

The Tea That Changed Everything

The smallest possible input, repeated, becomes the first measurable change.

Before any of this changed, I want to tell you about my iced tea.

I drank Arizona iced tea, decaf, full sugar, by the gallon. By the gallon. I bought it in those big plastic gallon jugs they sell at the grocery store, and I never bought it one at a time. I would walk in, find them on sale if I could - they were three or four dollars a jug back then - and load up eight or ten of them into the cart. Fifty bucks of iced tea in one trip. The cashier never blinked. I never blinked. My wife never blinked because she didn't drink the stuff, and she figured ok, if that's what the man wants to drink.

Eight or ten-gallon jugs. They lined up in the refrigerator like soldiers. And in case I needed something for the road, I'd throw a six-pack of the smaller bottles in the cart too - the ones that fit in a cup-holder - because I wasn't about to drink iced tea out of my giant plastic mug while I was driving, it was too large for the cup holder anyway.

Here is how I drank it at home. I had a plastic mug. I want

to be exact about the size of this mug, because it matters to the story. It was bigger than a quart. It was approaching half a gallon. It was the kind of cup that, if you saw it sitting on a kitchen counter, you would assume two people were going to drink out of it, but it was just for me; only I drank out of it. I would put a little ice in the bottom - not a lot, because I didn't want to water down the tea - and I would pour off a glass and start drinking.

On a normal day, I would put away a full gallon. On a hot summer day, two. I did this every single day. I had been doing it for years.

And here is the part I want you to hear clearly, because it is the truth about how I lived: I never once thought about what was in it. I knew there was sugar, of course, I knew there was sugar in the tea, the label said so. I just didn't do the math. I didn't convert it from grams into spoonfuls, then into what must have been cups of sugar per week. (I have looked into this calorie load since and have learned that each gallon I drank contained about 1600 calories. That's approximately 80% of the recommended daily TOTAL of 2000 calories for most adults, I was consuming, DRINKING, almost a WHOLE additional day's worth of calories each day just by drinking my iced tea.)

The thought never landed. My wife and I had been drinking

processed, sweetened liquid, sometimes with sugar, sometimes with artificial sweeteners, since the 1980s - we had a Diet Pepsi phase that lasted years, we'd buy two-liter bottles in bulk, we'd sometimes drink an entire bottle a day between us - and when I switched from Pepsi to tea, I didn't do it because I was thinking about my health. I switched because I liked the way it tasted.

A habit you don't notice is the most powerful kind. It hides inside the ordinary furniture of your day - the cup on the counter, the bottle in the door of the fridge, the receipt at the bottom of the bag - and it does its work whether you are paying attention or not.

A Waffle House in North Carolina

I can tell you the day this started, and the place, and the time of day, because I remember it clearly. We were visiting my brother in North Carolina. He lives down there. It was a Sunday morning, around eleven-thirty. We were going out for breakfast - my wife and I, my brother and his wife. - My brother suggested a Waffle House. He said, If you're in North Carolina, you have to go to a Waffle House. He said, "I think it's a law."

I had never been to a Waffle House before.

There were two things I noticed when we walked in. The first was that almost the entire restaurant had booths, with only two tables. I made a beeline for one of the tables, because I hadn't fit in a restaurant booth in over a decade. The second was that the menu had iced tea on it; they offered regular SWEET TEA, my usual poison, UNSWEETENED TEA, and then raspberry tea.

I had been drinking the same kind of thing for years, but I'd never tried raspberry-flavored tea. I ordered chicken and waffles - with extra gravy, because the gravy was the best part, their "gravy" was a maple syrup-sweetened version of the gravy you'd usually get with biscuits and gravy. It was a thick, sweet, brownish "gravy" poured all over the top of the dish. - and when the server came around to my order, I just blurted out, on a complete whim, "Let me try the raspberry tea." That was it. No big decision. No thought process. Just - something different, why not?

They brought it over. I took a sip. And I noticed something I had not noticed about drinking this tea that I'd not noticed ever before, over maybe twenty-five years I'd been drinking the stuff, my regular sweetened tea.

This isn't really THAT sweet.

It tasted like tea. It tasted like the raspberry, of course - a clean, light note of raspberry on top - but underneath that,

for the first time in a very long time, I could actually taste the tea. The tea I had been drinking by the gallon at home was so sweet that the tea itself had become invisible. The sugar was the whole thing. The sugar was the drink. This raspberry tea, by comparison, was lighter. Cleaner. I could both taste and feel the difference in my mouth, on my tongue. The sweetened version, when I think about it now, would coat my tongue with a sticky, almost syrupy weight, a film that sat there long after the last sip. This one didn't. It just ... went away. It left no residue, no aftertaste. It felt very CLEAN.

I drank the whole glass. We had a nice morning. I ate my chicken and waffles with my extra gravy, sipped my raspberry iced tea, and enjoyed it very much. When we got up from the table to leave, I had a small thought - the kind of thought that, if I had been a different man, I might have written down. The thought was: Well, that was interesting. Maybe I don't need the sweet stuff. Maybe I could cut back a little.

And then I let go of the thought, and we got in the car.

Most of the moments that change your life don't announce themselves at the time. They sit there, quietly, alongside the chicken and the gravy, and you don't know what they were there until later.

The Slow Taper

I want to be honest about something, because the easy version of this story is just that, a STORY, I have caught myself telling at parties. It's not the whole story, it's not what actually happened. It's the easy version, the SIMPLE version. It simply says, "I switched to unsweetened iced tea and lost 20 pounds." The truth is messier and slower than that, and it is the part I think matters most.

When I got back from North Carolina, I did not start drinking unsweetened tea. I went to the grocery store, and I looked for the closest version of what I had been drinking that wasn't the full-sugar Arizona tea. They made a sugar-free version too. I wasn't ready for sugar-free - no sugar sounded like a step too far - so I bought the DIET-caffeine-free version instead. Artificial sweeteners. Still sweet, just less heavy. Like the Raspberry tea, it might be lighter. I told myself it was a good compromise.

I drank diet tea for months. Maybe two months. Maybe five. The exact timeline has become fuzzy, but it was long enough to become my new normal. I bought it in jugs. I drank it out of the same big plastic mug. Nothing about my routine had visibly changed except the label on the bottle.

And then one day I ran out, and the next part is the part I want you to picture clearly, because it is the part nobody puts in the inspirational version of these stories.

This was such a SMALL thing.

It would have been easy to miss.

Had I missed this, had I not made this ONE CHANGE, none of this would have happened.

THIS one thing was truly the key to the lock - this ONE THING opened the door to what would ultimately become my new life and the path that I'm on today.

My wife is Debbie, she drinks regular Lipton tea, but she takes hers HOT. We always had a box of Lipton tea bags in the cupboard. She asked, "Do you want me to brew you a jug?", "Please go ahead". She did.

And the moment she handed it to me, the cash register in my head went off.

Not the diet register. Not the health register. The CASH register. Hang on a minute. Those Arizona jugs cost me four or five dollars apiece. A whole box of these tea bags costs four bucks. A whole box. And it makes - what - five gallons? Eight gallons? So, I asked her, "Would you mind making the iced tea from now on?" And so she began

making my tea. I stopped buying bottled tea completely.

That is how the second change started. Not my health. Not my diet. The Money.

When she first began brewing my iced tea, it was still with sugar. She asked me, and I said, Sure, put the sugar. And we kept the empty Arizona jugs and reused them, so when you opened the fridge, it looked the same as if it always had - a row of plastic gallon jugs, lined up like soldiers - except now they were tap water, tea bags, and a little less of my paycheck.

Then one day, I was walking through the kitchen, and I saw her pouring in the sugar, "Whoa, honey, that's a lot. Can we maybe put a little less in there? It's a little too sweet."

That was the next dial-down. She put in a little less in the next batch, and a little less in the one after that. The recipe was never precise - it wasn't a chemistry experiment, it was just my wife brewing iced tea - and so each jug came out a little different. I would taste it and say, I like this one. This one is good. Could you maybe cut it back another notch? And she would. And I would taste it and say the same thing. And she would.

Eventually, I asked her to please try it without the sugar. Just see what happens.

She brewed me a jug without sugar.

And here is what happened to me, the man who had been drinking a gallon of liquid candy a day for years (remember, these were 1600 calories per jug PER DAY): I liked it. I liked it more than the sugar version. Because by then - and I want you to hear this carefully, because it took me a long time to understand it - my taste buds had begun to change. Each step down the sugar ladder had retrained my palate and my brain to expect a little less, and a little less, and a little less, until the tea I now wanted was actually just ... tea. Plain, brewed, cold tea, with nothing else in it.

The cash register in my head did another little dance. I wasn't buying jugs anymore, just refilling the old ones. The tea bags were cheap. The water was free. And now I wasn't buying sugar either.

I drank that for two or three months without thinking about it.

Real change, in my experience, rarely happens in one decision. It happens in a long series of micro-decisions that feel so small you don't even seem to notice them at the time. The story you tell about the change - one day I just stopped - is the story of the last step on a staircase you were already walking down.

Twenty Pounds, Discovered by Accident

I want to set the scene properly because of all the moments in this whole transformation, this is the one people ask me about most, and it is also the one with the least drama of any moment in the whole story.

I was, even in those days, a man who weighed himself once in a while. Not often. Not on a schedule. Just occasionally, just using our regular bathroom scale. Every couple of weeks or so, I would step on, register the number, and step off. I know what I was when this all started. Three hundred and ten, give or take a pound or so. 310 That was the number on the scale the last time I looked, and it was my highest ever. I think I knew then, this had to stop. I needed to change.

About two or three months into Debbie's no-sugar tea, I stepped on the scale for the first time in a while, I looked down, and froze.

That can't be right.

I was twenty pounds lighter.

I stepped off the scale. I stepped back on-same number. I want to tell you that what I felt next was a wave of triumph,

pride, or motivation, but it wasn't any of those. What I actually felt was confusion. What the hell happened? I haven't done anything. I'm living the same life. I'm eating the same food. I'm drinking my iced tea like always. Why am I twenty pounds lighter? It didn't register, yet the sugar was gone.

It took me about a week or two to put it together. I was still drinking tea - it still tasted the same to me - but the math hadn't yet clicked that it was different. The version I was drinking now, the version Debbie made with no sugar at all, was a completely different beverage from the version I had been drinking for years. And eventually, on a random, maybe a Tuesday morning, really, I have no exact recollection of when, just that the realization hit me in one ordinary moment when I wasn't looking for it - the line connected itself in my head.

You stopped drinking sugar.

You stopped drinking sugar and lost 20 pounds.

Now, here is what surprised me most about my own reaction. You would think a man who had walked around for years at three hundred and ten pounds, listening to doctors talk about pre-diabetes and an enlarged heart, would have responded to a twenty-pound weight loss the way the man on the cover of a magazine responds: with a

fist in the air and a confetti cannon. I did not. What I felt, sitting on the edge of the bed with one foot still on the bathroom tile, was something much smaller than that.

Hmm.

Whoa. Who knew?

Isn't that interesting?

I FELT CURIOSITY.

I asked myself, what had just happened?

And that was it. That was the whole reaction. I did not run downstairs to tell Debbie. I did not call my brother in North Carolina. I did not write a single word down. I did not, in any way, behave like a man who had just discovered something. I just ... walked back into my day, and I kept it to myself, and I let it sit.

I want to be honest about why that is, because I think it is important. I had been a three-hundred-and-ten-pound man for so long that twenty pounds was not visible. Nobody at work commented. Nobody in my family commented. There was nothing about me, from the outside, that looked any different than it had been two months earlier. If you weigh a hundred and twenty pounds and you lose twenty pounds, the world sees it. If you weigh three hundred and ten and

PREVIEW ENDS HERE

This free preview covers the first 12 pages of the chapter. The rest is in the book. To order Volume II - From 310 to Thriving, email metabojoe@gmail.com.

metabojoe.com - The Metabolic Engineer by J.F. Kilty