



The Big Effect of Small Actions

For who hath despised the day of small things?

ZECHARIAH 4:10, KJV

It is a very great folly to despise “the day of small things,” for it is usually God’s way to begin His great works with small things.

CHARLES SPURGEON

Fifteen minutes a day can change your life.

LES HEINZE, PASTOR

The small things that you do every day matter more than the big things that you do once in awhile.



Have you ever made big plans to change your life? Maybe you were going to start eating better, or begin an exercise program, or improve your marriage, or get your family to pitch in with chores. It could be almost anything. Did you carry through on the change? Probably not. Change is hard, and big changes are correspondingly harder. When someone decides to get physically fit, for instance, he or she almost always thinks in grandiose terms: “I’m going to join a gym and work out for an hour five days a week.” Guess what? That type of plan is almost always going to fail. The best way to make changes in your life is to *start small*. Plan to take a 15-minute walk every morning after breakfast. Conquer that initial goal and then move on to something more.

I get a little tickled when I think of some books I've read on household management. There will often be a section in which a plan is laid out for making changes in the way the house is run. The suggestion is usually made that the best thing to do is to have a family meeting and announce the new way of doing things. From now on we're going to work together as a team! We're all going to have responsibilities! We're going to have charts and rewards! Everything is going to be different! Sigh. What a way of shooting yourself in the foot. Initial momentum may carry the day for awhile, but this type of big dramatic plan almost never works. How much better to start with a manageable goal: every day before dinner we're going to put the toys away, say, or no one leaves the kitchen *after* dinner until it's clean.

So, a small change I have instituted in my life is *to do the dailies first*. And the dailies are very small in themselves: make the bed, clean off the bathroom counter, clean up the kitchen after breakfast. I've started saying to myself as I move through the day and am faced by choices of what to do: "Have you done the dailies?" If not, then I need to do those things first. It's a very small change, but it has made a big difference.

These daily jobs are part of a checklist of tasks that I'm trying to do every day. There are only five items on the list, and they're all small:

1. Do the dailies.
2. Do the neck and shoulder exercises that my chiropractor gave me. (10 minutes max)
3. Work on my current 15-minute job. During the summer and fall this was supposed to be weeding. I was surprised at how much I could get done in 15 minutes—when I did it. I tried to be consistent about doing this by getting in my time right after taking my walk, as I was already outside and dressed appropriately. Now it's winter and yardwork is over until spring, so I'm working on going through our many, many books, both to organize them and to weed them out.
4. Have Jim rub my shoulders for five minutes before bedtime.
5. Clean up the kitchen and plan breakfast before bedtime.

Let me tell you something: I *hate* doing little daily jobs. Look at item #2. I have neck and shoulder problems related to my scoliosis. Over the last 15 years or so I've gone to several chiropractors, repeating a familiar, counterproductive pattern: I do the big things but not the small. I start out faithfully going in for my appointments, sometimes two or three times a week. This is a big investment in time and money. I'm usually given some type of exercise routine to do on my own, which I don't do. I keep going in for treatments and get some relief, but not as much as I would if I did the small daily tasks. I get to the point at which I'm doing better, so I quit going. And then I regress back to the starting point and beyond. Months or even years go by, and then I start the whole process over again.

About a year ago I realized that I was losing range of motion in my neck. It was quite an operation just to look over my shoulder when I was changing lanes while driving. I imagined myself completely frozen up, unable to turn my head at all, and it was a pretty scary picture. This fear propelled me into going to yet another chiropractor, and I signed up for yet another course of treatment. I was told exactly what to do every day and was even given an instructional DVD, but I didn't do the exercises. Last week I finished the first half of the treatments in my plan. How did my x-rays look? Not very good. "You *are* doing your at-home exercises, aren't you?" the doctor asked. "No, not really," I admitted. "Well, you're not going to see much improvement without doing those," he said. (Makes you wonder if I need to go in to him at all, doesn't it?) So ... I've put the exercises on the checklist. I've finally figured out a place to hang the contraption I need to use for one of the exercises, and yesterday I made myself go to a sporting goods store to get the sports ball that I need for the other one.

I've been thinking about having a checklist for some time now, ever since I read *The Checklist Manifesto* by Atul Gawande. Gawande is a surgeon who has studied ways to reduce errors in his profession and has also applied these ideas to a wider audience. In the *Manifesto* he tells the story of how aviation checklists became standard after a horrific crash of a new plane and how powerful such a simple list can be. In hospitals where they are used, the error rate on routine procedures, such as putting in an intravenous line, goes down dramatically. You wouldn't think that it would be necessary to have this written tool for

something a professional has done dozens or even hundreds of times, but it is. You wouldn't think that I'd need any help to remember my five simple tasks, but I do. I plan to type it up in a large font, get the sheet laminated, and buy a couple of dry-erase markers. I'll hang it up somewhere and mark off the items every day. The act of writing something down on a to-do list doesn't make you do the task, but if the list is very visible its presence does create a spur. If I were actually to do the items on that checklist every single day there is no question that my health would improve, the house would stay cleaner, and I would make progress on some long-standing projects. A great gain for a very small expenditure of time and effort, and a tremendous happiness boost.

This idea of doing the small things consistently so that you get big results is nothing new. Anthony Trollope, a prolific 19th century novelist who got up early every morning to write before heading off to his day job (in which he reformed the British postal service) said, "A small daily task, if it be really daily, will beat the labours of a spasmodic Hercules." Most of us are good at being that Hercules, or at least planning to be. During gardening season I tend to think in terms of big chunks of effort. Saturday, I think, I'll plunge in and get the garden weeded. It's a mess and will take several hours. What are the chances that I'll actually get it done? Pretty small, especially if I don't get out there until it's hot. But 15 minutes every morning, in conjunction with my watering? Now that's very doable, and actually kind of enjoyable. (I especially like working on what I call "spider plants"—those weeds that have long stems coming out of a central point. There's a big payoff for every weed since they spread out so much, and they don't need digging but come out with a pull.) I'm going to get myself a better timer, one I can hang around my neck on a lanyard, but that shouldn't cost too much. Good tools help us do our work better, but only if we're committed to doing the work in the first place. They don't make us do the work, and it's a mistake to spend a lot of money on them, but once the decision's made to chop down the tree a sharp axe really helps.

In conjunction with the idea of small, regular efforts vs. the spasmodic ones, here's the wording I've come up with: *Get the best return on your investment of time.* Think of a dirty, cluttered refrigerator. It has crumbs, spills, and moldy leftovers in it. There are three containers of sour cream because two of them are hidden from view. So you spend an

entire morning getting it cleaned up: taking everything out, taking out the shelves and washing them, throwing out the leftovers, wiping off the bottoms of the bottles, sweeping out the onion skin fragments, etc. Now it's immaculate. How long will that last? Maybe a few days. Pretty soon it's headed downhill again. You let it slide until it's just unbearable and then spend another couple of hours getting it back in shape. Up, down. Up, down. Wouldn't it be better to keep it at a reasonable level of cleanliness all the time? Don Aslett, a noted cleaning and organizing expert, agrees:

Establish an acceptable cleanliness level and maintain it daily. If you really want to be freed from housework drudgery this one change in style will work wonders for you. When you learn to keep house on a straight line, you'll not only find extra hours appearing, but some of the other up-and-down styles you've been struggling with for years (diets, meals, letter-writing, PTA assignments, etc.) will follow your housecleaning system and suddenly begin to be manageable.²²

Think of it this way: you invested several hours in cleaning up the refrigerator, but you only got a return on that investment of a week at most. If you divided up the time and spent a little every week or every few days, you'd invest the same amount of time but get a far larger return—basically a clean refrigerator all the time. This is such a simple idea and makes so much sense: that steady, consistent effort yields a much more effective result than larger but intermittent ones. So why don't more people follow it? Why don't I? The answer lies in something my mother said to me once. She was talking about my housekeeping propensities or lack thereof, but what she said applied to the way I lived my life in general, and, I'm convinced, the way most people live theirs. She said, "Debi, you get your apartment all cleaned up and it looks really nice, but then when you try to keep it cleaned up you get bored. So you let it get really messy, and then you have to clean it all up and that's exciting because it's dramatic." She was completely right. I was indeed bored with keeping my place picked up and orderly all the time. What a pain! I'd let it get so bad that I'd sometimes invite people over just so I'd be forced to clean it up. I'd spend hours on it. And right after

²² Don Aslett, *Is There Life After Housework?* (Cincinnati: Writer's Digest Books, 1981), 22.

the guests left I'd watch helplessly as it started to slide again. I had no real grasp of how to keep things on an even keel, and I didn't want to bother with doing that anyway.

Boredom plays a part in my failure to stay consistent; so does impatience. I want to do things quickly, all at once. But most important projects simply cannot be done that way. I can't write this material in one big session, for example. (Do you notice how I use the actual writing that I'm doing as fodder for the actual writing that I'm doing? I think that's called a recursive loop.) I run out of steam and ideas. I have to stop and think through what I've already said. New information comes in from reading I'm doing, or I remember an example that might be useful. Those small fragments get fitted into the overall structure. I need to do the writing a little at a time, consistently over a long period, so that I can always say, "I'll do more tomorrow."

There's probably a whole book's worth of material about my failures in this area of small, consistent efforts. I had a dear friend and colleague a number of years who shared my approach to tasks, especially in the area of housekeeping. We were both single and living alone, and we used to joke that we were "on-the-burst" housekeepers instead of "steady-state" ones. Now I find myself muttering, "Every day, Debi, every day," as I am tempted to put off until tomorrow the post-dinner cleanup or some other daily task.

But this idea applies to far more than wiping off the bathroom counter or keeping up with paperwork. In relationships, too, it's tempting to have long slides, big blowups, emotional reconciliations, and then back to the long slide. But if that's the way we handle things, in whatever area, then we spend most of our lives in the "long slide" part of the equation. The house is almost always messy. The laundry is almost always behind. And the relationship is almost always in a state of low-level bickering, disinterest or neglect.

I have been so saddened, for instance, as I've thought about my father's last years when he lived in San Diego. He moved out to California when he remarried in 1995 after my mother's death. It turned out to be a good decision for him in many ways, but he did miss Colorado. As his health failed he became more and more limited in his activities, and he

was very lonely. I needed to call him regularly, maybe once a week for 15 minutes. A small thing. It would have cost me practically nothing in terms of money or time and meant a lot to him. I just needed to plan to make it happen. But my father and I weren't particularly close. And there was a three-hour time difference between Virginia, where we were living at the time, and California. I would think of calling him when it wasn't feasible, such as 9:00 AM my time, 6:00 AM his time, or when it was inconvenient for me, such as 10:00 PM, my bedtime, which would have been 7:00 PM for him, right after supper. I'd think, "Oh, I'll call him tomorrow." But, as my husband says, tomorrow never comes. I rarely made the call.

Just in case you think that I was totally neglectful, though, I did make sure that we went out as a family to see my dad in San Diego on a pretty regular schedule every other year. When he went into a nursing home in 2006 I made a point of having us go out there during my son's spring break to see what his situation was. Trips to San Diego involved plane tickets, a hotel room, a rental car, and admissions charges for activities during the day. They were a big thing. And I'm sure that my dad enjoyed seeing us. But ... if I'd had to choose the consistent small thing or the occasional big thing, I would have done best by making those weekly calls. Now he's gone, and it's too late for me to change the way I handled that relationship.

I've seen this tendency more recently in our family as we've struggled to help my son settle into good sleep habits. For the most part he slept very well until middle school, but then, for whatever reasons, he started having problems. Gideon moved like a zombie through his sophomore year of high school, with us thinking that surely, surely, he'd get better as time went on. Instead, he got worse. During the first semester of his junior year the sleep problem manifested itself in a new complication: he couldn't wake up in the morning because it had taken him so long to get to sleep. As I've said many times, if someone had told me before this happened to us that "I just can't wake my son up in the morning and get him to school," I would have thought, What a wimpy parent! Now I know better. It is a surreal, almost frightening experience to be shaking and shouting at a person who cannot wake up.

Finally, after months of struggle, we took him in to a sleep specialist. He recommended something called “chronotherapy,” a truly challenging process in which the patient sets his bedtime for when he’s actually falling asleep (in Gideon’s case around 4:00 AM) and then keeps moving that bedtime later by 2-3 hours per day until he’s at the point where he’s on a normal schedule. Bedtimes and waketimes get weirder and weirder for about a week before they finally start heading in the right direction. Gideon put great effort into this process, sticking to the schedule, wearing the special light-blocking goggles at certain times and using the special blue-light lamp at others, and checking in with the doctor if there were any problems. The process worked, and he got through the rest of his junior year in pretty good shape.

Then we started letting the little, daily things slide. Gideon was supposed to have a set schedule, going to bed at 10:00 and getting up at 6:30. He stayed on that timetable for months, setting his alarm and getting up on time even on the weekends and after the school year ended. But he didn’t always use the light and the goggles. And we let that slide. Then we went on vacation, and I just didn’t think about his sleep too much. I thought, Oh, he’ll be fine. Well, he wasn’t fine. By early in his senior year of high school he’d fallen right back down in the rabbit hole. At one point he missed two weeks of school in a row and went through yet another round of chronotherapy. All of this missed school and weird scheduling probably could have been avoided if we had been more careful about the little daily things. We’d been good at the big thing: the chronotherapy itself. But if we didn’t do the follow-up then we might just as well not have bothered.

Isn’t this big thing/small thing idea true for life in general? You kill yourself planting a beautiful flower garden, planning and digging and planting and mulching. It’s done. Whew! Except that it’s not done. Now you have to keep it up. You have to water and weed and fertilize. And if you don’t do those small daily or weekly tasks, you aren’t going to have much of a garden. It’ll be a mess. You redo the kitchen and it looks gorgeous, but then you have to keep up with the dishes and the dirt or no one will be able to appreciate the new custom cabinets and granite countertops. This whole idea is astoundingly obvious but often overlooked, especially by me.

The Bible addresses the issue of how important small efforts are. Luke 16:10-12 is one of the classic passages on this subject:

Whoever can be trusted with very little can also be trusted with much, and whoever is dishonest with very little will also be dishonest with much. So if you have not been trustworthy in handling worldly wealth, who will trust you with true riches? And if you have not been trustworthy with someone else's property, who will give you property of your own?

Much as I hate to admit it, my failures in dependability with small issues can stain my reputation and keep me from being effective in the larger arena. Just last week I failed to make sure that I had the DVD for the women's Bible class I'm teaching. I thought I had left it at the church but I had really taken it home. I wondered about it at one point but assumed it was where it should be and so didn't check. Sure enough, there we were on Wednesday morning, ready to start our brand-new study, and the DVD wasn't there. Everyone was very gracious about it and we ended up having a good discussion using the materials we had at hand, but I sure didn't start the class out on the right note. Now all the women in the morning class are having to make arrangements to borrow the disc and watch it at some other time. It's a pain, and all because I didn't do the small, obvious thing of making sure I had a vital item with me. I'm tempted to think, Oh well, I'm doing the big thing of taking charge of leading the class. I should get a free pass on the small things. That's not the way it works, though. I'm violating the biblical concept of faithfulness if I dismiss the need for it on every level. I won't be perfect in leading the class, but I'm responsible for doing my best. A class checklist would be a good idea.

There are three principles that play into this area of small endeavors. They're not on the level of moral laws, or laws of physics, but they are general statements of how life usually works (like Murphy's Law). Logical analysis would show that they are simply different ways of saying the same thing, but it's profitable to look at them separately. They certainly apply in many areas but seem to fit in well here:

1. *The law of diminishing returns.*

This law says that the longer you work on something the less you get in return, at least in a task that has a definite limit. I know I keep using kitchen cleanup examples, but allow me to give another one: Imagine a filthy kitchen floor. It has dog bones, bread crusts, and lettuce leaves as the top layer. Then there's a layer of crumbs and other small debris. Then one of gunk composed of dried-up spills. There's tracked-in dirt somewhere in there, too. So you plunge in and clean it up. The first 20 percent that you do will give you about 80 percent of your result: cleaning up the obvious stuff. If you keep going, eventually you'll be down to using a toothpick to clean out the crevices in the corners and the joins of the tile, getting rid of the last percentage of the dirt. It's discouraging to think that you have to get 100% of the mess every single time. Your knees will give out! Far better to stop when the smallest amount of effort gives you the biggest return and to keep on doing that small thing. You can scrub out the corners once a year.

2. *The law of disproportionate effects.*

This law ties right in with the previous one. Small efforts have big results, *if those small efforts are pursued*. Friedrich Nietzsche agreed with this idea: "The essential thing 'in heaven and earth' is ... that there should be a long obedience in the same direction." It isn't the size of the action that's so important; it's the consistency.

3. *The law of unintended consequences.*

The smallest action can have a totally unexpected result. You step out and do a small right thing and a train of blessings follows that you never looked for. You commit a small sin and the opposite happens. You never know how much something will matter. You let a small task slide and suddenly it's a big one.

Feeling in control, caught up, and on target is a great happiness booster. Doing the "next right thing," small as it may be, is a way to get that boost. Here's a short list of small things I can do faithfully. You can surely add items of your own:

1. *Keep up on the ironing.*

I just timed myself, and it takes me about 7 1/2 minutes to iron a shirt. I hate having a basketful of shirts to iron and feeling behind, but I consistently let this small task get away from me, and suddenly my husband needs to get to work and he doesn't have an unrumpled shirt. (Yes, I know that in theory he could iron his own shirts, but it's easier for me to do it. Trust me on this one.) If I shoehorned in ironing a shirt several times a day I'd never get behind; in fact, much of the time that basket would be empty instead of having last week's clothes still sitting there when I do the laundry this week. I actually carried out this idea over the past few days, and right now the basket is indeed empty. What a nice feeling! But tomorrow is laundry day: at least I have a somewhat set schedule for doing that, with Wednesdays being the main clothes day and Saturday being the sheets and towels day. But I have to make sure that I keep on carrying out this idea every week; otherwise the towering pile will come back.

A good term for this type of work is "whittling away." It doesn't have to be all done at once. Think of all the small tasks that need to be done regularly but that pile up quickly if left undone. From my work days I remember two of this type of task in particular: filing and paper grading. I was bad at both of them, although I did eventually come up with a strategy for the papers. Coming back again and again and doing a little bit more can also get big tasks done. Having a master to-do list helps. What can I do with this half hour, say, that will get me farther along the road on one of these items? Again, the list doesn't make you do the work, but it's your go-to source once you've decided to get something done. Oh, you may think, I'd forgotten that I needed to do that. I can work on that now.

2. *Take receipts from that day's credit card spending, check to see that they're accurately entered on the account, and transfer money from the checking account to pay them off.*

I struggle with having a budget and keeping track of what I spend. We use a credit card for our spending because of the protection the card gives us and because of the cash rewards we get, but if I don't

do this small thing regularly we overspend. And that credit card balance makes me very unhappy.

3. *Plan dinner ahead of time.*

I keep saying that I'm going to sit down on Sunday evening and plan the week's menus, then make out a grocery list for Monday. But I never do that. So we kind of limp through the week much of the time. Oh no, I think at around 5:00. What are we going to eat tonight? And it's not that I don't like to cook: I am *known* for my cooking and hospitality. I do a great job at throwing parties and having people over and have just been asked to participate in a workshop at my church on this very subject. But I don't do well on the small, daily necessity of feeding my family, and this failure makes me unhappy, keeps us from eating as well as we should, and causes us to spend more money than we need to on restaurant and takeout food.

I recently ran across a cookbook called *Dinner: A Love Story* and was intrigued by the fact that the author has kept a list of what she's had for dinner for the last *14 years*. I decided that I'd start doing that and see what happened. Well, guess what? That simple, small act has gotten me going on doing a much better job with dinner plans. There's a principle of particle physics that also applies to daily life: the very act of observation changes the thing observed. (In physics this idea has to do with light particles hitting subatomic particles and pushing them around). If I observe what I make for dinner I do a better job. If I keep track of my spending, as mentioned in #2 above, I do better at controlling it. It all has to do with paying attention. So much of the time our problematic actions come about because we're letting small matters fall through the cracks without really noticing.

Here are some small tasks I already do consistently and which add to my happiness:

1. *I keep up on my e-mail.*

I do need to do a better job of limiting my time on this. Not every e-mail needs to be a literary masterpiece. But my inbox is frequently

empty. I answer messages promptly and put them in folders or delete them. It's nice to see the message from Gmail: "Woohoo! You've read all the messages in your inbox."

2. *I water and fertilize my potted plants, both inside and outside.*

They are beautiful and healthy and give me a lift when I look at them. This is a good example of a small task that must be done regularly or you might as well not bother. I remember a funny story from years ago told by the youth pastor at a former church. He and his dad had been given several tasks to do while his mother was out of town, and one was to water her houseplants. Well, they let the house go to wrack and ruin while she was gone, but that was fixable. They ran around like rabbits cleaning it up. But all her plants were dead, and there was nothing they could do about that.

3. *I typically go through the mail and take care of it all at once.*

I throw out or shred the junk, put the magazines where they belong, and put the bills in the bill pile

4. *I watch my weight and don't let it get above a certain point.*

We often discount the small tasks in life when disaster strikes, or when some big obligation looms. But almost always the neglect of the small makes the large problems worse. I was so impressed recently in reading a book about James Garfield's assassination to note that his secretary, Joseph Brown, immediately upon hearing of the attack took charge of the small tasks that needed to be done to accommodate the wounded man. Later he wrote, "Even in moments of greatest misery, homely tasks have to be performed, and perhaps they tide us over the worst."²³ It is always a mistake to let things slide because we're distracted or distressed. I got rather tickled awhile ago when talking to a friend. She and her husband are both teachers, and we were discussing some upcoming social events and how she felt that she should host something but was completely unprepared to do so. "This house hasn't been touched since the beginning of the school year," she said. Her

²³ quoted in Candice Millard, *Destiny of the Republic: A Tale of Madness, Medicine and the Murder of a President* (New York: First Anchor Books, 2012), 172.

statement brought back memories of the state of my own home during the years I taught school. Yes, indeed, it was rarely touched. And my neglect of those relatively small details made my life harder, not easier.

What are some small things you could do today that would make you happier?

Study Questions for Chapter Eight:

1. Do you have a set of chores you do every day, even if you haven't formally written out a list of them? How important is it to you to get that list done every day? What difference does this accomplishment make in your emotional life?
2. Pinpoint one task and one relationship issue that you tend to let slide until you're forced to deal with the situation. How could you change your actions in these areas? Make a real effort over the course of a week to keep up. What was the result? Are you now motivated to keep those efforts going?
3. I list three principles of small endeavors on p. 120: the laws of diminishing returns, unintended consequences, and disproportionate effects. Choose the law that you have seen most prevalent in your life. (For example, do you often waste time trying to do that last 20% of a task when the extra effort gains you nothing?) If the effect you've seen is negative, how could you change what you do in order to avoid that effect? If you're getting something positive from these principles, how could you increase that outcome?