

A Menu of Small Things

A selection of things which can change; starters and substance
for changing everything through small things

by Brian Gerald

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Why change small things?

If you set out to change the world, you're not going to do it. Whether change the world means realize world peace or start your own company, it ain't gonna happen. Why? *You can't change the world*, you can't change anything. There I said it.

So what can you do?

You can change yourself. As you change yourself, you'll realize that (a) changing yourself is more important and (b) hey, the world around you begins to change anyway. Your family, friends, local community, co-workers, clients, business partners, strangers on a plane... they'll pick up what you're putting down.

Over the past three years, I have been making small incremental changes to my life. Most of these changes came without a grand plan—they made sense for me or I saw someone else doing it and decided to try. One change led to another and here I am today: Debt free, location independent, working for myself in a craft I love, and with the freedom to follow my passions.

When I moved to New York City to work at a national television network, *I didn't set out to change myself, I just decided to not replace my iPod.*

No sales pitch here

We serve each item on this Menu of Small Things plain. I'm not going to give you a list of perks, an ROI analysis, or a sales pitch. Instead, I will present you with options and you can take them or leave them. Of course, I suggest you take them but that is entirely up to you. Each item will sit differently with each person, and will unlock different possibilities. There may be some background or reflection from myself or others who changed these small things, but by and large, you'll need to act on faith and discover for yourself what each option holds. *Discovery is part of the process.*

What Next?

After reading through this Menu of Small Things, you may ask yourself, “Then what?” *This menu will not answer that question for you.* You will create your own next steps, and if you select some items of Small Things to change or start in your life, I'm convinced that what needs to happen will happen. Head over to the [Menu of Small Things post](#) to share your experiences.

Starters

These starters compromise the small things I changed over the course of my first year in New York City. I didn't set out to change anything, I just made each decision, one at a time.

Cancel the cable

Cable was the first "Thing That Changed" for me. It wasn't born out of a noble ideal, instead it was born out of economic necessity. Plus, friends are nearby for special occasions and *watching in this way transforms the activity into a social event*, rather than a time-suck.

Read daily; also, read an autobiography

I used my morning commute each day to read a book. Whether you take public transportation or not, carve out time each day to read. *We not the first people to travel through life on Earth*. We can look to others in this journey. I read a combination of fiction, social commentary, and non-fiction. Particularly influential were the writings of Gandhi, Martin Luther King, Jr., and Leo Tolstoy. I also really enjoyed *The Life of Pi* and *Next* and learned A LOT from *The Color of Violence*.

Cook one more meal each week

I used to, like many people, eat out or use pre-packaged and frozen entrees for most meals throughout my days. Instead, try swapping in a meal prepared from scratch. You can cook rice & beans, pasta with red sauce, or filet mignon... just cook one more meal for yourself each week than usual. One extra meal isn't really that hard, you'll want to add a few more each week as you get more comfortable. Why not cook for a friend too or host a potluck?

Invest \$25 in a microloan

On an ordinary day in July, I contemplated splurging on a cab home. Then I remembered how I had put off investing in Kiva, a service which provides small loans to individuals to support small businesses, for months. I skipped the cab and instead went home and invested \$25 in Patricia Amalia Lopez Ugalde's clothing business, and 5 others over the years since. As your loans are repaid, you can reinvest in other entrepreneurs or withdraw the funds.

More recently, my friend David Fraga started [Lend For Peace](#) which funds projects in the Middle East. It's similar to Kiva, but was started by two Jewish and two Palestinian friends to promote peace through economic stability and invite ordinary folks to be part of the solution.

Don't replace your iPod when it breaks, sell it if it still works

Once I ditched my iPod, I began interacting more with people around me (see below about smiling at strangers and buying meals for folks). It also gave me time to read, write, and reflect on my morning commute. *I became more in tune with my surroundings, less distracted, and even more in touch with myself*. But I still find time to jam out to Something Corporate.

Smile at strangers

This has got to be one of the easiest things to do. *Try smiling right now*. See how effortless is. Now repeat that action regularly, at strangers. If you're feeling gutsy, you can even strike up a conversation. If you live in a city like San Paulo, Moscow, or Tokyo, you may be surrounded by people all of the time, yet completely isolated from them. Put a crack in the wall with a smile.

Buy a meal for a hungry person

Goes well with: *eat a meal with them*

In New York City, there are 1.5 million hungry people. Some are homeless and living on the streets, others are my friends. Be prepared to feed hungry people wherever you meet them—that might mean packing some bananas before you head out or visiting the deli on the corner to pick out something together. Check your assumptions about what a hungry person looks like, or what type of job they have or don't have, or the reasons why they are hungry. You may be surprised what you learn. If you have the time, and the person is looking for a dining partner, take a break from your day and share a meal together.

The Optional Second Course

This can be a small thing or a very big thing depending on your circumstances (and how many other small things you've already changed). For me, it came after a year of unintentionally changing small things and signaled the start of an intentional approach to small things I would change.

Live in community

This was my most drastic Thing That Changed and so it deserves its own course on the menu. This item paved the way for many of the items which will follow, but let's not get ahead of ourselves. Living in community—with friends or family—gets short shrift in our culture which glorifies “your own place.” I had my own place—a studio apartment in a luxury high-rise but after a year of changing Small Things, I realized the dream didn't deliver. After visiting friends in St. Paul, MN who shared a three-story house amongst five housemates, I knew even my housing needed to change. I jumped across the Hudson and into a four bedroom house in Guttenberg, NJ with [Matthew Beams](#) and his two roommates. If you already live with roommates, it's sorta like you snacked on the ingredients while cooking ... lucky you!

Entrées

Since those initial decisions in my first year, I added on other Small Things. My motivations for each varied, the common theme is that they are small and set the stage for larger changes and choices.

Start an herb garden

You can buy herbs as seeds or plants from almost any nursery (and a growing number of grocery stores). Pick an herb or two (basil is an easy choice) and plop it down on a sunny window sill or box. Make sure it gets enough water and sunlight.

Cook a meal with herbs you've grown

A supply of herbs makes *the* difference when cooking. Growing your own means you will have fresh herbs on hand and you won't waste money. Enjoy!

Go vegetarian (or vegan, or raw vegan, or freegan) one day a week

You will get enough protein, I promise. In fact, you are probably consuming *too much* protein as it is. Pick a length of time, for example six months, and commit to eating only vegetarian one day every week. There are [plenty of blogs](#) out there if you need inspiration. Occasionally I will post about food on [Work in Progress](#).

Give things away!

This item comes in a few flavors. **Option 1:** Count your clothes, then give away half. **Option 2:** Support monthly projects. 100% of donations to [Charity:Water](#) fund clean water projects around the world. [Mocha Club](#) costs the equivalent of two mochas and supports seven life-changing initiatives. **Option 3:** Think about how much you can give away right now, and then multiply that by two. I know you think you can't afford it, but you can.

Whether it's the [Children's National Medical Center](#), [Queers for Economic Justice](#), or anything else, find a group which benefits from your gift and then give generously.

Turn off your cellphone or computer for twenty four hours

Does your cellphone or computer feel like a lifeline to the world? I know for me they sometimes do. *But technology can hold us back as much as it propels us forward.* Unplug from the barrage of messages and information overload by turning off your phone or your computer for twenty four hours. I promise, the world will not end.

Host a potluck

Now that you are cooking more, why not host a dinner party? Potlucks mean less cooking and cleaning for you and more variety for everyone. Pick a theme or leave it open. Try to use table lamps and candles instead of overhead lighting and take the food out of tupperware. Potlucks can be outside too if the weather is nice!

Read only books written by women for three months

You've already enough books by men to last a lifetime, I'm only asking for three months.

If you are ready for an adventure, try a theme: working class women, women from a particular region (West Africa, Palestine, Mexico, ...), autobiographies of women, or poetry by women are a few good options.

Deserts

After you've begun changing small things, you may be ready for some more adventurous projects, I recommend each of the items below.

Ride a bike to the grocery store

This item comes with all sorts of benefits: by biking (or walking) you can carry less so you will need to decide what is most important, exercise is built into your routine, and you save money on gas. I was slow coming to this item, but now I look forward to riding my bike whenever possible.

Eat only “real foods” for a month (check out [Real Food Revival](#))

What is a real food? Peaches. So says Sherri Brooks Vinton author of [The Real Food Revival](#). Rather than change your diet to conform to the latest fad, seek out the best quality foods you already love. You will enjoy them more and our world will be better for it.

Go “one in, two out” for a month

This is simple: for every new thing you bring into your home, remove two existing items. Count everything, if you bring in one piece of paper, find two things to remove. You can remove an empty shoebox or your flat-screen television... but the 2:1 ratio is non-negotiable. Margot Starbuck's [Thoughts on Hair, Shoes & Other Stuff](#) blog inspired me to this practice, which I succeed at to varying degrees.

Pick up the tab at dinner

Amy Follett is my first friend who ever picked up the tab at dinner and it signaled we had finally grown-up—or something like that. This is different than taking someone out to dinner, just pick up the tab after the meal.

Express yourself every day

This one is inspired by [Zoe](#), who takes a picture every day.

I'm not sure if the project has changed me -- it's definitely given me some focus and a bit of perspective on my life. For example, when I realized that the majority of the photos I was taking involved my cat (or other people's), I realized that maybe I needed to get out more. Which is strange because I didn't set out to take these pictures for other people (I don't contextualize them, there are no captions because these pictures are for ME), but I found that I am starting to care about how people view me through these photos.

I've also learned not to be disappointed in myself if I only take crappy pictures on one day—that's part of the "every day" thing, no one can be **good** every day. Which is a comforting realization, I think.

Also, even people I know don't like their picture taken. People don't know what to do around a camera. Do they pose? Do they keep talking? My friends have asked. I say I don't care. Just do what you want to do. And if a moment happens to get captured by a picture, then that's it. Taking pictures of people, I realize, is a lot trickier than scenery, because people are really involved in their own images.

Make a list of everything you own

Baker from [Man vs Debt](#) says, “Everyone has stuff. Some stuff is essential. Some stuff isn't. Knowing the difference can be an ongoing battle, especially in our current culture. In order to stay on the offensive in this fight, we've decided to inventory every item we own.” The more stuff you have, the more difficult this task is. In making a list, I am forced to confront everything that I own. I realized the kazoo my roommate bought for me at the dollar store two years ago is funny, but really just taking up space. I realized that I can give away two of my four pairs of running shoes and still be prepared. And I rediscovered a black & white photograph I took in high school—it's now framed on my wall!

Your Turn!

Now that you have completed reading the *Menu of Small Things*, it is your turn to put these items into action. Try writing about your progress in a journal or blog format. Yes, this could be its own item on the menu, but don't let writing replace action. No matter what you choose, I can't wait to hear how the journey goes for you, please leave a comment on [Work In Progress](#).

Let's do this together!

Happy dining!

Brian

Acknowledgements

First, the biggest thank-you to my parents: even when you are nervous because I am crazy enough to follow your life and example, you are immensely supportive. To my sister Brianna also, you have my back and are up for any adventure with me, large or Small.

In September 2008, [Alexey Timbul](#) told me to “pick a date and make it happen.” I picked September 2009. Only two months later I was talking with a major prospective client and was able to leave my job by April 2009—a full four months ahead of schedule. It was a kickstart and encouragement just when I needed it. Alexey, you are an inspiration, a solid friend, and always a source of adventures. Cheers to you!

When I was almost ready to leave my full-time job to work for myself, a year and a half into my journey through small things, I turned to the incomparable [Peterson Toscano](#) for some final advice from a fellow artist, traveler, and activist. He reminded me that I have made intentional decisions and preparations and that, though it seemed like a big step, it was the next one. You were right.