INTENTIONAL LIVING

CHOOSING A LIFE THAT MATTERS

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What’s your life story?

When I meet people for the first time, as soon as the introductions are out of the way, I ask them to share their stories—to tell me who they are and where they’re from, where they’ve been and where they’re going. I want to understand what matters to them. Maybe you do the same. The telling of our stories becomes an emotional connecting point for us. It bridges the gap between us.

Why is that?

Everyone loves a good story—we always have. Stories tell us who we are. They…

- Inspire us.
- Connect with us.
- Animate our reasoning process.
- Give us permission to act.
- Fire our emotions.
- Give us pictures of who we aspire to be.

Stories are us.
Intentional Living

Every day millions of people watch movies, read novels, and search the Internet for stories that inspire them or make them laugh. Every day we listen to our friends tell us about the dramatic or funny things that happen to them. Every day people take out their smartphones to show pictures and share stories. Stories are how we relate to others, learn, and remember.

As a communicator, I spend a good portion of my days sharing stories. People don’t care a lot about cold facts. They don’t want to look at pie charts. They want excitement. They like drama. They care about pictures. They want to laugh. They want to see and feel what happened. Statistics don’t inspire people to do great things. Stories do!

What’s Your Story?

So I’ll ask you again: What’s your story?

I wish I could sit with you right now and hear it from you. When you get to the end of this book, I’ll tell you about a way you can share your story with me and with others. But before we get to that, I want you to think about your story so far. What kind of story is it?

We all have a bit of humor in our stories, as well as some drama. We all have our ups and downs, wins and losses. There’s a bit of comedy, tragedy, and history in all of us. But overall, each of our lives tells a larger story. What do you want yours to say?

I believe that no matter what “plot” each of our stories may follow, deep down we all want one thing. We want our lives to matter. We want our stories to be of significance. Nobody wants to feel like the world wouldn’t miss him if he’d never lived. Are you with me?

Have you ever seen the classic movie It's a Wonderful Life? It’s
the story of George Bailey, a man who dreams of traveling the world and building things, but who instead stays home in Bedford Falls, because he repeatedly chooses to do what he believes to be right for others. A point occurs in the movie where George experiences a moment of crisis, and he comes to believe that everyone around him would be better off if he had never been born. What he’s really saying is that his life doesn’t matter.

The great twist in the story occurs when, with the help of an angel, George gets a chance to see what his town and others’ lives would look like if he had never existed. Without him, it’s a dark and negative place. George comes to recognize the positive impact he had made because, time after time, he took action to do what he knew was right and helped other people. As Clarence the angel tells him, “Each man’s life touches so many other lives.” George had touched many lives in small ways and made a difference.

Have you looked at your life from that angle? Have you thought about what you want your life story to be? Do you believe you can live a life of significance, that you can do things that really matter? Can you make your story great?

With all my heart, I believe the answer to these questions is yes. You have it within your power to make your life a great story, one of significance. Every person can. Regardless of nationality, opportunity, ethnicity, or capacity, each of us can live a life of significance. We can do things that matter and that can make the world a better place. I hope you believe that. If you don’t now, I hope you will by the time you’re finished reading this book.

Don’t let the word significance intimidate you. Don’t let it stop you from pursuing a life that matters. When I talk about significance, I’m not talking about being famous. I’m not talking about getting rich. I’m not talking about being a huge celebrity or winning a Nobel Prize or becoming the president of the United States. There’s nothing
wrong with any of those things, but you don’t have to accomplish any of them to be significant. To be significant, all you have to do is make a difference with others wherever you are, with whatever you have, day by day.

Back in 1976, I received a gift from Eileen Beavers, who was my assistant at that time. As I unwrapped it, I saw it was a book, and I was intrigued by the title: *The Greatest Story Ever Told*. I couldn’t wait to read it.

But when I opened it, I was shocked. The pages were blank.

Inside was a note from Eileen that said, “John, your life is before you. Fill these pages with kind acts, good thoughts, and matters of your heart. Write a great story with your life.”

I still remember the excitement and anticipation that surged through me when I read her words. For the first time it made me think about how I was the author of my life, and I could fill every “page” with whatever I wanted. It made me want to be significant. It inspired me to do whatever I could to make my life matter.

So what’s the secret to filling the pages of your life? What’s the key to a life that matters?

*Living each day with intentionality.*

When you live each day with intentionality, there’s almost no limit to what you can do. You can transform yourself, your family, your community, and your nation. When enough people do that, they can change the world. When you intentionally use your everyday life to bring about positive change in the lives of others, you begin to live a life that matters.

I vividly remember watching Reese Witherspoon’s emotional
acceptance speech after she won the Best Actress Academy Award in 2006 for portraying June Carter Cash in *Walk the Line.* Witherspoon said that people often asked June how she was doing, and she’d say, “I’m just tryin’ to matter!” The actress went on to say that she understood exactly what June meant because she too was trying to make her life matter—by living a good life and doing work that meant something to somebody.

And isn’t that what all of us want? To make our lives matter? So if that is true, why doesn’t it happen for everybody?

**Get into the Story**

Most people want to hear or tell a good story. But they don’t realize they can and should *be* the good story. That requires intentional living. It is the bridge that crosses the gap to a life that matters. I’ll explain this in detail in the next chapter, but right now I’ll just say this: when unintentional people see the wrongs of the world, they say, “Something should be done about that.” They see or hear a story, and they react to it emotionally and intellectually. But they go no further.

People who live intentionally jump in and live the story themselves. The words of physicist Albert Einstein motivate them: “The world is a dangerous place, not because of those who do evil, but because of those who look on and do nothing.”

Why do so many people do nothing? I think it’s because most of us look at the evils and injustice around us, and we become overwhelmed. The problems look too big for us to tackle. We say to ourselves, “What can I do? I’m just one person.”

One person is a start. One person can act and make a change by helping another. One person can inspire a second person to be intentional, and another. Those people can work together. They can
become a movement. They can make an impact. We should never let what we cannot do keep us from doing what we can do. A passive life does not become a meaningful life.

Not long ago I read *A Million Miles in a Thousand Years* by Don Miller. He eloquently writes about seeing our lives as stories. He explains, “I’ve never walked out of a meaningless movie thinking all movies are meaningless. I only thought the movie I walked out on was meaningless. I wonder, then, if when people say life is meaningless, what they really mean is their lives are meaningless. I wonder if they’ve chosen to believe their whole existence is unremarkable, and are projecting their dreary lives on the rest of us.”¹

If you are reading these words and thinking to yourself, *That’s me. My life is meaningless. My existence is unremarkable. I wish my life were less dreary*, then I have good news for you. This doesn’t have to be your story. Your story can be about a life that matters.

Don Miller also writes, “You can call it God or a conscience, or you can dismiss it as that intuitive knowing we all have as human beings, as living storytellers; but there is a knowing I feel that guides me toward better stories, toward being a better character. I believe there is a writer outside ourselves, plotting a better story for us, interacting with us, even, and whispering a better story into our consciousness.”²

No matter what your beliefs are, I can tell you this. If your story isn’t as meaningful or significant or compelling as you want it to be, you can change it. You can begin writing a new story, beginning today. Don’t settle for being merely a teller of stories about significance. Decide to be the story of significance. Become the central character in your story of making a difference!
Your Story, Not History

I have to admit, this notion goes against everything I learned in college. It may go against your education, too. In the courses I took on speaking, the professors taught us to take our stories from history, not to draw upon personal experiences to illustrate our points. They believed to do anything other than that appeared egocentric.

As a bourgeoning communicator, however, I observed that the greatest speakers didn’t just tell better stories. They actually made the stories better by living them first. Their stories came from their experiences. They were at the heart of their best stories.

And that’s what I want for you. I don’t want you to be merely a storyteller of significance. I want you to be a story liver! Your story still has many blank pages. You can write on them with your life. When you get right down to it, intentional living is about living your best story.

One of the biggest comedy acts of the sixties and seventies was the Smothers Brothers. I remember a routine they performed on their television variety show that went something like this:

“What’s wrong, Tommy?” asked Dick, who was the straight man. “You seem a bit despondent.”

“I am!” replied his brother Tommy. “I’m worried about the state of our American society!”

“Well, what bothers you about it? Are you worried about the extent of poverty and hunger in the land?”

“Oh no, that doesn’t really bother me.”

“I see. Well, are you concerned about the growing threat of nuclear war?”

“No, that’s not a worry of mine.”

“Are you upset about the use and abuse of drugs by the youth of America?”

“No, that doesn’t bother me very much.”
Looking rather puzzled, Dick asked, “Well, Tom, if you’re not bothered by poverty and hunger, war and drugs, what are you worried about?”

“I’m worried about our apathy!”

Apathetic people will never make their world different. Indifferent people will not live a life that matters. Passive people take themselves out of the greatest of all stories—their own. Maybe they want to see themselves in the story, but they exist as mere observers on the sidelines. They wish for more, but they fail to become active participants. Why? Because they are unintentional.

**How to Start Writing Your Significance Story**

If you’re like me and want to make a difference and have a significance story to tell by the end of your life, I can help you. I’m going to show you the simple pathway toward intentional living. But first, you need to be willing to take an important step forward. And that comes from a change in mindset, from a willingness to start writing your story by approaching your life differently.

**1. Put Yourself in the Story**

No one stumbles upon significance. We have to be intentional about making our lives matter. That calls for action—and not excuses. Most people don’t know this, but it’s easier to go from failure to success than from excuses to success.

In a famous study by Victor and Mildred Goertzel published in a book titled *Cradles of Eminence*, the home backgrounds of three hundred highly successful people were investigated. These three hundred people had made it to the top. They were men and women
who would be recognized as brilliant in their fields. The list included Franklin D. Roosevelt, Helen Keller, Winston Churchill, Albert Schweitzer, Clara Barton, Gandhi, Albert Einstein, and Sigmund Freud. The intensive investigation into their early home lives yielded some surprising findings:

- Three-fourths of them as children were troubled by poverty, a broken home, or difficult parents who were rejecting, over-possessive, or domineering.
- Seventy-four of the eighty-five writers of fiction or drama and sixteen of the twenty poets came from homes where, as children, they saw tense psychological drama played out by their parents.
- Over one-fourth of the sample suffered physical handicaps such as blindness, deafness, or crippled limbs.

Adversity tried to knock these people out of their stories, but they didn’t allow it to. Why? They were highly intentional. They had a strong why—a purpose—which drew them forward even if the road wasn’t wide and smooth. (I’ll tell you about finding your why in chapter four.)

Look at the lives of people who have achieved significance, and you can hear them calling you to put yourself into your story. Perhaps they didn’t use those exact words, but if you look at what they’ve said, you can sense the call to action:

“To dare is to lose one’s footing momentarily. Not to dare is to lose oneself.”

—SØREN KIERKEGAARD

“If you aren’t in over your head, how do you know how tall you are?”

—T. S. ELIOT
“Be the change you want to see in the world.”
—Mahatma Gandhi

“There’s to the crazy ones. The misfits. The rebels. The
troublemakers. The round pegs in the square holes. The ones
who see things differently…. Because the people who are crazy
enough to think they can change the world are the ones who do.”
—Steve Jobs

People ask me all the time for advice about how to write a book. I
tell them to start writing. Many people would love to write a story, a
poem, or even a book, but they never do. Why? They’re afraid to start.

To have a life that matters, you have to start. Start with yourself.
Your best story begins when you put yourself back into it. Be in the
picture. Stop looking—start living! Not only will that change your
life and help others, but it will also give you the credibility and moral
authority to inspire and team with others to make a difference. (I’ll
talk a lot about this throughout the book.)

Once, while walking through the Orlando Science Center, I read
these words on a sign: “Experiment—Experience—Explore. Do not
touch isn’t in our vocabulary.” I love that philosophy, not only for a
science center, but also for life. Dive in! You never know how well
you can swim until you are in over your head.

2. Put Significance in Your Story

A well-written story is built using elements that people think are
important. When we live for significance, we are telling people around
us that it is important to us. Almost everyone wants to live a life of
meaning and significance, whether or not they express the desire.

To put significance in our stories, we must do things out of our
comfort zone. And we must make changes that we may find difficult.
We often avoid trying to make those changes. But know this: though not everything that we face can be changed, nothing can be changed until we face it.

To put significance in our stories, we must also take action. Being passive may feel safe. If you do nothing, nothing can go wrong. But while inaction cannot fail, it cannot succeed either. We can wait, and hope, and wish, but if we do, we miss the stories our lives could be.

We cannot allow our fears and questions to keep us from starting. Are you tempted to wait until an ideal time? Do you worry that if you start on this journey without knowing exactly where it will go you might not do well? Are you concerned that you might fail?

Let me help you by telling you something you need to know. You won’t do well the first time you do anything. You don’t know what you’re doing when you start. Nobody is good at the beginning of doing something new. Get over it. Novelist Ernest Hemingway said, “The first draft is always crap.” (Only he didn’t say crap!) And he was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature. If you want to live a life that matters, don’t start when you get good; start now so you become good. I’ve never known a star athlete who started out good. All start out as beginners, and with practice, some become good. Others become great.

Everyone starts out bad, regardless of what they’re practicing for. We start so we can improve. We start before we’re ready because we need and want to get better. The idea is to deliver our best each time we try until one day, we become good. And then one day, we may even have a chance to be great. That’s growth. But we can’t evolve if we don’t start.

Your story won’t be perfect. A lot of things will change. But your heart will sing. It will sing the song of significance. It will sing, “I am making a difference!” And that will give you satisfaction down to the soul level.
3. Put Your Strengths in Your Story

Recently I had an enlightening lunch with Jim Collins, author of *Good to Great*. We were speaking together at an event in Las Vegas, and after catching up for a few minutes, we began to talk about the meaning and impact of significance.

“Jim,” I asked, “what is required to bring about positive life-change to a community?” I knew he had done a lot of research on the subject of transformational movements, and I was very interested to hear his answer.

“There are three questions you need to ask and answer to test your readiness to be a catalyst for significance,” Jim replied. “They are:

- Can you be the best in the world at what you do?
- Are you passionate about what you are doing?
- Do you have the resources to change your world?”

Since our conversation that day, I have spent a lot of time thinking about those questions. Here is what I discovered. The first question is about talent. You have skills and abilities that can help others. Can you be the best in the world using them? Maybe, maybe not. Can you be the best you in the world using them? Absolutely! No one else has exactly your skills and experiences, opportunities and obstacles, timing and gifts. You are unique, and have a unique chance to make a difference only you can make—if you’re willing to get into your story. Your talent will become the leverage in your life for creating the significance story you want to live.

The second question is about heart. Significance begins in the heart when we desire to make a difference. We see a need. We feel a hurt. We want to help. We act on it. Passion is the soul of significance. It’s the fuel. It’s the core.

The third question is about tools. No doubt you already have many
resources at your disposal. My desire is that this book will be another one. It will show you the way so that you can become highly intentional and live a life that matters according to your heart and values.

4. Stop Trying and Start Doing

“I’ll try my best.” This is a statement most of us have made at one time or another. It’s a way of saying, “I’ll work at having the right attitude and I’ll work at the task, but I won’t take responsibility for the outcome.” But is trying to do your best enough for a life of significance? Can we move from where we are to where we want to be just by trying?

I don’t think so.

Trying alone does not communicate true commitment. It’s half-hearted. It is not a pledge to do what’s necessary to achieve a goal. It’s another way of saying, “I’ll make an effort.” That’s not many steps away from, “I’ll go through the motions.” Trying rarely achieves anything significant.

If an attitude of trying is not enough, then what is?

An attitude of doing!

There is enormous magic in the tiny word do. When we tell ourselves, “I’ll do it,” we unleash tremendous power. That act forges in us a chain of personal responsibility that ups our game: a desire to excel plus a sense of duty plus complete aliveness plus total dedication to getting done what has to be done. That equals commitment.

An attitude of doing also helps us to become who we were meant to be. It is this doing attitude that often leads to the things we were meant to do. While trying is filled with good intentions, doing is the result of intentional living.

As you read this, you may be thinking, I’m not sure if I’m ready to make such a commitment. Steven Pressfield, author of The War of Art, identifies this reluctance. He calls it resistance. He writes,
There is a force resisting the beautiful things in the world, and too many of us are giving in.” An attitude of doing helps us break through that resisting force, and the world needs that. It needs for us to live our stories and contribute to the greater story that’s happening around us.

Discoveries in Your Story of Significance

I hope you will take steps to put yourself fully into your story and begin writing your life of significance—or to increase your significance if you’re already doing significant work. From the moment you start, it will have a positive, lasting effect on you. If you’re still not sure if you’re ready to take that first step, let me help by telling you what it will do for you:

It Will Change You

What is the number one catalyst for change? It’s action. Understanding may be able to change minds, but action changes lives. If you take action, it will change your life. And that change will begin changing others.

Entrepreneur and speaker Jim Rohn said, “One of the best places to start to turn your life around is by doing whatever appears on your mental, ‘I should’ list.” What task to help others keeps popping up on your “I should” list? I want to challenge you to develop the discipline of doing in that area. Every time we choose action over ease we develop an increasing level of self-worth, self-respect, and self-confidence. In the final analysis, it is often how we feel about ourselves that provides the greatest reward from any activity.

In life, it is not what we get that makes us valuable. It is what
we become in the process that brings value to our lives. Action is what converts human dreams into significance. It brings personal value that we can gain from no other source.

When I was in college, I felt that I should do something positive in the poorest section of the city where I lived. Often I would hear others say that something should be done to help the people who lived there, but I didn’t see anyone doing anything about it. So I decided to lead a clean-up effort in that area. For one month, volunteers did work to spruce up the neighborhood. Then we began helping the people who needed medical assistance. Soon people began to take ownership of the neighborhood and things began to change. I vividly remember walking through that area with a great deal of pride of accomplishment. I was full of joy knowing that I had been part of a group of people who had made a difference in that community. As a result, the change inside of me was as great as the change in the neighborhood.

When you take responsibility for your story and intentionally live a life of significance, how will you change?

- **You will reaffirm your values.** Acting on what you value will clarify those values and make them a permanent priority in your life.
- **You will find your voice.** Taking action will give you confidence to speak and live out what you believe in front of others. You will begin to develop a moral authority with people.
- **You will develop your character.** Passive people allow their character to be influenced by others. Active people struggle to form and maintain their character. They grow and develop because of that struggle.
• *You will experience inner fulfillment.* Contentment is found in being where you are supposed to be. It’s found when your actions are aligned with who you are.

When we live our lives intentionally for others, we begin to see the world through eyes other than our own, and that inspires us to do more than belong; we participate. We do more than care; we help. We go beyond being fair; we are kind. We go beyond dreaming; we work. Why? Because we want to make a difference.

If you want a better life, become intentional about your story. The return you get personally will knock your socks off. That doesn’t mean it will be smooth sailing. Significance is messy. It’s inconvenient. It’s overwhelming. At times I’ve been disappointed in myself. I’ve also been disappointed by others. All the couldn’ts, didn’ts, and wouldn’ts in my life have shown me my shortcomings. The story I wanted to write and the one being written are different. But that’s OK. My strikeouts have developed my character, and my hits have been unforgettable. When your story of significance moves from ideal to real, it will begin to remake you.

**It Will Bring Others into Your Story**

What you move toward moves toward you. For years I have taught that when a person moves toward his or her vision, resources begin to move toward that person. Those resources may be materials, money, or people. When a person stops moving, so do the resources. As you step into your story of significance and take action, you will find this to be true.

I have taken this principle one step further. When I move in an area of significance, I also ask people to join me. (I’ll explain this in detail in chapter seven.) There’s great power in inviting others to join you. You can share significance by inviting others to be part of your
story. Don Miller illustrates this in *A Million Miles in a Thousand Years*. He writes,

When we were in Uganda, I went with [my friend] Bob to break ground on a new school he was building. The school board was there, along with the local officials. The principal of the school had bought three trees that Bob, the government official, and the principal would plant to commemorate the breaking of the ground. Bob saw me standing off, taking pictures of the event, and walked over and asked if I would plant his tree for him.

“Are you sure?” I asked.

“Absolutely,” he said. “It would be great for me to come back to this place and see the tree you planted, to be reminded of you every time I visit.”

I put down my camera and helped dig the hole and set the tree into the ground, covering it to its tiny trunk. And from that moment on, the school was no longer Bob’s school; the better story was no longer Bob’s story. It was my story, too. I’d entered into the story with Bob. And it’s a great story about providing an education to children who would otherwise go without. After that I donated funds to Bob’s work in Uganda, and I’m even working to provide a scholarship to a child I met in a prison in Kampala who Bob and his lawyers helped free. I’m telling a better story with Bob.⁴

When you invite others to join you, you both change and have better stories to show for it. As poet Edwin Markham wrote,

*There is a destiny that makes us brothers*

*None goes his way alone.*

*All that we send into the lives of others*

*Comes back into our own.*
My greatest memories have come from the times others were in my story of significance with me. There is no joy that can equal that of people working together for common good. Today, my best friends are those who are taking the significance journey with me. Those friendships are heightened by meaningful experiences. Yours will be, too.

**It Will Increase Your Appetite for More Significance**

In 2013 at a speaking engagement I had in Bahrain, I sat across the table from Jaap Vaandrager at lunch. He is a highly successful businessman from the Netherlands who lives and works in Bahrain. During our conversation he asked me what I was writing. I briefly shared that I was writing this book about making a difference. He responded, “My daughter Celine is making a difference in the lives of people, and she is only a teenager.” He started to tell me her story, and I was blown away by it.

Growing up in the Netherlands, Celine knew how privileged she was. This became clear to her in India. Her father and grandfather had done many charity projects there, and she had gone there herself and witnessed the conditions. “I have seen how many people live in extreme poverty,” said Celine. “The children in the slums and other less fortunate areas lack basic education, and the only language they learn is the local language, which limits their opportunities later in life. Their greatest wish is to break out of the slums and start a life in the city with a stable job, a stable income, and a loving family.”

The key, she realized, was education. “I believe that it is one of the most important things in life and it enables people to do whatever they desire with their life,” said Celine. She thought that if children could be taught English, they would have a chance at a better life as they grew up.

Celine had a plan. She would provide underprivileged children
at a school with an English teacher. That would help them later in life and provide greater opportunities for them. After doing a lot of research and with the help of her friends in India, she found a school. It needed an English teacher, but didn’t have enough money to pay for one. At this school and others like it, students received only the most basic supplies and a lunch, which for many is the only hot meal they get all day.

The school she found was called Mahadji Shinde Primary School. The children who attended, forty-four to a class, were some of the least fortunate children in all of India: 10 percent were orphans, 60 percent had only one parent, and 80 percent lived in sheds in the slums.

Finding an English teacher for the school was not easy, but Celine did it in a month. The teacher was a young single woman whose entire family depended on her salary, including her father, who had cancer. She had been unemployed and was grateful for the job. Now all Celine had to do was figure out how to pay her.

She began raising money by holding bake sales at her school. She also sponsored swims. But the amount of money was nowhere near enough to fulfill her aims.

As Celine’s sixteenth birthday approached, she knew what she wanted to do. “For my sixteenth birthday I stepped it up a notch, inviting all my friends, family’s friends, and classmates to come to a birthday fundraiser I was having and I told them to bring a plus one.”

Instead of asking for gifts, she asked for donations for a charity she was creating called No Nation Without Education.

“Within hours the whole donation box was filled and I already knew I had achieved my target,” said Celine. “When I counted up the money I couldn’t believe my eyes. We had gone over more than double the money required. Success!”

She used the money to pay the teacher’s salary for a year. That meant the children would get English lessons, and the teacher would
have a stable job for a year and her father’s cancer would be treated. With the extra money, Celine bought dozens of basic English books for the children and stuffed animals for the primary school. When Celine went there to deliver the books and toys, the children were overjoyed and welcomed her enthusiastically. On the same trip, she helped with other projects her grandfather had sponsored.

“I had such a fantastic time in India,” said Celine. “I couldn’t thank everyone enough for helping me. It was a life-changing experience and one I will never forget.”

But Celine’s story doesn’t end there. She says, “My new mission? To build a school in Mumbai, India, for my eighteenth birthday.”

Celine’s story shows that when you make significance a part of your story, it only increases your appetite to do more things that matter. I know that once I started adding value to others, it became an obsession in the best sense of the word. The more I did it, the more I became intentional in finding other opportunities. A butterfly cannot go back to being a caterpillar. When you start living the significance story, you get a taste for making a difference and you won’t go back.

I wish I had read a story like Celine’s when I was a teenager. Even with all of the advantages I had, no one ever pointed out that there were people doing significant things at that age. And it never occurred to me that I could make such a difference as a kid. Knowing this possibility then would have had a huge impact on me.

**It Will Outlive You**

In my book *The Leadership Handbook*, there is a chapter on legacy titled “People Will Summarize Your Life in One Sentence—Pick
It Now.” By getting into your story and becoming intentional about making a difference, you can choose your legacy. What an opportunity! Today you and I can decide to live a life that matters, and that will impact how we will be remembered after we’re gone.

My wife, Margaret, was deeply moved by a book called Forget-Me-Not: Timeless Sentiments for Lifelong Friends, by Janda Sims Kelley. It is a collection of prose and poetry written in the 1800s. One of the entries particularly impacted her. It said,

To Viola,
Dare to do right, dare to be true,
You have a work that
no other can do.
Do it so kindly,
so bravely, so well,
That angels will hasten
the story to tell.
Your friend, Annie
Haskinville, New York, February 08, 1890

Isn’t that what all of us should strive to do? As Viktor Frankl said, “Everyone has his own specific vocation or mission in life. Everyone must carry out a concrete assignment that demands fulfillment. Therein he cannot be replaced, nor can his life be repeated. Thus everyone’s task is as unique as his specific opportunity to implement it.”

This Is Personal

At this point, I should pause so that I can tell you something. If you’ve read any of my previous books, you’re going to find this one different in both tone and approach. I will show you the way to
intentional living and help you to create your own life that matters, but I'm also going to tell you a lot of my personal story—from growing up and going to school in small-town Ohio during the fifties and sixties; to becoming the pastor of a tiny church in rural Indiana; to leading ever-growing churches through the seventies, eighties, and nineties; to crossing over as a speaker to teach businesspeople and leaders; to starting several businesses and a nonprofit organization; to eventually training millions of leaders around the world.

I won’t be telling you all this to toot my own horn. My life is flawed, yet I believe I need to share it with you in a way I never have before because I don’t know of any better way to teach you how to embark upon intentional living. I believe that if you know my story and how it unfolded, it will help you to write your own story of significance. It will empower you to lead yourself to a life that matters.

Let me also tell you something else. I talk pretty openly about my faith in this book. I do that because it has been an important part of my personal journey. It may also be a part of yours. But I also know that it may not be. Rest assured, I will not try to force my faith on you. If you’re indifferent to faith, or even if you have a negative disposition toward faith or God, I sincerely believe you’ll benefit from hearing my story. Having said that, I want you to know that I’ll let you know when I’m going to talk about my faith, and you can skip that section if you want to. I won’t be offended.

Since it’s confession time, I’ll also let you in on a little secret. I struggled with writing this book—more than with any book I’ve ever written. Why? The message of intentional living and the resulting significance is so meaningful, so powerful, and so very personal that I felt I had to get it right. I believe what I have to say on this subject has the potential to change your life, as it has mine.

And to help you start taking your first steps into significance right away, I’ve created something called the seven-day experiment. It will show you how to take your first small steps in your journey of
intentional living and significance. Go to 7DayExperiment.com and try it out. It’s free.

As I have looked back at my story and explored my journey of intentional living and significance, I have come to realize that it followed a pattern, a pattern I will use to show you the way. Here it is:

*I Want to Make a Difference*

**Doing Something That Makes a Difference,**

**With People Who Make a Difference,**

**At a Time That Makes a Difference.**

The rest of the book is organized in alignment with the pattern of those four thoughts (after I explain some things about intentional living in the next chapter). My desire is that as you read and hear about me, you will make discoveries about yourself, your calling to make a difference, and about your ability to live a life of significance, which you can start doing now.

Even though I will be telling you much of my story, and revealing more about my background than I ever have, I want you to understand that my story isn’t more important than anyone else’s—including yours. I believe that every person has great value. Every person matters. I believe in you. I believe in your potential for personal transformation. And I believe you have the ability to make an impact on the world.

Your story, like mine, won’t be perfect. Everyone’s story includes wins and losses, good days and bad, highs and lows, surprises and uncertainties. That’s life. This book is not about creating a *perfect* life for you. It’s about wanting a *better* life for you.

I’ve been an observer of people all my life, and I’ve noticed that most people are pretty passive about their lives. An indication of this is that when asked to describe significant regrets in their lives, eight out of ten people focus on actions they did not take rather than actions they *did.* In other words, they focus on things they failed to do rather than things they failed at doing. A better story will emerge for you
when you are highly intentional with your life. I know because I have experienced it.

Your Best Story

One of my favorite movies is *Amistad*, directed by Steven Spielberg. It’s about a mutiny on a slave ship and the trial that occurred to determine the status of the rebellious slaves after the vessel miraculously made it to the United States. Representing the slaves was African American abolitionist lawyer Theodore Joadson, played by Morgan Freeman. His advisor was former US president John Quincy Adams, played by Anthony Hopkins.

In the movie, Adams asks Joadson to summarize his case. Joadson’s summary is brilliant, accurate, and devoid of emotion. Old Adams then counsels Joadson: “Early in my career in the law, I learned that *whoever tells the best story wins*.”

I want you to win by telling the best story you can with your life. As you think about your life story and how you want it ultimately to read, I want to leave you with a final thought. I often teach that we have two great tasks in life: to find ourselves and to lose ourselves. Ultimately, I believe we find ourselves by discovering our *why*. We lose ourselves while traveling the path of significance by putting others first. The result? The people we help also find themselves, and the legacy cycle can begin again. That cycle has the power to live on after us. When I die, I cannot take with me what I have, but I can live in others by what I gave. This is what I hope for you as you read this book.

If you’re ready to learn how living with intentionality will change your life, then turn the page and let’s look at why having good intentions alone is never enough for living a life of significance.
Intentional Application: Your Life Can Be a Great Story

Your Story So Far

How would you characterize your life story so far? Is it already a great one? Is it good, but not spectacular? Is it falling short of what you want it to be? Take some time to think about it by writing about it. You can do that any number of ways. You can create a list of every memorable moment—both positive and negative. You can write it out as a story. You can jot down ideas or create a summary paragraph. The how isn’t that important. What matters is that you take the time to do it, and be sure to think about whether your story is headed in the direction you want it to go by the time you’re done living.

Start Outlining a New Chapter

If the direction of your life isn’t all that you want it to be, then take some time to write out what you want to accomplish to make the world a better place. It doesn’t need to be lofty. It doesn’t have to be earth-shattering. It just needs to make a difference in some way that’s important to you. What would you like people to say at your funeral? Write it now.

Step into Your Story

Now try to discern what it would mean for you to become more proactive in making your life matter and stepping into your own story. Identify what single action you could take today and every day for the next week or month to start rewriting your own story. As Doug Horton says, “Be your own hero. It’s cheaper than a movie ticket.”
Poet Samuel Johnson is credited with saying, “Hell is paved with good intentions.” Why would he say such a thing? Isn’t it a positive thing to want to do good, to possess a desire to help others? My answer is yes. Having a heart to help people and add value to them makes you a better person. But if you don’t act on it in an intentional way, it won’t make a difference.

Crossing the Significance Gap

In the movie Pay It Forward, teacher Eugene Simonet challenges his class to go out and make a difference in the lives of others. “Think of an idea to change our world, then put it into action,” he tells his students. Why? Because he knows that most people, even though they desire to do something that matters, don’t start intentionally building the bridge between knowing and doing. They wait. As a result, they never span the gap. And as a result, they never experience significance.

When I look back at my own journey of significance, I recognize
that it began with good intentions more than intentional living. My good intentions expressed my heart and desire to help others but fell far short of the significance I genuinely craved. A great example of this occurred when I was in high school. I loved basketball growing up. From junior high school on, I played on the basketball team, and I was pretty good. But I always wanted to play football, too. However, I knew my parents didn't want me to play two sports. They worried I wouldn't be able to keep up with my studies. So I had a dilemma. Every summer, I told my buddies I would be at football tryouts that fall. It was my intention to show up. However, I knew I’d disappoint my parents if I did. So inevitably, I disappointed myself and my friends by not going. The result was that my intentions were inconsistent with my behavior.

Early in my life, too many times my intentions were just thoughts—great ideas but not backed with actions. If I had just been intentional and told my parents I wanted to play football, I think they would have let me.

The sad part is that I never got to play football because I never told them how I felt. Every fall, I sat in the stands watching the game because that’s as far as my good intentions took me. Over time I found a way to get out of the stands and onto the field more often in life. It came as I began to see the difference between good intentions and intentional living. Significance only started to become mine when I became consciously aware of the need to take action and follow through every single day.

What game are you watching that you’d rather be playing? Are you sitting in the stands in areas of your life where you could be making a difference?

There are many ways to be significant—as many as there are people on earth. Each of us has unique skills, talents, opportunities, causes, and callings. I’ll help you start to figure out what some of
those things are for you in subsequent chapters. But there is only one certain pathway for you to achieve that significance, and that’s through intentional living. Since you’re still reading this book, I believe you have made the decision to get into your story as I suggested in chapter one. You want to live a life that matters. You desire significance. That’s good. But the next question is how.

First, let me clarify what I mean when I talk about intentional living. I’m describing a life that brings you daily satisfaction and continual rewards for merely working to make a difference—small or large—in the lives of others. Intentional living is the bridge that will lead you to a life that matters. Good intentions won’t get you there.

What’s the big difference between good intentions and intentional living? I can show you using just a few words. Take a look at the three columns of words below, and as you do, ask yourself, “Do I live in the land of good intentions, or in the land of intentional living?”

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>WORDS OF GOOD INTENTION</th>
<th>WORDS OF INTENTIONAL LIVING</th>
<th>A LIFE THAT MATTERS</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Desire</td>
<td>Action</td>
<td>Results</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wish</td>
<td>Purpose</td>
<td>Fulfillment</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Someday</td>
<td>Today</td>
<td>Every Day</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fantasy</td>
<td>Strategy</td>
<td>Follow-Through</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hopefully</td>
<td>Definitely</td>
<td>Continually</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Passive</td>
<td>Active</td>
<td>Proactive</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Occasional</td>
<td>Continual</td>
<td>Habitual</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Emotion</td>
<td>Discipline</td>
<td>Lifestyle</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Somebody Should</td>
<td>I Will</td>
<td>I Do</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Survival</td>
<td>Success</td>
<td>Significance</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

As you look at these lists, can you see why good intentions alone will never get you to significance? In fact, if all you ever do is
cultivate good intentions, but you never act with intentionality, you’re actually likely to become more frustrated and less fulfilled, because your desire for positive change may increase, but the lack of results will leave you frustrated.

Whether we realize it or not, people live in one land or the other. Whether by design or default, if we have a desire to make the world a better place, we either settle for good intentions or embrace intentional living. Which will you do?

**Learning to Be Intentional**

Even someone like me, who grew up in a home where intentionality was highly valued, doesn’t always understand how to be intentional right off the bat.

My father is the most intentional person I’ve ever met. He knows what he believes, he identifies what he wants, he thinks about what he needs to do to bring about the results he wants, and he consistently takes action to see it through. He’s in his nineties, and he’s still living intentionally.

As a young man, Dad studied successful people and found they all had one thing in common: a positive attitude. He was not a naturally positive person, so he began reading books and listening to speakers who taught him how to become more positive. And he practiced positive thinking every day. He still does.

Here’s another example of his intentionality. During the Depression, when many people were out of work, he would go to a business where he hoped to get a job, and he would work a day for free. He figured that his work would be so good that the business owner would simply hire him on the spot. If that didn’t happen, he would move on and do the same thing for another business. He was never out of work.

My parents were highly intentional with my older brother Larry,
my younger sister Trish, and me. Because they wanted to meet our friends and supervise us as we built relationships, they made sure we had everything kids could ever want at our house: toys, a Ping-Pong table, a chemistry set, and a pool table. As a result, all the neighborhood kids gathered there, and my mother would gently guide us about which relationships were positive and which were negative.

At the dinner table, my mom and dad would ask questions every night. “What did you read today? What did you try and fail at?” My parents were trying to plant seeds of intentionality in us at every meal.

Dad was intentional about our growth and development, too. He paid us for reading books he knew would improve us, instead of paying us to put out the garbage. (I still put out the garbage. I just didn’t get paid for it!) And the day I got my driver’s license, before we got in the car to go home, he said, “I’m going to teach you the most important lesson you’ll ever learn about driving.” He pulled a book from his jacket pocket, and put it in the glove box. “There will be times when you’re stopped in traffic, stuck at a train track, or waiting for someone,” he said. “The best way to use that time and make it count is to read.” My love of reading was intentionally instilled in me by my dad.

Despite my parents’ high degree of intentionality, I didn’t really get it as a kid. I didn’t embrace intentional living. Maybe there was too much play in me. Mostly, I wanted to have fun. Then when I became an adult, I thought hard work was the key to success. I believed that the harder you worked, the more successful you would be.

What changed me? How did I finally recognize that intentional living was the key to a life that matters, that it was the bridge between success and significance? When I was in my midtwenties, I met a man named Curt Kampmeier.

Curt was associated with the Success Motivation Institute out of Waco, Texas. Because I had heard him talk about the principles of
success and I really liked what he had to say, I had written him a note asking to meet with him the next time he came through my town. Much to my surprise, he said yes. So we met for breakfast.

While I was eating my eggs, Curt asked me if I had a personal plan for growth for my life. It was a question nobody had ever asked me. Not only didn’t I have one, I didn’t even know I was supposed to have one. I was so embarrassed by the question that I tried to fake my response. I started to tell him about all the things I was doing in my work and how many hours I put in. He saw right through it.

“If you’re going to grow,” he said, “you have to be intentional.” That statement hit me like a punch in the face.

Curt told me he had a detailed plan for growth—a kit with material on goals and attitude and initiative and responsibility. I knew instinctively that these things could help me. When I asked him how I could get it, he told me I could purchase it for $695. That was the equivalent of one month’s salary for me!

I went home from breakfast looking for alternatives. I started asking friends and colleagues if they had a plan for growth. Nope. None of my friends was intentional about becoming better at what he did. They just expected it to happen on its own, like I had. That sounds kind of like good intentions, doesn’t it?

Finally, my wife, Margaret, and I sat down, put pencil to paper, and figured out how to sacrifice and pinch our pennies to save the money to buy the kit. We were newly married then, barely scraping by on the money we were making. Yet at the end of six months, we’d saved what we needed. (Realize that this was in the days before credit cards were available to everyone.)

I’ll never forget the day I received the kit. I had seen it before when I met with Curt, but when I opened it and started to dig into it, I was struck by the simplicity of it. At first I thought, I paid almost
$700 for this? I had been hoping for a silver bullet. Instead, this was going to require a lot of work.

What else could I do? I dove in. After all, we’d spent a small fortune for the kit. But it wasn’t long before I realized it was worth every penny. Yes, it encouraged me to dream, but it also taught me to put details to my dreams and attach deadlines to them. It prompted me to examine myself and where I was. It called me to look at my strengths and weaknesses. It made me identify my goals every week. And it engaged me in a process of growth every day.

I had hoped for a solution. Instead, it gave me direction.

It was a course in intentional living. Even buying the kit had forced me to be intentional, because we had made sacrifices every day for six months to save the money.

That kit opened my eyes to intentional living. It helped me begin creating my first life plan. I cannot put a price on how valuable it was. Why? Because it led to a major epiphany:

If I wanted to make a difference . . .

*Wishing for things to change wouldn’t make them change.*

*Hoping for improvements wouldn’t bring them.*

*Dreaming wouldn’t provide all the answers I needed.*

*Vision wouldn’t be enough to bring transformation to me or others.*

*Only by managing my thinking and shifting my thoughts from desire to deeds would I be able to bring about positive change. I needed to go from wanting to doing.*

Maybe you’ve already had this epiphany yourself. Maybe you’ve already begun to make this shift. Maybe you figured it out earlier than I did. But if you didn’t, guess what? You can make the change from good intentions to intentional living right now. In fact, you can become so intentional in the way you live that your friends and loved
ones, your colleagues and bosses, your neighbors and naysayers will say, “What in the world happened?” Your transformation will blow their minds. And it will inspire others to embrace intentional living, too.

The Seven Benefits of Intentional Living

Intuitively, you might sense that intentional living would benefit you, but I’m guessing you’d also like to know specifically what it does for us. My experience has shown me that it does many things for us. Here are seven of its benefits:

1. Intentional Living Prompts Us to Ask, “What Is Significant in My Life?”

I was twenty-five years old when I met Curt Kampmeier, and I desperately wanted to be successful. Working through his kit and becoming intentional prompted me to begin asking, “What are the keys to success?” For the next eighteen months, I studied successful people and started forming ideas based on the information I was gathering.

After observing dozens of successful people and reading many books, I came to a conclusion: Successful people are good in four areas: relationships, equipping, attitude, and leadership. Those were the areas I would need to cultivate if I wanted to become successful. With a growth plan formulated, I began developing myself in those four areas.

Living intentionally will motivate you to start asking questions and begin prioritizing whatever is important to you. That’s what it did for me. I began by asking how I could be successful. When I had begun to achieve some success, I realized that I needed to be asking questions about significance. Can I make a difference? Whom
should I help? How can I help them? How can I add value to them? These questions began to help me become intentional in the area of significance.

Once I asked myself, “What is significant in my life?” and realized the answer was adding value to people, I began to focus on that thought. That’s the essence of intentionality. An unintentional life accepts everything and does nothing. An intentional life embraces only the things that will add to the mission of significance.

2. Intentional Living Motivates Us to Take Immediate Action in Areas of Significance

When you have shifted from good intentions to intentional living, whenever you detect a need that matters to you, you no longer think, Something must be done about that. Instead, you think, I must do something about that. You take ownership. Napoleon Hill said it best when he observed, “You must get involved to have an impact. No one is impressed with the won-lost record of a referee.”

My shift toward intentional living was amplified in my mid twenties when I heard W. Clement Stone speak at a positive-motivational-attitude rally in Dayton, Ohio. He was a student of Napoleon Hill, whose books I had read, so I was very eager to hear what Stone had to say.

One of the lessons he taught that day was about the need to create urgency to get things done. He challenged us to say aloud to ourselves fifty times every morning before we got out of bed, “Do it now. Do it now. Do it now.” Every evening before we went to sleep, he challenged us to once again to say the phrase, “Do it now,” fifty times.

He told us to do this exercise every day for one month until it became a discipline.
I left that conference and heeded his advice. I actually did it. Every day. Fifty times in the morning and fifty in the evening. At the end of that month I had within me such a sense of urgency to act that I found myself ready to seize the moment at any time. This new, “do it now” mentality caused me to live with such immense anticipation that I began to take action on all of the things I had been delaying. It took me to a whole new level.

We all have a tendency to put off things. I needed the “do it now” exercise to get me motivated to do acts of significance. It began as a discipline, but it turned into a daily delight. It quickly transcended from “I have to” to “I want to” to “I can’t wait to.” (I’ll talk about this in greater detail in chapter nine.) No people have ever thought themselves into significance. They acted themselves into it. You can’t sit in the bleachers as I did in high school—you’ve got to get in the game.

Allow the desire to act that you feel when you become intentional to propel you into acts of significance. The most important thing you can do is to get started because it will increase your appetite for more significance.

3. Intentional Living Challenges Us to Find Creative Ways to Achieve Significance

When I was in college, I scored below average in a creativity test given to me and my classmates. Yet, I have been able to deliver thousands of messages and write dozens of books that have been well received by people. How was I able to change? When I became intentional in what I wanted to do, I became creative in finding ways to obtain my desires. A clear picture of what I wanted to accomplish gave me the will to persist and the creative spirit to overcome barriers and make up for deficiencies.

When you live an intentional lifestyle, you see many possibilities. When you are unintentional, you see few:
Intentional living always has an idea.
Unintentional living always has an excuse.

Intentional living fixes the situation.
Unintentional living fixes the blame.

Intentional living makes it happen.
Unintentional living wonders what happened.

Intentional living says, “Here’s something I can do.”
Unintentional living says, “Why doesn’t someone else do something?”

Intentional and unintentional living are worlds apart in every aspect of life, including creativity.

Intentional living is all about knowing what you want. Often that desire will be elusive or even seemingly impossible to achieve. However, when we feel that way, necessity disguised as creativity can kick in. When it does, intentional living turns the doubt-filled question “Can I?” into the invigorating, possibility-inducing “How can I?”

When you know what you want and can’t find what you need, you must create what you need, so you can get what you want!

4. Intentional Living Energizes Us to Give Our Best Effort to Do Significant Acts

Best-selling author Bob Moawad said, “Most people don’t aim too high and miss. They aim too low and hit.” What’s even worse than that? Not aiming at all!

“Most people don’t aim too high and miss. They aim too low and hit.”
—Bob Moawad
Being unintentional is failing to take aim in life. Unintentional people wander through life without focus. They are like Brother Juniper in the comic strip by Father Justin “Fred” McCarthy, who shoots arrows at a wooden fence in the backyard. He pulls back the bowstring and lets the arrow fly. Wherever it sticks into the fence, he takes a marker and draws a target around it. This way, he figures he is sure never to miss a bull’s-eye.

Sadly, many people live their lives similarly, landing somewhere random and calling it a bull’s-eye. That describes life without purpose or energy. Living that way would be like golfing without the hole, playing football without the goal line, playing baseball without home plate, or bowling without the pins.

I became aware of the necessity of goals at ten years old, though I didn’t recognize the significance at the time. I fell in love with basketball at that age. My father wanted to provide me with a place to play at home, so he poured a concrete drive and put a backboard on the garage. He and I then went to town and bought a basketball and a rim. I was so excited, because I was about to have my very own place where I could practice basketball every day.

Dad was about to put up the rim on the backboard when he received an emergency call and had to leave on a trip. At that time Dad was a superintendent who was responsible for leading many pastors. Sometimes a crisis situation needing his immediate attention would occur, so I understood well when he had one of these sudden departures.

“John,” he said, “when I get back home tomorrow, I will put up your rim.”

“No problem,” I replied. “I’ll practice until you get back.”

As he backed the car out of the driveway, I waved goodbye and then started dribbling my new ball on the fresh concrete drive. After about fifteen minutes of dribbling I got bored. So I decided to throw the ball against the backboard. I thought it would satisfy me. But
it didn’t. As the ball bounced off the backboard and rolled to the side of the driveway, I lost all interest in playing. What was basketball without the basket? Just dribbling. And dribbling the ball wasn’t what the game was all about. Scoring is the ultimate purpose of the game, and there’s no scoring without the hoop.

This is symbolic of many things in life. For anything to have great meaning, it needs to be driven by a specific objective and followed through with action. We know this when we’re trying to win the one we love before we get married. When we’re dating, the pursuit of the other person is usually highly intentional. We try to maximize every experience with the person. We do extra things and go out of our way to please him or her. We look our best. We’re on our best behavior. We try to make our loved one’s day. Sadly, after the marriage, many people lose that intentionality and focus on the other person, and they spend their time waiting for the other person to make their day. That’s when the relationship begins to slide.

Of course, intentionality can take us in the wrong direction when our focus is off. I learned that on my wedding day. After the ceremony, Margaret and I were packing the car to leave for our honeymoon. We planned to drive to Florida to stay at her grandparents’ house for a week. As I was loading our luggage, Margaret saw me placing not one but two briefcases in the trunk.

“What are those, John?” she asked.

“I thought I’d bring along some work to do in my spare time,” I said, pleased with myself for being so strategic.

“Honey, there’ll be no spare time!” she said with a curious combination of irritation and flirtation. I’d tell you she was right, but that’s none of your business! Let’s just say that as we packed the car, she was already trying to teach me an important lesson in intentional living.
5. Intentional Living Unleashes the Power of Significance within Us

I was around twenty-six years old when I first saw Zig Ziglar speak. I was sitting in the middle seat of the front row of an auditorium, doing my best to glean everything I could from this master of motivation. I was deeply drawn to his upbeat attitude, his easygoing, conversational style, and his friendly and approachable southern drawl. As he spoke and moved across the stage, I felt as if he were talking to just me, even though I was part of an audience of ten thousand people.

It was during this speech that I heard Zig say, “If you will first help others get what they want, they will help you get what you want.” And I experienced another major significance epiphany. I realized that up until then, I had been putting myself and my needs ahead of others. I was always focused on my agenda and what I wanted to accomplish, not on others and what was important to them. I cared about people, but it had never occurred to me that focusing on others and helping them would actually help me.

Not only did what Zig said make perfect sense to me, but I knew I could do it. It would be an easy fix. I already liked people. I simply hadn’t been aware of my naïve mistake in leadership.

I immediately changed my leadership approach with others, and the response was dramatic. As soon as I expressed genuine interest in people, they reciprocated and showed more interest in me. By putting others first, I was letting them know I believed that their lives mattered. Instead of only selling my vision and motivating people to join my team, I began to first ask about their dreams and how I could help them achieve what they so deeply desired.

As I made this change in my leadership, I was consciously aware

“If you will first help others get what they want, they will help you get what you want.” — Zig Ziglar
I was doing the right thing by putting those I led ahead of myself, and in time I experienced the joy of seeing this truth work in the lives of others. As they received the attention and care they needed, they were not just ready, but also willing and able, to help me fulfill my vision.

It is a law of nature that you cannot reap without sowing. That’s why it’s so important to give first, before you expect to receive. The compounding, positive result of practicing this principle for many years has now given me an immeasurable return on my investment into people’s lives. People are not only making a difference, but they are also investing in others who are making a difference. I’m seeing season after season of harvest in the lives of others.

This give-and-take is natural, like breathing. You take in air; you blow it out. You can never just breathe in. Nor can you just breathe out. Both are continually essential. Likewise, we give to others and receive from them. Our lives are to be like a river, not a reservoir. What we have should flow through us to others. The moment the good things we have to offer begin flowing from ourselves to others, the miracle of intentional significance begins to happen. The more we share, the more we have. The more we have, the more we can give. We don’t hand out significance in little doses over time. We unleash it. That’s how we build a life that matters.

6. Intentional Living Inspires Us to Make Every Day Count

John Wooden, who mentored me for several years, admonished everyone to make every day their masterpiece. This legendary coach of the UCLA Bruins basketball team once explained, “As a leader of my team, it was my responsibility to get the most out of my players. As a coach, I would ask myself every day, ‘How can I make my team better?’ I concluded that my team would improve when each player
improved, and that only would happen when each player each day intentionally made that day his masterpiece.”

How did Coach do that? Every day during practice he would watch the energy, focus, and overall behavior of each player. If a player was not giving his best, he would walk over to him and say, “I can tell you are not giving 100 percent of yourself to practice today. I know you are tired, perhaps you stayed up late studying, or maybe this day has been a difficult one. I also know you are thinking, I’m only giving 60 percent today, but tomorrow I will give 140 percent and make up for today. I want you to know that thinking will not make you a better player. You cannot give 140 percent tomorrow. The best any of us can give on any day is 100 percent. Therefore, if you give only 60 percent today you will lose 40 percent and never recover it. A few days of less than 100 percent and you will be just an average player.”

John Wooden was a master of intentionality when he coached. He planned every practice for his players down to the minute, and wrote that plan out on index cards before the players came together. He once said that if you asked him what his team had done in practice on any given day during his long career, he could retrieve the index card for that day from his files and tell you what all his players were doing. His philosophy was “many hours of planning for a couple hours of practicing.” And it worked. His record of ten national titles speaks for itself. No wonder he was named Coach of the Century by Sports Illustrated.

Coach’s teaching motivated me to write the book Today Matters. The thesis of that book states, “The secret of your success is determined by your daily agenda.” The key is to make good decisions based on your principles and values, and then to manage those decisions every day. When I wrote that book, I considered the lessons to be simple and basic. But the teachings of John Wooden were simple, too. He focused on fundamentals, yet he was immensely successful. The key is in the consistent follow-through.
A couple of years ago I was speaking in Singapore. While signing books for the group, a young lady handed me Today Matters and asked me to sign the back of the book.

“Why the back?” I asked

“Last year I bought this book, and you signed the front,” she replied. “I’ve now read it and mastered the daily dozen you write about. Now I’d like you to sign the back of the book.”

As I did, she continued, “You taught me to focus on today, and I’ve done that. What’s the next book that I should read?”

I wish I could have handed her this book, because it would have given her the next step in achieving a life of significance. I have no doubt she would have put the ideas into practice that very day. I could see that she wasn’t a person of good intentions. She was already practicing intentional living.

7. Intentional Living Encourages Us to Finish Well

On February 20, 2012, I turned sixty-five. As many other people do, I saw this as a significant birthday, and that made me reflective. One of the thoughts that kept recurring in my mind was that I wanted to finish well. For the next six months, I asked myself every day, “How can I finish well?”

What did I mean by that?

I did not want to get to the end of my life and discover I had lived the length of it but without any depth. After much thought, on August 13, 2012, I wrote this:

I Want to Finish Well
Therefore I Will . . .
Be Bigger on the Inside than the Outside—Character Matters
Follow the Golden Rule—People Matter
Value Humility above All Virtues—Perspective Matters
Travel the High Road of Life—Attitude Matters
Teach Only What I Believe—Passion Matters
Make Every Day My Masterpiece—Today Matters
Love God with All My Being—God Matters
Finish Well—Faithfulness Matters

Nobody finishes well by accident.

My father is now ninety-three. He is finishing well. Every day he adds value to people. He loves them and serves them. Not long ago I asked, “Dad, what keeps you going?”

His reply: “Every day I try to make a difference for others. That gives me the energy I need to keep going.”

Every Sunday Dad leads church services in the assisted-care village where he lives. When he arrived there, he started with just one service. When he filled that one up, he started a second. He filled it up, and now has three full services every Sunday.

Recently he said to me, “John, we keep growing and have run out of room. I’m looking into doing services at satellite locations.”

He’s ninety-three and thinking about satellite services! Most people his age are thinking about sleep. Where does he get his energy?

Intentional living. Are you getting the picture?

If I’m anything like him—and I hope I am—I still have plenty of time to make a difference. Whenever I ask my dad about his day, he usually talks about someone he has recently helped, encouraged, or inspired. He’s going to fully live until he dies, and never get the two confused. I want to be more like him.

Someday I’m going to die. You are, too. What do you want people to say about you at your funeral? I hope people tell funny stories about me. But I also hope they tell a story of significance. I don’t
want my family and friends to have to guess about my legacy. I want them to tell about how I added value to leaders who multiply value to others. That’s the legacy I’m living to create. I believe that’s the best contribution I can make while I’m here.

We’ve all heard the saying, “All’s well that ends well,” but I believe nothing can end well unless it starts well. If you want a life that matters, you don’t need to change everything in your life. The shift I am inviting you to make is not huge—but to live a life that matters, it is essential. It is the shift from good intentions to intentional living. That small tweak in your mindset will bring massive significant dividends.

Are you ready to take that step? It’s simpler than you might imagine. You just need to align your thinking and your actions. That’s what I did. When I recognized I had a choice to be intentional, good intentions no longer ruled my life. You have the power to choose which category to live in, and I want to show you how to get there, how to be intentional and achieve significance.

What will this look like for you? Your journey will probably be similar to mine in some ways. It will be filled with wonderful surprises, great excitement, big changes, unanticipated growth, fond memories, and, hopefully, a tremendous level of inner fulfillment. However, it will also be vastly different from mine. It will be as unique as you are. Significance will be deeply personal and special. I believe becoming highly intentional will be the beginning of a whole new world of opportunity for you.

Most people fear that significance is out of their reach. It’s not. Anyone can be significant. You can be significant—but only if you begin living intentionally by . . .

**Wanting to make a difference.** Significance begins with wanting to make a difference. If you don’t have the desire, you can’t be significant.

**Doing something that makes a difference.** When you find your
sweet spot—your unique strength that makes a difference—you are able to increase your significance impact.

**Doing something with people who want to make a difference.** Significance compounds when you partner with others. The Law of Significance from *The 17 Indisputable Laws of Teamwork* is true: one is too small a number to achieve greatness.

**Doing something at a time when it makes a difference.** You have to act with a sense of urgency and anticipation if you want to be significant.

When you embrace each of these four elements, you increase your odds and opportunities for significance. If you live out all four of them in your significance journey, you can be assured that you will truly live a life that matters.

The remainder of this book is organized into these four essential elements required to achieve significance through intentional living. They will help you leave mere good intentions behind and shift into a new gear. But before you start reading about them and learn the details of how to take your own significance journey, you have a decision to make.

Are you willing to make the shift from good intentions to intentional living?

If you’re not, you might as well stop reading now, because a life of significance won’t be possible for you. *Intentional living is the only pathway to significant living.* It is the first step.

If you are willing to make this shift, then let the following pages be your guide to the life you’ve always wanted but never thought was possible. Once you enter that pathway, your life will really begin to matter to you and to others. Please hear me: Significance is within your grasp. All you need to do is be willing to take the steps.
When we make a judgment call about ourselves, we tend to give ourselves the benefit of the doubt. We know what our intentions were, so even if we fall short in our execution, we cut ourselves some slack. That’s both good and bad. The good is that it allows us to remain positive and bounce back from failure. The bad is that we aren’t holding ourselves accountable for following through, and a life of significance is impossible for anyone who doesn’t live intentionally day after day.

**Where Do You Fit on the List?**

Earlier in this chapter, I introduced you to lists of words that illustrated the differences between good intentions and intentional living. Take another look at them. Put a check next to the word in the left or middle column on each line that better describes your attitude and actions.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>WORDS OF GOOD INTENTION</th>
<th>WORDS OF INTENTIONAL LIVING</th>
<th>A LIFE THAT MATTERS</th>
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<tr>
<td>Desire</td>
<td>Action</td>
<td>Results</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wish</td>
<td>Purpose</td>
<td>Fulfillment</td>
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<td>Someday</td>
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<td>Fantasy</td>
<td>Strategy</td>
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<td>Hopefully</td>
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<td>Passive</td>
<td>Active</td>
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*(continued)*
Unless you checked every entry in the middle column, you still have work to do when it comes to shifting your mindset from good intentions to intentional living.

For every entry where you checked the left column, write a sentence or two describing what you must do to embrace the attitude and demonstrate the actions of intentional living so that you get the results in the right column.

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<th>WORDS OF GOOD INTENTION</th>
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<th>A LIFE THAT MATTERS</th>
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<td>Occasional</td>
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<td>Emotion</td>
<td>Discipline</td>
<td>Lifestyle</td>
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<td>Somebody Should</td>
<td>I Will</td>
<td>I Do</td>
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<td>Survival</td>
<td>Success</td>
<td>Significance</td>
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I WANT TO MAKE A DIFFERENCE
My significance journey didn’t truly begin until I decided I wanted to make a difference in the lives of others. I vividly remember the day that I became conscious of that desire. I was in the fourth grade and was walking across a campground with my father.

At that time Dad was an overseer of two hundred pastors in a very small denomination. Although he was in a leadership position over people, the position he had in their hearts superseded any formal position or authority he held. Dad was a constant encourager. He truly loved people and wanted to help them. On this particular day it took us thirty minutes to walk a hundred yards because people kept stopping Dad along the way. They were thanking Dad for kind things he had done for them and passing along thoughtful words.

I listened to the people speak so well of him, and even in those moments his focus was still on encouraging each and every person. I watched their faces as my dad talked to them, making his way across the grass, and I could see that he was lifting them higher than they could lift themselves. When I saw what that did for other people, I knew that I wanted to provide that same gift to people as well. I can remember thinking, I want to be like my dad. I want to help people, too.
This is where my desire to make a difference was birthed. As I reflect on that moment of realization, it provides clear evidence that you don’t have to be a big person to have a big idea. After all, I wasn’t anyone out of the ordinary. I was just a kid from southern Ohio. But something caught fire in my belly that day, and I inherently trusted that I had the capability to touch people’s hearts in the same way my dad did. I hoped that if I believed in myself enough, others might be willing to believe in me, too. The only way I knew to do that was to follow in my dad’s footsteps and enter the ministry. I wanted to lead with conviction, show kindness to others, and offer compassion wherever I went. I would study to become a pastor and be guided by the Golden Rule: Do unto others as you would have them do unto you.

While I considered myself to be an ordinary boy, I recognize that my childhood was filled with extraordinary opportunities most children rarely receive. Because of my father’s work, he had developed friendships with many noteworthy spiritual leaders from all over the world. So I was exposed to their teachings at a very young age. While I couldn’t possibly appreciate the impact they would have on my life in those moments, I can surely look back now and recognize the effect they had on my path. Each one of these encounters left a lasting impression that shaped my life and my future toward intentionality and significance.

One of those important encounters happened when I was around twelve years old. My father took me to hear Norman Vincent Peale speak at the Veterans Memorial Auditorium in Columbus, Ohio. Dad was a big Peale fan. He was drawn to his messages about the power of a positive attitude. Dad had all of Peale’s books in his library, and I had been encouraged to read them time and time again.

After hearing Peale speak, I immediately understood the attraction. I still remember walking down the wide concrete steps of Veterans Memorial Auditorium after that experience. My father turned to
me and said, “Norman Vincent Peale is a great man, John, because he helps a lot of people.”

By my teenage years, I was ready to tell my father about my desire and intentions to follow his footsteps, to enter the ministry. The day I told my father how I felt, that I intended to enter the ministry, he put his arm around me and said, “That’s wonderful, son.” I could see that it touched his heart. He simply yet poignantly looked at me and asked, “What does that mean to you?”

“I am going to give my life to helping people.”

He watched me closely, as if he was waiting to see if I would blink. Perhaps he was looking for signs that I might not be certain of my calling. But I had never been more committed to anything in my life. I didn’t break our eye contact because I felt confident. This was what I was meant to do.

Dad smiled and said, “Then you are going to make a great difference, son.”

I believe my father took tremendous pride in the idea that I would choose to honor him in such a way. And while it’s true that he was my chief inspiration, the thought of helping others and having a positive impact on their lives was the engine that drove my passion the most.

As I drew closer toward my life’s work, my father began to open more doors that helped me grow and continued to fire my desire to serve others. He introduced me to good leaders and took me to hear powerful speakers.

I will never forget the day Dad took me to hear the great E. Stanley Jones. To this day I consider it one of the most profound experiences of my life. As we drove to the event where Jones would speak, my father described him as one of the greatest missionaries and theologians who had ever lived. Though he was born in America, Jones had spent most of his life in India, where he started the Christian ashram movement. During this time, Jones had become a
close friend of many prominent Indian families and leaders, including Mahatma Gandhi. After Gandhi’s assassination, Jones wrote a biography of the Indian leader’s life. (It was this book that inspired Martin Luther King Jr. to nonviolence in the civil rights movement.) To say that he was a powerful and inspirational figure would hardly be doing E. Stanley Jones justice.

At the end of Jones’s talk that day, my father and I went off to a side room where we had the opportunity to meet the great missionary. He was a quiet man, not boisterous or grand in any way. I was taken by his gentleness.

He talked to my father for a short while. Toward the end of their conversation, my father explained that I really wanted to make a difference in people’s lives. He asked E. Stanley Jones to pray over me, and this man who had lived such a significant life said he would be glad to.

I don’t know why, but I was nervous. I could feel my heart pounding inside my chest. Jones laid hands on me—placing one hand on my shoulder and the other on my head—and in that instant, a sense of peace fell over me. I could feel it in every part of my body. My shoulders relaxed and I exhaled. I tried to soak in every aspect of the moment. I knew in my mind, body, and soul that this would leave a profound impact on me.

“God, empower this young man. Give him a heart for people and help him to be a person of compassion,” he said. There was authority in his voice. His words still ring in my ears as I recall them.

Afterward, I knew without doubt that E. Stanley Jones had spoken that belief right into me. I left the room feeling much stronger, more self-assured and confident than I had when I walked in. And I felt three inches taller, too! I had been given a great gift. I can change the world, I thought. I had been shown a path—been pointed in a direction.

Later I thought about President Kennedy, who was in office at the time. I recalled his brave and powerful words: “Ask not what your
country can do for you. Ask what you can do for your country.” That speech greatly influenced my generation. Kennedy was an effective leader because he connected with people, especially the youth of the country. I was one of those kids who were inspired by him. So were my friends. We were a nation ready for change, and for some of us, we believed we were the change.

Why can’t I be the one to make a difference? I thought. It was as if I had been given a sign that said, “Your future → this way.” It was my seminal moment. My fate, my path, my future was sealed.

Suddenly, the words of my fifth-grade teacher, Mr. Horton, came flooding back to me. Mr. Horton, whom I admired very much, had stopped me one day after recess and said, “John, you are a born leader. I’ve watched you on the playground at recess, and all of the other kids follow you. You are the one who determines what game everyone will play, who will be on your team, and what the outcome will be. You have excellent leadership skills, John. I think you will grow up to become a wonderful leader someday.”

I’ve never forgotten his observation or what it meant to me. I had always seen my father as a wonderful inspirational leader, but Mr. Horton was the first person who ever articulated the idea of seeing leadership in me. That was the day I realized I might be a leader someday. And though at the time I didn’t fully understand what that meant, it was a hint about my future. It would be almost twenty years later that I would understand how important leadership would be in my personal journey of significance, in how I would add value to people and make a difference.

Be Willing to Start Small

I believe we all have a longing to be significant, to make a contribution, to be a part of something noble and purposeful. And to make
that contribution, we need to be willing to focus on others. We need to give of ourselves. The action of intentionality I talked about in the previous chapter must be guided by the desire to improve the lives of others, to help them do what they perhaps cannot do by themselves. Are you with me?

Many people look at all that’s wrong in the world and mistakenly believe that they cannot make a difference. The challenges loom large, and they feel small. And they think they must do big things to have a life that matters. Or they think they have to reach a certain place in life from which to do something significant.

Does that seed of doubt exist in you? Have you ever found yourself thinking or saying, “I will be able to make a difference only when . . .”

I come up with a really big idea,
I get to a certain age,
I make enough money,
I reach a specific milestone in my career,
I’m famous, or
I retire”?

None of these things is necessary before you can start to achieve significance. You may not realize it, but those hesitations are really nothing more than excuses. The only thing you need to achieve significance is to be intentional about starting—no matter where you are, who you are, or what you have. Do you believe that? You can’t make an impact sitting still. Former NFL coach Tony Dungy once told me, “Do the ordinary things better than anyone else and you will achieve excellence.” The same is true for significance. Begin by doing ordinary things.

Chinese philosopher Lao Tzu said, “A journey of a thousand miles begins with a single step.” That’s true. In fact, so does every
human being’s first journey. As children, we had to learn how to take that first step in order to walk. We don’t think anything of it now, but it was a big deal then.

Every big thing that’s ever been done started with a first step. When Neil Armstrong took his first walk on the moon, he stated, “That’s one small step for man, one giant leap for mankind.” But the first steps of that achievement occurred decades before. We can’t get anywhere in life without taking that first small step. Sometimes the step is hard; other times it’s easy. But no matter what, you have to do it if you want to achieve big things.

You never know when something small that you do for others is going to expand into something big. That was true for Chris Kennedy, a golfer from Florida. In 2014, a friend nominated him to do the Ice Bucket Challenge for the charity of his choice. Kennedy passed along the challenge to his wife’s cousin Jeanette Senercia because the two liked to tease and challenge each other. Kennedy chose amyotrophic lateral sclerosis (ALS) as his charity because Jeanette’s husband suffered from the disease. Jeanette accepted the challenge, posted the video on her Facebook page, and nominated others.5

That was a small start of something big. In today’s digital world we talk about things going viral. The term viral was coined because ideas and initiatives can spread quickly the way germs do. Almost anything that starts out as a single idea—a bold statement, a YouTube video, a creative or memorable photo—can gain vast popularity and quickly spread via the Internet.

The Ice Bucket Challenge soon went viral. If you somehow missed out on it, the idea was to either donate to the ALS Association or record a video of yourself being doused with ice water, and then challenge three other people to donate or get doused.

This turned out to be a brilliant idea to raise money to help fight a disease that many people otherwise might not have known about and would not have donated to. I participated in the challenge. Sure, I
was aware of the disease, but it wasn’t a charity I normally gave to. I was nominated by colleagues to take the challenge, and I was happy to participate.

Most people chose to give and get doused. When I accepted the challenge, I made a donation and asked three of my grandchildren to do the honors of soaking me. They used not one, but three, freezing cold buckets of water on me. Though I pleaded for compassion and warm water, the grandkids showed no mercy!

The best part is that over $113.3 million was donated between July and September of 2014 as a result of the Ice Bucket Challenge, compared to $2.7 million donated during the same period of time the previous year. On Facebook alone, over twenty-eight million people had uploaded, commented on, or liked Ice Bucket–related posts as of the last time I checked. The purpose of the campaign wasn’t just to raise money. It was about raising awareness. But it accomplished both with great intentionality.

What can you do now? As you think about making a difference, be willing to start small. You never know whether your passion-fueled idea will have an outcome similar to that of the ALS Ice Bucket Challenge.

**My Small Start**

My start in making a difference was surely small. It happened in June of 1969. In that month I graduated from college, married my high school sweetheart, Margaret, and accepted my first position as the pastor of a tiny church in rural Indiana, in a community called Hillham. The town had eleven houses, two garages, and one grocery store. Does that sound small enough?

I had high hopes and unlimited energy. I was ready to help people, so I jumped in. The first service I held in Hillham had three people in attendance. And two of them were Margaret and me!
I was not discouraged. I saw it as a challenge. I started doing what I could to help people in the community. I visited the sick, offered counseling, invited people to services, and taught messages to help people improve their lives. I did everything I knew how to do to add value to people.

As I look back now more than forty-five years later, I recognize some things that can help you and encourage you to start small but believe big:

1. Start Where You Are

Parker Palmer, a philosopher and author, wrote, “Our real freedom comes from being aware that we do not have to save the world, we must merely make a difference in the place where we live.” That’s what I tried to do. Hillham didn’t look like much, but it was a great place to start the journey. It was in Hillham that I learned to value people, work hard, stay emotionally strong, solve problems, work well with others, and lead by example. It’s where I took my first steps toward significance. In Hillham, in the poorest county in Indiana, while leading a congregation of conservative farmers who were far from wealthy, I became a person of abundance.

A pivotal experience at Hillham occurred just a few months after my arrival. Many of the people were struggling financially, so I sensed that they would benefit greatly from some teaching on stewardship, the management of our time and talents. Being young and inexperienced, I wanted to find some resources to help me develop my teachings. I remember going to a bookstore in Bedford, Indiana, to look for the help I needed. For two hours I skimmed through dozens of books but found nothing written on this vital subject. Feelings of disappointment and panic filled my heart as I drove home empty-handed.

What was I going to do?
I had a sense of what I wanted to teach, but I didn’t have the tools to communicate the lessons. When I shared my concerns with Margaret, we decided that if we couldn’t find resources, we would create them ourselves.

We began by looking for quotes on stewardship, first in the Bible and then in other books. (Remember, this was way before Google.) After several days of reading and research, we had developed eight solid thoughts on the subject.

That evening we went into our garage and began painting poster boards different colors and writing the selected quotes on them. Eight posters later, we were ready to launch our first stewardship teaching. The next Sunday, we placed the freshly painted posters on the walls of our tiny church auditorium so that people could read them when they came to the service.

I laugh out loud every time I think about this. Why? Because my sermon had a lot more passion than content. But I engaged the crowd with my eagerness as I walked around the auditorium, stopping at each poster and exhorting them to embrace the ideas I explained. The posters looked, well, homemade with their childlike gaudy colors and unprofessional quality. And because of where we had placed them, people had to keep craning their necks to see them. You can bet everybody in the congregation was sore on Monday morning after having to look in every direction on that Sunday. The whole event was so basic, but the people talked about it for a long time in the most positive way.

Once people understood God’s principles about money, they started to give generously to the church. And news about the people’s faithful giving began to spread to other pastors in my denomination. They began asking me to share my program with them.

Shamefully, I did not want to do that. I felt that if I kept the methods I developed to myself, my church would grow past other churches, and my reputation would be elevated with that success.
Even though I genuinely wanted to help people, I was also selfish and competitive. (I’ll tell you more about this in chapter five.)

Sadly, for a couple of months I chose not to share my approach with other pastors. Then one day my eyes were opened. I did the math. If I kept my ideas to myself, I would help a hundred people. If I shared them with other pastors, I could potentially help thousands. Being generous would make a greater impact. A few weeks later, I freely gave my entire stewardship program to others. And when I did, I experienced my first feelings of abundance—and yes, significance!

I felt good about myself. I was excited about what I had done for others. And most importantly, I felt that I would create more ideas because I had freely given away what I had to others instead of hoarding it for myself. It was at that moment that an image came to me that made it clear what God wanted me to be: a river, not a reservoir. Whatever I was given I was to allow to flow through me and pass on to others, not hold on to for myself. And I could do this because there would always be more. God would never run out.

Perhaps you are in a Hillham experience right now. You don’t have much, and what little you do possess, you’re holding on to for dear life. Let go. You don’t need a lot to give. It’s a matter of heart and attitude, not how much you have. Are you willing to give that a try? Mother Teresa said that some of the greatest works ever done have been performed from sick beds and in prison cells. Like her, you can be significant from wherever you are with whatever you have. Opportunity is always where you are. Be willing to start by giving of yourself.

2. Start with Your One Thing

I believe everybody has one thing they do better than anything else. The right place to start is with your one thing. I learned this from my dad. In fact it was a Maxwell house rule when I was growing
up. When we were kids, my dad’s message to my brother, sister, and me was to find your strength—your one thing—and stay with it. He never encouraged us to try to do lots of different things. He wanted each of us to do one thing exceptionally well. A long running joke in our family was that we felt sorry for multi-gifted people. How would they know which of their gifts to focus on?

In my eyes, my father became an exceptional man not because he was exceptionally gifted, but because he found his one thing and stuck with it. He was a great encourager. As a result, he rose to way above average. He mastered the art of encouraging others and never departed from it. Excellence comes from consistency in using our strengths, and Dad has been consistent.

Henry David Thoreau wrote, “One is not born into the world to do everything, but to do something.” I found my something in Hillham: communication. That was what I focused on. I poured myself into it. I spent hours crafting my messages. I went to see good communicators every chance I got. I was determined to become the best I could.

I look back now and realize that back then my messages were very informational, but they weren’t transformational. I wanted to facilitate transformation in others, but I was falling short. I didn’t realize that I needed to change first. Viktor Frankl was right when he said, “When we are no longer able to change a situation, we are challenged to change ourselves.” I’ll talk about that change in the next chapter.

When I got started doing my one thing, I had no idea it would lead me to where I am today. Besides, even if I’d wanted to start big, I wasn’t sophisticated enough to, so I just started with what I had and did it as well as I could. As a result, my ability multiplied. That came from working at it with consistency. I am where I am today, not because I have done several big things, but because I have worked at
communicating ever since my twenties, and this intentionality has compounded in my life.

Investing in yourself is like taking a penny and doubling its value every day. If you did that for a month, how much would you end up with? A hundred dollars? A thousand dollars? A million dollars? Not even close.

If you start with just a single penny and double it every day for thirty-one days, you end up with $21,474,836.48. Personal growth is like that. Practice your one thing with excellence daily, and you will get a return. It’s like putting money in the significance bank.

What’s your one thing? What do you have the potential to do better than anything else? Do you have a sense of what that is? If not, then ask people who know you well. Or look at your history. Or take a personality or skills assessment to get clues. Don’t think about what you can’t do. Think about what you can. There is always a starting line. You just need to find it. It’s about beginning with what you have, not with what you don’t have. Find your one thing and start developing it.

3. Start Watching Your Words

Solomon, who was reputed to be the wisest man who ever lived, said, “Words kill, words give life; they’re either poison or fruit—you choose.” If you want to make a difference and live a life that matters, you need to embrace some words and reject others. We all have a running dialogue in our heads. What we say to ourselves either encourages us or discourages us. The words we need to embrace are positive, words such as we, can, will, and yes. What do we need to eliminate? Me, can’t, won’t, and no.

During the season of my life when I was getting my start in Hillham, I realized there were words I had to reject if I wanted to make
my life count in a positive way. I brainstormed a list of words that I believed were holding me back, and then went to my dictionary. As I found each negative word, I literally took a pair of scissors and cut it out. There was one word in particular that I hated: *quit*. I cut that word and every variation of it out of each of my four dictionaries.

My thesaurus wasn’t safe either. When you’re a public speaker, these books are like treasure troves. I used them often. But whenever I came across a page with a missing word, I was reminded of this symbolic act of positive thinking. It supported my intention to think positively and watch my words.

Perhaps you don’t want to cut up your books. Maybe you don’t even have a dictionary because you do your research online. Instead, you can try doing what my longtime friend Dianna Kokoszka does. Recently she told me about how she watches her words:

I journal (wish I could say every day). I am very purposeful about writing in my journal, and once a month or so I scan what I have written and look for words that are used over and over again and write them down. Then I ask, “Are the words I use moving me towards being the person I choose to be? Are they words that I would love my family to use?”

Several years ago I saw the word *frustration* show up many times, so I changed it to fascination. No longer being frustrated, I began looking for opportunities where I could be fascinated with endless possibilities.

I also no longer choose to use the word *but* since that negates everything I have said before that word. I have eliminated *try*, too. As Yoda says, “There is no try.”

*Yeah but* sends a message of an excuse or reason for not obtaining my goal, so I let that one go as well.

I wrote this as a law in bold in the course I teach: You can have reasons or results. You can’t have both.
Words have power. Diana recognizes that and does something about it. No wonder she is such a positive person.

What kinds of words do you use—in your mind as you talk to yourself, out loud as you speak with others, and in your writing? Are they positive and encouraging? Do they encourage you to embrace a bigger vision? Or are they holding you back? Are they preventing you from doing small things that can ultimately make a big difference? Don’t tell yourself that what you can do doesn’t matter. It does.

4. Start by Making Small Changes

When Mother Teresa wanted to start her work in Calcutta, she was asked what she must do to consider the work successful. “I do not know what success will be,” she replied, “but if the Missionaries of Charity have brought joy to one unhappy home—one innocent child from the street keep pure for Jesus—one dying person die in peace with God—don’t you think... it would be worthwhile offering everything for just that one?”

It’s easy to forget that even someone who eventually did big things started out trying to make small changes. That’s what I did in Hillham. I tried to make my sermons a little better each week. I tried to visit one more person who was sick. And I worked at shifting my time away from things I didn’t do well, such as counseling, and putting more time and energy into things I did well, like communicating and leading.

Change can be difficult, but it becomes easier when you do it a little at a time. Nathaniel Branden, who is widely considered to be the father of the self-esteem movement, created what he called the 5 percent practice. He recommended trying to change 5 percent a day by asking yourself a question. For example, “If I were 5 percent more responsible today, what would I be able to do?”

This kind of thinking helps us to embrace incremental change.
Trying to make a huge change overnight often creates fear, uncertainty, and resistance, because the change appears unachievable. The idea of making small changes is less threatening and helps us overcome our hesitation and procrastination. In fact, this is how Toyota transformed from a middle-of-the-pack automobile manufacturer to the largest in the world. Every person employed by the company is tasked with finding ways to make tiny improvements to every process Toyota performs. They understand that success is gained in inches at a time, not miles.

Give it a try. What can you improve by some small percentage? Can you find a way to organize your desk to be more efficient? Can you slightly rearrange your calendar to get more out of your day? Can you become just a bit better at the most important task you do for work? Can you read a book to broaden your thinking ever so slightly? Any small change that makes you better is worth making, because many small changes add up to major improvement over time.

Believe Big

One of the most important steps you can take in life is to increase your belief. If you don’t believe you can make a difference, guess what? You won’t—no matter how talented you are, how many opportunities you receive, or how many resources you have at your fingertips. You have to believe.

That’s one of the things I had going for me when I started out. Because my parents believed in me and loved me unconditionally, I was able to believe big.
1. I Believed in Myself

Throughout the years I’ve been a very lucky man who has been blessed to have many longtime friends. But the best friend I’ve ever had is me. I know that may sound strange. But as I already mentioned, we all talk to ourselves in our minds. We have a running dialogue. When I say I am my own best friend, I am really referring to self-belief. My belief in myself has encouraged me when no one else did. It has strengthened me when I had no other resources. Whether I was doing something significant or trivial, my belief in myself stayed with me when others didn’t. The most important voice I listen to, the one I hear most often and I give the most weight to, is my own.

This belief in myself has kept me going when others doubted me or wanted to limit me. Here’s what I mean:

- When I was twenty-five and many people thought I could not lead the largest church in my denomination, I thought I could—and I did.
- When I was twenty-seven and I told my wife I’d be a millionaire by the time I was forty, she thought I was nuts and worried she was in trouble! I wasn’t nuts and she wasn’t in trouble—and I accomplished that goal.
- When I said EQUIP, the nonprofit I founded with my brother in 1996, would train one million leaders around the world, some thought I was reaching too high, but I reached anyway—and it happened.
- When I had to make a thirteen-foot putt on the eighteenth hole at the AT&T Pebble Beach Pro-Am to make the cut and qualify for the final round, my caddy wasn’t sure I could make it, but I was—and I did.
My belief in myself enables me to take first steps. You may be wondering, “Does your self-belief always have positive results?” My answer is no. But I experience more positive results because of my self-belief than I would if I was filled with self-doubt.

Do you believe in yourself? Your belief will drive your behavior. The thought I don’t think I can often arises out of I don’t think I am. You will never be more than how you see yourself. Steve Jobs said, “The people who are crazy enough to think they can change the world are usually the ones who do.” I’ve seen many successful people whom others didn’t believe in. But I’ve never met a successful person who didn’t believe in him- or herself. Start believing in yourself and you will see a change in your ability to make a difference.

2. I Believed in My Mission

In 2004, I was interviewed by New Man magazine. They asked me to share my thoughts on knowing and embarking on life’s mission. What I most remember about that interview was saying that our life’s mission cannot be borrowed from someone else. It must be our own. Borrowed beliefs have no power, and a borrowed mission instills no conviction or passion for making a difference.

How do you discover your mission? By taking small steps. Too many times people make the mistake of thinking they can discover new experiences, ideas, or concepts without moving. They can’t.

I’ve made my greatest discoveries in motion, especially traveling the world. I do my best thinking on the move—not sitting. You’re supposed to leave footprints in the sands of time. Most people leave butt prints. You need to get moving. You need to experience new things. You cannot analyze what you don’t know. However, the moment you discover something new, your thinking goes to a deeper level.

I am not sure everyone has a mission. I am not even certain everyone has a dream. I used to think everyone did, but now I am
not so sure. What I do know is, even people who don’t have a dream can connect with someone who does. I believe that’s what makes a great cause great. People identify with its goal and want to be a part of it. Just because you aren’t leading a mission doesn’t mean you don’t have a purpose. If you don’t feel you have a compelling mission, you can buy into somebody else’s cause, make it your own, and still make a difference. You’ve got to find something that stirs you, even if it’s not a mission that started within yourself. It can be a mission that comes from outside you as long as it’s something that you buy into completely and participate in with passion.

In Hillham, my mission began by helping people. Since then it has grown and evolved. Every time I learn and grow, so does my mission. I didn’t need the whole picture early in my journey, and neither do you. Act on your feelings of compassion. Go with your desire to make a difference. Are you willing to do that? Peter Senge says, “Mission instills the passion and the patience for the long journey.” It also gives the impetus to get started.

3. I Believed in My People

I told you that I started my career in Hillham. What I haven’t told you is that I could have chosen to go to a different church. It looked like a better opportunity. The church was larger. It had more money. It was in a more prestigious community. They would have accepted me as their pastor because of my father’s good reputation. But I wanted to earn my own way. My father agreed that choosing the smaller rural church would be good for me. And he was right.

The people of Hillham were mostly farmers. They were solid people who lived straightforward lives. They worked hard. They had faith. They cared about one another. I quickly came to love them. And that is important. You can’t really do anything for others if you don’t care for them. I believed in them and wanted the best for them. And they knew it.
When you work with a person who truly believes in you, don’t you respond to them based on their level of belief in you? Don’t you perform better for a boss you want to please, or for a teacher who encourages you, or for a coach who inspires you? You work harder because of that belief factor.

As you get started in your small efforts to make a difference, work with people you believe in, people you care about. Or better yet, begin to care about and believe in the people who are already in your life. It will give you the desire to do things for them, to make a difference in their lives.

4. I Believed in My God

I’ve already told you that I don’t want to force my faith on you or offend you. So if my talk about God bothers you, skip ahead to the next section. But I can’t be true to myself and tell you my whole story without telling you how I feel about God.

It is always my desire to do my best. I have adopted Coach Wooden’s motto “Make every day your masterpiece,” so it’s a given that I will give my best every day. But God helps to make my best, as flawed as it is, even better. I have always believed that God will be there for me and help me. In fact, my belief in myself grows out of my faith. I totally embrace the words in Jeremiah 29:11: “‘For I know the plans I have for you,’ declares the Lord, ‘plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future.’” That has given me confidence to act, and if you also embrace faith, it will give you confidence, too.

Faith permeates every aspect of my life, and that of course includes my interaction with my grandkids. Because Margaret and I desire to create great memories for them, every year our Christmas gift to our family is a trip. For Christmas in 2014, we took our children and grandchildren to Hawaii. Before the trip, Margaret and I selected a Scripture verse, found a quote, and wrote a three(161,780),(892,811)
each grandchild. When we were in Hawaii, we sat with each of the five
of them and shared these things with them. The verse we picked for
our oldest granddaughter, Maddie, was “I can do all things through
Christ who strengthens me.”

Bob Pierce, the founder of World Vision, called this “God room.”
It was the gap between what he could humanly accomplish and what
could happen only if God helped him. I have chosen to leave a lot
of “God room” in my life also. I firmly believe God will make up
the difference if my heart is right and I do my best. The verse in the
Bible that best describes this “God room” is Ephesians 3:20, which
says, “God can do anything, you know—far more than you could
ever imagine or guess or request in your wildest dreams! He does it
by working within us.”

There is only one thing in my life that I value more highly than
intentional living in order to achieve significance, and that is God.
He can do more than I can imagine, guess, or dream about. I always
want Him as my partner. I feel like one little fellow who knelt at the
side of his bed, closed his eyes, and prayed, “God bless Mom. God
bless Dad. God bless Grandma.” He said it the same way every time.
But one night he added, “And please take care of yourself, God.
’Cause if anything happens to you, we’re all sunk!”

It Started with a Small Idea

I hope the story of how I got my start is an encouragement to you. I
truly believe that everyone can make a difference if they’re willing to
take small steps. And I was again reminded of how true and powerful
small ideas can be not long ago when I met a young woman named
Carrie Rich. In December of 2013, she told me an incredible story.
Though only in her twenties, she was working as a senior director for Inova Health System in Virginia, and one day she got an idea. She wanted to do something positive for others, and she thought that with a small amount of money, she could get others to contribute to organizations that were already making a difference.

She was excited about the idea, so she told her boss, Knox, who had been the CEO of Inova for thirty years. His response was, “That’s nice, Carrie, but could you go back to work now?” But then two months later for her birthday, he gave her a card. In it were two things—$100 and a quote attributed to John Wesley: “Do all the good you can. By all the means you can. In all the ways you can. In all the places you can. At all the times you can. To all the people you can. As long as ever you can.”

Carrie says that Knox had taken some “lunch money”—the money he would have spent on her birthday lunch—and given it to her to put to good use. So what would she do?

She decided that she would try to turn the $100 into $1,000 for each of six organizations. In today’s world where Bill and Melinda Gates have given away $28 billion, that amount probably sounds small. But that didn’t discourage Carrie. She wrote to organizations in Washington, DC, Haiti, Tanzania, and elsewhere to ask what they would do with $1,000. The DC-area organization said it could improve literacy rates for a class of students. The Haitian organization said it could sustain ten families by using community agriculture. The Tanzanian organization could send twenty-five women through secondary school.

These stories ignited Carrie’s passion. She was ready to act. But how? How could she turn $100 into $6,000? She decided to do something she had never done before. She wrote individual e-mail requests to family and friends—ultimately to every name that came up from her contacts list as she typed alphabetically in the “To” field. She even decided to write to the names that popped up that she didn’t
recognize. As she came to the “Subject” field, she wondered what to write. When she could come up with nothing better, she wrote, “The Global Good Fund.”

It wasn’t long before money started coming in: $20, $50, $1,000. “It was extraordinarily generous,” says Carrie, “particularly from my peers who were just starting in the workplace. It really resonated with them.”

Within two weeks, Carrie had received $6,052. She felt good. She had started small, but she had accomplished her goal. She was ready to give the money to the six organizations. All done! she thought. Little could she guess what would happen next.

As the donations were coming in, she had also received an e-mail from someone she had met for five minutes at a conference the year earlier. They had exchanged cards that day, and Carrie had sent him a “nice to meet you” e-mail afterward. That’s why his name had been in her contacts. The return e-mail from the man, who wanted to remain anonymous, said, “I’d like to donate a million dollars to the Global Good Fund. Where should I send the check?”

Carrie’s reaction: “This guy’s pranking me. I’m not giving him my home address!”

She e-mailed him back saying that if he was serious, he was to meet her on a particular day at a specific time in a specific place (a very public one with security cameras). And she would wait only ten minutes.

When he arrived, he handed her a bank-certified check for $1 million, made out to “The Global Good Fund,” an organization that did not exist. And his question for Carrie was the same one she had asked the six organizations: What will you do with this money?

Carrie had not prepared for such a question because, honestly, she didn’t think the guy would show up. She couldn’t fathom someone she’d met for five minutes doing that. She quickly thought about what had made a difference in her life, and she told him she would
invest in young leaders around the world who were using entrepreneurship for social impact. As others had invested in her, she would help these leaders to grow personally so that they could be a gift to society. He handed her the check.

Not knowing what to do, Carrie went back to her office and asked to see her boss, Knox. His assistant, Carol, could see that Carrie was sweating and hyperventilating, so she escorted her right in.

“Look what you’ve done,” she said, slamming the check down on his desk. “You gave me the lunch money, and this stranger gave me a million dollars for an organization that doesn’t even exist! I have no idea what to do with the money. Would you please help me?”

“I’ll help you under two conditions,” said Knox. “First, while you may report to me at work, I’d like to report to you at the Global Good Fund. Second, I’m going to match the initial gift.”

Carrie says, “You know that expression ‘You fell out of your chair’? I literally fell. Carol came in and she helped me back up. And that’s how it started.”

That was in 2011. A year later, she stopped working for Inova and became the CEO of the Global Good Fund, which she created as a nonprofit organization. She has begun a fellowship program and is already investing in nineteen young leaders in countries around the world. And she continues to seek opportunities to make a difference.

How big will the Global Good Fund become? How great an impact will it make? I don’t know. Carrie is still young. But does it matter? She is making a difference now. She is helping people and making the world a better place for her having been in it. And isn’t that what matters?
Most people want to believe big and start big, or believe small and start small. It goes against the grain to believe as big as you can and be willing to take very small steps. Yet that’s what 99 percent of people must do to make a difference.

**What Do You Believe?**

Believing big begins with believing in yourself. Do you believe you can make a difference? Do you believe you have a contribution to make that can positively impact the world? Or are your beliefs about yourself holding you back?

Test it. Take some time to write out all the positive things you can think of about yourself. What do you bring to the table of life? I challenge you to write twenty, fifty, or even one hundred positive things about yourself.

**Your One Thing**

After you brainstorm and write down the positive potential you bring to this world, take a look at your list. What is your one thing? What is the thing you do better than anything else you do? The authors of *StrengthsFinder 2.0* say that every person does something better than the next ten thousand people.

What’s yours? You may be able to name it instantly, instinctively. If so, great. I hope you’re already developing that strength for all it’s worth. If not, one of the tasks I encourage you to do before you finish
reading this book is to figure out what it is. Look at your personal history. Question your friends and family. Talk to your colleagues. Ask your boss. Take aptitude tests. Do whatever it takes. Until you identify and tap into your one thing, you may find your life going around in circles, and significance will be elusive.

**You Are Here!**

One of the reasons people don’t start small is that they can see a better starting place than where they are. *If I could just be there*, they think, *then starting would be easier*. But the only place anyone can start is where he or she is. I started in Hillham because that’s where I was. If I had waited until I was somewhere else, somewhere better, I never would have done anything worthwhile.

Define where you are and what you have right now. Carrie Rich had a desire to make a difference, lunch money, and an e-mail list. What do you have? Take an inventory. Look at your opportunities. Think about where you currently are. Figure out what’s working for and against you. Get the process started.

In the next chapter, I’ll prompt you to go deeper inside and tap into what really matters to you. But in the meantime, you need to be willing to get started.