

JUST ONE MORE

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Eight years ago, during an extremely difficult phase of my professional life, I walked into a CrossFit gym for the first time. I have been regularly walking into CrossFit gyms ever since. In important ways, CrossFit has changed my life.

For those of you not familiar with CrossFit, it's a high-intensity and constantly varied exercise program combining functional movements from sports such as gymnastics and weightlifting with various cardio exercises such as rowing, skiing, and running. The program typically takes place in dedicated CrossFit gyms, where CrossFitters gather for hour-long group sessions.

CrossFit focuses on functional movements — movements that enable you to do what needs to be done in your life. The goal isn't to look good at the beach, which is why CrossFit gyms typically have no mirrors. Also, I've never done a single bicep curl in eight years of CrossFit training. Bicep curls aren't functional movements — unless you spend your days sitting at a bar, in which case bicep strength should be the least of your worries.

For my part, I like CrossFit programming because of its variety. In more than 1,500 sessions over the past eight years, I don't think I've ever encountered two that were exactly the same. The variety keeps things interesting.

I also like the intensity of CrossFit. While everything can be scaled to each individual's fitness level, the goal is for everyone to work exhaustingly hard. If the movement in question is a back squat, for example, the person on your right may shoulder a 135-pound barbell, while the person on your left may shoulder a length of PVC pipe — or nothing at all.

I also like the camaraderie of the classes. People tend to show up for the same sessions each week, and over time, they learn to know each other. If one of the regulars is missing, someone usually follows up to find out why.

I also like the accountability that's built into the program. Every movement or activity gets weighed, timed, or measured in some other way. If you kept track of how you performed previously in a particular movement or workout, you can try to improve your effort this time, even if slightly.

Day to day and week to week, the improvement usually turns out to be exceedingly slight. You're probably familiar with barbell plates in the typical weights — 10 pounds, 25 pounds, 45 pounds, and so on. Barbell plates also come in 5-pound and 2½-pound increments.

A company called Micro-Gainz makes barbell plates in even smaller increments — down to one-quarter of a pound, only 4 ounces. By placing micro plates on either end of a barbell, you can increase your lifts by one-half pound at a time, which isn't much of an improvement. But an increase of one-half pound per week over a period of, say, eight years yields a cumulative increase of 160 pounds, which is a vast improvement. The motto of the Micro-Gainz company is "Never Plateau." Yes, I have the t-shirt.

CrossFit has taught me a number of important life lessons, but none more important than recognizing that achieving big changes in life results from repeatedly making tiny changes over time.

This principle, which more generally can be called incrementalism, applies to more than fitness. It also applies to politics and social policy.

The Economist magazine begins its review of a new book on incrementalism by pointing out that revolutionaries have all the best slogans. They want everything they want, and they typically want it right now. Advocates of gradual change, by contrast, find it difficult to come up with a good rallying cry. No crowd ever worked itself into a frenzy calling for things to change little by little as conditions allow.

Nevertheless, the Economist says, incrementalism works, as Greg Berman and Aubrey Fox argue their new book titled *Gradual: The Case for Incremental Change in a Radical Age*: "Revolutionaries promise paradise but often bring about bloodshed, bread lines and book-banning. Humanity has grown more prosperous by making a long series of often modest improvements to an unsatisfactory status quo. The Industrial Revolution, despite its name, was not a single, sudden event but thousands of cumulative innovations spread across nearly a century."

"Over time," Berman and Fox say, "incremental reforms can add up to something truly transformative."

They cite Social Security as an example. During the Great Depression, two proposals were circulated to help support people who were elderly or otherwise in need. One represented a big change that could be enacted quickly. A California physician named Francis Townsend proposed that every American over 60 should be given a monthly pension equal to \$3,500 in today's money — on the condition that they quit their jobs immediately and spent their full pension each month. This, according to Townsend, would free up jobs for young people and stimulate the economy.

The Townsend proposal was so attractive that nearly 20% of Americans over 60 signed up for it. Fortunately, Berman and Fox say, the plan was abandoned, because it would've been a disaster. By one estimate, it would have cost half the nation's wealth without any means of funding it.

The other proposal was, in the authors' words, "slow to develop, internally contradictory, and seemed hopelessly inadequate to the urgency of the moment." President Franklin Roosevelt's so-called "Social Security" law of 1935 paid benefits to retired workers, but the benefits were roughly tied to the contributions they had made during their working years.

The program began slowly — the first benefits weren't paid out for five years — and it took 15 years of incremental modifications before Social Security assumed more or less the shape it has today. But because benefits were tied to contributions, the program became unassailably popular. As Berman and Fox point out, recipients embraced Social Security because they believed their benefits had been earned, and thus they would be furious if their benefits were threatened. Today, Social Security is often referred to as the third rail of politics. If you touch it, you die.

Berman and Fox admit that incrementalism can seem slow. But, they say, small changes are more likely than dramatic ones to achieve a consensus across the political spectrum. Small changes are also less likely to provoke a backlash and wind up being reversed.

Incrementalism works — not only in fitness and in public policy, but also in dealing with the emotional complexities of our individual lives. I've mentioned before a book by the romance novelist Holly Jacobs, but the story she tells of a woman named Lexie McCain bears repeating. It illustrates how new beginnings often come not all at once, but gradually — one incremental step at a time.

As Jacobs tells the story, Lexie and her husband had divorced after their daughter Grace died young of cancer, driven apart by shared suffering rather than united by it. When time and circumstances eventually brought their paths together once again, they gave marriage another try, a fledgling triumph of hope over history that soon came to an even more painful end.

In the wake of these devastating losses, Lexie retreated to her family's cabin deep in the woods. She lived there alone, tending her garden and weaving tapestries at her loom. She often walked in the woods with her dog Angus, seeking solace in his bounding company and in the play of light and shadow among the trees. Once in a while, she would venture into town to buy a few essentials. But otherwise, Lexie withdrew completely from the world.

Then, one Monday night after four months alone, she walked two miles into town and took a seat on a barstool in a tavern called The Corner Bar. She chose the stool furthest from the door, hoping to be left alone. She ordered one Killian's Red draught from the bartender, a man named Sam. She drank the beer slowly and then walked back home. This night in town became a routine: always the same bar stool, always one Killian's Red and never more than one, and always on Monday nights.

Why Mondays? Lexie explained, "Fridays and Saturdays were for dates and desperate people looking to 'hook up' with others. I wasn't dating, nor was I interested in hooking up. Sundays were for church, and it seemed wrong to go to a bar that day, even though I wasn't attending church anymore... God and I weren't on speaking terms. Still, no bars for me on Sundays. Midweek was filled with work around the cottage. So, Mondays were my day."

After six months of serving Lexie on Monday nights without question or comment, Sam's curiosity overcame her obvious reticence. He paused before he set her

beer down and said, “Tell me just one thing.” Lexie decided that telling him one thing about herself was easier than arguing with him, so she told him her name.

Thus began a new pattern on Monday nights, to which Sam and Lexie adhered faithfully. “Just one thing,” Sam would say as he served her each week, and she would respond by telling him yet another thing about herself. She soon began asking him to say just one thing in return.

Eventually, the things they said to one another began to describe not only the superficial facts about their lives, but also the deep suffering they had endured — she as a mother and wife, and he as a badly-wounded combat veteran.

The story of Lexie and Sam — the book is titled *Just One Thing* — is a story of tragedy and healing. It’s about finding the courage to step over the line that divides what’s past from what’s possible. It’s about realizing that the tipping point that moves us from despair to hope doesn’t require us to make one great leap. It only requires us to make one small step — and then another, and then another.

Near the end of the book, Lexie says, “I know I will suffer other losses, but I can trust that I will mourn and recover... Sometimes the journey to forgiving yourself — to finding yourself — starts with one person, one step... with just one thing.”

The qualities and capabilities we need to be able to function effectively in life almost never develop all at once. They come as we are patiently persistent, slowly building the physical, emotional, and spiritual strength we need to do the work that is ours to do.

Sometimes when I’m midway through a CrossFit session, especially when the going gets tough and I’m not feeling the flow, I remember a quote that continually circulates in the CrossFit community: “Do today what others won’t, so you can do tomorrow what others can’t.” With that in mind, I try again — just one more.

I don’t know what part of your life needs to be transformed, or what part of our world you feel especially called to change. But I know you can take one step today — a small step, one that may not even seem like a step, a micro step. Then take another, and then another. Gradually but inevitably, your life and your world will be transformed.