In March of 2006 I found myself walking down a long hallway towards a door I was terrified to knock on. As I passed by the various offices I glanced in at my co-workers. They didn’t look up. Each of them was focused on their computer or talking on the phone or in meetings. They were working. As they should be since we were all at work. One of their colleagues walking down the hallway wasn’t something of note.

However, for me, this was everything.

A few years before this I had graduated with a degree in Computer Science. I had big hopes of finding a great, well paying job with benefits that would allow me to work there for decades and retire, much like my mom and my uncle. Soon after graduation I got my first job. It was a great fit and gave me a lot of responsibility and freedom to learn, but I quickly chafed at the rules and politics of the office. So I applied to another position at a different company.

I got the job and arrived the first day excited for the new opportunity. However, without telling me, they had put me in a position different from the one I had applied to. I tried to make it work, but I quickly grew unhappy.

I began to despair. I had graduated with a great degree and the promise that I could get a good, secure job. And I had! Two of them actually. But everything in me was chaffing against the reality. Every day that I showed up for work I felt like my soul was screaming at me to do something else.

It was at this point that I started picking up freelance work. I specifically went after clients and projects that would give me the freedom to learn and express my creativity. My name began to spread and I quickly filled up my docket with extra work. Since I was still holding down the full-time job, I would fit in the work at night, on the weekends, and during lunch breaks. It was worth it. I was finally feeling alive with my work.

In January 2006, the breaking point came. My first son was born. Suddenly, all of the free time I was using to get my freelance work done was being sucked up by the duties of parenting. My nights were filled with desperately getting our newborn to sleep instead of getting my work done. Meanwhile, at my day job I was only getting more frustrated. I realized that I would never be happy pouring my creativity and hard work into someone else’s dream.

So on March 21st, less than two months after my son was born, I made that long walk down the hallway, knocked on my boss’s door, and quit my job.

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I had done it. That thing people dreamed of — quitting your job to pursue your dreams — I had actually had the guts to do it. Not only that, but I had done it while I was the sole income provider for my small family.

I felt ready. I had reached out to my clients and started building up extra work. I had secured some free office space. I had bought a new computer that could handle the workload.

Then it all came unglued. Immediately I started falling behind. Even though I had way more time to get my work done, I wasn’t keeping up. I had plenty of work from clients. I knew how to do the work. I had complete freedom to get it done. And yet, I wasn’t working.

In his book \_The War of Art\_, Steven Pressfield calls this force Resistance. He says, “[Resistance] is a repelling force. It is negative. Its aim is to shove us away, distract us, prevent us from doing our work.”

I hadn’t yet read Pressfield’s book, but looking back, I realize this is what crushed me. In this big, dramatic, I’m-following-my-dream moment, I had quit my job to set out on my own. But then I couldn’t actually pull myself together to achieve the dream. I thought the hard part was deciding to go after it, but I learned pretty quickly that it was merely the first step in a marathon. Not just a marathon, but one where you were actively being attacked while you tried to run.

I found myself avoiding work. I would show up at my office promptly at 8:00am, then spend most of the morning playing video games. Then around lunch my buddy Dan would poke his head in my office and we’d walk across the parking lot to McDonalds for a long lunch. On the way back to my office I would promise myself that I would work hard in the afternoon, but end up wasting the time by answering emails and reading articles about how to be more productive. Then around 4:00pm I would franticly try to get some work done before giving up a few minutes later, packing my bag, and heading home early.

The whole way home I would feel waves of shame for wasting another day. I would vacillate between shaming myself for being such a loser and making promises about how hard I was going to work the next day. Once home, my wife Candace would ask how the day went and I would lie, telling her I had gotten so much done.

Of course, this pattern could only go on for so long before it finally hit a wall. Six months after quitting my job, I ran out of money. I had to call my parents to borrow enough so I wouldn’t miss a mortgage payment. I was devastated and embarrassed.

What had gone wrong? I had decided to make the leap, but the whole thing unraveled so quickly. I was shocked. At this point I had a decision to make. I could throw in the towel, go get another good paying office job with benefits and security and room for advancement. Or I could double-down, grit my teeth, and figure out how to keep going.

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Fast forward seven years and I found myself celebrating at a rooftop bar in Portland, OR, one of my favorite cities in the world. I was posing for a picture with bestselling author Pamela Slim and she was holding my newly published book up to the camera.

The previous six months had been the most successful of my career. As I had grown my company, I worked alongside some of the biggest authors in the publishing world. The work had culminated in running the campaigns that put those client’s books at the top of the \*New York Times\* and \*Wall Street Journal\* bestseller lists. At one point, five of my clients were on the \*New York Times\* list at the same time. Then in June of 2013, I published my first book \_Your First 1000 Copies\_ and it had outperformed all of my projections and dreams. Successful authors had sung it’s praises in blurbs and reviews. It was selling well. And now I was with my friends celebrating my successes.

Somewhere in that seven years I had gone from being crushed by my dream to surpassing every goal I had laid out for myself. Along the way I had become a published writer, a speaker, and hosted a popular podcast. That original dream had become a reality. And not just that original dream.. I hadn’t just built a successful company. I had also become a published writer. And I had spoken in front of thousands. I had launched online trainings that reached around the world. That original dream kept expanding and I kept finding more success.

How did it happen? How did I go from complete failure, playing video games all day, and lying to my wife to where I am now? How did I become a success?

Before we can dive into that question, we need to define the term. What does “success” mean? How do you measure it? If you measure it by money, then any Wall Street executive or movie star has me beat. If you measure it by the size of my company, then I fail there too since I’m the only full-time employee. If you measure it by how many bestseller lists my books have it, then I don’t rank there either. So what is a success?

I believe true success can only be judged by asking this question: “How close did I get to my dream?” Or another way to ask it is “Am I doing the work I am supposed to do?”

For most of us, the answer is “no”. We are writers that aren’t writing, or artists that aren’t creating, or entrepreneurs that aren’t starting, or speakers that aren’t speaking, or teachers that aren’t teaching, or musicians that aren’t playing.

But it’s more than that, right?

We don’t just want to write, we want to write a novel. And we don’t just want to write a novel, we want to write a novel that people read and love. And we don’t just want a few people to read and love our novel, we want thousands or hundreds of thousands of people to read and love our novel.

So how do we do this? How do we go from being an artist not creating, to an artist whose worked is known and loved throughout the world? How do we go from being a speaker not speaking, to a speaking to thousands of people and booked through the next two years?

Then when we reach this success, how do we ensure that we don’t find ourselves, as I did, just as depressed and full of sham as when we started?

Over the last decade, I’ve not just achieved my own success, I’ve worked and lived and grown with hundreds of other people that have achieved their own success. Here is what is most surprising about what I’ve seen: None of us are special. There’s no special talent. There’s no mojo that we have that other people don’t have.

It all came down to one simple thing: They kept chasing down the dream. In this way, I believe that your success in inevitable. There are not those that succeed and those that fail. There aren’t winners and losers. There are simply those that kept going and those that quit before they were done.

Of course, if it were that easy, this would be a simple book. I could just say “work hard and you will achieve it” and be done. However, as with everything in life, there are better and worse ways to accomplish your goals.

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On the final page of \_The War of Art\_ Pressfield says “Do it, or don’t do it.” This is the part of the book that devastated me. I had the dream. I knew where I wanted to go. But I just couldn’t bring myself to do the work. I promised myself and shamed myself over and over to “do it,” and then I didn’t do it.

So what could be done? How could I become successful when I couldn’t bring myself to do the work that needed to be done?

Looking back, I realize I was lost. At any given point in time I didn’t know what I needed to do next to kickstart my success. Even when I finally got to the point where I was working steadily every day, I still kept running into major hurdles. It was like being lost in the woods and finally coming across a fresh water lake. Sure, I can get a drink and it helps me. But I’m still lost!

In \_Running Down a Dream\_ I’m going to show you the four different stages that every creative journey takes. I’ll help you identify where you are in the process, the major problem you should be focusing on, and extremely practical steps you can take to make it to the next stage.

The promise I can make to you, based on my own journey and those around me, is that if you follow the advice in this book and keep pressing forward, you will reach the success you’re dreaming about.

Let’s get started.

The Beginning

I had been accepted to college and sent a big packet in the mail. Inside was all of the normal glossy pictures of smiling coeds along with descriptions of all the amazing opportunities I would have on campus.

Also inside was a single sheet of yellow paper with a list of all the majors available.

I ran my finger down the list until I found Computer Science. The only thoughts I had when I saw this option was a) I like playing on computers and b) you can make a lot of money with computers.

So I mailed the information back to my university, officially declared my major, and signed up for classes in the fall.

The idea that I would do anything else in college but get a degree that would help me make a good living never crossed my mind.

I got through college and bounced between my first couple jobs in my chosen field, but was unhappy in all of them. So I started website and began writing. It was just about my hobby of mountain biking at first, but quickly expanded. It wasn’t long before I publishing thousands of words every week for the various websites I was running.

I eventually shut down the websites to focus on my brand new freelance consulting firm, but soon found another reason to start writing.

I needed to attract new clients.

I began publishing articles regularly. They didn’t do much for my business at the time, but I kept writing them anyway. Along the way I decided to codify what I did in my consulting firm by writing my first book, *Your First 1000 Copies*.

Even though I had written a book, I didn’t really think of myself as a writer. I just wrote the book to help my business. But then, I wrote another book on the same topic, *Book Launch Blueprint*.

Along the way, I had begun dabbling in writing fiction. From time to time I would write down a story that was rattling around in my head. I even finished an entire manuscript once.

But I still wasn’t a writer. I was a marketing consultant. That’s it.

I eventually connected with Shawn Coyne, author of *The Story Grid* and my editor on this book, and we started an online radio show where each week he taught me the principles and methods behind telling great stories.

All this time, I would have never called myself a writer. It wasn’t until Shawn wrote an article about me where he laid out everything I was doing in my life to be close to writing without admitting to myself that I was a writer.

Here we are at the beginning of a journey. Before we can begin running down a dream, we have to admit that the dream exists and it’s worth the blood, sweat, and tears it’s going to take to run it down.

What is your dream?

Another way I could ask this is “who are you?”

This is not about what you do.

I’ve spent most of my time on everything except for writing. And yet, I am writer.

Are you a painter? Are you a musician? Are you a photographer? What is it?

It’s ok that you’re a writer that’s not writing or a photographer that’s not shooting — that’s what this book is for.

In this first section I’m going to show you how to create space in your life and actually start creating.

Here at the beginning, your don’t need to worry about how you’re going to do it or if you’ll have enough time or if you’re going to be any good at it. All you have to do is name the dream. I’m going to show you how to be successful in running down the dream, but for now, you must simply name it.

Who are you?

“Joe’s going to give you a call,” Candace, my wife, said.

“What about?” I replied.

“He’s got a new business idea and Talia said he needed to call you so you can shoot it down for him.”

I cringed, but, sure enough, Joe called me. He told me about his new idea and I spent the next half hour poking holes in it and explaining why it wouldn’t work.

This is who I am.

I’m a pessimist. Not a glass-half-empty sort of pessimist. I’m more of a at-some-point-the-glass-will-get-knocked-over pessimist. Anytime I’m presented with a new idea or a new plan or a new resolution, my mind immediately starts turning it over looking for the holes and the places it’s going to break. My friends don’t call me to have someone to get excited with. They call me when they’re ready to face reality and have to defend the thing they’re excited about.

This makes starting new projects hard for me. Especially projects that I’ve started and failed so many times in the past. When the new year rolls around and I want to make a resolution to finally start writing more and finish that novel, my mind jumps back to all the times I’ve told myself that in the past and then lasted a day or a week or a month. It doesn’t matter. I always stop. So why is today going to be any different.

This is why so many people never start the journey to their dream. There’s the outside voices from their friends and family. Even if they don’t come right out and say that you’ll fail, they’ve made enough sideways comments that you know that’s what they think. And there’s all the stories of the starving artists and sayings like “don’t quit your day job!” that float through our culture. And that’s not counting the voices in your own head beating you down.

So it’s easier to never start than to get excited, begin the journey, then immediately turn back. But what if, instead of keeping our eyes on everything that can and probably will go wrong, we shifted our view?

Several years ago I was out for a mountain bike ride with my buddy Mike. We had ridden together for years and had the war stories and scars to back it up. This particular day was perfect for a ride. It was cold and crisp outside. One of those days were you start out cold, but, once you get going, you get a good sweat on. What we didn’t know at the time was that one of us would end up being carried out of the woods instead of riding out.

We decided to head up to the Candlers Mountain trail network. It was just on the edge of town and the local college’s mountain biking team had been cutting a bunch of new trails that were a lot of fun.

We met at the trail head, pulled the bikes out of the cars, put on our helmet and gloves and other gear and started out for the ride. We were riding for awhile. It was a familiar trail with some good climbs and fast descents. Eventually we came upon the dam.

This wasn’t a big river with a giant structure blocking the water. This was a small creek, mostly dried out, with a concrete wall running through it about six inches wide. At it’s tallest point you were only about five feet above the ground.

Neither Mike or I had ever had the courage to ride across this dam, but today was going to be different. I had read an article in one of the mountain biking magazines I subscribed to about how to ride over obstacles like this and I was ready to give it a try. Mike agreed he’d do it.

I went first and as my front wheel started across the dam, I lifted my eyes up and locked them on the other side of the creek. Everything in me wanted to look down at my front wheel and make sure it was in the right place, but I fought the urge and continued looking ahead while I pedaled.

I made it across safely and immediately turned back to watch Mike. He had already started riding across but was in trouble. His eyes were locked on his front wheel and he was teetering widely. I opened my mouth to yell at him to look up, but it was too late. With a holler he toppled over the dam.

I jumped off my back and ran back across the dam to find him laying down in the leaves. He was extremely pale and staring down at his foot which I noticed was pointing off at a weird angle.

He had completely broken his ankle.

An hour or so later after frantic emergency calls and anxious waiting, I was helping several fire and policemen carry Mike out of the woods on an orange sled.

Here at the beginning of your journey is not the time to look at everything that could go wrong. If all you do is stare down at your problems, you will naturally fall into them. Now is the time to shift your view to the horizon and dream big.

Awhile back I was working with an author Gene Kim on his book *The Phoenix Project*. He kept throwing out all of these ideas of things we could do to make the book successful and I kept pointing out all the ways they wouldn’t work.

Finally, he got frustrated with me and said, “Ok Tim, if I could wave a magic wand and get everything I want, here’s what it would look like.” For the next couple minutes he described the perfect scenario. If everything fell into place perfectly. If everybody did exactly what they were supposed to do. If all of the systems worked with no bugs. Then, he said the words that changed my life. “How close can we get to that?”

I was so used to cutting ideas off at the knees before they even got started, that I never thought to think about what would happen if everything went right.

Sure, everything won’t go perfectly. But if you shoot as high as possible, you’ll always end up higher than negativity and pessimism would let you on their own.

You have a dream and you want to run it down. Sure, a lot of stuff will go wrong. It’s going to be hard. There’s going to be bad days. But here at the beginning, let’s not worry about that.

It’s time to pull out your magic wand and wave it around a little bit.

Sit down with a pen and paper and start dreaming. If you could wave a magic wand to make everything go perfectly and get everything you want in the next five years, what would that look like? What would you have accomplished? Who would you be? What would it feel like? Put it all down. Even the silly stuff and the stuff you just know will never happen.

For the rest of the book, this is where we are going to keep our eyes. Yes, you have to steer and pedal and keep going, but our eyes will stay locked on the dream. This is how you will reach it.

Last year I stopped working on this book for four months. This isn’t the first time I’ve shelved a project for a long period of time, but there was something different about this particular decision.

Writing isn’t my full-time job. My income comes mostly from a company I run that has nothing to do with writing this book.

So early last year, I sat down and looked at everything I had to do in my business and personal life over the coming months. Then I decided, for the next few months, I would set this project aside focus on my other responsibilities.

What made this different from other times I abandoned projects is that I made a conscious decision. I didn’t let life overwhelm me. I didn’t put it off and feel shame about it. I didn’t let resistance stop me.

I chose.

If you’re reading this book, I’m going to go out on a limb and say that you have a huge amount of autonomy in your life. When I look at my own life, the list of things I don’t have control over is extremely shorter than I often feel like it is.

Where I was born, my race, and the fact that I now have children. Other than that, I have almost complete control over my life.

It often feels the opposite though. I look at my kid’s private school bills and my rent and my car payments and think that I have to work and make enough money to pay for it all. I also think about spending time with my family, going to the dentist, and making that phone call as things I have to do.

However, the truth is, those are all optional activities. I could stop working and paying for things. I could abandon my family. I could decide to get in my car and just drive away from all of it.

The only thing I’m weighing in these decisions are the consequences of those decisions. None of those things are things I absolutely have to do. I’m not going to die if I stop doing them. I choose to do them because I like the results of continuing to do them.

The point of this bit of rambling is to show that you have a choice over how you structure your life. You can either passively let things come and go and play the victim, or you can take back control and choose to choose.

We often make excuses about why we’ve never actually run down our dream as if these things happened to us and are outside of our control.

When my wife first started seeing a therapist one of the first exercises he gave her was to start paying attention to every time the word “should” popped into her head.

“I should cook dinner.”

“I should exercise today.”

“I should be a better mother.”

The goal here was to stop each time and ask “Is this true?” The word “should” became a trigger to stop and pay attention to her thoughts.

I want you to do something similar.

From now on, anytime the words “I’m too busy” pop into your head, you have to replace them with the “I have chosen not to prioritize.”

Instead of, “I’m too busy to get eight hours of sleep a night,” you say, “I’ve chosen not to prioritize getting eight hours of sleep a night.” Instead of, “I’m too busy to pack a lunch for work,” you say, “I’ve chosen not to prioritize packing a lunch for work.” Instead of, “I’m too busy to paint today,” you say, “I’ve chosen not to prioritize painting today.”

This one simple switch in your mind will start pulling the responsibility of your life back from outside forces and put it in your hands. Life is not something that happens to you. Avoiding your dream is not a force of nature. It is a choice.

It’s important here to point out that these are not moral judgements. You may have things that are more important than getting eight hours of sleep or packing a lunch or painting. Maybe your mom got sick and you need to take care of her and so you decide to prioritize that over writing your book. Neither of the things are bad things. The point is that you *could* choose to prioritize writing your book over caring for your sick mother, you merely chose not to.

Last year when I stopped working on this book for four months, I wasn’t too busy. I chose to prioritize other things above it and it was the right decision.

In the coming chapters we’ll talk about how to organize your life in such a way that you can prioritize your dreams, but for now, start choosing to choose.

Running down your dream is a marathon, not a sprint. You’re not going to reach your dream in a few months. It’s a long journey.

The first step in this process of moving from not pursuing your dream at all to actually making progress has been taking back control. We started by waving our magic wand and dreaming big about where we are going. We then took the simple but important step of choosing to choose.

Now it’s time to dig in and do some work.

But this isn’t a productivity book. This isn’t about organizing your calendar and making the right todo list and finding accountability partners. The reason for that is because it’s largely counterproductive. I’ve learned along the way that if you try to fix a problem that you don’t understand, you’ll create a problem that you don’t know how to fix.

Personal change should never be violent. It’s not about forcing yourself to do things or shaming yourself or making promises. We’re not going to go from years of not pursuing our dreams to years of pursuing our dreams just because we decide to try harder.

Personal change comes as a result of turning from a lie to a truth. It’s that simple. It’s looking closely at your life from a new angle so you can find what is keeping you from moving forward.

Several years ago I installed a tracker on my computer. It was this little piece of software that ran in the background and logged everything I did on my computer. It kept track of how long I was in my email, getting work done for clients, writing, or browsing the internet. It also kept track of all the websites I visited and how long I spent on them.

At the end of the week it gave me a report. I was able to see just how much time I was spending on various activities during the day and I was appalled. A huge chunk of my day was being eaten up by activities that didn’t actually help me reach my goals.

Suddenly it became extremely easy to block those distracting websites and uninstall those useless programs on my computer once I saw clearly how much time I was wasting on them.

Now that you’ve taken the step of owning your decision on what’s in your life, it’s time to actually evaluate what you have chosen to spend your time on.

This is an exercise that you will need a writing utensil and a piece of paper for. I recommend you stop reading and do this right now.

1. List out everything that you do in a day. All of it. Get as granular as you can. Here’s an example of a list I might create:

[image of my list]

2. Circle everything that is essential. Here is my criteria for what is essential First, you would die or get extremely sick if you didn’t do it. i.e. going to the restroom, taking your medication. Second, it is an extremely important obligation. i.e. going to work or taking my kids to school. Watching TV is not essential. Reading the news is not essential. Having coffee with my friends is not essential.

[image of my list with essential things circled]

3. Cross out everything else left on the list.

[image of my list with unessential things crossed out]

4. For five days, Monday through Friday, only do the circled items.

5. Each day of the exercise, journal about what it feels like to live like this.

6. After five days, evaluate. Decide what crossed out things you add back in, and what stay out permanently. Some of the things you lived without for five days you’ll want to keep out permanently. Did you enjoy not being on social media or reading the news? And other crossed out things you will add back in, but you will do it decisively. You will decide you want to do these things instead of passively let them creep back in.

7. Do this exercise once a year. Resistance is insidious. It is slow but deliberate. Like the ivy that is beautifully and slowy growing around a tree and choking the life out of it. You must regularly reevaluate what you are spending your time on and where it is going.

It’s important to remember that I am not saying that you have to live like this forever. I watched a movie with my wife last night and I’m still getting my writing done this morning.

This is meant to shock you out of the belief that you are too busy.

This is a practice to use when your life is filling up with things and your creative work is getting pushed out the back door.

Also, it’s extremely important you don’t merely mentally do this exercise. You need to actually do it.

You need to feel what it’s like to be sitting on the coach at 8:00pm staring at the floor because you have nothing to do because you have not filled your life with the unessential.

It is in those moments that you will realize that you are not to busy to be creative.

Taking one week to stop doing everything that is unessential is the exercise that will ruthlessly open your eyes to where your time is going and it will be much easier to keep your life free of these distractions.

Thirty years ago my dad got his dream job and he moved my family to Georgia so he could take the position. It wasn’t a big time corporate job. It wasn’t working for his favorite company of all time. It was a Little Debbie snack cake distributor.

If you’ve ever walked into a gas station or grocery store in the United States, I’m sure you’ve seen them on the shelves. My dad is the guy that sells them to the stores and stocks the shelves.

He loves the job because he gets to be his own boss. He makes his own hours, works the way he thinks is best, and is directly rewarded for how hard and smart he works.

Several years after taking this position, a curious thing started happening. Little Debbie managers started flying in from all over the country to spend a day riding around with my dad to watch him work.

You see, my dad had become one of the top five Little Debbie distributors in the entire country. And he was the only one in the top 50 that didn’t have full-time or part-time help.

He did it all by himself.

The managers were flying in from all over the country to see how this one man was able to output so many Little Debbies in so little time.

My dad was able to pull this feat off with the power of opting out.

When he first got the job, they trained him on the “right” way to sell Little Debbies. They taught him where to park the truck, how to pull the orders, how to interact with the store managers, how to stock the shelves, and so on. This was based on years of training Little Debbie distributors all over the country.

Pretty quickly my dad started seeing some problems in how they did things. Maybe not problems so much, but definitely big inefficiencies. And inefficiencies cost money.

My dad had always wanted a job like this because it put the power in his hands for how hard worked and how much money he made in the process. If you could do something faster, or, better yet, stop doing something and still get the job done, that means you can sell more Little Debbies in less time. Selling more in less time means my dad made more money every day.

So instead of parking around the side of the building, he parked right out in front so he didn’t have to walk as far to get in and out.

Instead of showing each individual item to the store managers checking him in, he would do inventory in bulk.

Instead of taking out all of the snack cakes and putting them on the shelf by hand, he would just take the top off the box and put them on the shelf still in the box.

And then, instead of having to take the tops off all the individual boxes, he started paying someone to open all of the boxes on the weekend so he wouldn’t have to do that while he was out on the job.

Each one of these things kept shaving off more and more time to the point that he was servicing four times as many stores in a day as most of the other Little Debbie distributors.

This is the kind of power that opting-out has.

And it applies to you as a creative as well.

As I begin to spend time with successful creatives, I was constantly surprised by the amount of things they don’t do. All of these things that I would read about how to be successful, I rarely saw these people doing any of them.

Here’s a few of the things you don’t have to do in order to be successful:

You don’t have to be active on social media.

You don’t have to start a website.

You don’t have to write or shoot or paint every day.

You don’t have to constantly pitch your stuff.

You don’t have to be a self-promoter.

You don’t have to use the best equipment.

You don’t have to use the right equipment.

And most of all, you do not have to do it the way other people have done it.

You simply need to find the few things that you need to do to build success and do those over and over. But what are those things? How do you figure out what are the handful of essential things so that you can cut out the rest?

Here’s a few things you can do:

1. Question everything. Take absolutely nothing for granted. Do not automatically do anything without first questioning if it is worth your limited time and resources. Start by assuming you should \*not\* be doing something, and then get talked into it.

2. Ask the questions “Do I have to do this?”, “Do I want to do this?”, and “Why am I doing this?”. If you can’t give good answers to those questions, you should stop doing it.

3. “Hell yeah!” or “No.” I took this one from the author, musician, and entrepreneur Derek Sivers. His rule is, if you are not so excited about something that you say “Hell yeah!” then you should say “No.” As he put it, “When you say no to most things, you leave room in your life to throw yourself completely into that rare thing that makes you say ‘Hell yeah!’”

Keep in mind that these do not have to be permanent decisions. You can experiment with this (more on this in Chapter X). You can opt out for a week or a month just to see how it plays out.

When my oldest son turned five, my wife decided to homeschool him and I wanted to start taking Fridays off work so I could teach him science (read: blow stuff up in the backyard). But I was afraid to do this.

At the time I was running a busy consulting firm. I had employees and lots of clients and, so I assumed I was far too busy to cut my work week down from five days to four.

But I decided to question this.

Did I really have to work five days a week? Where did this rule come from? Is this something written in stone somewhere.

So I opted-out.

I decided for a month I would take Fridays off.

I told my employees to call if they needed anything. And when my clients asked to talk to me on Friday, I said I was busy but could talk Thursday or Monday.

And what happened?

Nothing.

Not a single bad thing happened.

So I just kept going and, to this day, I take Fridays off work.

Most people fill their time with movement, not progress. They feel productive because they filled their time with things that seem like work, but don’t actually get them closer to their goals.

By constantly being alert to things that you are spending your time on and opting out of most of them, you will create the space to do the handful of things that actually matter.

A few years into running my business full time I had a nervous breakdown. I found myself in the fetal position on my bedroom floor freaking out. When I was finally able to recover enough to get to my feet and stumble to the bathroom, I saw that I had broken the blood vessels all across my forehead and face.

It felt like no matter what I did or how hard I worked, everything kept unraveling. So I finally reached a breaking point where I either needed to make big changes or give up on the whole thing. The only problem was I didn’t know what changes to make.

So I reached out to Josh Kaufman. Josh ran the business PersonalMBA and, at the time, was accepting new business coaching clients. I reached out to Josh, paid him a bunch of money I didn’t have, and we got started.

One of the first things he started asking me about was the systems inside of my business. At the time, when I thought of business systems, the first picture that popped into my head was a car assembly line. Lots of people and robots and machines and tools all working together on something built by a giant team of engineers.

What did my tiny, two-man operation need with systems? Then Josh showed me the light. It doesn’t have to be complicated or intricate. Instead, a system is simply something you do over and over to get predictable results.

Every day when I get home, the first thing I do is take my keys out of my pocket and drop them in a little silver dish that sits on a ledge just inside our front door. If you come to my house and I’m home and my kids haven’t stolen them, that’s where you will find my keys.

You probably have something like this too. A little hook inside the door or a certain pocket in your purse you keep your keys.

Why do we do this?

It’s so tomorrow morning when I’m trying to get out the door, I don’t waste precious time franticly looking through the house and laundry so I can find my keys.

That’s a system. It’s something you do over and over to get predictable results.

If you’ve been following along so far, you’ve seen that are first step was start removing the unessential stuff from our life. We took several steps to take back control and start systematically finding the time sucking activities in our life that were keeping us from our creative work and start getting rid of them.

But what about everything else? Things like packing your kid’s lunches or paying the bills or making dinner or keeping track of your keys or the hundreds of other things in your life that you can’t stop doing, they’re essential to your life, but yet are still killing your creativity? What do you do about them?

The answer is to do the same thing I did with my keys. You create systems so things happen automatically. There’s a few reasons this is an important step to start taking.

First, and foremost, systems save time. By putting your keys in the same place every day or cooking the same thing for breakfast every morning you save time in planning, preparation, and doing. You never lose your keys. You always know what you need at the grocery store, etc.

Second, systems save mental energy. You no longer have to decide what to do, your system takes care of it for you. Also, you stop forgetting to do things because your system always tells you what to do next.

Third, systems set you up for future success.

Here’s the trigger: Anytime you find yourself doing the same thing over and over, you should turn it into a system.

There are three types of systems you can create.

First, if it’s very simple (a handful of steps, like your car keys), merely make a decision on what you are going to do and start doing it that way every time.

Second, for more complex tasks, create a detailed step-by-step checklist.

Every week, after recording the audio for my online radio show, I have twenty-six different things to do to get it ready to send to the editor. They’re all simple. Most of them only take a few seconds. However, it was causing me a lot of trouble because I kept forgetting to do different parts of the process. This would waste my time, cause me to do redo work, and, overall, added stress to what should be a very simple process.

So I created a checklist. It has every single step of the process from the time I start until the time I email the editor with the files. Having the checklist ensures I don’t forget an important step, it reduced my average time to completion from thirty minutes to just over ten minutes, and, if I ever hire an assistant to help me, I have the entire process mapped out for them.

Whenever you have a task that you have to do over and over, and it has more than a handful of steps, you should create a step-by-step checklist that you can follow.

Third, outsource to a computer, service, or person.

I really wanted to start eating a healthier lunch. I had tried taking my lunch to work, but I kept forgetting to bring it with me or didn’t plan ahead, so I would end up either going hungry or picking up fast food.

So I outsourced it. I found a service that prepares healthy meals and they drop them off every Monday morning at my gym. After I work out on Mondays, I grab my meals, put them in the fridge at my office, and my lunches are done for the week.

I’ve created a system that allows me to completely stop thinking about what I’m going to eat for lunch.

Another way to approach this is to get computers to do things for you.

The thing I hate the most about running my business is all of the payroll and tax preparation. I don’t mind paying the taxes so much as filling out the paper work, sending in payments, and keeping track of all of it. Up until recently, I was doing it mostly by hand. Every two weeks I would write the check for payroll. I’d then go to the state and federal websites to pay my taxes. And then I would fill out the paperwork by hand and send it in.

I had a checklist to make sure that I got it all done and turned in the right way, but it was still an annoying, time-consuming process.

Then I found the ultimate online service. They do it all for me. Every two weeks they automatically grab the money out of business account, direct deposits my check into my personal account, and pays all the tax payments and files all the paperwork. I’ve found an online service that completely takes care of my checklist for me.

I workout on the same days, at the same times every week. I have a checklist to make sure I pack my workout bag with everything I need in the morning.

I have essential items like toilet paper and deodorant automatically delivered every month to my house.

I leave the house and come home at the same time every work day.

By creating systems, you reduce the time and mental overhead on the essential things you must do, but are not your creative work. You will reduce the amount of time it takes to do these essential tasks while freeing up your mind to focus on your creative work.

The more repetitive things in your life that you create systems around, the more freedom you will have to focus on the handful of truly important things in your life.

There’s two sides to this coin of getting started.

When we’re just getting started on our journey, it’s important to clear out space to pursue our dreams. That’s what we’ve been doing so far. We’ve been taking a hard look at our life and finding the beliefs and patterns we’ve developed that fill up our lives and keep us from our true work.

However, once you start removing the systematizing and opting-out, you’re left with space. At this point, you’ll have to come to terms with a new truth. It wasn’t that you were too busy that kept you from creating. It was fear that drove you to fill your life so you wouldn’t have to create.

Time and again, once people start actually creating space in their life to paint or write or play, they still don’t actually do it. So how do we actually start filling this new space in our life with the creative work we want to do?

Many times you start setting goals. You want to finish your book by a certain date or practice your guitar for an hour every day for a month or decide to finish your painting by the end of the month.

What we quickly find is that setting goals causes more problems than it solves.

I don’t want to be a guy that wrote a book once. I want to be a writer. You don’t want to be someone who released an album once or finished a painting once or had a side gig for awhile. Whatever it is that you do, the goal is to be doing it, not to have done it.

There are two fundamental problems when it comes to setting and achieving goals in your life.

First, most things are outside of your control.

You can set a goal to lose ten pounds in the next two months. But what happens if you get sick? Or a huge stressor drops into your life? Or money gets tight and you can’t afford the healthy food?

Suddenly, you’re going to miss your goal. Not because you failed but because something outside of your control threw you off track. Most of the things we set goals for we don’t have complete control over. It’s a mix between things we can control and things we absolutely cannot.

But yet we’re told to set goals. So we do, and then life happens and we don’t hit them, and we too easily own all of the failure.

I don’t like to tie my emotional well being, especially about my creative work, to things that are outside of my control.

Second, there should be no end to our creativity.

Goals infer a finish line. Once I hit my goal, now I’m done. But that’s not how the creative life works. Once you publish or open or display, you’re not done. You’re still working. You still need to get up tomorrow and put a paintbrush to canvas.

I don’t want to be someone that wrote a book once. I want to be a writer. And so, I don’t set goals. I don’t create a situation where there is failure or success. I focus instead on creating a process that will ensure only success. Instead of goals, we need habits.

This is the third book I’ve published. I have a lot more in me. On top of that, I write articles regularly that I publish online. I also write novels and I regularly enter a short story contests.

I have a lot of writing to do. So when this book is done, I’m not done. I’ll keep writing. Instead of worrying about what projects I need to finish and what goals I have for publishing, I focus on making writing a regular part of my life. Some of it I publish online. Some of it is the draft of a novel. Some of it is the draft of this book. Some of it gets thrown out.

If you create today and then tomorrow and then the next day and then the day after that, you’ll hit every goal you could possibly come up with. But most importantly, you’ll be what I want to be.

You can apply this to anything. I don’t want to lose ten pounds, I want to live a healthier lifestyle. If I do that, the weight loss will take care of itself. I don’t want to win my next jiu jitsu tournament, I want to constantly get better at jiu jitsu for the next fifty years. If I do that, the tournaments will take care of themselves. So instead of focusing on reaching a certain goal, we’re going to focus our energy on creating habits. If creativity is a regular part of our life, hitting our goals becomes inevitable. If we keep running, we’ll catch our dream eventually.

However, we’ve done this before. We’ve promised ourselves we’re going to go out and take more pictures or we’re going to write a thousand words a day. And it lasts for a little bit, and then something comes along — whether we oversleep or get a new job — and kills our progress. And then we stop.

So if I tell you to throw out goals but you’ve tried a hundred times to start a new habit and failed, what’s left?

We must go tiny.

There are all kinds of problems with developing habits. The biggest one is that we start too big. BJ Fogg PhD is the Director of the Persuasive Tech Lab at Stanford. He spends a lot of time studying and teaching around behavioral change and he has developed the Tiny Habits system.

This is the best system I’ve found for creating new habits and changing behavior in your life. The idea here is to start extremely small and slowly, incrementally improving. We are going stop trying to make huge, sweeping change in our lives all at once and, instead, focus on stacking up a lot of really really small changes over a long period of time.

This is a marathon, not a race. You eat an elephant one bite at a time. And other cliches.

Here is how you add new habits to your life.

Step 1: Get Specific

Do you want to paint every day? Do you want to read before bed? Do you want to do more pushups? You must be specific about the behavior you want, not the outcome. You don’t want to write a book, you want to write every day.

Step 2: Go Tiny

If you want to start flossing your teeth, the smallest version of that is flossing one tooth. If you want to shoot pictures, the smallest version is shooting one picture. If you want to write every day, the smallest version is writing one sentence.

What is the smallest version of the behavior you want to create?

Step 3: Use a Trigger

In BJ’s TED talk, he tells the story of how he wanted to start losing weight. So he wanted to exercise. He decided, for him, the smallest version of exercising was doing two pushups. But when was he supposed to do the pushups? How would he ensure that he did the pushups and didn’t forget about it or put it off until tomorrow?

He attached the new habit — doing two pushups — to something he already did automatically. He decided every time he went to the restroom, he would do two pushups. He attached the new behavior he wanted to create to a behavior he was already doing.

If you want to start flossing, floss one tooth immediately after or before brushing your teeth. If you want to start shooting more pictures, take a picture as soon as you put the coffee on in the morning. If you want to start writing more, write one sentence while you are eating breakfast. What habits do you already do? Attach your new habit to one of those.

Step 4: Celebrate.

The last step is to celebrate every single time you do the new behavior. You can do this however you want. You can do a little dance. You can say out loud “I’m awesome!”. It doesn’t matter much as long as it’s physical and/or verbal. Just thinking it isn’t good enough.

The most important thing you must do as you walk through these steps is to really be happy and celebrate when you do the tiniest action towards the new behavior. It really is awesome that you wrote one sentence. You really should dance a little jig because you took one picture.

Sure, if you’re in the mood, take ten pictures, or write a whole page. But you get the “I’m awesome!” just for doing the tiniest of new behaviors. I said in the introduction that one of the goals of this book is to help you “organize a creative life.”

I don’t want to help you reach a goal and finish. I want to help you create a life where your creativity grows and continues for your lifetime.

That’s where habits will take you.

Start small. Slowly add. Slowly build. Before you know it, you’ll be producing more work than you every though possible. This is how you start to fill that space you’ve worked so hard to open up with your creative fork.

The first section of this book has been focused on helping you begin your journey. We all have dreams we want to chase and the first step is to put on our shoes, lace up, and get moving. But what you’ll find once you get over the initial excitement of actually having time to pursue your dreams and developing the habits to keep working on them is your enemy will quickly become your own thoughts.

Our minds can be mean, hurtful, and damaging spaces. I’ve spent most of my adult life telling myself I wasn’t good enough, that I was too late, that I was sure to be a failure, that nobody would ever give two shits about anything I ever create.

I could fill volumes with the negativity my mind can produce. I’m sure you can too. There are obviously many, many problems with that negativity, but the worst consequence is the amount of space it takes in our minds.

Like weeds in a garden, too often out creativity is choked out by the negativity that crowds in. It’s hard to create when you’re convinced that it’s a complete waste of time, is bound for failure, and will eventually be one of your greatest sources of shame.

Early on I believed that eventually these voices would die down. If I could just push through them long enough to be successful, then success would bring confidence and I would finally convince myself that I wasn’t a hack.

However, as I started working with actual successful creative people, I found that they were even more scared of the work than I was. When you’re in this beginning stage of creativity, you’re only fighting your own expectations and voices. Once your work starts getting out into the world, there’s a whole new set of voices. There’s anonymous reviews and critics. There’s peers that are paying attention to what you do. And if success does come in a big way, the pressure to continue to succeeding makes everything worse.

The truth is, the negative voices never go away on their own. There is no amount of external success or accolades that will convince your internal that you are good enough. You have to fix this one on your own.

When I first started listening to Zig Ziglar, I rolled my eyes a lot. He was a famous motivational speaker and trainer who had authored several self motivation books. He would say all these weird sayings over and over in his thick southern accent like “If you see a turtle on a fence post, you can bet he had help getting up there,” and “You can get everything in life you want if you will just help enough other people get what they want,” and “People often say that motivation doesn't last. Well, neither does bathing - that's why we recommend it daily.”

I was skeptical. And when he began talking about his daily affirmation, I was even more skeptical. According to him, all I had to do was stand in front of a mirror twice a day for thirty days and read off his daily affirmation out loud and it would change my life.

This affirmation said things like:

“I am an honest, sincere, and hard-working person.”

“I am an encourager, a good finder, and a forgiving person.”

“I am intelligent, competent, persistent and creative.”

“These are the qualities of the winner I was born to be…”

The first time I heard Zig Ziglar suggest doing the daily affirmation, I ignored it. Then I was listening to Zig awhile later in the car with my wife and she suggested we actually do this.

I rolled my eyes again and put it off some more. Finally, after a particularly bad day of negativity that destroyed any creativity I had hoped for the day, I decided to give it a try.

So I searched online for “Zig Ziglar daily affirmation”, printed out the document, stood in front of the mirror, and started reading. The first time I did this, I couldn’t get through it. I choked up and had to stop. When I got to the lines about being “competent” and a “winner”, I so deeply did not believe these things that I couldn’t even get myself to say them out loud without crying.

This is when I realized for the first time how deeply and truly I believed these negative things about myself. I had lived with the negativity for so long that it didn’t seem separate from me. It *was* me.

The daily affirmation, for the first time, started taking a scalpel and gently, yet painfully, starting cutting these things off of me. I stuck with the daily affirmation for the full thirty days and it changed my life.

There were two fundamental things that a daily affirmation did for me.

First, it created a distance between me and the negativity. Like a person who has always been sick, I had no understanding what it meant to live without the sickness of the negative voices. By reading the daily affirmation every day, it allowed me to back up and see the negativity for the first time.

Second, it truly started changing my thinking. It’s really hard to keep calling yourself a loser when twice a day you are looking into a mirror and telling yourself you are a winner.

Since that first thirty days was over, I go back to the affirmation periodically. I’ve written my own to combat new negativity that has sprung up. I’ve written ones specifically for the creative field that I am working in.

If you’ve never done an affirmation before, I recommend searching online for “Zig Ziglar Daily Affirmation” and printing out and using his affirmation. It’s a great start and covers all the bases.

You can also write a specific affirmation for your own creative pursuit.

First, as you work and are aware of the negative thoughts that come floating into your head, write them down. Keep them all in on place. If you have the same one multiple times, that’s fine, write it down again. Write it down every time you catch it coming into your head.

Second, you will notice patterns. There will be at least a few, but probably a lot more, on repeat. They are the “go tos” for your negativity to talk you out of whatever you are working on.

Here’s a few of mine:

“Writing is a complete waste of time. You should be doing something more useful to yourself / your family / society.”

“You will never, ever be good at this.”

“You will always be a failure at writing.”

Third, create “I” statements that are in direct opposition to this. Here’s what I wrote for the above three.

“I never denigrate my writing, my calling, or myself. I write to bring hope, joy, and change to the world.”

“I give grace to myself and accept that perfection is not the goal, only truth.”

“I am a successful writer working towards my dreams.”

Fourth, write them down, stand in front of the mirror, look at yourself, and say them out loud every morning and evening for (at least) thirty days.

The daily affirmation is the best tool you will find to combat the negative self-talk that is on auto play in your head all day, every day. It will feel silly at first, but power through. It’s a powerful tool.

There’s a story in the Bible about the father of the Jewish people. Abraham was rich and comfortable living in Ur with his tribe. At this time in history all of your safety and security came from your tribe. You stayed with your tribe no matter what because setting off on your own invited danger, and why would Abraham leave the comfort and safety of his tribe and invite danger?

The problem was that even though he had everything he needed, he didn’t have the thing he truly desired. He wanted a son. He wanted something bigger than himself.

This is when God came along. He promised to not only give Abraham a son, but to make Abraham a father of a new nation. The only catch was that Abraham had to give up all of the comfort and safety he was use to and strike out into dangerous territory with only the hope in a dream that it would be worth it.

I wonder what his tribe thought about him. They had to think he was crazy. Why would he give up on all of this in order to chase a dream that could very well be a mirage? Why wouldn’t he stay where he was and keep hoping that the path everyone else was following would be good enough for him?

And yet, he left.

That’s what this first section has been about.

Because the truth is, you’re fine without your dream. You’ve got your life and your job and your family and your friends. You’re comfortable. You could keep on going just like this and nobody would fault or question you.

And yet, it’s time to leave.

It’s time to start running down that dream. This is the end of the beginning and the beginning is always fun. It’s where you see fast progress. You’re spending time on your creative pursuits and it feels great. You’re finally doing the thing.

However, just like Abraham, danger is ahead. As you begin creating and you get over the initial excitement, you’re going to run into the first real obstacle to your journey. You’re going to realize that in order to actually reach this dream you’re running down, you have to grow. You’re not good enough yet. You have to figure out how to keep creating while getting better at what you do while nobody cares about you and what you’re working on.

Congratulations, you’ve started. Now it’s time to get to work.