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Arlington Street Church
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Just One Thing

Eighteen of us are rafting down the Colorado River— eight days, 107-degrees in the sun, and 187 miles of 50 degree water that runs burnt red, chocolate brown, or cold, bright green; sometimes glassy on the surface and sometimes a roiling torrent squeezed between the high walls of the Grand Canyon. As a passenger, your only job is to hold on and enjoy the ride; to get drunk on the infinite permutations of beauty; and not fall out of the boat.

In the hottest part of the day, we pull up on a sliver of beach and hike into the deep shade of a side canyon to fern-lined grottos and cascading waterfalls. Your only job is to experience the magic of these hidden places you can reach only from the river and not to fall off the precipitous edge of the trail.

Every morning, we're up before dawn. As evening falls, after we make camp and eat dinner, we sit by the river and visit. No one is missing the news or their social media feed, and we get used to not being able to Google the facts. When the sun sets over the canyon wall, we lie down on cots next to the water and try to keep our eyes open long enough to see meteors trail across the starry, starry night. Everyone is full to the brim and above the brim, living deeply into this grand adventure, but no one is hurried or distracted or exhausted.

I ask myself, What is it that's so restorative about being in the wilderness? How can I bring back to you the spaciousness and deep peace that come from this life on the loose?

It's a lot of things, I'm sure, but here's one thing:
Just. One. Thing.

Have you ever seen the hit comedy *City Slickers*? I haven't. But I know there's a scene that proffers a surprising insight. Curly, a gritty cowboy played by

the late Jack Palance,¹ and Mitch, the city slicker played by Billy Crystal, are looking for stray cattle. Suddenly, Curly reins in his horse and turns in the saddle to face Mitch.

“Do you know what the secret of life is?”

“No, what?”

Curly holds up a finger. “This.”

“Your finger?”

“One thing. Just one thing. You stick to that and everything else doesn’t mean [anything].”

“That’s great, but what’s the ‘one thing?’”

And Curly says, “That’s what you [have] to figure out.”

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I should have figured this out a long time ago. My first Zen teacher said, “Pay attention” and others said, “Take the one seat.” Ram Dass said, “Be here now.” I heard them, and set myself to that spiritual practice, but I missed the part that was implied: Diffusing our intentions and focus and energy can only come to no good.

In the interests of efficiency and getting more done in less time, many of us have aspired to multi-tasking. Ten years ago, Stanford professor Clifford Nass asked a great question: “If doing the most important thing is the most important thing, why would we try to do anything else at the same time?” He created a study in which he divided his test subjects between high multitaskers and low multitaskers.

Secretly “in awe” of the multitaskers, “I was sure they had some secret ability,” he says. “But it turns out that high multitaskers are [this is a quote!] suckers for irrelevancy.” They were outperformed on every measure. Although they’d convinced themselves and the world that they were great at it, there was just one

¹ pronounced PAL-əns

problem. “Multitaskers,” says Nass, “were just lousy at everything.” They spread themselves thin, and everything suffers.

And why? Because there’s no such thing as multitasking. “We can do two or more things at once, but we can only focus on one thing at a time; those who appear to be multitasking are actually toggling back and forth between tasks.” Even juggling is an illusion of multitasking; there are three balls in the air, but each ball is actually being independently caught and tossed in rapid succession.² It’s now been definitively proven that the human brain can only bring its full attention to one thing at a time. And “when [we] switch away from a primary task to do something else, [we increase] the time it takes to finish that task by an average of 25 percent....³

A study by Timothy Wilson, a researcher at the University of Virginia, concludes that while our brain receives 11 million “bits” of information every second, it can only process 40 of them.” We get progressively worse at ignoring irrelevant information, storing and organizing information gets sloppy, and our memory is compromised. For example, those of you who have two devices up at once — say, watching Netflix while scrolling through your Instagram feed — can attest to being a little vague on the plot line.

So why do we do it? When the brain is stimulated by a lot of activity at once, it releases more dopamine, the feel-good chemical. It tricks us into thinking we’re on a roll. Writing in the *Harvard Business Review*, Tony Schwartz says, “What we’ve lost ... are [boundaries,] stopping points, [and] finish lines....” And wherever we go, our work follows us on our digital devices, ever insistent and intrusive. [But] it’s like an itch we can’t resist scratching, even though scratching invariably makes it worse....⁴ And as we all know, multitasking makes us look busy, which has a certain cachet in our society.

Harvard psychologists Matthew Killingsworth and Daniel Gilbert discovered that 47 percent of our waking hours are spent thinking about something completely unrelated to what’s right in front of us.⁵ Think about that! At any

² Gary Keller, *The One Thing*, p. 47

³ Tony Schwartz, *Harvard Business Review*, 3/14/14

⁴ Tony Schwartz, *op cit*

⁵ Chris Bailey, *The Art of Doing One Thing at a Time*, 4/11/16. Please see alifeofproductivity.com/do-one-thing-at-a-time

given moment, we're only half there ... or, more accurately, half here.⁶ We're in the past, we're in the future, and the more time we spend lost in thought, the more unhappy we are.⁷ It also wears us out. Between 25 and 50 percent of people report feeling overwhelmed or burned out.⁸

The cowboy was right. We need to do just one thing. Stephen Covey, author of *Seven Habits of Highly Effective People*, said, “the main thing is to keep the main thing the main thing.”

More experts weight in:

Kevin Systrom, co-founder of Instagram, says, “Focusing on one thing and doing it really, really well can get you very far.”

Aytekin Tank, founder of JotForm, writes, “Success comes from going deep, not broad.”⁹

Our thrill seeking brains will resist it, because it threatens to be boring, but doing one thing at a time “lets us dive deeper.” he says. What Canadian productivity consultant Chris Bailey calls “single-tasking ... helps us build our ‘attention muscles,’ giving us more control over where we’re directing our attention.... [It] lets us think [more deeply], make more connections, work more creatively, and find more meaning” in what is before us.”

Writing for mindful.org, Eric Langshur and Dr. Nate Klemp invite us to engage in single-tasking as spiritual practice — what they call one-thing-at-a-time meditation:

Pay attention to what you’re doing;
Bring your attention home and focus in the present;
Engage deeply — even savor it ...
or savor knowing that it, too, will pass.

Chris Bailey suggests setting a timer for 20 minutes, which is about how long most of us can really concentrate (this, by the way, is why TED talks are 18 minutes long). Set a timer and give yourself to just one thing. Feel the resistance of your

⁶ Tony Schwartz, *op cit*

⁷ Eric Langshur and Nate Klemp, PhD, *op cit*

⁸ Tony Schwartz, Harvard Business Review

⁹ Aytekin Tank, *How to Do. One. Thing. At. A. Time.* Please see jotform.com/blog/do-one-thing-at-a-time/

stimulus-craving mind and resist all those impulses to distraction. And then ... unleash your focus and energy! And when that 20 minutes is up, take a break.¹⁰

Beloved spiritual companions,
 As a passenger, your only job is to
 hold on,
 enjoy the ride,
 get drunk on the infinite permutations of beauty,
 and not fall out of the boat.

It's a spiritual practice:
 Just. One. Thing.

I invite you to the spaciousness and peace
 that come when you
 Go deep,
 Make connections,
 And show up for your life.

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Let's close with Mary Oliver's *The Summer Day*.

Who made the world?
 Who made the swan, and the black bear?
 Who made the grasshopper?
 This grasshopper, I mean —
 the one who has flung herself out of the grass,
 the one who is eating sugar out of my hand,

who is moving her jaws back and forth instead of up and down —
 who is gazing around with her enormous and complicated eyes.
 Now she lifts her pale forearms and thoroughly washes her face.
 Now she snaps her wings open, and floats away.

I don't know exactly what a prayer is.
 I do know how to pay attention, how to fall down
 into the grass, how to kneel down in the grass,
 how to be idle and blessed, how to stroll through the fields,

¹⁰ Eric Langshur and Nate Klemp, PhD, *op cit*

which is what I have been doing all day.

Tell me, what else should I have done?
Doesn't everything die at last, and too soon?
Tell me, what is it you plan to do
with your one wild and precious life?¹¹

¹¹ Mary Oliver, "The Summer Day," *New and Selected Poems* (Beacon Press, Boston, 1992)