

The ONE Thing: Finding Focus in Bewildering Times

By Katie Rose Guest Pryal

Right now, amid this pandemic, you might feel like everything is scattered. I know I do.

When I say “everything,” I mean all aspects of your work and personal lives. If you are teaching, you most likely had to transition to online teaching without much experience doing so. If you are an administrator or other higher ed worker, you are now working remotely, doing a job that wasn’t meant to be remote, dealing with new technology (videoconferencing software, for example) and figuring out how to work together with your colleagues in this new environment.

If you have a family at home, you have to figure out how to work with them around. If you have people you care for (children, elderly parents), then you are likely dealing with their care in addition to your work without any help that you used to have.

And yet, you—we—must carry on somehow. One of the things I’ve been struggling with is prioritizing tasks for each day. There isn’t time to do them all anymore.

So, how do you narrow the scope of your responsibilities to what is most important?

Small Is Better

Recently, I picked up a book called *The ONE Thing: The Surprisingly Simple Truth Behind Extraordinary Results* (2012).

The author is Gary Keller, founder of Keller Williams Realty, one of the largest real estate companies in the world. He writes to an audience of people like him—men who want to start and run successful companies and who have the resources to do so. Thus, the book has some limitations, but some of the advice is particularly useful now.

The premise of the book is simple: If you can focus on doing one thing, then you will be more successful. The more scattered you are, the less successful you will be. The challenge, of course, is figuring out which one thing to focus on.

Keller’s first piece of catchy advice is this: “Go small” (Chapter 1). This is the opposite of the “go big” advice that is more common. He writes, “‘Going small’ is ignoring all the things you could do and doing what you should do. It’s recognizing that not all things matter equally and finding the things that matter most.”

Furthermore, he writes, “You have only so much time and energy, so when you spread yourself out, you end up spread thin.” As I read, a lot of what he said made sense—especially now. Before COVID-19, I was pulled in opposite directions by work and family life, and in my work, by different projects. Under this pandemic, I’m spread very, very thin. I am struggling to prioritize.

Survival Lists

My parents worked in the medical field, and they have a saying that goes like this: “If everything is stat, then nothing is.” (“Stat,” in medical-speak, means “immediately.”) The point is that nothing can get your attention if everything is equally important.

In Chapter 4, “Everything Matters Equally,” Keller

takes on this exact issue. He writes, “When everything feels urgent and important, everything seems equal.” In particular, he criticizes our culture’s preoccupation with to-do lists. He argues that to-do lists reinforce the equality of the tasks in our lives, when these tasks are anything but equal. Keller writes that to-do lists can “tyrannize us with trivial, unimportant stuff that we feel obligated to get done,” rather than encourage us to do the most important things that will help us reach our goals. He writes that “most to-do lists are actually just survival lists—getting you through your day and your life.”

Instead, Keller would say, as we write our to-do lists, we should pick only the items that will get us to where we want to go—that will help us reach our goals, whatever those are. And we should delete the rest.

The point of the chapter is that much of our work, even the work we assign ourselves, is noise. It can be put off for a little while, or even indefinitely. Much of our stress is self-inflicted, caused by things we’re doing because we think we ought to. (For more on women doing too much because they feel guilty, see my review essay of Karen Karbo’s *Yeah, No, Not Happening* in the April 2020 issue of *WIHE*.)

But How?

You might be asking at this point how you’re supposed to figure out what your “one thing” is. How are you supposed to discern what to leave out? It’s scary to delete things from your to-do list. I know—I did it before I wrote this essay, so that I could write this essay honestly.

In Chapter 10, “The Focusing Question,” Keller explains the strategy of how to focus your energy. Here’s the secret: You don’t do your one thing to the detriment of other things. Instead, you do your one thing, so that the other things don’t need to be done at all.

To help you figure out the one thing you should be doing, Keller provides a multipart question to ask yourself: “What’s the ONE Thing I can do such that by doing it everything else will be easier or unnecessary?” As Keller explains, the question has two parts: “big picture and small focus.”

The question is meant to take large, unmanageable tasks (get in shape, spend more time with your partner, write a book) and make them into manageable things you can do. That sounds simple, but it isn’t. Fortunately, I have an example.

When I got injured last fall and couldn’t play sports, I needed something to do to keep up my strength. However, I hate “working out.” So, I picked one thing: push-ups. I did push-ups every morning and evening. I was able to do more and more as time passed. It was amazing. Furthermore, if I’d picked some complex exercise routine, I wouldn’t have stuck with it. But just one thing—push-ups—I could do. Inadvertently, I’d used Keller’s tool. My big picture was to stay in shape while I healed; my small focus was push-ups. And it worked.

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If you can focus on doing one thing, then you will be more successful.

NEWSWATCH

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planned to go to a four-year college prior to the coronavirus is likely to change their direction as a result of the outbreak, and another 4 percent are very likely to do so. And 10 percent say it's too soon to say." A decline in enrollment between 10 and 24% would be a heavy hit for many colleges, especially tuition-driven schools. *The Chronicle of Higher Education* reports that the numbers might be more dire, with one in six students choosing not to attend a four-year college in the fall. Other students are waiting to make a decision on enrollment based on what schools decide to do about the format of classes.

Unsurprisingly, this means that administrators are concerned about whether students will enroll or not. The American Council on Education did a survey of college presidents in April. What it found was that almost 100% of those surveyed were worried about COVID-19's effect on enrollment in fall. And some colleges are already planning for the worst by instituting furloughs or cutting faculty and staff positions to make up for the hit they'll take for lower enrollments. It's hard to predict what the fall semester will bring and how the pandemic will change higher ed.

—*Inside Higher Ed* on April 13, 2020, and *The Chronicle of Higher Education* on April 29, 2020

WATER Builds Inclusive Religious Communities

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women and the marginalized, says Hunt. The agenda is set by "the needs of the world and not the failings of the Church," says Hunt, who noted that the organization is "the best and the brightest of the bad girls."

Since the start of the pandemic, all of WATER's in-person gatherings have ceased and the group has had to pivot its activities online or by phone. Not wasting the crisis, Hunt and Neu have started a Tea on Tuesdays at 2 p.m., an online gathering place to discuss how to move forward when people are at home.

For Hunt, the pandemic is no surprise: "We are experiencing the fruit of what we've been up against for a long time.

"There is a new call for these things [alternatives to traditional rituals] on a broader scale. The old, clerical church is not going to do it."

As if to agree with Hunt's assessment, when Pope Francis was filmed giving his *Urbi et orbi* (to the city and the world) blessing at Easter, the pandemic's impact was reflected in the ghostly images and lack of pilgrims that usually gather in St. Peter's Square. Hunt talked with various religious orders of women about their Easter rituals in the time of COVID-19.

Many were finding new ways of "being church." Without a male presbyter available to celebrate the liturgy and with social distancing in place, they told her "we're doing it ourselves."

What does this bode for the future of the all-male Catholic priesthood and the hierarchical structure of many of the mainline religions? Time will tell, but it is more obvious than ever that women will lead the way.

Moveable Type: The ONE Thing: Finding Focus in Bewildering Times

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There are unacknowledged weaknesses to Keller's book: The author, a white man with vast financial resources, tells stories of similar people as models in the book: Walt Disney, Sam Walton, Bill Gates and more. He doesn't acknowledge that not everyone can use his advice the same way. Women have family obligations in ways that men do not, as housework and child care are still not shared equally between men and women in U.S. society. Furthermore, socioeconomic class has an immense impact on life choices: a person might have drive and passion, but if she must work long hours for food and rent, she will always be spread thin.

Nevertheless, as I deleted items from my to-do list today, and as I relegated others to the "undated" list of "things I'll get to when I have time and/or feel like it," I felt incredibly free. I scheduled myself only one task per day for the next three weeks—which, under these conditions, feels right.

The Move to Online—Getting It Done

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day, and students pop in and out," says Moras. "That mimics the idea that I'm present and available when you need me.... With our faculty, we're emphasizing communication and availability, and that may mean different things."

Online tutoring and writing support continue to be available for SHU students. Students can also interact with one another through WebEx.

Ongoing Development

FAMU spring finals will be posted through Blackboard. For the health sciences, Boston says the university has identified specialized vendors that do test proctoring for comprehensive exams, particularly in areas like the pharmacy, nursing and allied health sciences.

"It's one of the things we have worked through to make sure that students are still attaining the skill sets that they need. But we're also taking the precautionary measures needed to make sure that we're not putting our students in harm's way as they may be participating in internships at pharmacies and hospitals or nursing internships that may be taking place at hospitals," says Boston.

The format for SHU spring finals will be determined by faculty as appropriate. Moras says her courses will have online written essay exams. Some courses will have set exam times, and the web browser will lock down so students can't use other windows while taking the exam.

FAMU has decided the A term (May 11 to end of June) and C term (May to August) of summer sessions will be delivered remotely. The B term (end of June to beginning of August) will likely also be taught remotely.

There will be summer courses offered online at SHU, and details for registration are being worked out. Moras is creating systems to help students pick their courses as well as navigate internships and do career planning and thesis planning.

"It's a new normal for everybody," says Moras.