means that capturing a thought, sketching a plan, or revising a decision cannot require much mental energy. Structure helps here. Having a clear sense of *which questions belong to planning*, and which do not, makes it possible to compartmentalize decisions instead of holding everything at once. When you are only looking at a manageable portion of the whole, planning can even become enjoyable — not just because progress feels possible, but because the next few steps are visible.

Cheap planning also makes room for granularity. When tasks carry resistance or dread, it can help to break them down further than seems strictly necessary — even to an absurd degree. A very small, clearly defined action can still produce a meaningful sense of progress, because it creates momentum. Crossing something off matters less for what it accomplishes than for what it signals: *movement is happening*.

Most importantly, low-cost planning preserves flexibility. When plans are easy to make, they are also easy to revise. This keeps decisions provisional rather than brittle, and it prevents the act of planning from feeling like a commitment trap. Planning that is cheap enough to revisit regularly stabilizes your relationship to an uncertain future by making adjustment normal rather than failure.

Axiom 3: Categorization Beats Prioritization

When the number of things you care about is small, prioritization can work reasonably well. Ranking tasks or projects from most important to least important provides a clear basis for action. But as the volume and diversity of what you care about grows, prioritization begins to fail. Comparing everything to everything else requires holding too much in mind at once, and it forces judgments between options that are often too dissimilar. The result is not clarity, but a renewed sense of pressure.

Categorization takes a different approach. Instead of asking which task matters *most*, it asks which *kind* of task this is, and under what circumstances it makes sense to consider it. By grouping tasks into contexts — defined by factors like energy, time available, mode of thinking, or area of life — categorization constrains the decision space without requiring a global ranking of values. You are no longer choosing from everything you could do, but from a subset that fits the situation you are in.

This distinction matters because prioritization treats choice as a one-time problem to be solved, while categorization treats it as a recurring condition to be managed. Adding a new task to a ranked list requires scanning the list until you find something with a comparable priority, which reintroduces the problem of comparing things with no clear basis of comparison. Categories, on the other hand, are flexible and versatile. A task can move between them as circumstances change — or even belong to multiple categories. The ability to focus on one category at a time, at an *appropriate* time, distributes the load of planning and decision-making so that no single part of it becomes overwhelming.

Most importantly, categorization respects the reality of multiple commitments and parallel interests. It allows you to acknowledge that many things matter without forcing them into a single hierarchy. By separating what you have to choose from *right now* from decisions about what matters to you *overall*, categorization makes action possible without demanding that you resolve conflicts you cannot yet resolve. After all, you cannot predict in advance how your time, energy, or interests will shift — and any system that assumes otherwise will eventually collapse under its own *illusion of certainty*.

7. What These Principles Are (and Aren't)

The principles outlined here are not a solution in themselves. They are the conditions a solution has to satisfy if it is to work at all for someone with many parallel interests. They describe the shape of the problem, and the constraints that any credible response must respect.

There are undoubtedly many ways to implement these principles, and no single approach will suit everyone. Different tools, habits, and rhythms will make sense for different people, and for the same person at different times. What matters is not the particular form an approach takes, but whether it actually reduces load, constrains choice without denying what matters, and makes progress possible in the presence of uncertainty.

Sidebar: From Principles to Practice

- **Principles can clarify what must be true, but they don't tell you what to do on a Tuesday morning. Living within these constraints means accepting that you can't resolve or accomplish everything at once, learning how to narrow your decision spaces without denying what matters to you, and building habits that are flexible rather than rigid.**
- **This document has been about theory rather than practice. Its purpose is to help you understand *why* certain approaches fail, and *why* others are worth experimenting with as you adjust and learn what actually works for you.**
- **If you'd like to explore these ideas further, I publish related writing in my Arguable Insights publication on Substack. The About page offers an overview of how this ebook connects to my other work, along with links to additional resources you may find useful.**