

Surprisingly Simple
21¹ STEPS
to a GREAT
LIFE

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STEP 1

PAY ATTENTION

It had been an overwhelming week.

I was going to school, doing two internships, working two jobs, volunteering at church, repairing a house built in 1902, and trying to finish a complicated doctoral dissertation. I was twenty-six years old and attempting to do much more than was realistic or even rational.

On my way home from church one beautiful spring afternoon, I looked up and noticed I was driving through a red light. Before I could even finish the thought, a car broadsided me. Glass shattered and metal crumpled. I shook my body to make sure everything was working properly. Then I went to the other car and was relieved to find out that no one was hurt.

When the police officer arrived and checked out the accident, he pulled me to the side and gave me a piece of sage advice: “When you’re driving, you’ve got to pay attention.”

I can’t tell you how many times parents and teachers told me that. I heard it in anger, frustration, impatience, and sometimes even in jest. I was surprised to find that Solomon, the wisest man in the world, also used these words. “Pay attention and learn good judgment. . . . My child, pay attention to what I say. Listen carefully to my words.”¹

As a psychologist it is my job to pay attention. As soon as someone walks into my office, I focus on his or her words, tone of voice, emotions, needs, concerns, beliefs, perspective, history, relationships, openness, and body language. This requires focus, and it can be exhausting. Paying attention is not always easy; in fact, sometimes it is hard work. Yet the payoff is that we become aware of an amazing world of causes and consequences just below the surface. Life is incredible. It is rich and inspiring beyond our wildest imagination, but we have to pay attention.

I am convinced that few of us have any idea what is really happening all around us. We don't look or listen with intentionality. J. Oswald Sanders wrote, "Eyes that look are common. Eyes that see are rare." None of us sees as often as we could. We don't take time to slow down, and when we do, we still don't consider very carefully what is right in front of us. Maybe we are too distracted or lazy or worn-out. Maybe we are looking at the wrong things or in the wrong direction. José, Ortega y Gasset said, "Tell me to what you pay attention and I will tell you who you are." Sometimes we just don't know how to pay attention. Yet whatever our reasons, this is something we can change with a bit of effort. Here are four big areas where we all need to pay more attention.

REALITY

Kelly is a sixteen-year-old girl whose parents have just divorced. She feels abandoned, disappointed, scared, and trapped between two people she truly loves. Through her tears she told me, "I want to close my eyes and make it all go away." John is so afraid of the history of cancer in his family that, even though he has some serious medical symptoms, he refuses to go to a physician. Judy and James were so overwhelmed by their financial situation that they didn't open any of their mail for six months—it was just too hard to look at all the bills. During that time their electricity was turned off, their garbage service was discontinued, creditors sued them, and their house went into foreclosure. All three of these stories are true, and in each case their situation got worse because they refused to pay attention to reality.

Situations rarely get better all by themselves. Paying attention allows us to problem solve, get help, consider alternatives, or at least prepare for the worst. In his book *The Next Generation Leader*, Andy Stanley provides some rules about facing reality:

- Thou shalt not pretend.
- Thou shalt not turn a blind eye.
- Thou shalt not exaggerate.
- Thou shalt not shoot the bearer of bad news.

- Thou shalt not ignore constructive criticism.
- Thou shalt not isolate thyself.

Each of these rules is critical to facing reality. To ignore any one of them is to encourage disaster at all levels—cognitive, emotional, social, physical, and ultimately, spiritual. Situations rarely get better by themselves. If you can find the courage to face reality and take action, you will increase your chances of improving your situation and discovering a positive outcome.

An honest and correct perspective of reality protects us from avoidable disasters. It also keeps us on a path that leads to growth—a growth that fills our lives with wisdom, joy, peace, and faith, which are more valuable than all the wealth this world has to offer. M. Scott Peck writes in his best-selling book *The Road Less Traveled* that “our view of reality is like a map with which to negotiate the terrain of life. If the map is true and accurate, we will generally know where we are. . . . If the map is false and inaccurate, we generally will be lost.” So open your eyes, look around, and pay attention to reality.

OPPORTUNITIES

Life is full of incredible opportunities, but most people never pay enough attention even to see them. Every day various doors of opportunity stand before us—sometimes they are frightening, inconvenient, or out of our comfort zone. Several years ago I was approached to do a daily call-in radio talk show. My schedule was full, and I had no experience with radio. I had been a successful psychologist for twenty years and had spoken to hundreds of groups, but quite frankly, the idea made me nervous. What if I was on the air and didn't know what to say? What if I made a mistake and a hundred thousand people heard it? What if I sounded foolish or uninformed? The what-if's overwhelmed me until I asked myself, *What if God just opened a door of opportunity? Are you willing to trust him and walk through it or are you going to slam it in his face?* I'm glad to say I walked through it and had an absolutely fantastic time for four and a half years, until God shut that door and opened another.

A wonderful proverb says, “When God shuts a door, he opens a window.” We have all had doors closed on us, and that can be a painful experience. But a closed door simply means a new opportunity somewhere else. As

Alexander Graham Bell, the inventor of the telephone, once said, “When one door closes, another opens. But we often look so long and so regretfully upon the closed door that we do not see the one which has opened for us.” We are surrounded with opportunities beyond our greatest dreams. God is patiently waiting to bless us. All we need to do is pay attention and seize the opportunities before us. Opportunities come in at least four varieties:

- ① **Easy opportunities:** things we feel competent at and capable of
- ② **Challenging opportunities:** things which stretch us and are out of our comfort zone
- ③ **Overwhelming opportunities:** things we can’t do without the expertise or assistance of others
- ④ **Supernatural opportunities:** things that seem impossible (We know we can’t do these things without God.)

We need to have all four of these types of opportunities in our life. Unfortunately, many of us keep gravitating to the easy opportunities, rarely slipping into the challenging or overwhelming areas. Because of this, we live stunted lives. We forget those incredible promises from the Bible: words like “With God everything is possible” and “I can do everything through Christ, who gives me strength.”²

Knowing that God is near, we can face any and every opportunity, even if it leaves us uneasy or fearful. In this spirit, Grace Speare encourages us to “welcome every problem as an opportunity. Each moment is the great challenge, the best thing that ever happened to you. The more difficult the problem, the greater the challenge in working it out.”

Every moment is a great opportunity with the possibility of being the best thing that ever happened to you. If we are willing to look to God, we will find him waiting to take us to unforgettable places of excitement and fulfillment and opportunities. So as a guard told the prophet Jeremiah when he released him from captivity, “The whole land is before you—go wherever you like.”³

BEAUTY AND WONDER

Yesterday I went on a hike with my two sons, Dylan and Dusty, up the small creek behind our house. It was a sunny February day with a frosty

nip to the air, but we were determined to go exploring. We battled through brambles, climbed over mossy rocks, and waded across chilly waters. We laughed and joked and had a great time. About a mile upstream, all three of us suddenly grew silent. We had just entered a secluded place where the creek cascaded and the mist lingered in the air. A small grove of stately cedars guarded the multiple shades of green ferns and ivy. As the sunlight filtered through the trees at the perfect angle that illuminated the water, we knew this spot was sacred. It was beautiful, incredibly beautiful.

Creation loves to surprise us in a thousand breathtaking ways that touch our hearts and invigorate our senses. The incandescent splash of oranges, yellows, and purples as the sun sets on the distant hills. The gentle melody of songbirds backed by the crashing waves of an early morning in Puerto Vallarta. The sweet and tangy strawberry freshly picked from my backyard in Oregon. The delightful fragrance of gardenia, plumeria, or jasmine on a perfectly clear star-studded Hawaiian night. The warmth of the sun on your face on a chilly morning or a brisk, cool breeze on a hot afternoon. As fourteen-year-old Anne Frank wrote in her diary, “Think of all the beauty that’s still left in and around you and be happy!”

Nature is amazing. We are daily surrounded by its awe, wonder, majesty, splendor, power, and terror, but so often we fail to pay attention. Jesus tells us to “look at the lilies of the field. . . .” It’s like he’s telling us to stop and think about the simplest aspects of nature—the details, the fine points, the nonessentials.

A friend once asked me the purpose of all the unique, beautiful flowers that bloom in unknown meadows and are never seen by humans. My mind flashed to a hillside I stumbled upon off a narrow gravel road at the Arctic Circle in northern Iceland. It was ablaze with thousands of brilliant yellow-and-blue wildflowers. I wonder whether God creates all this beauty for his own enjoyment as well as ours. Anne Dillard wrote, “Beauty and grace are performed whether or not we will sense them. The least we can do is try to be there . . . so that creation need not play to an empty house.” I want to be there, and I want to pay attention.

We have lost our sense of beauty and wonder. We have grown calloused and complacent. We have become so preoccupied with ourselves that we miss the glory of nature. Paul Simon said, “This is a world of

miracles and wonders.” Yet we walk amid the beauty, unaware of its magnificence and message.

Henry Ward Beecher wrote that “beauty may be said to be God’s trademark in creation.” Yet we often pay no attention to his handiwork and then wonder why we can’t feel his presence. We need to pray with Rabbi Joshua Abraham Heschel: “Dear Lord, grant me the grace of wonder. Surprise me, amaze me, awe me in every crevice of your universe. Each day enrapture me with your marvelous things without number. I do not ask to see the reason for it all; I only ask to share the wonder of it all.”

GOD MOMENTS

The book of Genesis tells the story of Jacob’s dream, in which he saw a stairway that was filled with angels and reached from earth to heaven. When he awoke, he declared, “Surely the Lord is in this place, and I wasn’t even aware of it!”⁴ Jacob had a “God moment”—a point in time when he was keenly aware of God reaching out and touching his life. Most of us have had moments when we sensed that God had just done something amazing in our lives or when we sensed that God was present with us. Unfortunately, we frequently don’t pay attention to these moments, so they come and go and are often forgotten. They should be remembered, treasured, and shared with others. They are an important part of our story and a significant reminder of God’s grace.

Jim Caviezel will never forget his God moments. Jim played Jesus in the 2004 Mel Gibson movie *The Passion of the Christ*. He dangled nearly naked on a cross for weeks in bone-chilling winds during the filming. He was struck by lightning during a re-creation of the Sermon on the Mount. A fourteen-inch gash was ripped into his back when the soldiers missed their mark during scenes of Jesus’ scourging. He dislocated his shoulder while carrying the cross. Through all of this he became aware of God’s presence and his protection. Jim said that these experiences “forced me into the arms of God. That’s the only place I can go.”

In his book *The God Moment Principle*, Alan Wright discusses the following five kinds of God moments:

- ① **Amazing Rescues:** moments when God protected us, healed us, rescued us, or made a way out for us

- ② **Holy Attractions:** moments when God led us to a healthier path, enabled us to resist a temptation, or inspired us to take a higher road
- ③ **Unearned Blessings:** moments when God gave us an unexpected blessing or an undeserved gift
- ④ **Revealed Truths:** moments when God spoke to us through something we heard, saw, read, or felt, and conveyed truth about himself or our life
- ⑤ **Valuable Adversities:** moments when God sustained us through difficult times or made us stronger through tests of adversity

If we pay attention to all the God moments in our life, we will be lifted above everyday, ordinary existence to a level of greater meaning, purpose, and perspective. Julian of Norwich, a fourteenth-century English writer, stated, “It is God’s will for us to pay attention to all his past acts. . . . Only then shall we rejoice in God.” God moments, whether big or small, give us a more accurate and meaningful perspective on life, while reminding us of his never-ending perspective.

THE SMALL STUFF

Mr. Crammer was my sixth-grade teacher. He was big and strong and had the meanest throwing arm I’d ever seen. One afternoon I was sitting in the back row telling jokes with my friend Dennis as Mr. Crammer was trying to teach us something about algebra. I hated algebra. Suddenly an eraser flew across the classroom and hit me smack-dab in the center of my forehead.

“Steve,” came his booming voice as I rubbed my head, “I would strongly suggest that you pay attention.”

“Yes, sir,” I replied.

Too often we miss the important stuff of life because we don’t pay attention. In the book *God Is in the Small Stuff*, Bruce and Stan insist that “if you want to improve in any area of your life, you have to pay attention to the small stuff.” Sometimes the details and seemingly insignificant pieces of life can have an extremely significant impact. So besides what’s been listed above, here are a few more things to pay attention to:

- the details
- people and relationships
- where you've been
- where you're going
- lessons you've learned
- consequences
- your words and tone of voice

I guess I'd also better add red lights and flying erasers. Yes, Mr. Crammer, I was listening, and I will work harder to pay attention.