

EXECUTIVE BOOK SUMMARIES

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One Big Thing

THE SUMMARY

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Introduction: The Big Questions

You are facing two big questions:

Question 1: *What am I supposed to do with my life?*

In one form or another, it's the Big Question that paralyzes people's futures, freezes their momentum, and stalls their promise. It keeps millions of people from fulfilling their potential and making a difference with their lives.

Question 2: *In a hyper-competitive, cluttered, and distracted world, how do I get noticed?*

Even if you have figured out your purpose—your One Big Thing—so what? We all struggle with connecting with the right person, circumstance, or situation to make that dream happen. But the problem is no one's listening. You *know* it could work. You feel it in your bones. But the truth is, if no one's there to help you make it a reality, then what's the point?

The intersection of those two questions is what this book is about.

I can't determine your purpose in life. That's something between you, your conscience, and God. But I can certainly point you in the right direction, and show you the questions you need to be asking on the journey.

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I think they're the most important questions you can possibly ask: Why am I here? What was I born to accomplish? How do I make the purpose known to others? How do I get my message, idea, or story noticed?

Discovering that unique purpose is important, but in the twenty-first century, it takes more than just identifying that One Big Thing. Today, if you're going to influence your family, company, community, or the world, you have to get noticed. You may have a remarkable gift for inspiring people, but until you learn how to get that message heard, your impact will be small.

Great things aren't accomplished by people who live in denial, or refuse to tell the truth. Your current circumstances aren't nearly as big a factor as you think. It's not about where you are; it's about where you're going. The point is that if you have passion, drive, and commitment—and will look at your life with honesty—almost anything could happen.

Chapter 1: Who's Painting the Portrait of Your Life?

The Power of Intentional Living

A great life doesn't happen by accident. My wife, Kathleen, and I are regular visitors to the Huntington Library, Gardens and Art Collections in Pasadena, California. Among the other outstanding collections, the museum boasts an incredible hall of portraits. While looking at the political, artistic, social, and military leaders featured in the portraits, I was gripped by a distinct sense of "intention" in their faces. These were leaders from another century who lived strategically and with purpose.

Walking through that gallery I realized that one of the key reasons these men and women were great was because they had discovered the power of *focus*. They were all focused on One Big Thing. They had serious ambition, and lived lives of intentionality. As I studied the paintings of military generals, architects, writers and artists, business and government leaders, I wondered about the place of ambition in my own life. What would have happened had I lived my life more *intentionally*?

I wonder if today we've become the victims of a desire to just live life as it comes—to assume that whatever works out is the best path. Especially if you're a child of the '60s, living a random life sounds somewhat romantic, but real influence in the world rarely happens by accident.

Coming from the Christian tradition as I do, it was actually frowned upon to take charge of our own lives. We were encouraged to "wait upon the Lord" and "seek His will for our lives," and see where He took us. Today I look back and realize just how naive I was. While each of those phrases is true, they're not referring to avoiding the hard work of discovering our place in this world.

In many circles today, *ambition* is an ugly word. But, truthfully, what's wrong with it? As long as it's braced with humility, what's wrong with planning, thinking ahead, and the desire to achieve something significant with our time on earth? To influence today's culture, we need to have the experience, credentials, and relationships that only come by strategic living. Walking through that museum and staring up at those powerful portraits, I realized that great leaders of the past didn't just take life as it came—they understood how to make life happen.

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Chapter 2: Do We Really Have a Destiny?

Life's Loaded Question

The issue of destiny is a loaded question. Nearly everyone wants to believe in the concept. Religious or not, most people want to believe they have a purpose for living and would find it enormously difficult to go on without that knowledge. *Do we have a destiny, and is it possible to discover it?*

I seriously doubt if we have a locked down, concrete, unchanging destiny we were born to accomplish. Destiny isn't a task. It's not an end point. It's not something you can check off a to-do list. In fact, that's where most people go wrong, and why so many attend destiny conferences, buy destiny books, and go to hear famous teachers speak on finding their destiny. It's also why so many end up frustrated and unhappy.

Your destiny is a moving target, and that's why I prefer to use the word *purpose*, or, your One Big Thing. Your purpose is bigger than any obstacle including physical limitations, financial circumstances, being fired, or other failures. Nothing can change the fact that you have a unique reason for being here, and there's still time for it to play out.

I would love to have discovered my one thing as a young man and, like those leaders in the portrait gallery at the Huntington Library, pursued it with passion, conviction, and intention. But because I had no encouragement, training, or coaching, I wandered down many blind alleys and spent many years wondering if there was any purpose at all.

It took me years before I started noticing the connections, honestly facing up to what I was *actually* good at doing versus what I *wanted* to do, and then finally embracing the way I was wired. Like picking up signs on a trail, things eventually began to make sense.

Is there such a thing as destiny? I think so, but we've spent too much time looking at the idea of destiny as a quick fix, a get-rich scheme, or a stopping point. Destiny wants to be pursued. It wants to be discovered. Why? Because it's in the journey we learn to understand and value what it means.

That only comes with coaxing, work and action. You're here because you haven't given up. You are determined to find the answer. That determination alone may make the biggest difference.

Chapter 3: Why One Big Thing?

Living in a Culture of Distraction

I've spent most of my life consulting for and advising large organizations, and one of the most common problems I encounter is that they're actually doing great things—*just too many of them*. In most cases, even the most successful organizations struggle because over the years they've been pulled in far too many directions.

Sound like your life? How often have you said yes to things that sounded good at the time, only to discover they began dragging you down later? Like barnacles on a ship, each of those commitments slows down our momentum and keeps us from accomplishing our dreams.

One of my favorite quotes is attributed to the brilliant artist Michelangelo. When an admirer asked him how he sculpted such wonderful statues, he replied that he didn't carve statues, he just removed the excess stone so the angel inside could be revealed.

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A lot of what I do with organizations is to remove the excess stone. These frustrated organizations are a mile wide and an inch deep. They do a lot of things, but aren't extraordinary at any of them. The problem with cutting back is that they're often *good* things. Most leaders find it difficult to cut these problems, divisions, or outreaches back.

My advice to these clients—and my advice to you—is the same: Step back and look at all you're doing. What are you doing well and what not so well? What excites you and what doesn't? What reflects your genuine calling, expertise, and brand, and what doesn't? What will actually take you into the future? What could you potentially be the best in your field at accomplishing? Remember Michelangelo and start removing the excess stone.

The questions are: Are you going to continue trying a little of this and a little of that, being unremarkable at a lot of things and getting lost in the clutter? Or are you going to find out what your One Big Thing is, let go of everything else, and pursue that with all your passion?

Some people respond that they're good at a lot of things and couldn't possibly limit themselves to a single pursuit. In fact, the word *limit* is used frequently to argue against the idea of focusing our talent and passion in the pursuit of One Big Thing. In life, a wide variety of activities can be challenging, stimulating, and inspiring. *But when it comes to your career, calling, or dream, understand that you won't get noticed for being pretty good at everything.*

It's important to keep in mind that once you're successful—once you've made it to the top—you can do anything you want. But to get noticed, you must focus on One Big Thing.

Chapter 4: The Power of One Big Thing

The Key to Having Influence

For me, it's ultimately about influence. The most important thing you can possibly accomplish with your life is a legacy of influence. Your ability to influence is all tied into knowing your single-minded purpose.

The reason is that discovering your one thing will make you passionate, and people respond to passion. Passion is one of the most contagious emotions on the planet, and people will line up to follow it, especially when that passionate person has credibility.

I can never say enough about the importance of credibility when it comes to influence. Brilliant ideas without a credible spokesperson are tough to sell. But those who are in pursuit of their One Big Thing are as attractive to people as paper clips to a magnet. People follow visionaries—especially those who know what they're talking about.

Whom do you want to influence? Start thinking about the answer to that question now because it will help you focus on your OBT. Perhaps more important, it will help you decide the knowledge and experience you need.

Far too many people believe they can't realize their One Big Thing because they can't call up the discipline, focus, or ability to make it happen. But that's simply not true. They simply didn't have the right skill set to make that change happen.

Real influence often happens when you apply the right tools to a passionate goal. Either one alone is a challenge, but together you can change people, change your company, or change your community.

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As you develop your OBT, the possibilities for making a significant impact will begin to open up. As you gain expertise and credibility in an area you're extraordinarily passionate about, you'll immediately begin to influence the people around you. It's tough not to notice a raging fire.

Chapter 5: The Power of Perception

Is Your One Thing About Having a Brand?

While a personal brand isn't the same as what I consider your OBT, I believe it's worth understanding what a personal brand is and how it impacts your perception.

Brands are important because perception matters. Your *influence* begins with discovering what you were born to accomplish. As a result, your *one thing* can be expressed in many ways—the reason you exist, your purpose for living, your destiny, or even what's been described as “what you were born to do”—while your *brand* involves your perception surrounding that thing. In other words, what do people think of when they think of you? I define *brand* as “a compelling story that surrounds a product, person, or organization.”

We all have a brand because we all have perceptions that surround us. So our OBT and how we execute it will communicate a message, and how that message is perceived by our boss, our spouse, our customers, investors, donors, the general public—whoever—will have a great impact on our ability to be successful.

In a media-driven culture, being different is everything. The world isn't looking for a copy of an existing writer, musician, politician, CEO, or leader; they're looking for someone new, innovative, and original. God gave you a unique DNA, so your job is to discover how your unique gifts and talents can differentiate you from everybody else.

Having an accurate understanding of what makes you unique and different is absolutely critical. If God created you as a completely unique individual, what does that mean for the type of vision you're called to accomplish? Too many people think that developing or influencing their own brand is about becoming something they aren't, when it's really about discovering what they truly are. I regularly meet people who live out other's dreams and refuse to act on who they were created to be. What about you?

It happens even in the best of ways. One friend got involved in raising money to build medical facilities in Third World countries. It was a great cause. Ultimately, it wasn't really her passion. When she finally had the courage to step out into something she was personally passionate about, she had already wasted years of productivity.

I know others who are trapped working in a company, church, or humanitarian organization who, although they do great work, are settling for second best in their lives. Being absolutely truthful about what distinguishes you from the pack is a critical step to finding your identity. I believe God made everyone unique and different, and that's why finding that distinctive combination is the key to understanding your One Big Thing.

Chapter 6: The Power of Values

Why Your One Big Thing Must Express Who You Really Are

Getting your to-do list out of your head and down on a page is incredibly important, but rather than the old days of simply using a legal pad, there are now computer apps that help you define priorities, schedule tasks, put them in categories, assign tags and more. I'm a big fan of productivity apps because I've discovered that half the battle of

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getting things done is just getting them down. But the greatest aspect of these apps for me is priorities—highlighting the tasks on the list that really matter. Every day is made up of many decisions based on what's really important. In fact, I would go so far as to say that most unsuccessful people are unsuccessful because they either can't or won't decide on the important priorities in their lives.

The secret to understanding your priorities is values. Values are the bumpers on the bowling alley of life. They determine our boundaries—how far we'll go on questionable issues. Your values are critical steps to identifying your one thing, because your OBT will never contradict your values. Values determine what's important and help determine your daily decisions. Furthermore, while values influence your big choices such as cheating on your spouse, robbing a bank, or killing your neighbor, they also govern a million small decisions we make every day.

Far too many people don't take their values seriously when it comes to the smaller things in life. But in many ways, that's the most important arena of all. What seems like something insignificant now can easily become something huge tomorrow.

Values matter. They help keep us on the right road in pursuit of our OBT. And when we discover our purpose, values are what help us make the right decisions regarding it. Your ability to change your life is directly connected to your ability to make choices and to take responsibility for those choices.

In other words, your daily decisions determine your destiny. One of the most important questions to ask is: *Where do my values come from?* The foundation of your life gives you the confidence to make decisions, and the critical importance of values is the key to making those decisions. Once you have a sense of the things that matter, you're in position to close in on your One Big Thing.

Chapter 7: What's your One Big Thing?

The Question Only You Can Answer

Some people seem to be born with a real passion in life—to excel in sports, become an activist, change the world, share their faith, write, and more. I've always thought they were lucky. I've had a number of people tell me they don't have that passion. Many struggle to find it. They are sincere people, and many have spent years looking for their purpose.

Discovering your one thing isn't about formulas, intelligence tests, or questionnaires. The more you understand about your personality, your wiring, your strengths and weaknesses, the better.

Your strengths and weaknesses are deeply ingrained in your personality—and are not easily changed. So begin looking for ways to focus more on your strengths and less on your weaknesses. For example, public speaking is a wonderful skill, but if it's not a strength, stop agonizing over your inability and start focusing on where you can thrive. I spent years thinking I was capable of roles totally outside my zone, and it wasn't until I realized my real strengths and weaknesses that I was free to let go of the things that were frustrating me and holding me back.

Your OBT isn't about a role although it will certainly influence the job, project, or mission to which you dedicate your life. It's also not about personality although your personality will have a huge impact on the choices you make. At the heart of the One Big Thing concept is finding the right seat on the bus. I believe millions of people work their entire lives without finding their place in the world.

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Until you start looking at your past, your present, and your future in brutally honest terms, you'll never be able to make the decisions that can transform your life. One thing that takes companies from "good to great" is their ability to look at all aspects of their performance in the cold, hard light of day. They create accountability and mechanisms for feedback so they know immediately if they're on the wrong track.

You can build similar mechanisms in your own personal life to give yourself accurate indicators to keep you on track as well. Are you listening to your customers and employees? Are you open to suggestions and advice? Are you aware of what the competition is doing? Are you up to date on the industry? Do you have an honest understanding of your own strengths and weaknesses? Would your coworkers, customers, and friends agree with that understanding?

One important note: listening to feedback from people on your payroll is helpful, but has limitations. You'll never get brutally honest feedback from someone who depends on you for a paycheck. Business and nonprofit leaders are especially susceptible to this when they only listen to their employees or their leadership team. Make sure you have relationships with people who are knowledgeable, *and* have nothing to lose by telling you the truth.

Chapter 8: The Map of Your Future

Road Signs on the Journey to the One Big Thing

Your One Big Thing is really the quest for what you were put on the earth to accomplish, and it's the key to getting noticed. It's not about a particular job or personality type, it's more about your purpose. Admittedly, it's difficult to pin down because it could lead to a particular job. However, I view your OBT as an overarching purpose that you could potentially fulfill in many different ways.

I produce television programs and films, write books, speak at conferences and events, write a blog, and consult with various clients, but my OBT is to help people and organizations engage their culture more effectively. Whatever it takes to make that happen, I'm ready to try. Whatever it is for you, it's what makes you unique.

The question becomes, what's your unique voice? What's your purpose for living? What remarkable thing were you put on the earth to accomplish?

Only you can answer that question, but its answer is the key to your success. Whether your dream is a book, movie, TV program, Web-based business, nonprofit organization, retail store, academic career, music, or performance, discovering your one thing is the key to getting that dream noticed.

There's no foolproof formula or series of checkboxes for discovering your one thing, but if you ask the right questions, you can begin to open the curtain on the answer. From this moment, begin to slow down, take your time, and start reflecting.

Start today by considering what comes easy in life for you. Not necessarily something that's without effort or pain, but what is so natural you do it better than most people without even thinking? For most people and in most cases, that "thing" is an ability or skill which is a God-given capacity to handle something other people find challenging.

Consider what you have done that made people notice. What brings you affirmation, encouragement, and compliments from friends and coworkers? Generally speaking, people can be harsh, so when you do get an

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encouraging word, especially from people who you don't normally expect it from, you should notice. It may be pointing in the direction of your one thing.

While outside confirmation is a good thing, outside criticism needs to be handled with care. My advice is to weigh any outside influence in the balance of who they are and how qualified they are. Too many dreams are ended because someone listened to the wrong person.

Another important signpost on your journey to your OBT is discovering a task, job, purpose, or cause that you love. The most productive, well-rounded, and fulfilled people have found a job they love to do and do extraordinarily well. What if you could actually make a living working at a job you love?

A third signpost might be what you hate. I've discovered that in many cases, the thing you hate the most could be the problem you were born to fix. So what drives you nuts? I believe the key to your destiny could be found in the answer to that question.

Chapter 9: Become a Force to be Reckoned With

Getting Your Story Out There

Getting your story told in a digital culture is tough. The demands, options, and choices your audience faces today are daunting. With every media platform we're constantly innovating and brainstorming new ways to reach consumers with our client's message. If they're not watching TV, where can we find them? If they're on the Web, how do we compete against billions of websites for their attention? What role should social media play in building that message?

In a digital culture, only the messages that actually *connect* will make an impact. These are the elements that most often need to be in place to be successful:

THE POWER OF ORIGINALITY. In a sea of competition, the quickest way to get noticed is to be completely original. Stop trying to be like someone else and start looking deep into your life for what makes your message, story, or project unique and different.

UNDERSTAND THE PLATFORMS. A significant number of dreamers fail because they don't understand the *reality* of making that dream happen. Stephen King understands the publishing industry. Steven Spielberg understands the movie business. As you develop your OBT, keep in mind that you'll never get the message out there until you understand the multiple platforms available. Start your education today.

LEARN THE POWER OF A NAME. In a digital, distracted culture, names matter more than ever. To get your book, movie, business, or other project noticed, you need to think seriously about the name. With thousands of daily choices out there, no one is going to take the time to step further in unless the name invites them. Choosing a good name, or changing a boring name, will open the door to a far greater audience.

SPEAK THE LANGUAGE OF DESIGN. Today we live in a visual generation. Visit an Apple Store or a Starbucks. Look at the effort studios put into movie poster design and publishers into book cover design. Your fastest way to building a platform, increasing morale, pitching your project or attracting eyeballs to your website is to think in visual terms. Great design is critical.

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KNOW YOUR AUDIENCE. When it comes to sharing my dream with the world, I figure out the audience first. How I present my subject changes dramatically, depending on my audience. You need to take your audience seriously. It's our responsibility to make sure we are connecting to our audience.

LOSE THE LINGO. Certain fields today have developed their own language that people outside that world don't understand. In some cases, like medicine, it helps professionals to be more specific. *Inside* the hospital, it can make a life or death difference. But *outside* that world, it only obscures your message and damages your purpose. By the way, this goes for bad grammar as well. I'm continually stunned by the number of executives, pastors, and other leaders who make basic grammatical mistakes on a regular basis. Get it right or damage how you are perceived. It's as simple as that.

Chapter 10: Just When You Thought It Would Be Easy

Challenges to Your One Big Thing

As you start to close in on your One Big Thing, it won't necessarily be smooth sailing. Here are some challenges you may encounter along the way:

DOES LOCATION MATTER? Do you have to live in Los Angeles to succeed in a movie career? With today's technology, a filmmaker can live and work anywhere. However, if you're serious about your career, you need to understand that *Hollywood is where the decisions are made*. When it comes to discovering your one thing, location matters for some people. There can be a real value in being near the action.

SURVIVING IN A DISTRACTED WORLD. I wonder if today our greatest obstacle on the road to discovering the One Big Thing is simply distractions. I'm convinced a significant number of people fail not because they aren't talented, determined, or passionate, but simply because they get distracted. I've never been a fan of the person who invented the "open door policy." Sure, we want to be accessible to employees and coworkers, but at some point it's time to shut the door and get to work.

TAKE RESPONSIBILITY FOR YOUR DREAM. It's often necessary to point out that we should stop feeling guilty about creating time for our OBT; too often we allow other people's needs to come before our dream. Obviously we need to care for our children, honor our spouse, and deal with our primary responsibilities around our family or job. But the first step in achieving our dream is to take responsibility for it. That means scheduling it, and "un-scheduling" the lesser needs of our coworkers and friends. These daily commitments chip away our time, and before long it's our dream that gets lost in the shuffle.

Stop doing what other people think is urgent, and start focusing on what matters to you. Each of us has to learn to say no. If it's not a critical part of your job responsibilities or a vital role for the future of the company or your personal life, consider turning it down. Be sensitive and respectful. I don't recommend you lead with "I can't be on the committee because I'm writing a best-selling novel."

Your ultimate goal in life should be to find the place where the world's great need and your great passion intersect.

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Chapter 11: It's Never Too Late

The Time to Begin is Now

It's never too late to discover your one big thing. Even after years in one direction, it may be time to change.

The NBC television program, *The Office*, was originally built around a middle manager named Michael Scott who didn't have a clue when it came to personal awareness. Played brilliantly by Steve Carrell, he doesn't get jokes, he's incredibly insensitive to the people around him, and he hasn't a clue about his own ability (that is, if he has any).

One thing I've observed is people who live lives of significance aren't like Michael Scott at all because they are people who truly know themselves. They can accurately tell you what their strengths and weaknesses are. They know where they need help, and where they need to grow. They have very few (if any) illusions when it comes to their expertise or potential. Most of all, they're remarkably humble about it.

But there are a lot of Michael Scotts out there. I find they are way off base when it comes to their own lives; they're convinced they have talent where there is none, expertise where it doesn't exist, and potential that no one else can see. They assert themselves in inappropriate places and take credit for work they didn't accomplish.

In short, you can't make a difference in the world, and you won't find your OBT, if you don't have a clue about yourself. Comedy aside, the Michael Scotts have never taken the time to look deep into their own hearts; they've never taken a cold, hard, dispassionate look at who they are and what they're made of, and they have no idea about their One Big Thing. How about you? Have you taken that look lately? It's not too late.

Chapter 12: It's Not About You

Living Out the Potential of Your One Big Thing

The old saying that quitters never win and winners never quit couldn't be more false, and has resulted in far too many people spending their lives in pursuit of the wrong thing. I'm an avid reader and have more than a thousand books in my library, and I never go on a trip without a few books in my bag. But one thing reading so much has taught me is that if I start a book that isn't right for me, or isn't what I expected, I can put it down. No regrets, no guilt.

There are millions of people in the workforce, in politics, in academics, and in the nonprofit world who are terrible at what they do. They're in over their heads and hopelessly lost. The problem is they're terrified to admit it.

It's one thing to allow outside criticism, obstacles, or frustrations to stop you. I don't believe in that at all. But if you've gotten in over your head, don't know what you're doing, and things aren't going to change, then don't be afraid to step down. Allow a more qualified person to do the job. There's no harm in realizing your limitations. In fact, there's honor in it.

Perhaps an even more difficult situation is that you've read this book and even though you're good at your job, perhaps even brilliant, you've also realized you're on the wrong path. You may have always suspected it, but now you know the truth. You're not fulfilling your purpose.

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What do you do? Uproot, change everything, and step into the unknown, or turn away from what you know is the truth, and carry on as usual? The question is what sacrifice are you willing to make to fulfill your dream? Before you jump ship and risk everything, let's consider a strategy for making that transition.

Begin today preparing, strategizing, and pursuing your purpose, but don't be drastic. So don't quit your current job until you have a transition plan in place. In some cases, it might take time to transition into your dream on a full-time basis. When the time comes to make your transition, don't burn bridges and don't make enemies. Leave amicably and work hard to keep existing relationships on good terms. Deliberately focus on developing new connections and building genuine and honest relationships.

It never hurts to keep your resume, demo reel, or portfolio up to date. You never know when the opportunity to pursue your dream will happen, and it's not always about launching out on your own. My advice is to treat your full-time job like a freelance position. Never close the door on change, and always be ready to shift gears or adapt to a new position.

Discovering your OBT and then stepping out to pursue its reality will be the greatest adventure of your life. When that happens, work becomes passion, and you will join the ranks of the very few who have accepted the risk, calculated the peril, and leaped off the ledge.

Epilogue: You're Not Crazy

Pursuing your One Big Thing may be mistaken by your friends and family as losing your mind. A life pursuing One Big Thing isn't easy, but it will settle your questions about why you're here and what you were born to do with your life. Helen Keller once said, "Life is either a great adventure or it's nothing."

Millions of people spend their lives in the pursuit of nothing, but you have chosen the great adventure. Go. Seek it with everything you have, and don't look back.

The Communicator's Corner

The Bread Plate Lady

If Kathleen and I are in London on a weekend, we always head out to Notting Hill for the Portobello Road street market. It's an incredible experience, and even in the dead of winter, it's always packed with shoppers looking over the antiques, jewelry, rare books, clothes, and other wonderful stuff. Most of the stalls sell a variety of items, and I'm personally fascinated by the rare book dealers.

Recently, toward the end of the day, we came upon a sweet little old lady in one of the smaller stalls who sold only two things: antique bread plates and their matching bread knives. The British apparently call them "bread plates" but we Americans call them cutting boards—although the British versions are shaped like a plate and beautifully carved.

While Kathleen was looking at a collection of plates from the mid-nineteenth century, I struck up a conversation with the woman. I discovered that she was in her eighties and had been selling antique bread plates for about forty-seven years. Since most of the sellers at the market sold a variety of antiques and other items I asked her: "Why just this one thing? Why only bread plates?" She replied that forty-seven years ago she wanted a way to stand out and get noticed. She realized so many other stalls sold everything imaginable, so she decided she would focus.

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She loved cooking and was fascinated by rare bread plates, so after much thinking, she decided that would be her focus. Now, all these years later, she's still at it, and it seemed like everyone at the market knew her as the "bread plate lady." She sells one thing and does it very well. Other shops at the market have some bread plates, but nothing like her collection. By focusing all her time and energy on one thing, she owned that niche, and was sought after by people seeking that particular item.

Radically Different Thinking

I have a friend who has a unique corporate training program designed to help companies solve high-level challenges. If a company is struggling to design a new product, overcome an organizational hurdle, or break into a new market, they'll often send their top leaders to spend a few days at my friend's facility.

But what they encounter is not what they expect.

In one case a bicycle company came because they were stumped with a design flaw in a new concept bike. When they arrived, my friend has assembled a team—not of bike experts, but a military general, a heart surgeon, a college football coach, a novelist, and a housewife. Needless to say, the bicycle designers and executives were initially surprised and somewhat disappointed. But once they started discussing the problem, they were amazed by the different potential approaches. The surgeon looked at the flaws as an anatomical problem, the general as a battle strategy, the housewife as a family issue, and so on. Each brought unique questions, experiences, and ideas to the table.

By looking at the problem from those unique and unusual angles, they solved the design flaw on the project in record time. A flaw that had stumped bike experts for months was solved in a matter of days by bringing radically different thinking to the table.

Heifetz with a Violin

George Lang was born in Hungary in 1924 and eventually emigrated to the United States. His only real possession was hope, and his great dream was to be a violinist. After escaping a labor camp and probably execution during World War II, Lang fled to New York in 1946 with little money, even less English, and only his dream of becoming a concert violinist. He practiced and practiced, always holding onto the vision. But after hearing a remarkable violin concert by famed performer Jascha Heifetz, he realized his future pointed in a different direction.

Lang later remarked that the concert was a moment of revelation. He realized that he could never be "a Heifetz with a violin," so he'd become "the Heifetz of something else." He turned to the restaurant business and worked his way up the ladder to eventually owning the highly acclaimed Cafe' des Artistes in New York City. Having built an international reputation, he even became a highly respected food critic and correspondent for CBS News.

Brutal Honesty

Recently, I met an actor here in Hollywood who is passionate and driven, and his goal is to be a great actor. But my new friend has one simple problem: he's terrible at it. I viewed some scenes he's done in a few low-budget films and commercials, and it doesn't take an expert to see that he has no technique, little talent, and a tin ear for dialogue.

The problem is, acting is all he's wanted to do since high school. He left the Midwest a decade ago and moved to Hollywood to pursue the dream. He refuses to get a full-time job so he'll have plenty of time for auditions, so he lives in

One Big Thing

cheap, dangerous neighborhoods and gets by on food stamps. His single-minded pursuit has cost him his family—his wife left him and took their son back to their hometown because of their financial struggles.

But he considers that collateral damage in pursuit of his art.

He receives no confirmation of his talent because he has none. But he continues forward because he refuses to be brutally honest about his ability—or lack thereof.

“Stop looking for the biggest crowd, and start looking for the right crowd.”

Phil Cooke (p 130)

“The key is determining the intersection between what you’re passionate about and what people are willing to pay you to do.”

Phil Cooke (p 105)

“Until you value yourself, you won’t value your time. Until you value your time, you will not do anything with it.”

M. Scott Peck (p 66)

“Always remember that you are unique. Just like everybody else.”

despair.com (p 87)