

080: Finding Your One Thing: Interview with Jay Papasan

==

P Focusing on your one thing, and aligning those dominoes, you get momentum. And that momentum gets confidence, and you can now go for bigger and bigger hurdles.

[Music playing]

A Welcome to The Portfolio Life with Jeff Goins. I'm your host, Andy Traub, and this is the show that helps you to pursue work that matters, make a difference with your art, and discover your true voice. Who are the special people who succeed more, get more done, and live happier lives? Maybe they're special from birth, or maybe they've figured out the secret that Jay Papasan shares in his book, *The One Thing*. In this interview he and Jeff discuss how long habits really take to form, and why self-discipline is a myth that sets us up for failure. Here's a fascinating conversation with Jeff Goins and author, Jay Papasan.



[Music playing]

J Jay, welcome to the show. It's great to have you.

P Thanks for having me. I'm excited to be here.

J So, Jay, you are the coauthor of a book called *The One Thing*, and I just want to jump right into it. What is *The One Thing*? I've been hearing a lot about this book. I started reading the book. It reminds me a little of *Essentialism* which I think I saw on *The One Thing* Website recently featured as a recommended book. And I love that book. I love and hate that book.

P [Laughing]

J I hate to love that book, love to hate it. And—

P We had Greg McKeown, the author of *Essentialism*—

J Yeah.

P —on our monthly Webinar last month.

J OK.

P *Essentialism* and *The One Thing*, they're both white books with black and red print. We have a lot in common.

J Yeah.

P And we also have the same theme: If you really want to get more out of your life, you need to focus on less.

J Yep.

P And the book ideas, and the way we sourced them, through about five years of research – it's nothing new. All these ideas have been out there. But we are really pragmatic people, Gary Keller, my coauthor and I. We really wanted to give people a way to, "How do I do less to get more?" Because you hear that, "Oh, do less to achieve more," and it sounds trite. But there is actually a way people who are at the top of things are getting it done. So, our book is fundamentally a tool. It's a mechanism, an approach for people to kind of zero in on what matters most, and give that few things, or that one thing for the title, their best efforts.

J So, I want to come back to that. Thanks for giving us the *Reader's Digest* on that. And, obviously, you wrote a book about this. Our podcast would be six hours long if *Audible* is any indicator of how long it would take to actually—

P Yes.

J —explain what *The One Thing* is. I'm sure you could talk a lot about it.

P I've done two-day workshops.

J Yeah.

P So, it's actually harder to say it in 30 seconds than it is in 30 hours. But, yes, I'm absolutely happy to go as deep as you want where you want to go.

J So, what does that look like for you as a writer? I mean, you've been the coauthor of several best-selling books that looks like. You're not a – I don't think you're a ghost writer. I mean, you are a contributing author to these books. But I think this book is a great example of this, because Gary Keller is this, Keller Williams, I'm sure a lot of people are familiar with that big Real Estate entrepreneur. Let's kind of go back and talk about how you got started as a writer, and how you've fallen into this sort of collaborative writing that you seem to do.

P I think like a lot of people who end up writing, I have a love of books as a little kid. I mean really huge passion for books. I've discovered it somewhere around 4th or 5th grade. And, then, reality was lost on me for many years. I think at age 12, thereabouts, I have a distinct memory of getting a card table in my room, borrowing my mom's electric typewriter and trying to rip off *The Hobbit* and *Conan the Barbarian*. It's kind of mix of the two plots. But I had this kind of idea that I wanted to be a writer at a young age. And I wrote and read a lot throughout my lifetime. And I think one of the interesting things – and this is something we can touch on in your book is that, sometimes your life purpose, the destinations that is clear as it could be, or that you're afraid of it, or—

J Yeah.

P Maybe you don't have the confidence to just say it. Me, it took me 30 years to start saying I was a writer.

J Wow.

P I worked in bookstores. I was an editor at Harper Collins Publishers.

J Uh-huh (yes).

P I mean I danced all around it without ever really committing myself to it until I was living in Austin and my wife was hearing me describe what I do. And she said, "You're a writer." And I had just met a guy who called himself a writer without ever having published anything—

J [Laughing]

P And I was really struggling with that. I was like, "What does he mean he's a writer? He doesn't even write for a living, or write at all?" You know? But she's like, "You know who you are and what you do should be the same. But who you are is how you should define yourself." And, wow! You get great gifts from your spouses who see us better than we see ourselves. So, that was about the time I joined a little Real Estate company as another of those roles around writing. I was a Tech Writer 2, and I found out that Gary Keller was planning on writing a book. And I approached him in the bathroom as a little company back then.

J [Laughing]

P 27 employees. He was washing his hands. And I said, "Hey, Gary, I hear you're writing a book. Do you remember I used to work at Harper Collins Publishers?" And he kind of looked at me and clearly had forgotten that part of my resume. Invited me into his office, and he laid out five books. And he and our coauthor to be at that time, is a guy named Dave Jenks, had spent a couple of days in Barnes & Noble and picked out their five favorite books that were nonfiction but they wanted to emulate. It was *Good to Great*, *The Millionaire Next Door*, a book I never remember, and then two books I actually edited, *Body for Life* by Bill Phillips, and Mia Hamm's, *Go for the Goal*. And it was one of those moments where you're like, "Holy crap. This is just set up perfectly." And I said, "Well, you know, I helped write those two books." And I showed him my name in the acknowledgements. And it was pretty much 2002. Four-and-a-half months later we had written our first book together.

J Wow.

P So, that's my journey from kind of this dream of being a writer to kind of, I think, late realizing that I could actually do it myself. And when you talk about my one thing as a writer, I would be hard pressed to say it's anything different than Stephen King or anyone else says, "You've got to write a lot, and you've got to read a lot."

J Yeah.

P So, every day I try to get a little bit on those two things. And we block from 10 to 2 most days, and when we're really hard-core writing, sometimes from 10 in the morning till 4 in the afternoon. And that's writing time.

J Yeah.

P Behind the closed door with very few interruptions. And that's how we kind of gotten – we've published 11 books in about 12 years.

J Wow. That first book, was that *The Millionaire Real Estate Investor*? Was that another book? Am I—

P It was *The Millionaire Real Estate Agent*. Gary, the founder of a franchise Real Estate Company.

J Yeah.

P And he wanted to write a book. And we talk about this in *The One Thing* to kind of put that company on the map. So, he had been thinking about that book for years. So, we basically barricaded ourselves. I knew nothing about Real Estate. But between him and Dave Jenks, I could help them communicate it. And we wrote that book in a little over three months with a month to kind of go into planning. So, start-to-finish four and a half, maybe. And it shocked us. No one would publish it. Twenty – I don't know how many publishers rejected it. I wish I had the number now. But only The American Management Association said yes. And I saw the amount that they were offering, and I told Gary, "You know what? Let's self-publish." And we did. And we sold 100,000 copies the first year.

J Sheesh.

P Yeah, I know. It surprised the heck out of me. I had actually argued to him that my name didn't belong on the cover of the book. But Gary being Gary said, "But you helped us write it." So, it's Gary Keller with Gabe Jenks, and Jay Papasan. And I actually thought from a publishing standpoint that I was burying myself in a very tiny niche. I didn't think the book would sell very much. But he had envisioned the topic that at that time in that industry was just right. And that book has sold almost 900,000 copies—

J Wow.

P —since 2003 which – wow! That's all I can say. It surprised everyone.

J Yeah. Do you think of yourself as a ghost writer? I mean, how do you label yourself? Most writers I know don't like to label themselves, but it's sort of the nature of the business. Genre is the place that you start, but you never want to get pigeonholed. What kind of writer do you think of yourselves as, do you call yourself?

P I think of myself as an author. And in this case I'm a coauthor.

J Uh-huh (yes).

P And I enjoy writing books in partnership. I've done it with Gary. I've done it with another friend, Ben Kenny. He and I wrote a book on social media. I really work well in tandem. I've written by myself, but that's where my published works have come from. And I distinguish the difference between a writer and an author. And it might have been from my days I lived in Paris for a few years. And they made a distinction between journalists, author, and writer. And I feel like when you're an author, I very much go to this idea of you're writing, and you're publishing. And, then, there is the other intangibles that go with it. You have to promote a book. To be an author, when I think of that, you know, doing what we're doing right now is a part of that package. Speaking in front of people. I

can remember I articulated to Gary very early on that that was my goal. And I got a call at 5 AM. We were at a conference. He was going to do his signature speech in front of about 8,000 people. And I got a call at 5 AM that at 9 AM he wanted me on stage with him.

J Wow.

P And I, you know, like sick-at-your-stomach scared, you know?

J [Laughing]

P But I had only a few hours to be scared. And when I asked him later I said, "Please don't ever do that to me again. I'm always happy to support you in this, whatever." And he said, "You know, if you're going to be an author, that's what authors do." You've got to go ahead and just get it over with, get your fear over with, get prepared, standing in front of a lot of people, because if you're going to be successful, that's going to happen. As usual, he's kind of a mentor, and a coach, and a partner, I just soaked that in and said, "Yeah." There's going to be things that as a writer, or an author, I'm an introvert, right? I like to be with my books. I'm going to have to adapt if I'm going to truly be successful at this.

J And when was that? When did he pull you up on the stage with him?

P It was Orlando. I want to say this was 2004 or '05. And we'd already written two best-selling books, *The Millionaire Investor*, and *The Millionaire Agent*. And I think we had a third in the works. And I've had numerous executive positions in the Real Estate company. And I'd done research for – because I do research for books. I was doing research for the company so that his signature speech had research. And that's why he had me come up there to kind of be a support on that. But, yeah, I think it was around 2004 or 2005. It was pretty early in our run. And it was as shock to the system. You know, at that time I think the most I'd ever spoken in front of was maybe 100.

J Wow.

P And, then, you're in a giant room in front of 8,000 where the noise bounces off of the back of the room. I don't know if you've been on a stage that big.

J Sheesh.

P But it has its own challenges just in itself.

J Yeah.

[Music playing]

J So, you – there's lots of good stuff there, Jay. I want to go back and make sure we highlight this so we don't miss it. One of the things you said is, you spent a lot of time dancing around your one thing, your vocation.

P Yeah.

J I love the things you said. I thought you were like reading my mail, or my biography, or something.

P [Laughing]

J I mean you tried a bunch of different things that were sort of ancillary to the thing. And I love – Stephen Pressfield talks about that – I think in his book *Turning Pro* – and he calls those shadow careers, the—

P Uh-huh (yes).

J They're sort of a representation of the thing, but it's not quite it.

P He touches on that in *The War of Art*, too.

J Yeah.

P He's one of my favorite guys to go read. Because *The One Thing* is showing up every day and writing. That's the war. But, yeah, there was a book we read in the researching *The One Thing*. And it was called, *They Happiness Hypothesis*. And it had a metaphor in it that I thought I've read in other books. And it's called *The Elephant and the Rider*. And the way he described it, the author, I'm forgetting his name in the book said, "If you think about that *National Geographic* special where there is a 90-pound kid riding two-ton Asian elephant through the jungle. The reality is, the elephant is following the path because it chooses, too. If it wants to leave the path to go do something else, there's nothing else that little kid can do about it, period. The kid is along for the ride. And, so, once he got that imagery in his mind, he said, "Now, understand, that the rider is your intellect. And the elephant is your heart, and your heart is going to go where your heart is going to go even if your rider thinks it's in charge."

J Uh-huh (yes).

P When I read that, my whole life just kind of replayed. Like one of these deathbed moments. And I was like, "My elephant was walking me down this path." I've got degrees in writing, and a graduate degree in writing. I worked in bookstores. I got in publishing. I mean anybody who was observing my life objectively would say, "Well, there's a guy who is on the path."

J Right.

P And he's just taking the long path. I could have taken a lot of shortcuts if I'd really known the destination.

J Yeah.

P But the elephant was in charge. And I've often taken comfort in that and tried – people who felt a little lost, weren't sure where they're going, I tell them that story. And I say, "The one thing you can take to heart is, your elephant has been in charge whether you've realized it or not. And if you just start looking at clues, you might start seeing where it's leading you." And they were all over it. I mean, I'm the worst student in the classroom, the slowest one for sure. Because it took me 30 years to figure it out.

J Yeah, me, too. And finally when I came home to my wife after going to this conference and paying this money to figure out what my dream was, I came home and I told her, "I think I'm

supposed to be a writer.” And she’s like, “Are you kidding me? I’ve been telling you that for like 10 years.”

P [Laughing]

J And it’s so interesting how sometimes we are like the last ones to be let in on the secret of the purpose of our life or something. But I think that’s fear sometimes. I don’t know what it was for you, but I think—

P Fear, lack of confidence.

J Yeah.

P I think all of those things.

J Yeah.

P Also, and I try, I really strive to be different about this now. I also think I was moving from low-hanging fruit to low-hanging fruit without ever really stopping and maybe my rush, or my ambition, or just maybe some of it youthful kind of exuberance, not really paying enough attention. You know? I did have some angst later where I clearly was missing it. But I think it’s – a lot of people, they have to just kind of stop and ask the question, or they won’t get the answer. That’s a big part of *The One Thing* is helping people ask the question a little earlier. Because a lot of times we know the answer, but we just never even ask.

J I love that quote by Parker Palmer from *Let Your Life Speak*. He says, “Before I can tell my life what I want to do with it, I need to listen to my life telling me who I am.” It sounds like when you started listening to your life, Jay, things started to connect. The dots started to connect to quote that famous Steve Jobs speech. You look back and you see all these things that look like disparate, nonsensical events in your life, and all of a sudden they start to make some connections when you begin to listen. I love that.

[Music playing]

J OK. Now, let’s talk about *The One Thing*, and I want to talk about the elephant in the room.

P Laughing.

J You wrote a book with Gary Keller about *The One Thing*.

P Right.

J I have a podcast called *The Portfolio Life* which is about many things, the fact that you do more than one thing, and that creates this portfolio. And these ideas seemingly conflict. I’m not sure that they actually do, but I want to talk about what that looks like for you. You said that there’s a difference between being a writer and an author. I’ve never thought of it like that. But it explains a lot to me, why I have some friends who just want to sit in cafes and write, and have this sort of artistic angst. And for whatever reason, that’s never really connected with me. I’ve always assumed if you’re going to be a writer, you kind of had this profession mindset. You’re going to write. You’re going to publish books. You’re going to have to promote books. But a lot of artists that I know, artistic temperaments, really struggle with the promotion, the marketing, even having to go out and speak. A

lot of introverts really struggle with that. And you've just embraced it. I mean Gary calling you up on stage. There was a lot of anxiety with that, but you leaned into that. And it sounds like what it means to be a professional to you is to be an author, a speaker, a promoter, even a businessman working. You've got office hours. You guys are collaborating. I mean, this is more than you just sort of sitting in a cabin in the woods pontificating, thinking of thoughts or stories that you want to share with the world. Does that conflict with the idea of *The One Thing*? Or is it part of it?

P OK. Well, it's like there's two great – I love where you went with the author just now. Here's the way I think – and I'm just now articulating this on the spot. It's not like it's something in my back pocket. But maybe in my mind the biggest distinction is an author has an audience, right? The AU of the first – that's it. And writer's, I mean, we all know great writers that were published posthumously.

J Yeah.

P And to me it's clear as much as I enjoy writing, I also wanted the joy of sharing it.

J Yeah.

P Not necessarily the limelight or any of that stuff. I'm actually not comfortable with that stuff.

J Yeah.

P But I love having an impact. I love getting the note that, "Because I read your book, I started walking my daughter to school." "Because of what you wrote, I'm getting up at 5 in the morning, and I'm getting so much more done." Like, that's the juice, right? And I think you have to be an author to get that. So, just that little – I'm just piggybacking a little bit on what you just said.

J I love that.

P So, let's talk about *The Portfolio Life* versus *The One Thing*. The number one objection to even the concept of this book – we went to the book fair in New York to sell it to booksellers, they're like, "There's never just one thing. What are you talking about? That's ridiculous!" Right, you know? And I was like, "Yes, yes, yes." And, so, the central metaphor in the book is we talk about getting a domino run in your life. And everybody listening to your podcast as a kid at some point, maybe an adult, you've lined up dominoes so that if you knock the first one over, they'll all fall down.

J Uh-huh (yes).

P And that idea is real central, because we understand that there is usually a succession of skills that add up to mastery. There is usually succession of roles we play before we take on the mantle of what we're actually going to do. And often to achieve anything truly extraordinary which is in the subtitle of our book is about extraordinary results. There's a long line of dominoes that lead up to that. So, a lot of what we talk about in the book is, how do you align those dominoes so that you can get there as fast and as efficiently, and as powerfully, as you can? And we found this weird – I mean, back to 1984 or '82, there was an article in *The American Journal of Physics*. This guy Loren Whitehead wrote about a two-inch domino can knock over a three-inch domino, and a three-inch domino can knock over a four-and-a-half-inch domino. Basically, the physical properties being such in the physical world a domino can knock over one that's 50% larger. And he actually built dominoes. And, so, the eighth one was taller than a door. And he described knocking them over in succession. He said, "What started with a gentle tick ended with a loud slam." And for us, that's it. There's this kind of geometric

progression that happens when you start focusing on your one thing, and aligning those dominoes, you get momentum. And that momentum gets confidence, and you can knock over bigger and bigger hurdles. You know? You speak to an audience of 100, or you do a small podcast. And, then, you get invited on the Jeff Goins podcast, right? And, then, you have confidence to do that. And there is that momentum. And that's that domino effect. There are many steps, but they can be aligned powerfully.

J Uh-huh, yeah, I mean there are some great examples in the book. Yeah, I sort of set you up on that, because my understanding of *The One Thing* is it's one thing at a time. I was reading Chapter 3 where you have this quote from Og Mandino. Didn't he write a book called *The Greatest Salesman in the World*, or something?

P You got it.

J Yeah, it is those who concentrate on but one thing at a time who advance in this world. And, then, you talk about Kentucky Fried Chicken starting with one recipe. There's a cool little story about Star Wars. It's not so much that you're going to get pigeonholed doing one thing for the rest of your life, or at least that's my understanding. It's that whatever you're doing right now, in whatever area of your life you're focusing on, you need to be all there, all in, doing the best that you can. And that requires saying no to a lot of other things at that time. Is that right?

P That's exactly right. And even conundrums like Peter Teal, like who's built or founded multiple billion-dollar companies. If you listen to him talk, he has a very, very clear sense of where he invests his capital. And there is a commonality that runs through those things about the vision of the founder, and how they weren't following a trend. They were creating something completely new in the world. And, so, I think that those veins can be identified. And when you do identify that, it makes you even more powerful whether it's one product, or one approach. There's usually if you look backwards at history, you almost always see that in what people are doing, even if they achieve many things.

J Yeah. When I'm doing a bunch of different things, I'm stressed. And I have – I don't know if this is an artistic thing, or a creative thing, or whatnot, but I'm kind of all over the place until I finally buckle down and do it. And when I'm writing a book, or even writing on a blog post, it's very hard to distract me from that. I get obsessed with it. I mean I'll run late into other meetings or something, because I have to get this thing finished. And one of the things that I hear, especially from writers, is this struggle with management, self-discipline. I mean every day I get emails, questions, "How do you do this? How do you discipline yourself to write?" Because you said this earlier Jay. You said, I just try to write and read a little bit every day. I love the simplicity of that. Because often I'm running into these powerhouse, creative writers who are writing 10,000 words a day, and I feel like a total slacker.

P [Laughing]

J My approach has always been, if I have written by the end of the day, that was a win. Because it's so easy inertia to creep into my life. And as you said, "I'm just trying to keep the momentum going." In the book you talk about discipline. I mean really you guys sort of call it a myth. You keep debunk this idea of discipline. Another great quote here from Leo Babauta from *Zen Habits*. Love his blog. It's one of the most prevalent myths of our culture: self-discipline. That sort of threw me for a curveball. Because like I said are always asking me. And I don't really have a great answer except to just do it. Talk to me about where discipline, or the lack thereof, factors into finding your one thing at

any given time and doing it at the abandonment of other tasks and distractions. If we don't need more discipline, what do we actually need?

P OK. I love that. And this is one of the big ah-has I had writing this book is that we really got clear about the distinction between discipline and will-power.

J Umm.

P and when people talk about discipline, they're really thinking about this mental will-power to kind of do what I need to do when I need to do it. And discipline is really – think of it more like a soldier who has been trained so intensely that the acts are now habitual. They don't have to think about them anymore. They've just become habit. So, our whole thing was to become a person of selected discipline. Figure out the things that will impact your lifework the most, and make those things habit. And contrary to a lot of the self-help, and self-improvement guides that you read, habits don't form in 21 or 30 days. The only hard research we could find showed that on average it takes 66 days to form a habit. Two to three times as long as most people thought.

J Really?

P And you look at the data under it, we like got – talked to the researchers. And the data went from 18 days for really simple stuff, to like over 200 for things like quitting smoking. And, so, if you are going to try to do the writing habit, here's the advice I give people. I want you to go to your calendar, and I want you to make an appointment with yourself at the same time every day. Go find a place on your calendar that is consistently free." Here's the reality. Ninety-nine percent of the population – that's going to happen late at night, or early in the morning.

J Yeah.

P I tell people, "When in doubt, choose early."

J Yep.

P Because early in the morning you can get – successful people have a great day before noon is one of the sayings we have around here. You can get a lot of stuff done before most people are at work. And have an amazing day before most people are even out of their house. But I've done a book that was called, *The Eleventh Draft* when I was at Harper Collins where I got to work with all these amazing writers. And the thing for all of them, especially when they were starting their career is that they got up early, before the kids, the wife, before the world was awake, and they put in an hour of time.

J Yeah.

P If it's 30 minutes, or 15 minutes, start small, build big. That first domino is just making that commitment to that time and see if you can't do that for 66 days. And see if you can't start now. One, my ah-ha was when I write regularly, I get into that creative mode so much faster than when I'm just scrapping for time randomly. Now I show up. I sit down. I've got my rituals about my coffee. I've got my special pen or whatever. And I can get into kind of my flow a lot faster. So, to me, that's the – that's the core of it. The discipline is building the habit. And it takes just a little bit of willpower to make that happen. And you have the most of that in the morning.

[Music playing]

J So, let's be real for a second, Jay, and share a little bit of your humanity if you don't mind.

P Uh-huh (yes).

J What do you do when you get off track? I mean, the biggest challenge, especially for the creative person is there – I don't want to feed any stereotypes, but there is sort of this binge and purge, manic, bipolar sort of personality that more creative artistic types tend to embody. I certainly at times embody it. I'm not a well-balanced person. I kind of swing from one extreme to another. I don't know that that necessarily leads to better work. But when I get distracted, or I stop writing, or I fall off the wagon, there's all this shame. You know? And it's hard to rekindle a habit. Do you ever deal with that? And what happens when—

P Absolutely.

J —the power is a struggle.

P Absolutely. And my writing partner calls me on it. You know? We've set up a system where at the end of the week we trade work. And I dread it when I know I've done it. I'm like, "Oh, he's going to send me an email Saturday morning saying, "Where was my section? I didn't see any email from you." And I feel guilty. I've let them down. And the reality is, everybody stumbles. Everybody hits creative blocks. And things happen. Kids get sick. And by the way, if your kid is sick, or you got in a fight with your wife, those things are more important. The reality is, you just want to put in the hours. And the more habitual you make it, the easier it is. And I know I'm sure like half of your audience might have actually just hit pause and rolled their eyes or whatever when I said, "The morning," because I taught a creative workshop in New York at 8 AM.

J [Laughing]

P Talk about absenteeism, right?

J [Laughing louder]

P Creative writing students. They were out to midnight, right? And they're night owls by and large. And these are all stories, I think, that we tell ourselves, because I did. I mean, I was the late night, I thought you had to sip Scotch, and smoke, roll cigarettes to be a writer. The whole persona. I mean, I lived in Paris.

J That's funny.

P O'Hare, Don Lemongrasses. That's just a story you tell yourself.

J Right.

P I think over time you can kind of work through that. I just think you do your best, and if you fall down – if I lose an hour here or there, I try to pick it up. You know? I set a goal of reading 50 books a year. I give myself two weeks off. And the reality is, for the last three years, I've fallen a little bit short. But I know I've done more because I kind of set a big goal for myself. And I allow myself to read

fiction, not just all self-help stuff. Because otherwise I become a robot. And I don't think anybody wants that.

J Yeah.

P But I think you can push yourself as an artist, as an author, as a writer. Can I be the best I can be at this? If I'm going to do it, what does it mean to give my best?

J Yeah.

P And, for me, I do that because my wife expects it of me. And in the most positive way, like I love her, and I want to keep her respect. And that motivates me. I'm like, "You know what? I don't want to pretend like I'm working when I'm at work. I want to come home and tell her, 'I nailed it tonight.'" I love that. And I want to have a good example for my kids. And those help motivate me to do it when I really don't want to do it, when I had a crappy night, or I've got a cold. But, yeah, the reality is, everybody struggles with this. There might be some freaks out there. Maybe Stephen King never struggles a day. But I doubt it.

J Yeah. I doubt that, too. But maybe just because I want him to be on the same level as me.

P [Laughing]

J You do the best that you can, because that's all you can do. I want to wrap up with this, because this is kind of the way that you wrap up the book. It's toward the end of the book. You talk about the three commitments to your one thing. And I love that there's – this is a generous approach to really doing the best that you can. Not necessarily being the best in the world, or getting ultracompetitive, and sort of despairing if you're not a best-selling author, or whatever. It's really sort of a personal thing from what I can gather. And I love that. You outline – you guys outline these three commitments. And I'd like you to explain each of those to us.

P Sure.

J Number one. Follow the path of mastery. Mastery is this word that we don't talk about too often. I love that word. But you do not hear it in high schools or colleges too often. It's sort of reminiscent of the Renaissance or the Middle Ages when people chose a craft and did it for their entire lives. What does the path of mastery look like? I always thought mastery was a destination. You got there, and you're a master. But that's not what you guys say.

P No, and it's about the attitude of being a life-long learner, right? Is that, I'm here to do my best. So, every day I can learn something. And there is so much out there about the 10,000-hour rule, and it's the deliberate practice. You can go and be very scientific about it, or you can be philosophical. I think they're both legitimate. I think that it takes a long time to achieve mastery. That's the 10,000 hours.

J Yeah.

P But the attitude, your approach, the guy who founded Judo, Jigoro Kano. I don't know how to pronounce his name. Like one of the coolest things – here's the guy who founded this whole thing. He's on his deathbed. He gathers all of his students together to say goodbye. And he asked to be buried in his white belt. And that moved me when I read that, because here's the guy, clearly the best

in the world, invented the whole art form of this martial art. And he is sending this message to his best students is that even in death he's taking the attitude of a beginner. And I think when you take that kind of attitude to your work is, that I don't know it all. I always can learn from everyone. One, I think you have a better attitude in life. And, two, you're always kind of picking up new tips and tricks and learning to be better. So, it's a path. If you never get there, you'll go a lot farther if you just have that attitude and kind of the commitment to continually being better at what you do.

J I like the white-belt analogy more than Dan Pink's mathematical analogy he makes in *Drive* where he says mastery is an asymptote which you know from a nerdy perspective, I totally get that. But when I'm sitting around a group of friends and I go, "Yeah, mastery is an asymptote." They go, "Watch your mouth."

P [Laughing].

J An asymptote is this line that moves us closer and closer to—

P And never touches, yeah. We have an asymptote reference in this book, because we are nerds. But we couldn't do it here.

J Yeah, I love that. I mean you're always — I think Hemingway said, "We're all apprentices in a craft that nobody ever masters." So, follow the path of mastery, but it's really about habits, as you talked about, not so much about a destination. The second commitment to finding your one thing is, move from E to P. What does that mean?

P All right. Entrepreneurial versus purposeful. So, the E is entrepreneurial. In our business classes, in our coaching, we talk about this a lot is an entrepreneur isn't necessarily someone who does everything well. But because they're the owner and the founder, they're willing to do everything as good as they can.

J Yeah.

P Being purposeful about something means that when you hit your ceiling of achievement, you're going to look up and say, "What do the best in the world do that I'm not doing? What are the techniques, their models, right, for attacking this problem that I could adopt so that I could be better?" And it follows hand-in-hand with this attitude of being a student. I often will demonstrate it. If you've ever had a golf lesson, or actually been shown how to hold a golf club, it is 100% unnatural. Like you want to hold it like a baseball bat.

J Yeah, it's awkward.

P But you have to put your pinkie between your forefinger—

J And lock your fingers.

P But if you do this really unnatural thing, you're actually a lot better. And that's an example of, you're taking a method that's already out there that the top people use and applying it to you. And that would be the same as some of these habits. Like, go study the people that you admire the most, and hopefully they're not dead poets through an overdose, right? They're people who are successful, and continuing to write books, and you find out things like in my journey on *The 11th Draft*, that book, writer after writer, after writer, said, "I sucked it up. I got up early in the morning. And that's how I got

my novel done.” And I was like, “OK, that sounds like a model.” That’s going from E to P. Just accepting and saying, “There are better ways to do this. I don’t want to hit a ceiling in achievement, because that’s as good as I’m going to do naturally. Because I love this, and I’m committed to it. I’m going to look for the best possible way to do it.”

J And that’s entrepreneurial to purposeful, is that right?

P That’s right. I’m going to be purposeful in my approach would be the way to think of it.

J And, then, the third commitment is to live the accountability cycle. What do you mean by that?

P Right. It means that you’ve got to take ownership of your outcomes. We talk about being accountable versus being a victim. And that’s tough language.

J Sure.

P But a lot of people when you ask them, “How’s the book going?” You’ll hear a lot of excuses.

J Oh, sure.

P And, you know, like principally in my head I can, “It sounds like you’re not writing.” And, ultimately, I know there’s a lot of stuff that happened, right? But it wasn’t like you were in a plane wreck and relegated to some supernatural island in *Lost*. You know? You actually were in our house and going to work every day. You just didn’t find the time. Like taking full ownership of your life. And the outcome of that when people kind of take that attitude that whatever happens, I’m just going to say, “I’m going to own that. That outcome is because I made choices, and I can make better choices in the future.” And I like hanging out with people who live this way. They tend to complain less. They tend to be a lot calmer. And they just tend to own it. It’s like, “You know what? I got this. I screwed up, but I’m going to do it right.” And if an employee says, “I screwed up, but I want to make it right,” I don’t care. It’s like, “I wish you hadn’t screwed up, but I love that you’re going to make it right,” versus bringing excuses and how, “It’s not my fault.” And that’s a whole drama I don’t have to deal with. The outcome of this is, I think if you’re really, truly accountable, and you really want to own your outcomes, I think those people tend to migrate and they find mentors. They find coaches. They find people who are going to help them objectively look at their performance and say, “You can do better.” Because as hard as we try to be this way, we’re all going to gloss it over every now and then. But if you’ve got a coach – and I don’t know if you have one, Jeff, I’ve got one.

J Oh, sure.

P And he tells me like it is. And he said, “You know what? How many pages were you supposed to write this week?” Or, “How many days were you supposed to write?” If I wrote down a number less than I said, he’s going to call me on it. And I know that. And because I know he’s going to do that, I almost never do that, right? It’s this weird kind of cycle of accountability that happens when you allow yourself to be accountable to something bigger than yourself.

J Love that. I want to end with this quote, because I thought it was really apropos for this whole journey that you’ve been taking us through which *The One Thing* sounds really intimidating. I remember when I was working on *The Art of Work* and talking about finding your calling people were

like, “Yeah, but you can have more than one thing.” People are so afraid of commitment, and I love that you guys, I think, are very generous. But at the same time there is a certain tough love. You’ve got to do something. You can’t just sit around and complain about your life and expect magical things to happen to you if you want to live a happy, meaningful successful life. And I think in the last chapter of the book you quote this Chinese proverb: “To get through the hardest journey, we need take only one step at a time, but we must keep on stepping.”

P Yeah.

J And those steps – to go back to your early analogy are those dominoes, lining up those dominoes and knocking them down, creating that momentum. But we have to take the next step. And, Jay, I feel like you’ve given us a ton of great information—

P [Laughing]

J —that you can’t really walk away from this and go, “I just don’t know what to do.”

P [Laughing] No.

J Take the next step.

P Action. Just pick one thing and implement it. And I’ll just say this, and I like the way you characterize it. That was honest. I think we are a little hard core. But we were really clear in our subtitle is that, it’s the surprisingly simple truths behind extraordinary results.

J Yeah.

P And, so, in that five years we have two full-time researchers working with us, finding stories, and examples. And it took us six months to read the research binders when they were done. And extraordinary is a high bar, right? We didn’t – if you want to do other things, then you might get average. And if you’re OK with that, I’m fine with that, too. But I wanted to have an extraordinary marriage. I want to have an extraordinary career. There’s a few things in my life I want to be extraordinary at.

J Totally.

P And, so, I don’t want to settle for being average. And I think that’s the key is understanding you say, “Yeah, I don’t have to do that,” you might be settling for a lesser outcome.

J Yep. Well, thank you so much, Jay. It’s been an honor to have you. And I have to give a big shout out to Clark, our podcast editor, who interned with your company and connected us. This interview would not be possible without Clark.

P We love Clark.

J Yeah. Thank you, Clark. Big shout out to him. If you’re listening to this, please go to Goinswriter.com and thank Clark for this interview. Because it’s his fault.

P/J [Both laughing]

J Thanks again Jay. It was a pleasure. Thank you Clark. Thanks for listening everybody out there.

P Thanks a lot.

[Music playing]

A That was an interesting and practical conversation for anyone who wants to live a richer life. We'd love to know what changes you're going to make as a result of listening to Jay and Jeff's conversation today. And you can find today's episode at GoinsWriter.com and leave us a comment there. As always, we really appreciate you leaving a review on i-Tunes about the show. It helps other listeners find the show for the first time. And on a special note, if you have a podcast, or want to start a podcast, and would like to connect with our podcast editor, Clark, please visit <http://ClarityPodcasting.com>. That's <http://ClarityPodcasting.com> to find out more about how his team can make your show great. I'm Andy Traub, and on behalf of Jeff Goins, thanks for spending some time with us. Now, go build your portfolio.

[Music playing]

P I tell them that story and I say, "The one thing you can take to heart is that your elephant has been in charge whether you realized it or not. And if you just start looking at clues, you might see where it's leading you."

Resources

- *The One Thing* by Gary Keller & Jay Papasan
- *Essentialism* by Greg McKeown
- *The Millionaire Real Estate Agent* by Gary Keller, Dave Jenks, & Jay Papasan
- *The Happiness Hypothesis* by Jonathan Haidt
- *Let Your Life Speak* by Parker Palmer
- *The Greatest Salesman in the World* by Og Mandino