

THE POWER OF ONE THING

How to Intentionally Change Your Life



DR. RANDY CARLSON



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The Power of One Thing: How to Intentionally Change Your Life

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Praise for Dr. Randy Carlson's *Intentional Living* Radio Show

“The term *intentional living* has made a huge difference in my life. I think the whole mind-set that you start your day with—I’m *intending* to live this way; I’m intending to say the right things, watch the right programs, do the right things—makes a huge difference.”

“I have been wanting to live an intentional life, but I didn’t know where to start. The Lord helped me start in the area of my finances, which I’ve been kind of lax at. So I started sitting down and going through each area that I’m paying out every single month (going through my insurance, making changes to my phone, making Internet changes), and so far, I have been able to save \$780. I haven’t finished yet, but I just wanted to thank you for your help in keeping my focus on being intentional.”

“I called quite a few months back and was on the verge of a divorce. You told me to take the higher road and be intentional with my faith and relationship. Then if my husband chose to leave, I would know I did what Christ said. Now our marriage is growing stronger every day. . . . Thanks for your ministry!”

“I tried to quit smoking several times until I realized what I was lacking—it was exactly what I’ve been hearing on your show, about being intentional. I am three months nonsmoking as of today.”

“Since listening to your radio [program], my entire life has changed. I have a different opinion and a different attitude toward how I run and manage my life. I think the intentional living part for me is that I’m finding ways to give back to my community, making that an intentional part of what I do every day.”

“I am so thankful for this program. It really helps me stay accountable and live an intentional life. I know that I have my slipups, but I try to do ‘one thing’ a day and take it from there.”

To Donna, Evan, Kelly, Andrea, Derek, and Kylie—
you motivate me to live an intentional life in Christ



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The Power of One Thing is the result of my personal passion to help people experience the freedom and peace I've witnessed in those who have decided to live an intentional life in Christ.

This entire project evolved because of the dedication and hard work of a team of people who joined me in the passion to communicate the message in the power of one thing. First, I want to thank Barb Kois for her dedication in pulling together all my teachings on this topic, and then assisting me in shaping them into the book you hold in your hands. She spent untold hours helping to craft the final manuscript. I also want to express my appreciation to the entire Tyndale House team for catching the vision for what the power of one thing can do in a person's life and then joining me in this project. Jan Long Harris, Sharon Leavitt, Kim Miller, Sarah Atkinson, Yolanda Sidney, along with many others at Tyndale, have patiently assisted in turning an idea into reality—one word at a time.

I also want to extend much appreciation to my Intentional Living ministry team for their support and encouragement while I worked on this book. Much thanks is extended to Dawn Heitger, Steven Davis, and Shanna Gregor for providing their editorial feedback and encouragement.

I'm grateful to my radio listeners for providing the motivation for this book. I've witnessed in them the power of one thing at work. Each story in this book is a composite of what I've heard from all these dedicated listeners over the last several years. In any case where an actual story was used, we took care to protect the identity of the people who gave permission for their stories to be told.

Finally, this book would never have been possible without the loving support and encouragement of my wife, Donna. Her willingness to allow me to take time away from home in order to work on this project, not to mention her willingness to read and provide feedback on the manuscript, has been invaluable. My love for her never fades!

INTRODUCTION

What Difference Does One Thing Make?

Juliana was overwhelmed, unsure what to do next. She and her husband, Al, were the caretakers of their three young grandchildren. Their daughter, Amisha, had been in and out of drug rehab programs for more than two years. Every time she tried to take her children back to live with her, she managed for about three weeks before relapsing.

Juliana and Al had been looking forward to retirement in two years, but now the expenses of caring for their grandchildren had delayed that plan. Making matters worse, Al had atrial fibrillation, a heart condition that was aggravated by stress. The couple also had a son in the military who had been in a war zone for four months. They watched the news frantically each evening, praying his area hadn't been hit.

On top of these major stressors, Juliana was faced with the daily pressures of caring for small children again. When she called my radio program, her youngest grandchild was sick with an ear infection, his third in the last twelve months.

"I love my grandchildren and I love my daughter, but I don't know how much longer Al and I can do this," she said. "I'm so tired, and my husband isn't healthy. I don't know where to turn."

Perhaps you haven't experienced the stress of raising grandchildren, but like me, I bet you have been overwhelmed when setting out to undertake a big project or when faced with a growing list of responsibilities at work or home. *How on earth am I going to be able to do all this?* you ask yourself. Perhaps you've struggled for years to overcome a bad habit. You may even have licked it for a while, only to relapse. *How will I ever overcome this temptation for good?* you wonder.

Over the years, I've learned that intentional living is the only way out. Either you let circumstances control you or you take responsibility for what's under your control. You may not be able to make big life changes overnight, but by committing to follow through on one small thing every

day, you can inch yourself closer and closer to your goal. There are many ways to fail in life, but the only way to succeed is to be intentional.

Often when people are overwhelmed, they freeze, feeling trapped and unable to move forward. My focus when talking with Juliana, then, was to get her to identify her biggest source of stress. We could then identify the “one thing” that would bring her the greatest relief. Clearly, her biggest stressor was her relationship with Amisha. Specifically, Juliana said she was tired of trying to motivate her daughter to make positive changes, only to be let down again and again.

Juliana explained that Amisha often missed her counseling appointments and supervised visits with the kids. Every time Juliana reminded her of the importance of these meetings, Amisha offered excuse after excuse about why she’d missed another appointment. Usually, the two ended up arguing, which compounded the stress Juliana was feeling. No wonder she felt paralyzed by her situation. After all, she had no control over Amisha’s decisions.

There are many ways to fail in life, but the only way to succeed is to be intentional.

These fruitless confrontations were causing Juliana great stress, but she could put herself back in control by changing her communication pattern with her daughter. Instead of trying to reason with Amisha when she offered another excuse, Juliana might simply say, “I need to go now. I’ll talk to you later” before hanging up. It might feel uncomfortable and make her daughter mad, but that one small change could alter the dynamic in their conversations and prevent Juliana from feeling unproductive frustration.

You’ll notice I didn’t offer Juliana a profound solution or even ten steps she could take to remedy her situation. Once she realized that she wasn’t really stuck, that she could move forward simply by becoming intentional about addressing what was in her control—one small step at a time—Juliana knew she’d found a way to move beyond her anxiety and find renewed hope.

In my life, my counseling practice, and my radio ministry, I have discovered that one reason people don’t make progress toward their goals is that they get overwhelmed with the enormity of the task. They might

have done things the same way for ten, twenty, forty, or more years, and doing things differently and better seems impossible.

Yet I've learned that by taking a step-by-step approach that breaks down the journey from here to there into doable chunks, I can get there. I can do one small thing today that will improve all my tomorrows. The same is true for you. Doing just one small thing will give you a feeling of accomplishment and hope that you will be able to keep taking action to improve your situation.

I'm convinced that doing one thing each day, as Juliana did—just one small but important thing—can change your life.

NOT A TYPICAL GOAL-SETTING BOOK

It sounds so simple, doesn't it? Perhaps you've heard about goal setting on the job or read about it in a book. Countless articles and books, talk shows, Web sites, blogs, and motivational programs offer great advice about achieving your goals. Experts always tell you to make a list of action steps to take you where you want to go. It's good advice. So why do so few people actually follow through on something so basic?

First, multiple-step programs or complicated lists of rules and procedures simply overwhelm us. And as Juliana discovered, no one can make multiple changes at once. She needed to change one thing within her control—how she responded to Amisha—and practice it until it became a habit.

Second, change takes effort; inertia takes none. Once our initial enthusiasm wears off, we have little incentive to keep working toward our goals—especially when we don't see results as quickly as we'd like. Like most parents, Juliana wanted to support and protect her daughter, so stepping back didn't feel easy or natural at first.

What we need is a simple yet effective way to take actions that will get us where we want to go. Gaining on our goals must be done incrementally, little by little, one step at a time. That's actually good news; it means that if we are willing to do just one thing toward one goal today, we will be on our way to a better life.

Think of the steady dripping of water that helped to shape the Grand Canyon—or the loose change you toss into a jar that builds up to a large sum over time. Small things, done over time, yield big results.

GETTING THE MOST FROM THIS BOOK

In part 1 of this book, we'll look more closely at the power of one thing and the factors that prevent so many individuals from mastering this strategy. We'll also examine the link between intentionality and the power of one thing. Then I'll help you determine which one or two "one things" will make the biggest payoff in your life.

One reason people don't make progress toward their goals is that they get overwhelmed with the enormity of the task.

In part 2, I'll get more specific about practical ways to improve your life one step at a time. As I've counseled others, I have discovered nine personal challenges that get in the way of living a fulfilling life (see the italicized words in the list below). When someone describes a life struggle to me, the issue can almost always be traced back to one of these areas.

And meaningful change begins when the person makes one small change in a problem area. In this second section, you'll be able to consider these nine issues more closely and discover how you can harness the power of one thing done in the area(s) that will improve your life most significantly:

The power of one thing will change your *thinking*.

The power of one thing will change your *attitude*.

The power of one thing will change your *emotions*.

The power of one thing will change your *words*.

The power of one thing will change *how you use your time*.

The power of one thing will change *how you pick friends*.

The power of one thing will *unclutter your life*.

The power of one thing will change *the questions you ask*.

The power of one thing will change *how you make decisions*.

By identifying the root of your underlying struggle, you can determine the one thing that will begin to turn your life around.

Notice that the first three areas in the list above are related to the mind. That's where it all starts—everything flows from our thought life. Matthew 12:34 says, "Out of the overflow of the heart the mouth speaks."

We will examine the power of one thing to change your thinking, your attitude, and your emotions.

Once you are thinking properly, you can tackle some unhealthy behaviors. After all, right thinking shows up in right actions, the next four areas we'll look at. We'll see how the power of one thing can change your words, your use of time, and your choice of friends, and even clear the clutter in your surroundings and in your life.

Toward the end of the book, we'll look at two final areas, and you'll see how the work you have done to that point will give you the wisdom to ask better questions and make better decisions.

So what's the best way to work through the book? By the time you finish reading part 1, you may have identified the area that is your biggest challenge. If so, you may choose to turn to the chapter in part 2 that focuses on that topic. Each chapter explains why that area is a make-it-or-break-it part of life and offers numerous ideas of how to improve it—along with some ideas of the one thing you might do to initiate positive change. You can certainly adopt or modify one of these or select another “one thing” altogether. Once you've made that first “one thing” a habit, you might begin to focus on yet another step.

While you probably will get the most payoff from addressing the area at the root of your greatest struggle, you can also take your life up a notch simply by making one or more small changes in each of the other areas as well.

If, even after reading part 1, you're not sure where you'd like to make that first small change, I suggest you read part 2 in order, from chapter 5 through chapter 14. At some point, you're likely to think, *That's it—one small change here could put me on the path to a better life!*

Whichever way you choose to work through the book, I firmly believe that the power of one thing will work for you . . . that one thing done intentionally over time will improve your life.

Let's get started.

PART ONE

You Are Only
“One Thing”
Away from
a Better Life

1

DO ONE SMALL THING—INTENTIONALLY

The person who knows one thing and does it better than anyone else, even if it only be the art of raising lentils, receives the crown he merits.

—AUGUSTINE “OG” MANDINO,
TWENTIETH-CENTURY MOTIVATIONAL TEACHER

Whoever or whatever is most intentional in your life wins—the difference between winners and losers comes down to this profound truth. What do I mean by *intentional*? I use it to describe the driving force in an area of your life—physical health, let’s say. A woman who is more intentional about shedding ten pounds than sleeping later each morning might begin setting the alarm for an earlier time so she can hit the treadmill for twenty minutes. By following through on one small thing—an early-morning walk—it is clear that she values physical fitness above extra sleep. To make any positive change in your life, you must create an action plan and summon the determination to intentionally get to your goal, one small step at a time.

Notice I say successful people are *intentional*, not merely *well intentioned*. The key is commitment plus action. We can have great ideas about what we want to do next, but if we are not committed to actually changing what we do and how we think, nothing much will change. In Luke 18:18-22 (NLT), we read,

Once a religious leader asked Jesus this question: “Good Teacher, what should I do to inherit eternal life?”

“Why do you call me good?” Jesus asked him. “Only God

is truly good. But to answer your question, you know the commandments: ‘You must not commit adultery. You must not murder. You must not steal. You must not testify falsely. Honor your father and mother.’”

The man replied, “I’ve obeyed all these commandments since I was young.”

When Jesus heard his answer, he said, “There is still one thing you haven’t done. Sell all your possessions and give the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven. Then come, follow me.”

Jesus was talking about commitment plus action. He knew that the man’s wealth and position stood in the way of his total commitment. Although the man had the desire to do the right thing, he was not fully committed and lacked the willingness to act. As a result, he passed up the opportunity to follow Christ wholeheartedly. His life was not transformed.

Whoever or whatever is most intentional in your life wins.

You need to recognize that something drives everything you do. The rich ruler was driven by his possessions and status. You have only two choices—either you become the most intentional force in your life or you allow someone or something else to exert more influence over your life. If you’re not the most intentional about yourself, someone or something else will be—that’s a promise. You might know people who would love to run your life . . . or substances waiting to run your life . . . or emotions that are ready to run your life. You decide—who or what is going to win today?

If you’re like me, you want to succeed at what is most important to you, but you sometimes find it challenging to stay focused on your top priorities. Your good intentions don’t translate into the accomplishment of worthy goals. Some days everything seems to be trying to sabotage your efforts. Distractions come at you from all directions, and your time is probably eaten up by demands every hour of the day.

You can be your own worst saboteur as well. Procrastination, laziness,

discouragement, and disorganization strike everyone at some point. You may be skilled at multitasking, which can actually make you feel on top of your game when you are anything but. When you're driving and talking on your cell phone, neither the person you're talking to nor your fellow drivers are getting your best. Recently I heard a radio broadcast in which listeners were told that the brain can't really focus on more than one task at once.¹ Consequently, when you multitask, your brain shifts quickly from one activity to another rather than focusing at least a little on each of the several things you're doing.

If you're not the most intentional about yourself, someone or something else will be—that's a promise.

FROM INTENTION TO ACTION

As you've seen, having good intentions is easy. Being intentional—making an effort to reach important goals—is difficult. But it's not impossible.

Intentionality is critical; without it, you would never be motivated to change. But following through on your intentions is often manageable only when you focus on the next one thing you need to do to bring about change.

I tend to go off in numerous directions at once. I have lots of interests, lots of questions, lots of projects, lots of what-ifs. If you're at all like me, you can end up on lots of rabbit trails guided by your good intentions. And, as we know, the road to you-know-where is paved with good intentions. So what I'm about to show you comes from my own journey of moving beyond good intentions to life-changing results.

For me, getting focused happened when I was hit with one of those difficult, life-altering events. When my mother died in August 2005, eleven years after my dad, I suddenly realized I was an adult orphan. I was now part of the oldest generation in our family, and the shortness of life came into clear focus. Like the psalmist, my prayer became "Teach me to number my days" (see Psalm 90:12). I knew that if I was to turn my good intentions into reality, I needed to change the way I used my time and resources and start using the power of one thing to change my own life.

I wanted my life to count, and I became focused on my legacy. My parents had lived with integrity and commitment, and they ended strong. I wanted the same for myself. My parents had given up a big house in the suburbs and my dad's high-paying job in order to follow a dream . . . to build a ranch where disadvantaged children could get away from their dysfunctional situations for a while.

I realized that my tendency to overcommit, which sometimes led to procrastination, could keep me from living with a similar sense of purpose. I decided that the only way to finish life strong would be to break the rest of my life into bite-size commitments—one thing done each day in one or more essential areas of life. I realized that my legacy would be the accumulation of a series of “one things” lived out over an extended period of time—the rest of my life. I'm so committed to the power of one thing that I created a One Thing wristband that I wear every day as a reminder to do the one thing that day that will make the biggest difference in my life. Others have asked me about my wristband, and now thousands wear one just like it.²

A LESSON FROM TIGER WOODS

Every big accomplishment is preceded by lots of little, seemingly insignificant actions—resulting in the one big thing everyone sees. The other day, I watched as Tiger Woods won another PGA tournament on national television, but what the audience never saw was the hundreds of hours when Tiger, all alone, worked on perfecting his swing—one practice swing after another—far from the eyes of the public.

While Woods is a dramatic example, we see the same principle in all areas of life. We cheer when our son or daughter wins a statewide musical competition, but we don't have film footage of the hours the child spent practicing alone in his or her room. We congratulate a married couple on the accomplishment of a fifty-year marriage, but we weren't around to witness how they stuck together one day . . . one challenge . . . one disagreement . . . one illness at a time over those fifty years.

To illustrate how the power of one thing can lead to big accomplish-

ments in your own life, try this exercise. Take a piece of paper and draw a horizontal line across the top. On the left side, write the year of your birth, and on the right side, write this year. In between, mark off the paper in five- or ten-year increments to make your time line. On your time line mark the major events, accomplishments, and changes next to the year they occurred. For example:

when you met Christ
when you went to college
when you got married
when you solved a major problem
when a child was born
when you made a decision to go in a new direction in your life
when you started a business
when you paid off your house
loss of a child
loss of a job
major health crisis

Most people can list about a dozen “big things” in their lives. Once you have written them down, think about the questions below:

- What small things preceded and followed each event? List all the “one things” that led up to that one big thing. Were they a series of interactions, a series of choices and behaviors, or people you associated with?
- What pattern do you see? Are the significant events largely positive? Are they growth oriented? Or are they largely negative events that caused you pain? What does this indicate about how intentional you are? Who or what was most intentional leading up to each big thing?
- How has your life changed as a result of each event?

Now extend your time line into the future. What is the next significant thing you are hoping for in the future? Are you working toward

something that will result in a positive “big thing” in your life? Or are you just letting things happen? Your future will become reality only if today you remain focused on the most important next one thing.

For example, if the next important stop on your time line is to successfully raise your teenage daughter, then it is essential that you have a game plan to make that goal a reality. Start by making a list of all the “one things” you can think of that will be required of you to raise your daughter well.

- I need to deal with a bad attitude about my ex-spouse, my daughter’s father.
- I need to establish expectations and routines for myself.
- I need to pray for my daughter daily.
- I need to be more confident when I make a decision and not give in so easily to her demands.
- I need to hold my daughter accountable for her actions and not respond out of guilt.
- I need to monitor her relationships and get to know her friends better.
- I need to encourage her strengths.
- I need to stop criticizing her so much.

Your future will become reality only if today you remain focused on the most important next one thing.

Even though the list may get long and feel pretty overwhelming to you, the power of doing the next right one thing is the only path to success. Remember, healthy change will occur only when the power of one thing is used. By doing the first right one thing followed

by the next one thing until each is completed or has become a habit, you almost guarantee yourself success in what matters most.

When I look across my time line, I identify the following as the most significant moments in my adult life: my marriage to Donna, the birth of our children, the decision we made to move from Michigan to Arizona, the decision I made to finish my graduate work and go on for a doctorate,

my decision in 1988 to write my first book, and the decision in 1990 to start a radio program to help families. I realize that each of these big moments represents a move or a change, something new. But each of these events in my life was preceded by many small “one things.”

WHY ONE THING REALLY DOES MAKE A DIFFERENCE

We can only really live today one thing at a time—one thought, one idea, one relationship, one phone call at a time. Matthew 6:34 (NLT) tells us, “Don’t worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will bring its own worries. Today’s trouble is enough for today.” We can’t rush ahead; we can’t lag behind. So how does change happen? Think of it this way:

One thing done once is an experience.

One thing done twice has your attention.

One thing done often is a pursuit.

One thing done always is a habit.

It has been said that our choices become our habits and our habits become our character. Our choices add up and determine the overall quality of our lives.

As you learn to choose one small change and focus on it one day at a time, your life is going to get better. After you have made the first thing a habit and experienced the satisfaction of having achieved a small but significant milestone, you can tackle one more thing with energy and confidence.

I’ve seen it happen—in my own life and in the lives of others—doing just one thing differently can produce significant and lasting changes for the better.

By doing the first right one thing followed by the next one thing until each is completed or has become a habit, you almost guarantee yourself success in what matters most.

The key is how you manage each of the “one things” you do each day—the tasks, conversations, relationships, and projects that make up your life. Remember the advice of Solomon: “Go to the ant, you

sluggard; consider its ways and be wise!” (Proverbs 6:6). Ants are commonly thought of as industrious creatures. Ever noticed how ab-

Our choices become our habits and our habits become our character.

absolutely focused they appear as they head back to their colonies, hauling crumbs several times bigger than themselves?

In this proverb, Solomon urges unmotivated individuals to follow the ant’s example. He knew that people who do

one thing intentionally over an extended period of time can change their lives. Don’t be discouraged by how far you think you need to go. Instead, be encouraged as you consider the following:

Doing one thing to intentionally love your spouse each day will change your marriage.

Doing one thing to intentionally read God’s Word and pray each day for even a few minutes will lead to spiritual growth in your life.

Doing one thing to exercise each day will lead to better physical health.

Doing one thing to be truthful and reliable each day will result in people counting on you.

Doing one thing to control your anger each day will reduce violence, abuse, and the likelihood of divorce in your home.

Doing one thing to maintain healthy opposite-sex friendships each day will prevent the destructive results from emotional or physical affairs.

Once you begin linking a number of these one small things—like pearls on a chain, each representing one small, positive change—you eventually will have a long, solid chain of improvements.

Warning: The power of one thing can be your friend or your enemy. Unfortunately, a string of negative actions also accumulates. If you ignore

the signs and symptoms of poor health, for example, eventually you might find that you have a serious and advanced illness. If month after month you spend a little more money than you earn, you can wind up in serious financial trouble. If you don't discipline your child during the early years because he or she is just so cute, you are likely to raise a brat.

Warning: The power of one thing can be your friend or your enemy.

One small action leads to another, and they join together, for good or ill. Perhaps you have determined to improve your life before. As you probably discovered, it's far easier to slip back into destructive patterns than to achieve positive and lasting change. After all, when we do nothing, our situation just naturally deteriorates; improvement takes intentionality and consistent action. If you have tried to change before, only to give up, keep reading. The next chapter was written just for you.

NOTE FROM THE AUTHOR

My parents were married for over fifty years. They were an example to me of the power of one thing to change a life. Committed to each other and to Christ, my parents made a bold decision and acted upon it when I was sixteen years old and still at home. Driven by a dream to make their lives really matter, they sold everything we had in order to start a non-profit ministry committed to doing one thing—reaching needy children with the gospel. Out of their desire to use their remaining days for a purpose that would outlive their lives together, they founded, along with my brother, Larry, and his wife, Cheri, the Youth Haven ministry, a ranch for underprivileged children. Up until the time of their last breath, my mom and dad had one thing on their minds and in their hearts—to serve Christ and model for their children and grandchildren what it means to live an intentional life in Christ.

You, too, can start the journey today. I've given you dozens of "one things" to consider throughout this book. You can start at any point in the process by picking any of the one things you've read as the launching point for the rest of your life. But unless you start by choosing and acting on one thing, your life will be no different tomorrow than it is today.

My passion in life is to support people on the journey toward living an intentional life and to finish strong, as my parents did. I invite you to join us! There's help and encouragement at www.TheIntentionalLife.com.

NOTES

1. “Bad at Multitasking? Blame Your Brain,” *Talk of the Nation*, National Public Radio (October 16, 2008), <http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=95784052>.
2. If you think such a visible reminder might encourage you to keep at your “one thing,” you can visit <http://www.TheIntentionalLife.com> to find out how to order your own wristband.
3. C. S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity* (New York: HarperCollins, 1952), 227.
4. See <http://www.angermanage.co.uk/data.html>.
5. Daniel Goleman, *Emotional Intelligence* (New York: Bantam, 1995).
6. M. Scott Peck, *The Road Less Traveled* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1978), 30.
7. Chip Scanlan, “Tools of the Trade: The Question,” Poynter Online, http://www.poynter.org/content/content_view.asp?id=5075&sid=2 (accessed April 1, 2009).
8. John Brady, *The Craft of Interviewing* (New York: Vintage Books, 1977), 37.

THE POWER OF ONE THING IN ACTION

Information + Insight + Action = Intentional Living

The Problem:

My Goal:

Based on

this *information* (the facts of your situation):

and this *insight* (after prayerfully thinking through the problem):

I commit to this *action* (my one thing):
