

RANDAL A. WRIGHT
WITH SCOTT O'NEIL



CROSS ROADS



**CHOOSE THE
HARDER RIGHT**



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CHAPTER 1

CHANGE YOURSELF TO CHANGE YOUR WORLD

Once any of us conclude—"That's just the way I am," we give up our ability to change. We might as well raise the white flag, put down our weapons, concede the battle, and just surrender—any prospect of winning is lost. While some of us may think that does not describe us, perhaps every one of us demonstrates by at least one or two bad habits, "That's just the way I am."⁴

Elder Donald L. Hallstrom

Merrilee Boyack

I was a freshman at Brigham Young University when my life profoundly changed in a matter of minutes. I was on campus a week early for a seminar. I was lonely and homesick. I'm talking about the terrible, ugly, physical, full-on, crying homesick. One day I wandered through the student center and saw a large group of people in the main auditorium. I sat in the corner out of curiosity. Up front a man was teaching the large group. At one point in his presentation, he called up two young men from the audience. He whispered something in the first young man's ear. That young man then walked across the stage and began waving. With a big smile, he pointed to people in the audience. Then the teacher whispered something to the second young man, who slowly shuffled across the stage hanging his head and looking away from the audience. The contrast between the two young men was glaring.

The teacher then asked those of us in the audience a compelling question that I have never forgotten. He asked, "Which of these young men would you want to meet and talk to?"

Everyone called out, "The first one," with someone shouting, "We wouldn't want to interrupt the pity party of the second guy!"

Another called out, "The first guy was super friendly!"

Then the teacher asked, "Which of these young men is acting with his true personality?"

We were stumped. How could we know the answer to that question? They were both total strangers.

The teacher then taught, "You had no clue who was truly friendly or truly shy. You were just reacting to how they acted. This is called the Act as If principle. If you act a certain way, people will interact with you as if that is who you really are. Eventually that will become your true personality."

That day I felt as if a light from heaven was shining down! My life was changed in that moment. I understood, finally, how to change. I walked out of that class smiling and waving to people across the campus—pretending as if I were an outgoing, confident

young woman even though I was anything but that. A strange thing happened as I watched: everyone waved and smiled back at me. In three days, I kid you not, I had a marriage proposal. And no, I obviously didn't marry the guy, but that experience reinforced the power of the Act as If principle. That one simple lesson has profoundly impacted every single aspect of my life. I still use it forty years later. In minutes, I was taught a principle that changed everything for me.



Change Can Be Difficult

Merrilee had a life-changing experience by using a simple yet powerful technique first proposed by American philosopher, psychologist, and Harvard professor William James. He suggested, “If you want a quality, act as if you already had it.”⁵ In Merrilee’s case, she was shy and homesick and needed to act as if she was outgoing and well adjusted. Continuing this principle of acting a certain way should in time make this character trait become part of you.

Merrilee fully embraced this concept and applied it to a weakness she was struggling with and was “changed in that moment.” Her experience was something that perhaps many desire but few succeed in doing. Fortunately, Merrilee picked an area of life to change that resulted in instant rewards.

Obviously, not all change will come as quickly and as dramatically as Merrilee’s did that day. For example, if people want to change their eating habits and lose excessive weight, it will take time and considerable effort. Change is seldom easy or instant, but the results are often well worth the effort. IT industrialist Narayana Murthy explained, “Growth is painful. Change is painful. But, nothing is as painful as staying stuck where you do not belong.”⁶

Randal: A few years ago, I was skimming through old journal entries to see whether I was becoming a better person over time. Two entries caught my attention and taught me that change is not easy, and overcoming some weaknesses may be more difficult than overcoming other weaknesses. I have also learned that temporary change is far more common than permanent change. Both entries refer to a program designed to help people overcome self-defeating behaviors. The program was developed by psychology professor Jonathan Chamberlain. The two entries are almost exactly fifteen years apart.

Entry 1: I just finished reading a book, *Eliminating Your Sdbs: Self-Defeating Behaviors*, by Jonathan Chamberlain. The idea is to choose a behavior to work on that you feel is holding you back in your progression. Dr. Chamberlain and other researchers have spent years developing techniques to help people change these behaviors. It is a powerful program. I chose procrastination as the self-defeating behavior that I would most like to eliminate in my life. . . . I feel good that I have accomplished a great deal since beginning the program this week.

Entry 2: Lately I have been reading a book called *Eliminating Self-Defeating Behaviors* by Jonathan Chamberlain. It has been sitting in my bookcase untouched

for years. I remember working on some self-defeating behaviors long ago, but I can't remember what they were. Something told me that I should go through the process again and try to eliminate a behavior that seems to be holding me back. The biggest problem I have right now in my life is that I'm a huge procrastinator. I put off everything you can think of. I was very aware today of my problem and how much it is holding me back.

I was a little shocked to realize the irony of making a great deal of progress eliminating procrastination from my life only to discover I was still struggling with it years later. I don't know what happened, but it appears I started off with a bang, procrastinated or let life get in the way, and then forgot I was even working to rid it from my life. At first I was down on myself, but I realized that some weaknesses are just part of our natural man tendencies and overcoming them will take intense effort and the Lord's help. President Dieter F. Uchtdorf pointed out, "God wants to help us to eventually turn all of our weaknesses into strengths, but He knows that this is a long-term goal. He wants us to become perfect, and if we stay on the path of discipleship, one day we will. It's OK that you're not quite there yet. Keep working on it, but stop punishing yourself."⁷

Many who want change are familiar with the remarkable promise made by Moroni. In the Book of Mormon we read, "And if men come unto me I will show unto them their weakness. I give unto men weakness that they may be humble; and my grace is sufficient for all men that humble themselves before me; for if they humble themselves before me, and have faith in me, then will I make weak things become strong unto them" (Ether 12:27).

Act as If

Benjamin Franklin was a brilliant polymath who became one of the United States' Founding Fathers. In 1726, at age twenty, he was inspired to embark on a personal improvement project to reach moral perfection. He said, "It was about this time I conceived the bold and arduous project of arriving at moral perfection."⁸ His plan identified thirteen virtues he most desired and the things he needed to do to act as if he had that virtue.

Thirteen Virtues

1. Temperance: Eat not to dullness; drink not to elevation.
2. Silence: Speak not but what may benefit others or yourself; avoid trifling conversation.
3. Order: Let all your things have their places; let each part of your business have its time.
4. Resolution: Resolve to perform what you ought; perform without fail what you resolve.

5. Frugality: Make no expense but to do good to others or yourself, i.e., waste nothing.
6. Industry: Lose no time; be always employed in something useful; cut off all unnecessary actions.
7. Sincerity: Use no hurtful deceit; think innocently and justly, and, if you speak, speak accordingly.
8. Justice: Wrong none by doing injuries or omitting the benefits that are your duty.
9. Moderation: Avoid extremes; forbear resenting injuries so much as you think they deserve.
10. Cleanliness: Tolerate no uncleanness in body, clothes, or habitation.
11. Tranquility: Be not disturbed at trifles, or at accidents common or unavoidable.
12. Chastity: Rarely use venery but for health or offspring, never to dullness, weakness, or the injury of your own or another's peace or reputation.
13. Humility: Imitate Jesus and Socrates.

He went on to say, "I determined to give a week's strict attention to each of the virtues successively. Thus, in the first week, my great guard was to avoid every the least offense against Temperance, leaving the other virtues to their ordinary chance, only marking every evening the faults of the day." Soon after beginning his project, Franklin realized that moral perfection was significantly more difficult than he had anticipated. He noted, "While my care was employ'd in guarding against one fault, I was often surprised by another."⁹

However, Franklin did not throw in the towel because of the difficulty of his quest to change and improve. He tracked his progress in a small book to make sure he was focused on his desired virtues. Every morning he asked, "What good shall I do this day?" He then made out a to-do list of things that came into his mind. At night, he examined himself by asking, "What good have I done today?" Although Franklin freely admitted that he did not always live up to the virtues he desired, his attempt made him a giant among men and one of the most admired and respected people in American history. He was a printer, philosopher, editor, author, diplomat, statesman, scientist, wealthy businessman, inventor (Franklin stove, bifocals, swim fins, lightning rod), musician (violin, harp, and guitar), and coauthor of the Declaration of Independence. Franklin was also the first president of what would become the University of Pennsylvania. His focus on changing himself for the better made him a role model for generations to come.

Scott: Several years ago, I was promoted to senior vice president of Team Marketing & Business Operations for the NBA. At thirty-four, I was inexperienced but full of confidence, commitment, and force of will. Shortly after my promotion, we had a board

meeting scheduled. I had been going to the NBA board meetings for three years and thoroughly enjoyed them. This one proved to be a little bit different. David Stern, the NBA commissioner, summoned me to his office a few weeks before the meeting to inform me that I would be speaking in front of my bosses David Stern and Adam Silver, my peers at the NBA league office, thirty team owners, and several team CEOs. In so many words, he told me not to screw this one up. What could possibly go wrong?

I was nervous. So nervous that I hustled to the bathroom before I had to speak because I had a feeling I was going to lose my lunch. In the meeting, I was introduced but couldn't really hear anything as I walked up to the podium. I was sweating. I read for about twenty minutes, only looking up occasionally at the audience. I don't think they cared much about what I was lecturing on. I fielded a question or two and shuffled back to my seat. Shortly thereafter, we took a break, and people patted me on the back, said I did great, and wished me well.

The reality is that I was awful. I vowed never to put myself in that vulnerable position again. Tony Robbins said, "By changing nothing, nothing changes."¹⁰ So I decided to change. From that point on, I began to act as if I were an engaging public speaker. I worked, prepared, practiced, and forced feedback from interested parties just like a professional speaker would do. I vowed to never shake, sweat, or read a speech again, because that is not what professional speakers do.

I recently gave a keynote address at a large conference held in Chicago. There was no sweating, nor reading, but there was a lot of storytelling and emotion. This was not born into me, but once I began to act the part of a public speaker, I began to see improvement. I believe this principle will help change not only behavior but attitude also.

But you must desire a change in your life, or there will be no improvement. Andy Warhol declared, "When people are ready to, they change. They never do it before then, and sometimes they die before they get around to it. You can't make them change if they don't want to, just like when they do want to, you can't stop them."¹¹

You Can Change

Years ago, I attended a sales training meeting for my occupation. One of the presenters talked about human nature and said something that has always stuck with me. He suggested, "A person twenty-one years old or older will continue to do in the future as they have done in the past unless they have a spiritual experience or brain surgery." Even though he said it tongue in cheek, with a big smile, I'm not so sure his conjecture is far off. Change can be difficult, and so often when a person does change, it is short lived.

Natural man tendencies seem to be a source of struggle and frustration for most of us. The Apostle Paul explained, "And lest I should be exalted above measure through the abundance of the revelations, there was given to me a thorn in the flesh, the messenger of Satan to buffet me, lest I should be exalted above measure" (2 Corinthians 12:7). Apparently, mortality is meant to be difficult. As Paul discovered, at least one issue may be a constant thorn to deal with.

I once talked to a friend I'll call Sarah about her endless struggle with weight. She was depressed and down on herself because of so many failures. Only a few years earlier, she concentrated on eating only healthy food and exercising regularly, and she lost a

considerable amount of weight. During that time, she experienced more happiness and confidence than ever before. Many can relate to what happened next. Once she reached her ideal weight, she began to allow herself a few “free days” to eat whatever she wanted. Within a short time, she completely backslid and ended up gaining the weight back, plus even more. As we talked, she mentioned how disappointed she was in herself and that she was truly miserable. I asked, “If eating healthy and exercising led to weight loss and brought you so much happiness and confidence, why did you quit?” She tried to answer but ended up crying.

President Monson said, “The battle for self-discipline may leave you a bit bruised and battered but always a better person. Self-discipline is a rigorous process at best; too many of us want it to be effortless and painless. Should temporary setbacks afflict us, a very significant part of our struggle for self-discipline is the determination and the courage to try again.”¹²

It seems as if something holds everyone back. Stephen West was an attorney and former senior vice president and general counsel for Marriott International Inc. In a meeting I attended, he spoke about the importance of learning from our experiences and continually improving. To illustrate, he said he and other executives in his company met to consider candidates to fill an important leadership position. Someone suggested that a longtime employee be offered the job since he had twenty-six years of experience with the company. Another executive spoke up, “Actually, he only has one year of experience.” Other committee members were puzzled; they all knew how long this man had been with the company. The executive then explained, “He has one year of experience repeated twenty-five times.” Because the man had not improved himself over the years, he was passed over for a major promotion.

Change and improvement over time brings opportunity while the lack of it closes doors. Even making consistent small changes can add up to huge results. However, to be successful in making permanent change, your desire to improve must be greater than your desire to remain the same. And if by chance you occasionally fail at your goal to change, get back up and try again. President Monson taught, “One of God’s greatest gifts to us is the joy of trying again, for no failure ever need be final.”¹³

Be Open to Advice

Randal: Recently I read a magazine article about Aaron Franklin, owner of Franklin Barbecue, which is recognized as one of the best barbecue restaurants in America. His customers often endure a three- to four-hour average wait time to be served. In the article the writer stated, “Aaron Franklin’s favorite barbecue (other than his own, presumably) is Valentina’s Tex Mex BBQ.”¹⁴ I made a note of this recommendation and stopped by Valentina’s, waited fifteen minutes, and got one of the best sliced beef sandwiches I’ve ever eaten. Later, I took my wife, Wendy, there and encouraged her to order the sliced beef sandwich, recalling how good it was. Instead, going against my expert advice, she ordered a pulled pork sandwich. I assured her she’d made a major mistake.

Several months later, she and I again stopped by Valentina’s on our way to a movie theater. This time I strongly urged her to try the beef, but she again went against my advice and ordered the pulled pork sandwich. The thought occurred to me that one reason people don’t change is that they refuse to listen to the good advice of those who

know more than they do. We got our sandwiches to go. Since she was driving, I ate mine on the way to the movie. I expressed that the beef sandwich was even better than the last time and probably the best barbecue sandwich I had ever eaten. That's saying a lot because I've eaten barbecue in cities all across the nation. I reiterated how she really needed to be more open to suggestions and how she'd missed out by not getting the beef.

We arrived at the theater just in time for the movie to start, so she put her sandwich in her purse to eat in the nearly empty theater. After finding our seats, she pulled out her sandwich just as I left to buy popcorn. When I returned, she was visibly irritated with me and whispered, "You ate my sandwich! This is the beef sandwich you ordered!" There was no way out of it. I had mistakenly eaten her pulled pork sandwich, which turned out to be the best barbecue sandwich ever. I learned that night that we often fail to improve because we refuse to listen to advice from others, thinking we have it all figured out ourselves. If we never try others' suggestions, we have no idea whether this advice will benefit us or not. My friend Chris said, "Everyone should eat vanilla ice cream occasionally so they can appreciate rocky road!"

Live Life in Crescendo

I once observed a group of middle school-aged boys acting silly. At one point a girl their age sitting in front of them turned around and exclaimed, "You boys are so premature!" One of the boys stated, "It's *immature*, Julie, not *premature*." She replied, "Whatever the name—you are it." The word she used to describe the boys that night seemed quite accurate—premature!

Most individuals probably fit in the premature category in at least some aspects of life, and that is not a bad thing. It just means our greatest works lie in the future after we obtain a little more maturity and experience. Every year we should notice personal improvement and change for the better. In music, this concept is called a crescendo, meaning a gradual increase in loudness or intensity.

An unfortunate occurrence among people retired from full-time employment is using their newfound leisure time for unproductive activities. Retirees generally spend over four hours a day watching television, an hour a day reading, and forty-two minutes a day thinking and relaxing.¹⁵ At a time when individuals have the most experience, wisdom, and potential to grow and help make the world a better place, many stagnate. While relaxation and recreation are necessary for a well-balanced life, surely they should not be the major focus of life. Imagine what our country could be if everyone had the philosophy that Stephen R. Covey made a part of his life. Here is what he said about the retirement years:

I am now 76 years old and could easily retire. But I'm not retired and I don't plan to retire. I don't believe in retirement. Why people ask me? Simply, I have a life motto. It is: Live life in crescendo!

Living life in crescendo to me means that my most important work is always ahead of me, never behind me. I believe that "where much is given, much is required." I have a sacred stewardship to contribute and not to retire to leisure. . . .

Start living your life in crescendo—and remember your most important work is ahead of you, not behind you! There is so much more to do, to learn and contribute.¹⁶

Do Your Very Best

Randal: While serving in a volunteer leadership position, I had several opportunities to talk to Kasi, a high school student. At one point, I asked how she was doing in school. She said that everything was going well overall, but she was struggling in her Spanish class. We discussed what options she had to improve her Spanish grades. Her first suggestion was that she could quit watching so much television and spend more time studying. She then said that her friend Julie was good at Spanish and had volunteered to tutor her. Before we finished our conversation, she committed to try her hardest to earn an A on a test that was coming up in a couple of weeks. I was excited to see if she would put in the required work, knowing she could not only make excellent grades but also feel better about herself. President Monson explained, “Our responsibility is to rise from mediocrity to competence, from failure to achievement. Our task is to become our best selves.”¹⁷

I saw Kasi twice before she took the test and asked her if she was doing what she had agreed to do as far as using her television time to study and having Julie tutor her. She assured me that she was doing what she had committed to. The weekend after the test, I was eager to hear about the test results and ask what lessons she had learned from her hard work. I asked her how she did on the test as soon as I saw her. I was shocked when she said, “I made a forty-five out of one hundred.” Her answer was so unexpected I didn’t even know what to say. I couldn’t believe she had studied so hard and still failed the test.

I thought long and hard about lessons I could learn from her experience. After several weeks, a powerful message came to me. I learned that in some areas of life we can change and improve quickly just as Merrilee did by acting as if she were outgoing. In other areas, change can be difficult, but with determination and hard work those weaknesses can be turned into strengths. Then there are some things that are nearly impossible to acquire or change no matter how much a person wants it or how hard he or she tries. If you are born to be short in stature, it does no good to spend time trying to be tall. While I’m still confident Kasi could learn Spanish with enough sacrifice and hard work, surely it is possible and okay that learning languages is not one of her gifts. Over time she found that she had a knack for science and is now a registered nurse. Others perhaps have an easier time learning languages but find science nearly impossible to understand. In the scriptures we learn, “For all have not every gift given unto them; for there are many gifts, and to every man is given a gift by the Spirit of God” (Doctrine and Covenants 46:11).

Of course, there are plenty of examples where people have demonstrated that with determination and hard work they can acquire skills thought to be beyond their reach. On the other hand, isn’t it okay if some people who have not been blessed with a gift in one area spend time improving in other areas within their reach? A quote often attributed to Albert Einstein says, “Everybody is a genius. But if you judge a fish by its ability to climb a tree, it will live its whole life believing that it is stupid.”

The key is doing the best you can with what you have been given, while not getting down on yourself because you don't have the same gifts and talents that others have. In Matthew 25 we read about the parable of the talents. Most people are familiar with the details of the parable, where a man gives one of his servants five talents, another two, and another only one. The servant with five talents worked hard and obtained five more. The one given two went out, did the best he could, and gained two more. However, the servant who only received one talent buried his talent in the earth. To the first two servants the Lord offered his highest honor by saying, "Well done, thou good and faithful servant: thou hast been faithful over a few things, I will make thee ruler over many things: enter thou into the joy of thy lord" (Matthew 25:21). But to the one who buried the one talent he had been given, the Lord reserved a serious rebuke: "And cast ye the unprofitable servant into outer darkness: there shall be weeping and gnashing of teeth" (Matthew 25:30).

It is interesting that the servant who only gained two extra talents received the exact reward as the one who gained an extra five. Perhaps the Lord is saying if you will do the best you can with what you have been given, you will receive an eternal reward for your effort to change, improve, live life in crescendo, and, in scriptural terms, endure to the end.

Invitation to Act

1. Determine a weakness you most want to change to a strength and write it down.
2. Ask yourself why you have this weakness, and keep a journal of related thoughts, feelings, and actions.
3. Make a list of the long- and short-range prices you pay for holding onto this weakness.
4. List the positive things you miss out on because this weakness is holding you back.
5. Ask yourself every morning what good you should accomplish that day and write your thoughts. At night go over the list and ask if you accomplished your goal.

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