



The  
7-Minute  
Productivity  
Solution

How to Manage Your Schedule,  
Overcome Distraction, and  
Achieve the Results You Want

JOHN BRANDON

“Good routines can propel us forward as a way to develop game-changing habits. John Brandon has made the case for using simple daily practices to transform how you live your life.”

**Nir Eyal**, bestselling author of *Indistractable*

“Productivity is all about habits: forming and nurturing the beneficial ones, recognizing and ditching the harmful ones. Brandon’s book teaches you how to build (and stick to) a set of daily routines for staying focused and motivated. It doesn’t matter what kind of person you are—lazy, hyperactive, distracted, overachieving—this book will work for everyone. It’s like a skeleton key for unlocking the human brain’s potential.”

**Michael Calore**, senior editor of *WIRED*

“Anyone in business knows time is a precious commodity. What John Brandon has done in his new book is offer practical guidance on how to focus our attention and use time wisely. It’s a game changer for those seeking a competitive advantage.”

**Jason Feifer**, editor-in-chief of *Entrepreneur*

“In our world of information overload, *The 7-Minute Productivity Solution* provides a much-needed fresh perspective on navigating all of the pulls on our attention so we can actually feel fulfilled at the end of the day. John’s humor and wit makes this a fun read with incredibly valuable tips to improve performance and overall well-being.”

**Kristel Bauer PA-C**, founder of Live Greatly

“John Brandon has pulled off a not-so-small miracle here: he’s written a book about daily routines that’s a page-turner. He makes the quotidian exotic and turns everyday habits into superpowers. Any one of the nine 7-minute routines in this book will change how you work and, even more, how much you enjoy your work. But all nine routines together? Prepare, as far as your

output goes, to become a machine. Prepare, as far as your heart goes, to become more truly, fully, and deeply human. My only critique of John Brandon is he didn't write *The 7-Minute Productivity Solution* twenty years ago. Oh, the things I might have done and the joy I could have had doing them. But so be it: I have the book now, and, well, so do you. Get ready. Your most outlandish dreams and farfetched goals are about to become not only doable but almost inevitable. Get ready to transform."

**Mark Buchanan**, author of *God Walk: Moving at the Speed of Your Soul*

"When I started out, I asked a famous writer for advice: How was she able to publish bestsellers year after year? Her answer: *sitzfleisch*, a Yiddish-German word that means, roughly, 'butt in the seat.' She wakes up, goes straight to her desk, and writes five hundred words. Every day. In nine months, she completes a book, goes on tour, then starts over. I never really understood how this was possible until reading John Brandon's inspiring and practical approach to productivity with purpose. John provides the 7-minute strategies each of us need to make *sitzfleisch* joyful and meaningful."

**Michael Heller**, Columbia Law School professor  
and coauthor of *Mine!*

"*The 7-Minute Productivity Solution* is bite-sized and gospel-centric. A great read!"

**Jordan Raynor**, national bestselling author  
of *Redeeming Your Time*

"Are you distracted by many things? Do you have more on your 'to do' list than you can ever get done? Are you high-performing yet feel like you could be even more productive if you could get a handle on the ever-multiplying demands of social media and digital communication? John Brandon offers real, concise, immediately applicable help in just seven minutes! Too good to be

true? The investment you make in reading this book will return to you manyfold in the increased productivity you will experience and the bonus of deriving greater joy in each accomplished task.”

**Carmen LaBerge**, host of *Mornings with Carmen*,  
author of *Speak the Truth*, and curator  
of [ReconnectwithCarmen.com](http://ReconnectwithCarmen.com)

“John Brandon has a God-given gift of connecting the dots between what matters most and what matters now. If you want to develop good productivity habits, this book is a must-read. John’s years of practice, successes, and research will inspire and help anyone make the most of their time—the most precious of gifts.”

**Brittany Thoms**, owner of [See.Spark.Go](http://See.Spark.Go)

“John Brandon’s book is filled with incredibly powerful yet exceedingly doable insights for achieving productivity with purpose. And it is a joy to read. This is a welcome resource on managing your schedule and obtaining outstanding results in a sustainable way. Use this book as a guide to begin creating new and better productivity routines today.”

**Matt Perman**, director of career development at The King’s  
College and author of *What’s Best Next*

“In this book, John Brandon provides motivation, evidence-based explanations, and practical steps to help us make the best use of our time, our resources, and our opportunities.”

**Paul Jorgensen**, church planter and former pastor  
of Cornerstone Church, Minnesota

“As the pastor and CEO of a thriving church, the father of a busy eight-year-old, and the owner of several businesses, the question I’m often asked is, ‘How do you stay sane in the chaos?’ For years my answer has always been the same: ‘With God’s help.’ And that is still true. But it is also known that God helps those who help themselves. And after reading my dear friend John Brandon’s

book, *The 7-Minute Productivity Solution*, I have adjusted my response. John's book teaches that the task you are working on should actually be the task you want to complete. Calibrating your day is much more productive than surviving your day. One of the most profound excerpts of this book is the 7-minute morning routine: prepare, clear your head, read a little, and write notes. If you're busy like me, and you're trying to figure out a way to make it all happen, this book is for you."

**Keion Henderson**, pastor of The Lighthouse  
Church of Houston



# The 7-Minute Productivity Solution

**How to Manage Your Schedule,  
Overcome Distraction, and  
Achieve the Results You Want**

**JOHN BRANDON**

  
**Revell**

*a division of Baker Publishing Group*  
Grand Rapids, Michigan

© 2022 by John Brandon

Published by Revell  
a division of Baker Publishing Group  
PO Box 6287, Grand Rapids, MI 49516-6287  
www.revellbooks.com

Printed in the United States of America

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Brandon, John, 1965– author.

Title: The 7-minute productivity solution : how to manage your schedule, overcome distraction, and achieve the results you want / John Brandon.

Other titles: The Seven minute productivity solution

Description: Grand Rapids, MI : Revell, a division of Baker Publishing Group, 2022. |

Identifiers: LCCN 2021020275 | ISBN 9780800740252 (paperback) | ISBN 9780800741389 (casebound) | ISBN 9781493434398 (ebook)

Subjects: LCSH: Time management. | Distraction (Psychology) | Motivation (Psychology) | Self-actualization (Psychology)

Classification: LCC HD69.T54 B73 2022 | DDC 650.1/1—dc23

LC record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2021020275>

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Published in association with the Hartline Literary Agency, LLC.

Baker Publishing Group publications use paper produced from sustainable forestry practices and post-consumer waste whenever possible.

22 23 24 25 26 27 28      7 6 5 4 3 2 1

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# Acknowledgments

**WRITING A BOOK** is an exercise in extreme productivity.

It's not just doing the research, developing the structure, and writing the words. It's about the perseverance needed to stick with the plan. I often relied on coffee to help me type faster (imagine a highly caffeinated gerbil and you'll get the picture) and then had to dig deep for inner motivation.

Over an eighteen-month period, I spent many long hours reading books and articles, writing down notes in a journal, and following my own routines. Productivity is both a decision and a mindset. Most of us don't suddenly become productive but develop good productivity habits over time.

Writing a book tests that concept like no other. If the habits you need to write a book have not already developed—for example, you keep looking at your phone to read text messages from your kids or you choose an Xbox controller over a keyboard—you won't make it past chapter 1.

That's why it was so fun to look back and think about the people who helped me write this book. These are the folks who pushed me forward one step at a time, reminded me about the deeper purpose behind this endeavor, and even brought over a cup of coffee when needed.

## *Acknowledgments*

My agent, Jim Hart, really made the dream come true. His industry connections, attention to detail, and constant encouragement made it all possible from day one. On day two, it was Vicki Crumpton, executive editor at Revell. What a wonderful collaborator during the initial proposal stages and all the way through to the final revisions. The entire team at Revell acted in a spirit of shared unity and vision. Without them, this book would have never materialized. I'm also indebted to my early readers and researchers: Rachel, Katie, Jade, Annie, Ellie, Chyelle, Richard, Kaylyn, Stephen, Joe, Shayna, Ginny, Linsey, and Collin.

Productivity also has a geographic element. I hunkered down at the Wilderness Fellowship Prayer Cabins in a remote part of Wisconsin several times, often without a reliable internet connection—thank you, Lord. I sequestered myself in hotels and at regional parks, ordering my food by DoorDash and snacking on beef jerky. The silence and reflection I experienced at the King's House in Buffalo, Minnesota, helped me stay focused.

Authors Mark Buchanan, Jordan Raynor, Nir Eyal, Cal Newport, Ryder Carroll, Bob Goff, Chris Bailey, Matt Perman, and many others were my constant companions, at the least in how I lugged their books around but also when I emailed them and chatted by phone. I'm forever grateful to Mark Buchanan, one of my all-time favorite authors, because he said really nice things about my early manuscript and inspired me to persevere.

Over thirty-four years of married life, one person fanned my flame of productivity the most. We go on hikes in the dark woods, talking about future plans and watching as they come to fruition, wide-eyed with wonder. We debate our life decisions together, praying in the early morning hours until we have clear, God-ordained answers. My life would not be the same without my wife, Rebecca, and neither would this book. Along the way, my adult kids and their spouses have become my beacons of hope. Rachel (and Jonas), Hannah (and Eddie), Joshua, and Katie (and Blake), you're all great gifts.

## *Acknowledgments*

Finally, I owe everything to my Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, who gave me the words and helped me find favor. As it says in Proverbs 16:9 (NIV): “In their hearts humans plan their course, but the LORD establishes their steps” and, as it turns out, helped me write this book.

# Introduction

The secret of your future is hidden in your daily routine. —Mike Murdock

**I WAS WORRIED** about my laptop.

There I was, walking on a frozen lake in Minnesota as the sun arced above the horizon. In the morning light, I looked like outdoorsman Bear Grylls with a fuzzy beard and wool hat. I could have driven my car across the ice, but where's the fun in that? Still, I didn't want to waste time. Ahead of me, I could see my destination: a private island about a mile away. My friend told me I could use his cabin, and I intended to make every second count. My laptop wasn't exactly durable, and the temperature was below freezing.

That's when I glanced at my watch. It was 7:00 a.m., and breakfast was calling my name. I quickly calculated how long my walk would take. *You're gonna make it*, I told myself a few times. Behind me, I pulled a sled packed with the essentials: a sleeping bag, food, an extra pair of boots.

The first thing I noticed when I reached the cabin was that the snow had built up a wall around it, making it seem like my own private fortress. Cool! I typed in a code to open the door and set down my backpack and other gear.

I still remember how cold the laptop felt. I imagined it had “bricked” during my winter trek. I grabbed a few chunks of wood and built a fire in the fireplace, boiled some eggs, set up a temporary office space, and took a seat at the table. With a sigh of relief, I heard my computer come to life.

I was about to start writing my first book, but before connecting to the hotspot on my phone and opening my word processor, I decided to do something I’ve done almost every day for the last twenty years.

My fingers were a bit stiff, but I cracked open a journal and grabbed a pen. *Prepare the work area*, I reminded myself. I pushed aside a flashlight and box of matches, ordered the space in front of me, and straightened my chair. I set my watch down on the table and stashed my phone in a zippered compartment. *Breathe a little in and out, for exactly one minute*, I thought. As the sun broke through the trees, I listened to the fire crackle next to me and felt the warmth on my legs. *Write down your thoughts for the day but avoid making a complete list of everything*. What’s making me feel stressed and worried? What is giving me hope? How do my tasks match up with my purpose?

Lastly, I looked over the notes I had written and circled the most important one: *write a chapter of the book*. I was ready to start working.

It’s a simple routine, but I remember feeling relaxed and calm. As a writer, my most important accessories are my fingers. They were primed and ready to type. As the wind died down and I thought about cooking up a steak for lunch, I cranked out an entire chapter in one sitting.

## Why We Need Routines

Routines help us form new habits.

When we wake up in the morning, we shower, brush our teeth, and comb our hair. That’s a personal hygiene habit. At work, we

start up our computer, open a browser, and check email. That habit helps us dive into work quickly. I'm easily distracted and have multiple "squirrel moments" throughout the day, so I need routines to guide me, such as the journaling I did at the cabin that morning.

Journaling is one of several routines I'll explain in this book. Writing in a journal each morning helps you collect your thoughts so that you become more intentional with your time. Ending your day with a personal daily debriefing is a routine that helps you evaluate what you accomplished and why. There's even a routine to help you take a break more efficiently. Coffee optional.

In all these routines, you'll learn how to be efficient with your time and how to match *what you do* with *what you care about*.

The opposite of that? It's not anything good. The second half of this book explains what happens when bad habits like social media obsession keep us from achieving what is meaningful and desirable.

The opposite of a routine is a deep rut leading us nowhere—also known as a bad habit. You might struggle with checking email too often or browsing the web all day at work. Been there, done that! A rut is a slow and agonizing slog in the wrong direction to reach unimportant goals.

When we feel stressed, tired, and hungry—when life happens—a routine helps us get back on course. Author Greg McKeown says it best: "The right routines give us the equivalent of an energy rebate. Instead of spending our limited supply of discipline on making the same decisions again and again, embedding our decisions into a routine allows us to channel that discipline toward some other essential activity."<sup>1</sup>



Back at the island, I closed my computer. There's a sense of well-being that comes when we complete tasks. I started a fire outside and cooked up a late-night stew. In my journal, I started a daily debrief session. *Write down your biggest accomplishment*

*of the day.* That was easy, I wrote an entire chapter of a book and didn't burn myself near the fire (outdoor cooking is not my forte). *Write down your biggest stressors.* Getting to the island wasn't easy. I thought I had destroyed my laptop. *Note whether your activities matched up with your long-term goals.* That was also easy. I was writing a book. It had been a lifelong dream until then.

After my debrief, I slipped into a bunk bed and dozed off. The routines that day set me on a path toward good productivity.

Routines set a tone for efficiency, helping you develop good habits that last your entire life.

A good habit means you're driving in the fast lane. Buckle up and hold on for the ride! You'll reach your destination quickly and efficiently.

A bad habit means you're in the slow lane or, worse, stuck on the side of the road. Constant distractions and derailments keep you from making progress. The philosopher William James once wrote, "The more of the details of our daily life we can hand over to the effortless custody of automatism, the more our higher powers of mind will be set free for their own proper work."<sup>2</sup>

This book gives you nine helpful routines to either jump-start your productivity or rid yourself of bad habits. You need to invest only seven minutes in each routine. That's it! If you follow these routines, you'll focus on what's most important and become a highly productive person.

More importantly, you'll experience what I call *productivity with purpose*. As author and marketing expert Ryan Holiday notes, "A good routine is not only a source of great comfort and stability, it's the platform from which stimulating and fulfilling work is possible."<sup>3</sup>



Before we go further, here's something to think about: scientists have found we can pay close attention to something for about five to ten minutes before our brains start to lose focus and

switch off like a light bulb.<sup>4</sup> (I've split the difference and made each routine seven minutes long.)

You might be listening to a school lecture, watching a presentation by one of your coworkers, or checking email. After seven minutes, your brain needs to hit pause. The neurons slow down when we focus for too long. That's why I'm only asking for a short period of time to follow the routines. The routines are intentionally basic to help you maintain focus.

You can also follow the routines at any time or place during the day—say, in a cabin in the middle of nowhere or at your desk before a meeting. You can follow them at home or on a plane flying across the world. You can follow them on the bus or in the car, which might sound like the book *Green Eggs and Ham* but just go with it—the routines work! I know this because I've been using them for years. Focusing your attention on *one thing* for only seven minutes minimizes distraction. Mix and match the routines that work best for you, and don't worry about doing them all.

You'll increase productivity, but you'll also free up more of your time so that you can put more effort into the things that really matter.

## Productivity with Purpose

My journey to *productivity with purpose* started with a major career change. I used to be a corporate manager, but my wife suggested I start a writing career instead. I became a full-time writer back in 2001.

My wife encouraged me to follow my passion—not to mention use my journalism degree!—for more purposeful work. Since then, I've written reports for Fox News about protecting kids online,<sup>5</sup> interviewed famous people such as Francis Chan<sup>6</sup> and Andy Stanley,<sup>7</sup> and once wrote a story about a church that started a unique community-service project.<sup>8</sup> In my columns, I've written about productivity and work-life balance most often.

Work is part of what makes us human. It helps us find meaning in life, serve others, and become part of something bigger than ourselves. The alternative to work is to live like a slug, burning away our lives in meaningless pursuits, also called *watching television*.

It's not a question of whether we should work and toil; it's *how we work* and *what we are trying to accomplish in life* that's important.

Once we see work as a meaningful pursuit and part of what it means to be human, it's much easier to set aside the need for constant success and recognition. Working hard is wired into our DNA. We may no longer be plowing a field by hand, but we do understand that work is a noble effort. Our productivity can involve a marketing campaign in the office, school papers at home with our kids, or building a major corporation.

Since we are wired as humans to work hard and find satisfaction in toil and labor, we can rest easy. We already have the impulse and longing to achieve great things. We don't need to prove our value, since the value is intrinsic simply because we're human. We can set aside a need for constant success when we realize that. We breathe, we eat, we work.

Even if you're already productive, you can learn from the routines in this book. Improve all of us we can, as the wise sage Yoda might say.

We all have twenty-four hours in a day. We all breathe about twenty thousand times per day.<sup>9</sup> We all have about fifty to seventy thousand thoughts per day.<sup>10</sup> We're all in this together, struggling to learn and grow and become better at what we do. The important question is, What will you do with your twenty-four hours, twenty thousand breaths, and fifty thousand thoughts? Where will they lead you?



As I was researching habit formation for this book and how people become productive and successful, I discovered a few themes.

I read all the best authors, including Adam Grant, Nir Eyal, James Clear, and Dan Heath. They kept stressing the same things: habits form when we follow a predetermined routine. The best routine leads to the best results. Think about driving a car. First, you learn to use the gas pedal and the brakes, then you learn to drive. Eventually, stepping on the gas and the brakes becomes second nature. We don't have to think about it. But when we multitask, we end up losing focus. Look out! You haven't quite mastered the brakes yet! Habits also make us who we are. That's quite scary if your habits involve smoking cigarettes or playing video games all day. Yet, once you learn to drive, you can go places. Such as Chipotle.

Some of the routines I'll cover in each section are similar to those in other productivity books, but the twist is that they are about more than just becoming a better person and developing more skills. The goal is *to become who we were meant to be all along*. The goal is to do our work with this in mind: we were created for work as humans. We may sweat and toil all day, but we do so with integrity, honor, and a clear focus.

As author Mark Buchanan once told me, "We're always having to justify what we do on some hidden scale of values. This is not a bad thing. But there is another reason to be productive: I am productive because I am made in the image of God. If I deny that, I am denying the Almighty."<sup>11</sup>

Tim Keller writes about this in his book *Every Good Endeavor*: "If God's purpose for your job is that you serve the community, then the way to serve God best is to do the job as well as it can be done."<sup>12</sup>

## My Own Story

I wasn't always so productive and purposeful. In my younger years, I was easily bored and didn't know basic productivity techniques.

The radical shift in my work habits occurred when I started writing as a journalist full-time. In the last twenty years, I've written fifteen thousand articles for major publications such as *Inc.*, *Forbes*, *Popular Mechanics*, *Wired*, and *Entrepreneur*. There are few full-time journalists working today who match my total output over these last twenty years with such a diverse roster of publications. That's not a humble brag. It's remarkable to me and a credit to my faith and dependence on God as well as the techniques in this book.

My greatest burst of productivity started in 2008 when I wrote a daily online column for *Inc.* Over a decade, I wrote four thousand columns on leadership, mentoring, technology, and other topics, sometimes posting twice per day (for those who are questioning the math). All told, about a half million people followed my column every month.

That means around *sixty million people* have read my daily business column at *Inc.com* and in the magazine since 2008. That total doesn't include writing for *Forbes.com* or a long-standing weekly column for *FoxNews.com* that also dates back to 2008. I've written thousands of articles for many other outlets as well. I can juggle, cook pancakes, and recite poetry at the same time too. Not really, and maybe I've taken this too far, but honestly, I'm remarkably efficient. I've written at least a dozen articles about Elon Musk alone!

One highlight came in 2015 when I wrote about the seven-minute morning routine for *Inc.com*.<sup>13</sup> To my own surprise and excitement, the article went viral. To date, two million people have read that simple guide to having a morning routine, and thousands of people are already following my format. This book is a result of watching how that morning routine has helped so many people become productive.

I mention all of this with wide-eyed bewilderment. I needed a calculator to figure this out, but over a twenty-year span I've estimated a total production of around *eighteen million words*

with an average of about one thousand words per article. You can google almost all of them if you want. It's astounding to me.\*



People often ask me how this is possible. I usually say, “It’s my job.”

And yet, applying the productivity lessons in this book will save time, improve your own process, produce better results, and even help you lead a more fulfilled life. A routine is the engine to help you *actually* develop new habits—starting today. There is a method to this madness. If we are designed to work, we should steward that work as best we can.

There are times when I hear about extreme productivity and nod along in agreement. “That’s me, that’s how I work.” Yet some of the productivity advice I’ve found has left me feeling a little flat. Is that all there is? Getting better as a person? Small changes in self-improvement? Becoming more successful, so you can make more money? There must be more to it.

In researching this book, I felt as if the natural laws of habit forming and personal development were not satisfying. I don’t want to be *merely* a better person. I don’t want to be an email guru; I don’t even like email. I decided the real reason for becoming more efficient is because that honors who we are as humans. We are *good workers* at heart. I choose to become intentional with my time because my time on this planet is limited.

\* Following is a list of publications that have published my articles since 2001: Inc.com, Forbes.com, *Wired*, *Popular Mechanics*, *Entrepreneur*, TechRadar, *Popular Science*, *Computerworld*, CIO.com, CIO Insights, The Ladders, *Business News Daily*, *Business 2.0*, CSO, FoxNews.com, *Chicago Tribune*, *Outside*, *Men’s Journal*, *New Man*, *Christianity Today*, *Paste*, *Relevant Magazine*, TechHive.com, *PC Magazine*, *PC World*, CIO Traction Watch, VentureBeat.com, Baseline, *Break-away*, *Campus Life*, *InSite Magazine*, *Alliance Life*, *Beacon*, *Coastal Living*, *Computer Shopper*, *Macworld*, *MacUser UK*, *PC Plus Magazine*, *Windows Magazine*, *Linux Format*, *Shutterbug*, *Digital Photo Pro Magazine*, GamesRadar.com, Games Domain.com, GameZone.com, *Electronic Gaming Monthly*, *How It Works*, *Gizmodo*, *Laptop*, *PC Upgrade*, *Tech Edge*, *MIT Technology Review*.

As purposeful workers, we don't have to follow the same old routines and habits. Each day, we can create new habits and break old ones. Starting right now we can say, *Today, I will work hard. Today, I will embrace change. Today, I will start using new routines to form new habits.*

One day at a time. One routine at a time.

You *can* become more purposeful in your work. You can look back and say you made the most of the resources at your disposal. You can match your tasks to your purpose. You can make good decisions about how to live.

And if you make a mistake—well, you can start again tomorrow.

Here's the thing about *productivity with purpose*. The emphasis is on the *purpose*. We work hard, we manage our time, we take great comfort in the fact that we have labored for good reason and for good outcomes.

We're ready to begin a journey not of mere self-development but to experience a more fulfilling and rewarding life and to become more productive because that's how we were created: to work with joy. Are you ready? Buckle up for the ride. We're going to put the pedal to the metal by starting with the morning routine that helped me write my first book in a cabin long ago.\*

\* In case you're wondering, I applied the same routines to write this book as well. I even went back to the island—in the summertime.



**PART 1**

# Develop Good Habits

## SECTION 1

# Morning Routine

---

You'll never change your life until you change something you do daily. The secret of your success is found in your daily routine.

—JOHN MAXWELL



## Define What Is Meaningful

**IT WAS THE BIGGEST FAILURE** of my life. On September 18, 2001—just a week after 9/11—I lost my job. I was a corporate manager and drove forty-five minutes to work one way in heavy commuter traffic. I wore a tie and wing-tipped shoes. I managed a large staff, including web designers and writers. I was on the fast track at a consumer electronics company destined to become a vice president and lead an entire department.

Then it all came crashing down.

I came into work and my boss escorted me to a conference room with a handful of lawyers and some legal papers to sign. Not good. The economy was sinking faster than a bag of bricks in a swimming pool. I had to agree to a severance package and leave that same day . . . or else. My boss ushered me to the front entrance and took my security card.

“Sorry we had to do this to you,” he said, looking a bit grim.

Let’s just say it was a long drive home.

The next morning, I woke up at dawn. With four little kids at home, two of them barely out of diapers, I knew I had to act

quickly. The house payment was due, and my oldest daughter needed braces. I thought about seeking legal help and realized that was probably a dead end.

At the kitchen table, I sat down with a journal and a pen and wrote out my worst fears, deepest regrets, and biggest dreams. *Will I ever write a book? Can I do ministry with students someday? Why was I the first to be let go in the downsizing?* I jotted down a note about wanting more out of my career. I still have those faded sheets of paper in a well-worn journal.

I decided to write down my thoughts every morning. It was my only avenue for dealing with the deep disappointment of losing my job, of failing in a way that was so obvious to my friends and family. I haven't collected a regular paycheck in a corporate job since, and I'll explain more of my story later, but what really came out of that experience is this book. Roughly fifteen thousand articles and twenty years later, my biggest failure led to my greatest workplace success.

You see, I decided to become a writer that day.

Actually, my wife, Rebecca, suggested the idea. She knew I had a degree in journalism. She knew I had a deep longing to share my own thoughts and ideas, to put words on a page, to make a living as a professional author. She knew I wasn't happy being a director in an information technology department. (I might have constantly complained about it.) That day, I not only started writing in a journal to organize my thoughts, I started writing as a career.

I cobbled together enough income to support my family. Well, almost. My brother-in-law used to feel sorry for me and drop off groceries at our front door.

I had to apply for medical services and high-deductible health insurance. It took about a year before I sold my first article to a magazine called *Laptop*. I became "the router guy" in those early years, reviewing Wi-Fi devices and happily cashing the checks at the end of the month. By 2003, I started writing frequently

for Wired.com, then the *Chicago Tribune*. For two years straight, way back then, I started my day writing in a journal.

During that season of life, trying to figure out how to stay productive with my time, I kept writing down my biggest challenges for the day, upcoming stresses, and overarching goals. By writing in a journal—usually over coffee—I set the tone for productivity for the entire day. I calibrated my thoughts, circled the challenges, crossed out any stressors, and reviewed my ambitions. It worked. I'd come up with a routine that became a habit.

Well over twenty years later, I'm still using the same basic routine.

### **Why Start Journaling?**

In their 2013 bestselling book, *The ONE Thing: The Surprisingly Simple Truth Behind Extraordinary Results*, authors Gary Keller and Jay Papasan mention a curious stat about journaling. It turns out when we write down our goals and aspirations, we are 39.5 percent more likely to achieve them.<sup>1</sup> They didn't explain the reason, but we can make an educated guess. It's because we like to make things official.

There's something about jotting down a note that lodges that notation in our brains. Keller and Papasan go a step further and explain how writing down a goal and then seeking accountability—say, by sending someone an email about it—means we are 77.6 percent more likely to achieve the goal.<sup>2</sup>

The authors make a valid point. Only a few things *really matter*. When we record them, we decide what's important and what we'll remember. When we let chaos reign and allow multiple priorities to exist and wage war with one another, we end up never achieving anything. The reason I began to keep a journal so long ago, and the reason I'm still journaling today, is that I want to record (and ponder) what's really important. I want to match my daily activities with my biggest ambitions in life.

There are many things in life that define our purpose. Sometimes, it's a boss. They hand us a job description when we take a new role, and every meeting thereafter is meant to orient us toward that purpose. *Are we measuring up to the standards of the job description? Are we doing the most important activities the company requires?*

When we buck the system and make up our own rules about what matters, rarely aligning our tasks with our ambitions, we end up in a place where we are free to make up our own definitions about our life and call the shots every day. It's called *the unemployment line*.

When we were kids, our parents defined our purpose and set our tasks for the day. Others keep dictating our schedules in college . . . and marriage and life in general. Sure, as we get older there are times when we think we have more freedom. But the constant distractions of life and the wonderful opportunities we have at work become a jumble of confusion, competition, and chaos.

As adults, we have an incredible amount of freedom—we can stop at DQ anytime we want and buy the triple decker sundae. But with that freedom, how many of us are perfect at setting goals each day and always doing the most important tasks? I know I'm a long way from that ideal. I stop at DQ on occasion, which is fine once in a while. I sometimes get frustrated when I'm whiling away the time without intention and not reaching my goals.

Good routines such as writing in a journal each morning help you assess what is important and weed out the lower priorities. You're defining meaning and purpose in your life one day at a time. You minimize the impact of external factors such as stress or a busy schedule that often define our priorities and learn to defend yourself against constant distraction.

Ask yourself, Are the tasks you're completing the ones you really want to complete? Do they match up with your calling? Do they add up to the person you intend to be, or are they defining you on their own?

## Good Intentions

Good productivity starts with both prioritizing tasks and effectively pursuing them with intention. Once I started writing in a journal to record my challenges, stressors, and ambitions, the tasks for the day became part of a more complete picture, one I was creating and recalibrating.

Journaling helps you keep track of what is working and what is distracting you and causing derailment. It's more than just a way to keep things organized. It's a way to remind yourself that you have a mission in life and a purpose and that there's a way to achieve that purpose if you stay focused.

Writing in a journal each morning carves out at least a few minutes to compose yourself during a set period. Did you catch that? *Compose yourself*, which means *become who you were meant to be*.

All it takes is seven minutes. That's it!

Before we talk about the journaling routine and explain how it all works, we need to clarify one important factor: we think more clearly in the morning than at any other time period, according to science.

If we can carve out a few moments after we wake up to chronicle what's about to transpire for the day, then we'll be productive.

That's the best definition of *productivity* I can give you: being intentional about what you do and why you do it each day. You might not be a morning person, but the only way to define the *what* and the *why* is to do it before you do anything else. Plus, as you'll see, you're smarter in the morning.