

To the body of believers
at Port City Community Church



And to the thousands everywhere
who've joined us on the My One Word journey

CONTENTS

Acknowledgments	000
Introduction: Words Have Power	000
1. What Is My One Word?	000
2. Beyond Self-Help	000
3. Pick Your Word	000
4. Self-Deception	000
5. Keep It in Front of You.	000
6. Hearing Isn't the Hard Part	000
7. Let It Morph	000
8. Seeing through Your Word	000
9. Blow Up the Moment.	000
10. Write Your Guts Out.	000
11. Wait for It.	000
12. Last Words	000
Notes	000

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I've read acknowledgments in other books, and the common sentiment seems to be that words aren't enough to say thanks. At the completion of this book, I know what they mean. Words are not enough, but I do want to try and say thanks to a few people.

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And everyone knows that the toughest job at a church is not

MY ONE WORD

being a pastor but, rather, being a pastor's wife. Julie, thank you for being the best friend I could ever ask for. I couldn't imagine doing this without your support. I loved sharing a word with you and love sharing my life with you. *Thank you* doesn't begin to cover it.

Thank you to everyone who takes the time to read this book and who takes it seriously enough to pick a word. May God honor your efforts and change your life!

— Mike Ashcraft



It's easy to identify who I most need to thank for the opportunity to create this book. But as Mike said, it's hard to thank them adequately. My thanks go ...

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— Rachel Olsen



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— Mike and Rachel

WORDS HAVE POWER

The first day of class every semester, I begin my public speaking course at the university the same way. I ask my students to take out a scrap piece of paper and tear it into three smaller pieces.

From this one exercise, I can tell what kind of person each student is. The conscientious, detail-oriented, type-A students fold their paper neatly into three equal sections. They crease each fold, then fold it back the other direction and crease again. Sliding the crease to the edge of their desk, they apply pressure for a clean, straight tear. They wind up with three perfect pieces of scrap paper — but it takes a while.

The other group — the big-picture, usually more gregarious, impulsive type-B people — quickly rip their page into three smaller sections. The edges are tattered. The pieces are uneven. They don't care about that; they don't even notice. They just want to know what we're going to do with the paper.

I instruct the class to take one piece of their scrap paper and draw a creepy bug on it — any sort of insect or arachnid you wouldn't want crawling up your leg. The type-As also take longer to draw their bugs.

Then I tell them to take the second piece of paper and write down the name of a food they hate. Any food they think has an awful taste, texture, or smell. Anything they would cringe to have to chew and swallow.

Finally, on the last piece of paper, I instruct them to write

down whatever term they call their mother or the mother figure in their life. Might be a stepmother's first name or a grandmother's nickname. Most simply scribble the letters *M-o-m*.

Next I have them stand next to their desks with their three pieces of paper. I hold up my first piece, showing them my poorly illustrated picture of a centipede. I lay the paper bug on the ground and stomp it, like I'm killing it. I instruct them to follow suit with theirs.

After the briefest hesitation, the class — freshmen to seniors — begin smiling and stomping on their first piece of paper. Smashing ink-drawn spiders and roaches and fire ants over and over with their sneaker- or flip-flop-clad feet.

They laugh at themselves and each other, and I have to speak louder now to be heard over the commotion. I hold up my next piece of scrap paper, showing them the word *beets* I've written on mine. "Now throw down your second piece of paper with your food on it and stomp on it too. Because who wants to eat that?"

"Yuck!" I insist as I stomp on the paper that says *beets*. They follow suit, happily stomping out broccoli and Brussels sprouts and Aunt Hilda's congealed salad. Laughing and talking and stomping, they surmise this is going to be a fun class.

With momentum running high, I hold up my third scrap of paper where I've written the word *Mom*. I shout, "Okay, now . . ." to get their attention. I toss this paper down next to the other two pieces at my feet and tell them to stomp on their last piece of paper as well.

Suddenly my foot striking the floor is the only sound in the room. Motionless they stare at me stomping. Some look around the room — checking to see if others are as taken aback as they are. But none stomp, despite my repeated urgings.

In a decade of teaching, I've never had a class do anything

WORDS HAVE POWER

other than freeze with quizzical looks when I tell them to step on the third piece of paper.

Why? Well, that's what I explain next so the students will grasp the tremendous power, value, and responsibility of public speaking. Of any kind of speaking, really.

Of words, essentially.

I tell them that they don't tread on that little piece of paper with the word *Mom* because words are more than collections of letters. They are not just lines and curves. They represent.

It doesn't matter that their mothers aren't in the room to witness their stomping. I usually tell them that if their mother were present, she'd tell them to obey their teacher. They smile at that irony, but they still don't stomp.

It doesn't matter that each of them at some point in their life have felt like stomping when it comes to their mother. They've all been toddlers and teens. This doesn't matter, because the word *mom* not only represents their mother, but the role of mother. The idea of mom. The office and calling of motherhood.

In essence I've asked them to stomp on all that is loving, nurturing, live-giving, and good. As if it were an ant or an anchovy. I tell them stomping on that word felt wrong because words encapsulate ideas. They evoke our emotions. They hook into memories. They define our experiences — helping to shape us in the process.

There's power in words. Beauty in words. Grace in words.

Words create movement. They craft nations. They seal a marriage. They cast vision. They make us laugh. They focus our attention. They expand our horizons. They stimulate our creativity. And they script our possibilities.

That's why I'm so excited you've picked up this book. Inside these pages we will walk you through the process of using one word in the coming year to effect personal change and spiritual formation.

MY ONE WORD

This is a simple but potent practice. Don't assume its simplicity limits its effectiveness. If you enter fully into the My One Word process, one simple word will reach further into your life and embed deeper into your character than you've ever imagined it could.

I've done this My One Word project for six years now with my pastor, Mike Ashcraft, and the body of believers at Port City Community Church. So when Mike asked me to coauthor this book about the My One Word project, I didn't hesitate, because I know firsthand what this exercise can do. That's why I'm excited for you and what the coming year holds as you participate in this with us.

I can't wait for you to see how one word can profoundly change your life!

— Rachel Olsen

Chapter 1

WHAT IS MY ONE WORD?

*So teach us to number our days,
that we may present to You a heart of wisdom.*

— PSALM 90:12 NASB

I don't have enough time to live my own life!

I reached this conclusion after trying to follow all the advice given on a morning news show one week in January.

It seemed like a smart way to start my day. I figured I'd tune in, get the forecast, learn the headlines, and maybe hear a celebrity interview. I wasn't expecting all the show segments telling me how to live my life better.

Most of these segments offered the promise of deliverance: "Financial Freedom Is Closer than You Think" or "Four Secrets to Better Communication." Others, I decided, were designed to scare the socks off of me: "Six Health Risks Every Person Faces" or "Thieves You Cannot See — Avoiding Identity Theft."

Motivated by this combination of hope and fear, I compiled a to-do list of ways to improve my life and its management according to the experts. The more I listened, learned, and listed, the more behind schedule I felt.

The topics on my list ranged from health maintenance to home maintenance to car maintenance. I was informed I need to eat certain foods every day: four veggies, three fruits, two proteins (preferably chicken or fish), and I think a partridge in a pear tree. I also need to get enough fiber, calcium, Vitamin D, B, C, and Beta-something-or-other.

I need thirty minutes of cardio a day (but apparently with the right exercise product this can be done in ten), fifteen minutes of strength training, and ten minutes of stretching. Plus, some extended time for meditation so that my body and mind could align. I'm told a germ-resistant mat is needed for that.

I need to bust my stress, nurture my creativity, and improve my posture.

I need to pay attention to my finances. Save and invest. Spend frugally — yet somehow also buy the cool gadgets they review on the show. Apparently extreme couponing is the way to afford it all, but it takes a lot of time to save 80 percent on your grocery bill.

I need to check my credit report regularly. Shred important documents. Back up my computer. Meet with my financial planner. And read the information that comes with our kid's (underfunded) college fund. That, by the way, is forty pages of legal and financial mumbo jumbo in eight-point font, single-spaced. I suppose I need to meet with my attorney to understand it.

And that creates two prerequisite tasks to add to the list: find an attorney and find a financial planner. They assume every regular Joe has a CFP, a CPA, and a JD on speed dial. I have Domino's on mine.

The list continues.

Change my oil every 3,000 miles and my transmission fluid every 30,000. Test my smoke detector batteries biannually. Change my air filters every other month. Replace my toothbrush every three months. Flip my mattress every six. Buy new pillows

WHAT IS MY ONE WORD?

every three years—I think this is for my posture, but it could be to get rid of dust mites.

Check my skin for irregular moles. Check my yard for moles too. Weed and feed the lawn each spring. Grow houseplants to cleanse the air.

Save last night's roasted chicken bones to make my own chicken stock. Buy undervalued international stocks. Sell my stock before it drops. And stock my pantry for possible natural disasters.

Fertilize, amortize, winterize, maximize, scrutinize. Suddenly I realized: I don't have time to live my life!

PAUSE

My word for the year is PAUSE. In my busy life there are so many times I need to pause. Pause to remember these days, for they will fly by so quickly. Pause to say yes . . . and no. Pause to give thanks. Pause before I speak in anger, judgment, or criticism. Pause to say I'm sorry. Pause to dwell on God's goodness and mercy.

—Dawn

Looking at the list of things I was supposed to do to live my life right, or well, or whatever all this was going to do for me, I felt defeated. The list that was going to improve my life left me overwhelmed.

In my moment of defeat all I wanted to do was go surf. 'Course the list said I should put on a high-SPF sunscreen and take along a BPA-free water bottle to keep me well hydrated. Filled with filtered spring water, of course.

Dropping the Ball

I'm sure you can relate; you've made lists too. Lists of things you want to start doing or stop doing—things you want to change

about yourself. Lists of ways to improve your life and your character.

Maybe you've only listed them in your head. But I bet they come to mind each January. Nearly two-thirds of America's population has made New Year's resolutions.¹ I am one of them.

And you've probably found, like I've found, that each day keeps blurring into the next while we try to make some progress with our many good intentions. Yet very little actually changes.

That ball keeps dropping in Time's Square each New Year's. And we keep dropping the ball on our resolutions to improve. Only 20 percent of resolution makers report achieving any significant long-term change.²

When I open my Bible, I find more lists. Things a follower of Christ should do. Things a follower of Christ should resist doing. Traits a follower of Christ should display — all the truly important stuff that never makes it onto morning show segments.

When was I going to get to *any* of this?

I decided to drop my list of ways to get the most out of my life. I realized I needed to find a new way to approach personal change.

Losing the List, Picking a Word

My first journal entry in 2004 was a single word: FLOW. Not merely written on the page, but etched in bubble letters about three-quarters of an inch tall. The letters are heavily outlined, surrounded by a thin border, and colored in gray.

It took me about ten minutes to draw and color the word FLOW. But it took three weeks to narrow all that was bubbling up in me down to that single word.

I'd been writing in a journal for years, but here was something I had never done before. Instead of blasting paragraphs on a page

WHAT IS MY ONE WORD?

to capture my thoughts and insights, recording my steps and setbacks, I decided to meditate on just one word.

F AITHFUL

For twenty-seven years I've believed that my plan for my life is superior to God's plan. My time has been spent pursuing goals, accomplishments, and things I felt I needed to be happy and complete. After twenty-seven years of much external success, I realized I was still personally and emotionally unsatisfied. While driving to work one morning I was listening to K-LOVE, and I heard Mike talk of the One Word concept. That day I decided, for the first time in my life, to focus on God's plan for my life instead of my own. Handing over the reins has not been easy; in fact, sometimes I'm not sure I have the endurance. So I chose FAITHFUL as my one word, because I'm committed to being faithful to God's Word and plan. The thought of where things are going is exciting! I'm now being led by the earth's Creator.

—Brian

I wrote this word FLOW in response to something Jesus said. He said, "Whoever believes in me, as the Scripture has said, 'Out of his heart will flow rivers of living water'" (John 7:38 ESV). That struck a nerve.

There were times when I felt the living water flowing with ease from my heart. But there were other times, more times, when it felt forced.

The idea of FLOW drew me forward. It didn't have the trap-pings of regret or the pressure of sweeping promises to change like my resolutions did. It awakened something in me. Not a compulsive desire to change born out of being sick of the way I was, but a desire to live an authentic life that flowed from my relationship with Christ.

Could my life really flow from my heart? The question sent

me on a search anchored by the four letters of this one word. If what Jesus said was true — pause for the obvious answer to arise — then I'd need a way to pay attention to my heart on a daily basis.

I decided looking at and concentrating on this word FLOW would remind me to do that. In the months to come, I paid attention to FLOW and used it to gauge my heart and my life. I discovered I could tell the condition of my heart based on what was coming out of it into my life.

And slowly, over time with this word FLOW, I learned to reverse that process. Instead of looking at my life and actions to realize the state of my heart, I proactively addressed the condition of my heart. That changed my life.

In looking through the lens of a single chosen word, I found a new approach to personal change and spiritual formation — one that is doable, memorable, effective, and sticky. The results have been greater than I expected.

A Movement Rises

In January of 2007 I challenged my church, Port City Community Church in Wilmington, North Carolina, to ditch their New Year's resolutions and each pick a word to focus on that year. I titled the series and the project "My One Word." People quickly embraced it. Within a few years, My One Word embedded itself into the DNA of our church. It's how we now approach personal change and spiritual growth.

One of the coolest things to me is how My One Word not only gives people a doable way to focus on their spiritual formation, but an easy way to talk about it. Around here you'll hear people asking each other, "What's your word?" or, "How's it going with your one word?" You'll hear them answer, "My one word is ____, and so far God's been showing me ____."

WHAT IS MY ONE WORD?

Couples, family, and friends all help hold each other accountable, simply by talking about their words—around the dinner table, at small group meetings, even on Facebook.

In January 2009, the nation's most notable Christian radio station called my office. K-LOVE had heard about My One Word and invited me to come on the air to tell their listeners about the project. I shared My One Word with half a million listeners that month. And I returned to the K-LOVE airways to talk about My One Word in 2010 and throughout 2011. A movement caught fire.

The movement didn't become a movement because K-LOVE called me, but because God has called each of us. This is not a movement of me or my church, but a movement of God. And of his people wanting to be transformed into his image.

BOLDNESS

I saw the myoneword.org site on a friend's Facebook page and checked it out. Immediately after reading the purpose behind My One Word, a word popped into my head. I sat at my desk trying to think of a different trait to focus on. I read through other people's words to see if I could scavenge a good one off their list. I didn't want to use the word God gave me, because it was terrifying to me. Which was silly, because it's just a word. But at the same time, knowing that I'd be accountable to it for a year—that's rough stuff.

I am an intensely shy person. I avoid confrontation at all costs. And I only share my faith when it happens into a conversation. The idea of BOLDNESS, of being a truly bold Christian, is seriously out of my comfort zone. But it seems that this is God's challenge for me this year. I am to actively pursue BOLDNESS and be transformed in the process. So here I go—man, this is intimidating!

—Jen

Focus Is Required

Our lives are fast-paced and demanding. Our attention is divided. The normal, natural pace of our lives will not likely lead us toward spiritual formation. We have so many things to focus on that spiritual formation tends to fall to the wayside, along with our good intentions to rotate our mattress or wax our cars.

Most of us feel overwhelmed at the idea of embarking on a grand plan for spiritual formation like reading through the Bible in a year or memorizing a verse every week. We'd like to, but it just hasn't happened. Enter My One Word. It's easy, doable, and surprisingly powerful, mainly because it supplies narrowed focus.

This book will give you a simple but effective plan to effect personal change (spiritual formation) by allowing a single word to become the lens through which you examine your heart and life for an entire year.

Your single word will force clarity and concentrate your efforts. And as you focus on your word over an extended period of time, you position yourself for God to form your character at a deep, sustainable level.

We're so busy with the surface-level things of life that we forget to number our days and tend to our hearts. We become so preoccupied with getting our lives to a manageable point or a better future that we miss both the moment right now and the reality of a coming eternity.

Yet God calls us to use our days to develop a heart of wisdom. And that's what this My One Word project is ultimately about.

Between these pages I'll outline how to pick a word for the year and how to focus on it. I'll discuss what you can do to drive it deep into your character and what you can do to apply it in your life. The goal is a transformed heart.

WHAT IS MY ONE WORD?

At the close of each chapter you'll find directions and questions for personal reflection. Grab a journal and spend some time with the questions to help you get the most out of your year with your one word.

Throughout each chapter you'll also see words chosen by men and women from all walks of life — college students, pastors, moms, recovering drug addicts. You'll hear their reasons for choosing their one words and their experience with this project. I think you'll find those inspiring.

I invite you to join us this year on the My One Word journey. Change is possible. But focus is required. It's time to get single-minded and single-worded about your resolution to change. Are you ready? Well then, keep reading!

Reflect

- What are some things you would like to change about yourself?
- What distracts you from focusing on the change or the spiritual formation you desire?
- Think about your past attempts to change. Have you made resolutions or sweeping promises to change? How well did it work?
- Often our desire to change is fueled by regret — does regret generally propel you forward or hold you back?