Daniel J. Levitin's book, The Organized Mind, deals with the recurring theme that "we're not very good judges of what we can and can't do," the author says. JOHN KENNEY / THE GAZETTE
MONTREAL - There’s a lot to be said for dressing for the occasion, but actually doing it can be a bit tricky. Such were the thoughts of your reporter on his way to interview a prominent authority on how attention and memory work when he noticed, too late to do anything about it, that his socks didn’t match.

“From a neuroscientific perspective, it’s the same idea as not remembering whether you took your vitamins,” Daniel J. Levitin said when I pointed out my blunder and invited him to comment. “The activity has become so routine that you don’t have to think about it while you’re doing it. So you often don’t. Your mind is somewhere else. You’ve checked out.”

We were talking in Levitin’s Outremont house, nearly empty because his possessions had been packed for a move to an apartment closer to McGill University, where the California-born 56-year-old has been a professor in psychology and behavioural neuroscience since 2000. Best known for the wildly successful This Is Your Brain on Music and The World in Six Songs, he has now hit the bestseller lists again with The Organized Mind: Thinking Straight in the Age of Information Overload (Allen Lane/Penguin Canada, 496 pages, $30), a book that expands its practical-science focus from musicians and music lovers to … well, to everybody.

“A theme that runs throughout the book is that we’re not very good judges of what we can and can’t do,” Levitin said, taking one last glance at my feet. “The brain is a great self-deceiver. We think we’re paying attention to what’s going on around us, but there are lots of laboratory and real-world demonstrations that show we’re not.”

Another theme of the book is that we need to find ways to get around the undeniable truth that technology has outpaced human evolution, a process that has accelerated exponentially with recent advances in electronic communication. Put simply, we’re trying to do things we’re not wired to do.
“Any new technology requires a settling-in period,” Levitin commented. “When writing first came into practice in classical Greece, Plato and Seneca complained that it was going to lead to a weakening of men’s morals and minds, that once you can write something down you no longer have to engage in the fine art of conversation. Around the time of Gutenberg, people were complaining, ‘There are too many books. People will be too distracted.’ TV came along, and after a period where we all watched pretty much the same shows at the same times, viewing options increased to the point where you had to start filtering. We’re in the same position now. We can’t read every Facebook update, every tweet, every newspaper, but we all draw the line in different places. I don’t have a strong opinion on how many hours per day somebody should spend on, say, social media. I just think people should know how much time they’re spending and make sure it’s a conscious choice and not an unconscious one. Keep track. It might surprise you. Then you can make an informed decision on how you want to make use of your time.”

Paid-up members of the cult of multi-tasking should be advised that the strategy gets a thorough debunking from Levitin.

“The brain just doesn’t function that way,” he said. “It doesn’t do four or five things at once. It rapidly shifts from one thing to the other, and each time we switch we’re burning up glucose, the fuel neurons need to function. So after an hour or two of this rapid switching, we’re tired and depleted. We’ve also released the stress hormone, cortisol, which makes us feel edgy and tense, and our judgment is clouded, which is one of the reasons we think we’re good at it when we’re not. It’s like thinking we can drive when we’ve consumed too much alcohol. The other problem is that there’s a dopamine addiction loop that comes with multi-tasking. That’s the same chemical that causes people to get addicted to heroin. It’s also what makes sex feel good. It’s a powerful thing. The uni-tasker, the person who can step outside that loop, gets more done.”

Extolling the virtues of paying full attention in a world seemingly determined to stop us from
doing precisely that is one point where The Organized Mind finds itself sharing Venn diagram space with certain tenets of Buddhism and Hinduism. Might there be an element of the spiritual in what Levitin is writing about?

“IT depends on what you mean by spiritual,” he said. “I’m a songwriter, and I consider the creative process to be very mysterious. When I’m playing music and everything’s going well, I feel like I’m in touch with something different. I prefer not to call it spiritual, though. That’s a word that gets mixed in with religion, and I’m not religious. But yes, there is a direct connection here to what the Zen Buddhists promote. Being immersed in the moment, you’re more likely to be happy, to be creative, to have peak experiences.”

Another myth Levitin effectively dismantles is the notion that “creative” and “organized” are mutually exclusive mindsets. Joni Mitchell and Stephen Stills, musicians he chose to interview precisely because they came out of the '60s hippie milieu, serve as cases in point.

“They’re two very organized people in their lives and in their work spaces. Everything in Stills’s house is labelled — and he maintains it; he doesn’t have somebody doing it for him. The kitchen in Joni’s new home in B.C. is an organizer’s dream. That’s not the opposite of creativity — it’s a state that allows for creativity, because there’s a whole weight of things you don’t have to worry about.”

Levitin’s knack for homing in on useful truths from unexpected directions is illustrated by a talk he had with George Shultz, U.S. secretary of state during the Reagan administration.

“It’s something now well established in psychology: we think that the things that don’t work on us will work on our enemies,” Levitin said. “We know that if an enemy bombs us on our home territory, it will only increase our resolve. It’s not going to weaken us. Yet we somehow think that bombing them is going to cause them to surrender. It’s a strange double standard and another of the many illusions of the mind. When I spoke to Shultz, he reflected on 40 years of
American foreign policy and said that if it could be done all over again, rather than spend billions of dollars on weaponry and infantry and bombs — on aggressive action — instead spend a 10th of that on schools and hospitals in places like Iraq and Iran and Pakistan. If we had, the kids born in those hospitals and educated in those schools would now be in positions of influence and would love America — and by extension, to some degree, Canada — instead of hating it."

That it can morph from a meditation on junk drawers (“they represent a great act of cognitive economy”) to a fresh perspective on geopolitical power dynamics — that the micro can go macro and vice versa so smoothly that you hardly notice — is one of many things that make The Organized Mind a lot more than a self-help book with an uncommonly solid scientific underpinning. It’s a book that, if you let it, might just change the way you live.

Oh, and Levitin’s personal solution to the mismatched socks problem? “I’ve got 20 identical pairs,” he said.

Daniel J. Levitin appears with Kim Thuy and Chantal Hébert in Paragraphe Bookstore’s Books and Breakfast (http://www.paragraphbooks.com/news-events/) series Nov. 16 at Le Centre Sheraton, 1201 René-Lévesque Blvd. W. Breakfast is served at 10; attendees are advised to arrive by 9:45. For information regarding ticket prices, call 514-845-5811 or email paragraphbooks@paragraphbooks.quebecor.com.

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