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SAMPLE

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MAKE TODAY MATTER

10 HABITS
for a
BETTER LIFE
(and World)

CHRIS LOWNEY



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SAMPLE

Why Does It Take a Crisis?

Picture Houston in the aftermath of Hurricane Harvey's fury: Streets are flooded, and fetid water is rising in countless houses. Cell-phone coverage is spotty. Downed power lines have cast swaths of a vibrant city into darkness.

Now picture Larry, a friend of mine, who struggles through that chaos to reach his elderly, infirm parents in their flooded home: "We used a raft to evacuate my mother, who is bedbound with Parkinson's disease, and steadied my father as he used his walker to make the block-long journey through four-foot flood waters."

Those anguished images of his parents remain seared in his memory. But something else struck him even more powerfully. "Chris, the remarkable part was the cooperation, support, and mercy that was shown by so many, like the stranger

who literally seemed to show up out of nowhere with the raft that saved my mother. There was no racial tension, no political discord, no infighting. . . . It was a city in which people needed and were given so much support and help.”

Few will be surprised that these Houstonians rose to the occasion and bonded to support one another. Crises often bring out the best in people. Ordinary persons become selfless heroes in the wake of disaster.

At such moments, we are no longer irked by life’s minor annoyances; our sense of what ultimately matters becomes more vivid; we want to be our very best selves; we’re energized to make some positive difference.

But why does it take a crisis to bring out our very best? Why not rise to the occasion every single day?

My friend Paul manages to do just that. A vibrant, young father of two sons and principal breadwinner for his family, he had been sledge-hammered with an unexpected cancer diagnosis and given a few months to live.

That was years ago. A treatment regimen transformed his death sentence into a chronic but manageable medical condition. Still, that experience of impending death transformed his attitude toward life. He tells me that, ever since that time, “There’s no such thing as a bad day.” He’s grateful every

morning. He takes nothing for granted. He makes every day count.

He does many of the same things he always did, the same things we all do: goes for walks, phones his wife during the day, drives his kids to appointments, has dinner with friends, and goes to work every day. For most of us, such ordinary moments seem inconsequential; we drift through them, half distracted by something else on a to-do list. We typically forget them by the next morning.

But, for Paul? He's more present during these small moments. His mind no longer strays in the hinterlands of regrets and dreams. Instead of surrendering to apathy or crankiness, he approaches each day with determination and gratitude.

He seizes each day as a unique opportunity, because he sees each day as a gift. Which is exactly what this book is about: seizing today's opportunity, and rising to the occasion every single day.

If even a few million more of us could live with such focus and a strong sense of purpose, we would transform this world into a kinder, more loving, and more just home.

I know it's not that simple. Each morning, we're swept anew into the chaotic maelstrom of career, social media, and consumerism. I focus on my to-do list and lose track of the

big questions: *Why am I doing this, anyway? What ultimately matters?* That's why the following chapter will invite us to revisit the big questions and to declare what matters.

Yet, it's one thing to declare what matters, quite another to do what matters every single day. It's been far easier for me to envision my ideal self than to become that ideal self. For example, I wasn't quite brave enough to say what needed to be said in that meeting; wasn't empathetic enough to offer the help that stranger obviously needed; haven't mustered the fierce willpower to keep developing my gifts; or don't dare to chase that dream of a new career direction. I've let too many hours slip away, distracted by a social media feed instead of pursuing a dozen more important pursuits.

I can do better; we all can do better. I know that, because I've been inspired over the years by ordinary folks who have excelled at making every day matter. They are neither superhuman nor saints (well, at least one of them might be—read on). But they model attitudes and habits that turn them into happier, more grateful, and more effective people. The practices they cultivate are simple: Any one of us could emulate them tomorrow. Let's start. Let's hear their stories, and let's explore how we can do the same.

First Things First: Decide What Matters

“If, like archers, we have a target to aim at, we are more likely to hit the right mark.”

Aristotle said that. Aristotle was wrong.

Far be it from me to second-guess one of humanity’s intellectual heavyweights. But how I wish my life were as straightforward as target practice with a bow and arrow. Life is like aiming at a moving target while riding a horse. Oh, and while I’m shooting arrows at the target, someone else is shooting arrows at me.

Aristotle wasn’t talking about archery or even about life “targets” such as a great job, a nicer home, or getting tonight’s dinner onto the table. He was speaking of more fundamental

concerns, such as what a happy, purposeful life entails. Or, what really matters.

And he has a point: You'll never hit a target that you don't see, and most of us don't keep our target clearly enough in view. Who hops out of bed each morning thinking, *Lo and behold! My life target lies clearly before me! Let me devote this new day to hitting my target.*

The Roman philosopher Seneca had his own take on that idea: "If one does not know to what port one is sailing, no wind is favorable."

Without a clear vision of what makes life meaningful, one can end up adrift.

I once heard a story about a phenomenally successful business entrepreneur who started suffering the doubts that sometimes afflict phenomenally successful people. Once they reach the top, they wonder, *Is this all there is?*

It's understandable. Driven people sometimes get to the top by focusing almost maniacally on, well, getting to the top. They lead blinkered lives. Even family life gets pushed to the periphery. They keep hitting one professional target after another, all the way up the ladder. Until they reach the top and wonder if they're on the wrong ladder after all.

So this entrepreneur sought out someone who really did seem to have life figured out: Mother Teresa of Calcutta, world

renowned for humble service to the world's poorest folks. She radiated the serenity and sure sense of purpose that he craved.

So he left his fashionable New York neighborhood for Mother Teresa's unfashionable Calcutta neighborhood. But getting there was only half his challenge. See, Mother Teresa wasn't very interested in chatting with rich guys about the meaning of life. Her priority was tending to Calcutta's destitute and dying. But the businessman persisted, and Mother Teresa made time for what he assumed would be the first of many deep conversations.

He explained that he'd come to begin a dialogue with her about the keys to a meaningful life. He asked if she had any preliminary wisdom to share. She simply said, "Pray every day, and never do anything that you know is wrong."

Then she just looked at him, I would like to imagine in a kindly way, but also in a way that probably implied, *Okay? I gave you your answer. Are we finished now? I have things to do.*

The guy must have sat there for a moment, jet-lagged and dumbfounded. But give him credit for realizing, *What can I say to that?* He stood up, thanked her, and went back home. Whether he followed her advice, I can't say.

But Mother Teresa was implicitly challenging us (and him) to reorder priorities as we consider the targets we aim for. That is, instead of thinking first about a career or

financial goal, decide first what kind of person you want to become. Only when your vision of what ultimately matters is clear in your mind are you in a position to make good choices about career, lifestyle, and so on. As for the inner peace and sense of meaning that this entrepreneur (and each of us) craves, those won't flow from what we have and earn but from how we live and relate to fellow humans.

So, what matters? I've read dense tomes about that question over the years, but I always find myself pulled back to some simple ideas. Taken together, those ideas coalesce into a target of sorts, a picture of the kind of person I want to be. Here are a few of the ideas that have become important to me.

- To give as much love as I have received
- “Whatever you did for one of the least brothers [and sisters] of mine, you did for me.” (Jesus of Nazareth)
- “What does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God.”
- Do to no one what you yourself hate.
- Spread love everywhere you go. Let no one come to you without leaving happier.

I'd be awfully happy if I became worthy of an epitaph like “Here lies Chris, who gave as much love as he received, and

who never did to anyone else what he himself hated” and so on. I’m still a very long way from getting there, but I know where I want to go.

Make It Personal

How about you? How do you want to live? What’s your target? What ideas do you keep coming back to, whether for reassurance that you haven’t lost your way or for direction to get back on track?

Why not put this book aside, take twenty minutes, and answer some of those questions? Yes, right now. Keep your answers to one page, max, and keep that page in an accessible place in case any refinements cross your mind as you continue this book.

Then, stick the page in your Bible, day planner, cookbook, or whatever book you open regularly. At least a few times each year, review these thoughts about what matters.

I wish I could assure you that, once you know how you want to live, you will always live that way. If only it were that simple. I fall short of my aspirations pretty regularly, for lots of reasons. Yet all those reasons relate to a simple fact: I’m human, and if you didn’t know, *human* is the Latin word for “screws things up on a daily basis.” Here’s how the

great Christian apostle Paul summed up his own shortcomings and the human condition: “For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate.”

My problem has not been figuring out how I want to live; my problem has been living that way. My ideas about what matters aren't complicated; it's just that I'm complicated and the world is complicated.

Some years back, I helped care for my mother as she slowly slid toward death from leukemia. Talk about hitting the target—I've never felt so certain that I was doing what mattered. I loved my mother and felt so blessed to help support her.

Yet, even though my purpose was supremely worthy, my daily behavior was sometimes less admirable. I was sleep deprived, frightened, and stressed, and it showed: I sometimes snapped at a visiting nurse, lost my temper with the insurance company's call-center staff, or became defensive if my siblings asked about reconsidering some decision I had made.

But at least I was pursuing a supremely worthy purpose during those months, which is more than I can say about other life episodes, when I was temporarily pulled off course by selfishness, greed, laziness, anger, lust (let's not forget that one), or a dozen other inner demons.

The remedy was not to rethink my long-term vision of what matters; rather, I simply needed to pay more attention to the short term, to whatever crazy impulses were leading me astray. The following chapters will help us to do just that: pay more attention, every day; we'll acquire habits that help us to pursue what matters.

Such habits have never been more essential. It was challenging enough to tame our inner demons and keep our priorities in order; now we must do so amidst a world that grows devilishly complex and volatile.

When taking care of my mother, for example, I was constantly thrust into situations for which I felt utterly unprepared: processing complicated medical data, treatment options, insurance regulations, you name it. And as I struggled to reach decisions about her care, all the circumstances seemed in flux: an infection would creep in, or her temperature would spike. It felt as if some perverse goblin took delight in yanking the rug from under me every time I had found my footing.

The military world has a term for that—*VUCA*: “volatile, uncertain, confusing, and ambiguous.” The acronym describes the fog of war, where soldiers must make decisions under the worst possible conditions.

Well, I hope no one is shooting bullets at you, but you, too, are coping with volatility, uncertainty, confusion, and

ambiguity as you accompany a loved one through serious illness, raise a teenager, decide which of a hundred different career paths to follow, deal with a substance-abusing friend, or decide what's ethical when virtually every behavior short of murder seems acceptable to someone nowadays.

Marry our VUCA world to our human frailties, and hitting one's target in life can feel like a ten-meter high dive into a backyard kiddie pool.

I opened this chapter by comparing twenty-first-century life to hitting a moving target. But I realize that I had it backwards: The target isn't moving; everything else is. The target is often clear enough: Most of us know what matters to us. We want to be happy, make a positive difference, and make the world a bit better.

I can see the port I want to reach, as Seneca put it; I can envision what kind of person I want to be. And sometimes the life journey seems easy: calm seas and wind at my back. Other times are difficult and even frightening: Storms arise; I get blown off course; and my compass breaks.

At such times I'm reminded of that famous fisherman's prayer: "Oh God, thy sea is so vast and my boat is so small." Life sometimes feels that way in today's VUCA world. But people successfully navigate its complexity all the time. We meet some of these people in the chapters to follow.