

## Optimizing the Ordinary

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Can a trip to the commissary change your life? Not because of some tragedy en route or any distressing event, but just through uneventful, ordinary things? The answer is “Yes, but...” If you are like the majority of Americans, you are constantly in a rush. A rush to get to work, get home, get the kids, get dinner and the list goes on until you crash and resume a similar routine the next day. A trip to the commissary can often feel like this. The mission is to get in, get out, and get on with life. We tend to think this method gives us more of what we want because by “saving” time we can bank a few minutes up so that we may be able to have a few minutes of peace and quiet in the evening – perhaps, if you’re typical, in front of the TV. But does it give us more? Does this method of racing through life truly benefit us? Our loved ones? Our community? Reality dictates that time cannot be saved, it can only be spent. How you spend it depends more on the “ordinary” than you may realize.

This trip to the commissary can change your life, but only if you are willing to change the ordinary. Where do we begin? Let’s start with the parking spot. For most of us, the first great feat of any shopping adventure is to declare victory over our enemies: those fellow perfect-parking-spot-seekers who would DARE inflict upon us the severest of injuries – 20 more steps and 7.5 seconds more time (each way, mind you). Here is our first change from the status quo. As you are turning into the parking lot, take the very last spot. Yes, the one furthest from the door and preferably in that zone you used to think was just for suckers or those with the fancy wheels who feared getting a scratch. Take note of the satisfaction in reshaping your expectations. This is no longer a battle. Others are no longer out with the sole purpose of making your life difficult by coming to the commissary the same time you did. You are no longer the victim of a full parking lot. You are the active authority over this new, albeit unusual choice.

Next step? Pause. The car is not on fire even though our typical method of departure from most motor vehicles would suggest it. Take 10 seconds to just sit. Gathering your keys, phone or unbuckling does not count. The 10 seconds consists of no activity whatsoever. If you need any testimony of how rushed you really are, this pause will shout it from the mountain tops. It will feel like an eternity, when in real terms it is roughly equivalent to two breaths, which you may just notice for the first time all day.

And now? Hopefully, your planned pause provided a quiet assurance that life is not an emergency and you can begin your walk to the commissary with a slightly slower stride. You may cringe at this next step because it is likely the most unusual of these ordinary changes. The good news is, since you parked in the back of the lot, you will have ample opportunity to be successful in this endeavor. The goal here is to pick up trash you see on the ground before you. Huh? Yes, even just one piece, but do it with pride. Rumor has it that the installation commander, Col. Donald Kirkland, will award his coin to anyone he catches in such an act. Why? It is not simply to see a cleaner path before us. He knows that internally we change for the better when our tendency is toward doing such a simple act of service. Remember, this trip is about changing your life and while you may not see the benefits at first, they run far deeper than you can imagine. Once you’ve discarded your trash, the bathrooms are on the right as you enter.

Ironically, after you've washed your hands, you will begin your shopping with cleaner hands than those who ignored the trash for fear it would make them unclean.

With basket in hand or cart wheels rolling you now must take another conscious step to alter what might be termed the habit-of-the-bubble. It is just as pernicious as the fight for perfect parking, but much more subtle and invariably goes un-noticed. This bubble essentially reduces the world to your internal dialogue, your food collection instrument, and the crumpled list you've just produced for ready reference. To pop your bubble habit, simply look as far as you can see across the store and say out loud, "Wow!" Appreciate the fact that what you now enter would absolutely astound the vast majority of people who have ever lived. Aisle after aisle of priced and packaged food is easy to take for granted, but it is a profound privilege. So, as needed, break out that pin and say, "Wow!"

If you've been successful to this point at altering your ordinary, this last change will be the easiest. By giving the gift of gratitude, you will seal the deal in changing your life. Walt Whitman once said, "When I give, I give myself." Set a goal of saying a sincere "thank you" to at least three people before you leave the store. If this is already common practice, then expand it to telling them specifically why you are thankful. This will prime you to be on the look-out, ever-searching for the good in others and giving them a piece of yourself through your praise and smile.

Technology and science have brought numerous benefits to our lives, but we must never fail to appreciate the simple things. Naysayers may argue that these changes are impossible with children in tow, but are they really? Optimizing the ordinary can become an extraordinary adventure when we pause long enough to consider our options and choose wisely. If you have them, invite your children along for the ride. Small changes, hidden in plain sight, can forever alter our individual and collective paths toward a more promising present and a more fulfilling future.