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**Live Like You Were Dying**

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## **“Live Like You Were Dying”**

### **MY LIST OF THIRTY FIVE CHANGES**

**Developed by Paul Neff – Cancer Survivor – 2013**

Most of us live life like we are going to die of old age, even though we know today could be our last. In reality, many of us either die without warning or at an age where it is too late to make any real significant changes. Fortunately, in December 2013 I was blessed with a wake-up call informing me I had cancer and I might only have three years to live. One thing is for sure; you are never ready to receive that call!

Contemplating the thought you may only have three years left is profound. I have always loved to journal and reduce my thoughts to writing, and during my treatment I found myself reflecting on whether I was investing my time, talent, and resources exactly how I desire, given this potential time horizon.

I have lived my whole life very intentionally; living a life of purpose in the direction I believe God is leading me. Thus, from my time of reflection and prayer, I was shocked to discover there were thirty-five changes I wanted to make in my life.

Using this as a catalyst and opportunity to make future changes, the closer walk I now enjoy with God, Family and Friends, combined with the many blessings and miracles I have experienced since then, – truly made 2013 one of the best years of my life! God is good ALL the time!

We can rejoice, too, when we run into problems and trials, for we know that they help us develop endurance. And endurance develops strength of character, and character strengthens our confident hope of salvation. And this hope will not lead to disappointment. For we know how dearly God loves us, because he has given us the Holy Spirit to fill our hearts with his love.  
Romans 5:3–5

And we know that God causes everything to work together for the good of those who love God and are called according to his purpose for them. Romans 8:28

The wonderful thing about every change I desired to implement in my life, is if I truly only have three years or thirty years left, they are still great changes.

1. **Quality Time** – my wife Kathy and I have enjoyed a very full life and we have been blessed with the opportunity to spend a great deal of time together. She is my favorite person to be with and my best friend. She makes me a better person! However, I realize most of that time has been “on agenda.” We have so much to discuss, decide and process, whether it is ministry, family, business, etc. Business we discuss often includes Servant’s Heart which is our family foundation; Genesse Home – a home where pastor’s retreat; our family Ranch and Loving Hearts Babies Home – a ministry we run in Uganda. We are together a great deal, but our time is filled with the “stuff of life.” I want to spend more time with Kathy with no agenda, no lists of things to go over, no time constraints, just exclusive quality time as husband and wife.
2. **Marriage** – To always be investing in my marriage in key and significant ways. Don’t ever be satisfied by status quo, your marriage deserves to be excellent and work to that end.
3. **Relational Time** – I have always been a highly productive individual with a strong work ethic and get most of my self-worth from what I produce. I am happiest when I have put in a good day, gotten all of my work done, and delivered above expectations. Typically, I only go to breakfast, lunch, or enjoy coffee with a friend maybe twice a month, eat almost every lunch at my desk, keep two assistants busy full-time, and produce a great deal. Although I consider myself reasonably good at relationships and have many close friends,

I now have a clearer picture of the value of time with friends and I desire to be more available. Now, if a friend wants to walk, have coffee, or share a meal, even though my day is already fully planned, the answer is “yes.” It is okay that some things just won’t get done. I may not produce as much, but deeper relationships are more important.

4. **Servant’s Heart Foundation** – Our family’s philosophy is ‘*blessed to be a blessing*’. For many years now, we have involved our three children (who are all now in their 30s) in our giving and work through Servant’s Heart, our family foundation. In an effort to help them understand our philosophy further, we have now decided to increase their learning curve rather sharply and the five of us are now meeting monthly to discuss the details of each grant and the inner workings of Servant’s Heart.
5. **Increase Giving** – Kathy and I have done a significant amount of giving to ministry over our lifetime and it has produced a tremendous amount of joy as we watch God use those funds to impact His Kingdom and change lives. We want to increase the number of ministries we give to annually, so we may serve God through our giving even more and experience a greater joy as we witness God’s work.
6. **Generosity** – Generosity is important to me. I now have a strong desire to be more generous on all fronts; with family, friends, support staff, gratuities/servers, and overall giving to others.
7. **Exercise** – We all know exercise benefits our life in countless ways. The one thing all my cancer doctors agree on is that regular exercise is the number one thing I can do to help prevent cancer from returning. I now maintain an exercise routine even while travelling and now I am exercising four and often five times a week (weight, aerobic, & intervals).
8. **“Need to be right”** – Sadly, I have had this internal desire to be right. I now realize being right is just not that important (or valuable), even when you know you are right. I choose to spend less time in the “courtroom” arguing my point, especially with Kathy.

9. **Mentoring** – God has blessed me with an incredibly full life and I feel I have a fair amount to pass on to others. I always planned at age 65 to start a mentor a group of younger male Christian entrepreneurs. After my experience, I saw there was no reason to wait. I put together my outline, identified potential candidates and began my first group in 2014. To date, I have mentored 4 groups.
10. **Cancer Assist** – Reduce to writing all of mine and Kathy's learnings from our respective cancer journeys and be open to sharing and assisting others who find themselves in a similar place.
11. **John Stott Days** – John Stott, one of the wisest Christian leaders ever to have lived, told me years ago, that the main way he was able to maintain clarity in his thinking and a proper balance in life, despite his busy and hectic schedule, was to take a quiet day on a regular basis. A quiet day is not one where you are all alone and you get caught up on your project list. In contrast, it is a day you spend totally alone without any interruptions. It is a time for prayer, reflection, reading, journaling, writing, etc. I am now calendaring a minimum of one quiet day a quarter. They have been extremely rewarding.
12. **Legacy** – My parents passed away before my children were born and I realize I have not talked much about them over the years. I now take time to regularly share stories about my parents so my children will have a better understanding and relationship with their grandparents, even if they have already passed.
13. **Fathering** – Take time each week to teach our three children something in much more depth. Create opportunities and invest in their learning.
14. **Encouragement** – Look for opportunities to encourage, build up, and affirm others regularly.
15. **Joking** – Be sensitive to the cost of joking and its impact on others. ☺
16. **Annual Family Vacation** – Commit to a meaningful family vacation annually and explore the world together. Continue this when spouses and grandchildren

arrive, even if Kathy and I have a busy year of extensive missions and vacation travel; don't let it squeeze out the family vacation.

17. **Discretionary Time** – Be better at delegating more work to others in order to create more discretionary time and reduce my workload and responsibilities. Take the risk and even delegate work that I think I am the best at doing. I desire more margin time in my life.
18. **Music** – Listen to music more frequently. Make it readily available so it is easy to access. Plan ahead to listen to live music at least once a month.
19. **Souvenir** – Have a more flexible budget when purchasing souvenirs while travelling. When you look at the cost of the trip compared to an expensive souvenir, the additional cost is relatively insignificant. A special souvenir that reminds you regularly of the great memories could be priceless.
20. **Extend Our Stay** – Plan an extra day or two when travelling to do things you might not normally take the time to do. We obviously hit the high points, but often some of the lesser popular things can truly be special; or simply take time to relax before coming home.
21. **Visit Churches** – Make a point of visiting different churches on Sunday while travelling. Do research ahead of time to determine which might be the most interesting experience.
22. **Walks/Hikes** – Look for opportunities to walk. Take more opportunities to walk instead of drive. Look for interesting, beautiful hikes.
23. **Focus** – Try to maintain a focus on what really matters in life and hold on to everything else with a loose grip and be willing to let go more and more frequently and much faster.
24. **Learner** – Do things which create an interesting learning opportunity, plan outings that have an opportunity to learn. Regularly create situations which will challenge me intellectually and physically.

25. **Date Nights/Outings with the kids** – Increase the frequency of date nights with my daughters and outings with my son Encourage the kids to plan the outings more frequently. See and experience what they choose.
26. **Legacy Bible** – Create a Legacy Bible for grandchildren by reading the entire bible with my grandchildren in mind. Write notes, prayers, and insights to them as I read. Have it professionally copied, bound, and share copies with our three children for their children.
27. **Eating** – Eat a healthier diet. A diet, which discourages cancer, is actually a very healthy diet. Keep at the front of my mind those items which should be avoided and those items which are highly beneficial. Pay attention to portion control. I do not have to go crazy, just be smart.
28. **Weight Management** – Fortunately, while I was on my feeding tube during my recovery, I was able to intentionally lose weight and I now find myself at an ideal weight for me, something I have not seen for a few decades. Commit to not letting my weight creep back up.
29. **Travel** – One of the easiest places for me to be with Kathy with no agenda is when we travel together. Plus, I absolutely love adventure and seeing the world God created for us. Spend more time travelling with Kathy than previously – I want to stretch my concept of what I considered a normal travel period. Be sure there is plenty of down time for walking, hiking, talking, relaxing, and of course sea glass hunting.
30. **Sharing** – Be more intentional about sharing what I have learned with others.
31. **Laugh More** – Look for opportunities to laugh more. Look for comedians, comedy shows, comedy TV/movies, play games that make you laugh. Basically, find ways to laugh more each day.
32. **Family Time** – Don't let ministry/work cause me to miss family time.
33. **Go Deep** – Look for opportunities to have deeper conversations, especially with family, both intentionally and spontaneously.

34. **Cigars** – Stop smoking cigars. Although the doctors say my smoking one cigar a month did not contribute to my cancer, Kathy has asked I stop smoking altogether.
35. **Wine** – Reduce wine with dinner from four times a week to two times a week. Again, although my doctors say my limited drinking did not contribute to my cancer, it seems like the wise thing to do, except for while I am on vacation 😊

A few of these changes I have wanted to make for a long time, and I now find that having wrestled with cancer, the changes are actually easier to make. I have already implemented over half of these changes, and it feels great. I am confident they will last for the rest of my life. My hope and prayer for you is that reading my experience will somehow encourage and inspire you to make a few course corrections to help ensure you are moving more towards the person you want to be in life.