

Making a life list and checking it twice

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Illustration by Kenneth Harrison /

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Life lists can help anyone get their priorities in order.

Lists have become the hottest self-improvement tool. The list of resolutions. The grocery list of diet-friendly foods to go with those resolutions. Food diaries that list what you ate and when. The list of affirmations we recite to our reflections in the mirror.

But what about the fun list? The one that gets us excited about life? You know, the bucket list that doesn't require an AARP card. What's the best way to make one? Is it better to have the concrete list of shoulds or the dreamy list of desires?

Three friends who once worked at Amazon.com together began to share their "life lists" -- lists of things they wanted to do, but hadn't taken the time -- until it grew into a Web site with 1.5 million users, www.43.Things.com. And now these cyberspace wishes and desires have filled a book -- "Dream It. List It. Do It!" (Workman, \$9.95).

"Our perspective of making a list is that it's a to-do list, so the implication is that it is something you MUST accomplish and if not, there is a sense of

failure," says Dr. Renee Bruno, clinical professor of psychiatry at Tulane University School of Medicine. "The concept of 'life list' requires a shift in thinking. If put in the context of dreams and desires, a list is no longer one of 'shoulds,' but attainable goals at a more personal and perhaps fulfilling level."

What makes us want to make lists, much less share them with others?

"Sharing personal desires creates a form of commitment," says Josh Peterson of Robot Co-Op, the Seattle-based company behind the Web site.

But a list is only part of the process, says Lauren Mackler, Boston-based life coach and author of "Solemate: Master the Art of Aloneness & Transform Your Life" (Hay House, April 2009).

"A list comes further down the road," she says. A "life vision" should come first. Only after being clear about what you want, Mackler says, can you make a list of the things that will move you in that direction.

The example she uses is the desire to buy a home when you are in a low-paying job you do not like. The progressive steps toward the purchase of a home, she says, would be to find a better career, which might mean getting more education. Each step leads to the ultimate goal of buying a home.

"Solemate: Master the Art of Aloneness & Transform Your Life" by Lauren Mackler (Hay House, April 2009).

"Lists are good, but only put things on the lists that you are committed to keeping," Mackler says. "As good as it feels when you check off an item, there is also an internal mechanism that when we let ourselves down, there is an erosion of our self-esteem."

Procrastinating items on the list, however, can be valuable markers to self-discovery.

"Acknowledge the resistance, and ask yourself why you are resisting. Perhaps you feel overwhelmed, or you don't know how to go about it, or there is lack of time, or the item you put on the list was put there to meet the expectations of someone else," Mackler says.

The more genuine the motivation behind a goal, the more likely the goal will be met.

"The lists that are rooted in dreams and desire imply spirituality," Bruno says. "You don't moan when you say it."

Lists are personal, meaning the range can be as simple as "dance on a table" to as grandiose as "save the planet." Yet so much of what we wish for is what others wish for, too.

JUMP-START YOUR LIFE LIST

Imagine you have a magic wand that can create the life and situations you most long for.

Ask yourself who you would spend another day with if you had the chance.

Ask what you would do if you knew you only had a month to live.

Sneak a peek at the goals of others to prompt your own.

Create limitless thinking by asking yourself the question, "Why not?"

Make a vision board with magazine images, photographs, CD covers, ticket stubs, jewelry that reflect your desires.

SOURCE: *"Creating Your Best Life" (Sterling, \$19.95) by performance coach Caroline Adams Miller and positive psychology coach Michael B. Frisch*

"Health goals (lose weight, exercise more, drink more water, be less stressed) often top the lists," says Peterson, whose book divides life lists into 43 categories from "reconnect with loved ones" to "reinvent myself."

Making and sharing a list, Peterson says, is a way to see opportunities to make progress on your goals.

"The nature of being human is our interaction with others," Bruno says. "Sharing dreams and desires with others can be exhilarating." But others, she says, may prefer to keep their dreams close to their hearts -- and that's OK, too.

Among the goals local life listers have posted on the Web site: "Rebuild New Orleans." "Start a church for the de-churched." "Rebuild my life after Katrina." "Be inspired by the little things." "Embrace my awkwardness, admit I'm a geek and stop trying to be cool."

In making your own life list, the book makes some recommendations:

- Include some serious and some wild, just-for-fun dreams. Think about completing less daunting goals first, and build momentum from these early successes.
- Include undefined goals. Add them to the list even if you can't totally articulate them. If you have a desire to create art, write it down and let it simmer until something more specific emerges.
- Document progress. This allows you to identify behavior patterns or obstacles that keep you from achieving goals. It can also show you how far you've come.
- Define the finish line. It's easier to complete tasks and track progress if you determine the duration, results or final outcome. Eventually clarify vague goals such as "give back to my community" by specifying exactly what you want to do.
- Revise and remove items from the list. A life list should be constantly evolving, reflecting what is important to you right now. You can delete or tweak to customize your current state of desire.

You may realize, for example, that you're not going to be able to fly away to samba at Carnival in Brazil. But you just might get the same sense of fulfillment -- and another item to check off your life list -- if you head to St. Charles Avenue and boogie to Bacchus.