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AND PRACTICAL WISDOM

—  
JONATHAN FIELDS

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# How to LIVE a Good Life

SOULFUL STORIES, SURPRISING SCIENCE,  
AND PRACTICAL WISDOM

JONATHAN FIELDS



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# Introduction

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I'm the son of a hippie-potter mom and a mad-professor dad. I came of age in the '70s and '80s. Growing up, Duran Duran, ripped-jeans, big hair, and Frisbee were my religion. Yes, for those who've glanced at the head shot of me on the inside cover, there was a time I had hair. Same cut as Juan Epstein from *Welcome Back, Kotter*, and it was #GLORIOUS! I just missed the '60s free-love thing, but there was still a lot of love in our house.

Under the surface, though, as I'd come to learn, things weren't as I thought. My parents' marriage was coming apart. Over the years, my mom had become less hippie and my dad more academic. They wanted different things; they'd become different people. My mom had always been fiercely creative, possessed by the urge to make stuff. That's something I inherited from her. Clay was her playground. She'd vanish for days into the basement studio, absorbed in the process of throwing slabs into works of art. As my parents drifted apart, though, life got increasingly complicated. Pulled in many directions, my mom spent less and less time lost in the embrace of her basement pottery studio, largely abandoning the consuming devotion to craft that had been her source of solace, inspiration, identity, salvation, and even income for so many years. In my junior year of high school, my sister split for

college. Shortly afterward, my dad moved out, leaving my mom and me alone together in a big old house.

My folks had kept most of the emotional fallout of their separation from us, at least in the early days. Now, mom and I had to figure out a new dance. She kept up the facade of strength for a while. Then, one day, it all came tumbling down.

I came home to find her sitting on the edge of an old mattress flopped on the floor in the middle of her bedroom—hers alone. Her head lay buried in her knees. Her arms clung to her shins. She was crying. I'd seen her angry plenty of times, especially in the years leading up to the divorce. But I'd never seen her sitting quietly, lights off, weeping.

I didn't know what to do. For the moment, I was being called into the role of caregiver. It was my turn to kiss the boo-boo. But, this wound was soul deep. So I did the only thing I knew. I sat next to her and gently wrapped my arm across her back. "What's wrong?" I asked. In a somber silence that seemed to linger interminably, the unease of reversing roles washed through me. I almost hoped she wouldn't answer. Then I wouldn't need to figure out how to respond. My standard fallback to 17-year-old sarcasm wouldn't close this gap.

"I lost it," she whispered. "I went downstairs to the studio today. I sat at the wheel, grabbed some clay, and tried to throw. I kept trying. But I couldn't do it. It's gone." On the surface, the "it" she was talking about was her near-mystical mastery over clay. Just below that, it was the entirety of her being. Her identity as a maker, an artist, a powerful woman, and a creator. Her ability to reconnect with joy, to play, to get lost in a process, to achieve and be recognized, to put money in the bank and food on the table. The "it" that had left her was the very essence of who she believed herself to be. Somehow, at 17, I got that.

I wanted to cry along with her. Instead, I spoke. I'd trained as a gymnast for years, so this metaphor tumbled clumsily out. "You haven't lost it, Mom; you're just rusty. It's like me and gymnastics. You know how I get into great shape for competition during the season, but then during the off-season I kind of fall apart. And when I come back to training camp the week before we start, I'm



pretty terrible. It takes me a few weeks to get everything back. But it always comes back. Once it's in you, it's in you. You've been away from it for a while. You haven't lost anything. You're just rusty. It'll take a little time to get it back, but you will."

As she listened, the crying began to ease. Her breathing relaxed and she looked up. "Yeah," she said, "that makes sense." A spark of hope emerged, along with a gentle smile, and she gave me a hug. Later that evening, I heard the clank of the basement door as she made her way back into the studio.

I've often wondered why this moment has stayed with me. It would be years before I realized what had actually happened. What had been revealed to me. And it would be many more years until I gave myself permission to own the possibility that somewhere within me lay the ember of a rough-edged ability to affect others. Both the desire and the potential to create moments, experiences, and things that might inspire a change in state and belief. To incite possibility.

This potential to make a difference is, truth told, something I still grapple with. Owning it feels a little too trippy for my rational brain and a little too forward facing and arrogant for my more introverted, maker self. When my last book was named the number-one personal development book of the year by 800-CEO-READ, I was publicly grateful, but privately I recoiled at the label and what I believed it implied, both about me and about the work I was doing in the world. I'm not that guy, I offered quietly to friends. I'm about business, entrepreneurship, language, and creativity. Yet everywhere I've turned there have been signs. You are all those, those same friends would reply, but underneath it all, you're about something bigger: creating vehicles and pathways and moments that allow people to embrace their potential. To connect. To reveal. To see and engage with possibility.

I've come to learn that not owning this part of me out of fear of some kind of external judgment or label—well, that causes its own pain. It keeps me from doing what I'm here to do. Having refused the call for so long (I'm slow; what can I say?), I finally realized it was time to step into it.

That gradual awakening has fueled years of seeking and study and fierce engagement with life. It eventually brought me back to my seat not just as a student, but also as a maker, a mentor, a writer, and a teacher. It's the reason this book exists.

## Who Is This Book For?

I wrote this book with one person in mind but soon discovered she was, in fact, the face, the heart, the soul, and the stifled yearning of millions. From the outside looking in, she had so many reasons to be grateful. A confident woman in her middle years, she was building a career, had plenty of friends and shared interests, and put on a great show of health. She knew she was, in so many ways, blessed. But that did little to quell the undercurrent of yearning and her growing sense of stifled potential. Her deeper reality, like that of so many of us, told a different story.

She had given up so much in the name of being an adult and partner; a source of unflagging, always-on strength and wisdom, kindness and understanding, security and surrender. Everything to everyone at all times, except herself.

What had happened to those deep interests and passions, the burning questions, delicious topics, joyful activities, and moments of transcendent awe that had been at the center of her younger life? They had long been relegated to the land of lost socks and somedays. Being lit-up ceded the way to being grown-up.

Nobody else saw that she was increasingly uncomfortable in her own skin, but she knew. Standing before her mirror revealed more than clothes could ever hide. It wasn't just about the way she looked; it was about the way she felt. Her health and vitality, her sexual and sensual core, had gone the way of her exercise and former identity. Her friends, numerous as they were, drifted somewhere "out there," wrapped in their own versions of sweet oblivion. Sure, there was the occasional "Let's do lunch" text, but without fail, it would linger unanswered in the digital ether. She had her "people," but having them and being with them were two different things. She was never truly alone but often lonely.

She met each day overwhelmed with a sense of pervasive busyness, and fractured attention. It was as if a swarm of “interested parties” were in control and her job, from the moment she opened her eyes to the moment she lay down to sleep, was not to choose with intention but to mindlessly react to an ever-expanding list of other people’s agendas. Punch lists replaced purpose and possibility. Awakening one morning, she thought, “Welcome to my autopilot life.”

Maybe most upsetting was that pervasive sense of untapped potential, as if the “real” her was screaming to get out, to reclaim that lit-up self she used to be or silently yearned to become. She’d give anything to close the gap between the life she knew she was capable of living and the one that met her every morning. And she was gut-tired of answering “busy” and “fine” and “surviving” whenever someone asked, “How are you?” She was desperate to be in a place where she would look up when asked and, with a radiant smile, reply, “So damn good!”

She had flatlined on nearly every level. It was as if she were living that classic lyric from Pink Floyd: she’d become “comfortably numb.” For years, she didn’t want to own it. Despite her slow descent into what Teddy Roosevelt famously described as “the gray twilight that knows neither victory nor defeat,” there was extraordinary good in her life. She knew this. With so much “real” suffering in the world, she had just written off her state of disillusionment, disconnection, and malaise as a “first-world problem” because it was more about elevation than survival. And who was she to complain? Who was she to want more? Framing it this way not only made her feel greedy for wanting more, but gave her a seemingly rational justification for inaction. But there was something else. If she stood in her deeper truth, if she really owned it, she’d also have to own both her role in arriving at that place and her responsibility to do what was necessary to create a different future. And that terrified her, because she had no idea how to bridge the gap between where she was and where she so desperately wanted to be.

Until she finally hit her breaking point.

I wrote this book for her—but then, I’m guessing if you’ve read this far, there’s a good chance she is you. Even if you’re a guy. Even if you’re just graduating from college. Even if you’re starting over a bit further into life. We’ve all felt what she felt at different moments along the road. We’ve all been in that place of “fine” and “busy,” disconnected from the people, places, and activities that allow us to walk through each day utterly alive. Disconnected from our best selves. We’ve all felt like a piece of us was dying a little bit every day and we just didn’t know how to flip the switch, how to turn our lives back on. And we’ve all spun the conversation in our heads that justified inaction and complacency. The one that kept us cocooned, safe from the unknown, but also estranged from the possible.

Sadly, we are not alone. In a world where awareness and intention long ago lost the battle to mindless surrender, we’re not even the exception. For years, if not decades, we’ve been living with an undiagnosed condition, Reactive Life Syndrome. Living each day not by choice, but by default. Doing what we can simply to keep up and tread water. It’s not about getting ahead, but rather about desperately trying not to fall too far behind. And in the end, it’s a losing proposition. The great news is that it’s not too late. There is an antidote.

If you’re nodding and saying, “That’s me. This is what I need. I am ready,” then this book will serve as your guide. The community you’ll discover around the ideas in the book will help ensure that, maybe for the first time in your life, you’ll move from existing to living, and from knowing what to do to actually doing it.

But then, I’m guessing you’ve heard that line before. And you’re wondering, “Really? How is this going to give me back my life? What makes it so different? And who are *you* to tell *me* what to do?”

With your permission, I’ll start with that last question.

## Who Am I to Write *This Book*, and How Is It Different?

My finger hovered over the send button. “Who am I,” I wondered, “to propose a book entitled *How to Live a Good Life*?” The arrogance! A middle-aged, married dad from the Upper West Side of Manhattan pontificating on the single most vexing question in all of human history. What do *I* have to say about how to live a good life that hasn’t been said or shared a million times before? Funny enough, a large part of my work is helping people and companies who’ve lost their sense of identity, voice, and meaning answer this very question. *Who am I to have something to say?* As I sat with the question, the words of iconic dancer and choreographer Martha Graham, offered in Agnes de Mille’s biography, *Martha: The Life and Work of Martha Graham*, settled over me:

There is vitality, a life force, energy, a quickening that is translated through you into action, and because there is only one of you in all of time, this expression is unique. And if you block it, it will never exist through any other medium and it will be lost. The world will not have it. It is not your business to determine how good it is nor how valuable nor how it compares with other expressions. It is your business to keep it yours clearly and directly, to keep the channel open. You do not even have to believe in yourself or your work. You have to keep yourself open and aware to the urges that motivate you. Keep the channel open. . . .

Adding value to another’s life is not about being a guru, a sage, or a wizard. It’s not about placing yourself above others, preaching down, or telling anyone to “sit and listen while I save you from the world and yourself.” When I look at the astonishing body of wisdom around the pursuit of a good life, from the Stoics to the Buddha, from faith to science and metaphysics to mythology, it’s clear to me that there is little, if anything, that’s not been studied or said before. There are precious few new ideas. Yet, in the face of this gob-smackingly huge collection of wisdom, much of humanity stumbles along, eternally yearning for a life it knows is possible, but having no idea how to find or create it.

The problem isn't that we don't have the answers. We've had them for thousands of years. It's that the things that work are either engulfed in a vast sea of noise or offered in a way that doesn't land. They're too hard to find and validate, too complicated, too theoretical, too mired in dogma, that war with the reality of our lives.

I'm not here to claim ownership of something profound and new, but rather to help you separate the wheat from the chaff. To identify the big levers, the things that work. And then to share them in a way that preserves their potential but also goes down easy. A way that inspires not just understanding, but action and integration, without the need for blind faith, godlike willpower, or total disruption.

My role has been to live fiercely and study deeply. To walk through each day an eternal student. To wade into Joseph Campbell's disquieting abyss in search of our treasure. Hopefully the way I share my unique understanding and experience will somehow connect with the way you need to hear or see or feel something at this moment. Maybe some small piece will awaken a part of your story in a manner that helps you breathe a little easier, love a little more openly, or live a little more fully. That is my intention in writing this book.

But what about you? All I ask is this: Stay open. Hold on a little less tightly to the safety of a consistent yet failed past and to the perceived sanctity of truths that may or may not have served you and the way you dream of being in the world. As Mark Twain famously offered, "It ain't what you don't know that gets you into trouble. It's what you know for sure that just ain't so."

## Where Do the Ideas I'm about to Share Come From?

In the next chapter, I'll offer a simple model that you can use to guide nearly every decision in life, something I call the Good Life Buckets. Where does it come from? In part, from decades of study. Some at the feet of extraordinary thinkers and teachers, from Buddhist lamas to education reformers and grounded-theory researchers to neuroscientists. Other learning comes from

thousands of hours and decades of quiet study and contemplation, devouring everything from Thomas Merton to the *Bhagavad Gita* to reams of academic studies and research reports.

Then there's the wisdom that can come only from some 50 years of life. Lessons learned through more than two decades building communities and companies, failing repeatedly and finding the will to step back into the arena until I got it right. Years teaching everything from yoga to entrepreneurship to thousands of students from around the world, speaking on stages large and small, working with everyone from soccer moms to CEOs and movie stars to moguls, leading retreats, writing books, and lecturing at universities. But without question, my deepest, most humbling growth has come from being a dad and a husband, and from my daily practice, one that cultivates a deepening stillness and continues to awaken me to the life-affirming truth of my own impermanence and the urgency that comes from accepting that on a day unknown to me, I and all those I love will be gone. Each of these experiences has shaped what Martha Graham would call my unique expression of life. My quickening. My channel. And they've all found an outlet in the venture that now commands a good part of my vocation, Good Life Project®.

In January 2012, I began to write what had normally been an annual essay that inventoried and reflected on the year behind and set intentions for the year to come. That document rapidly grew into a 34-page Warren Buffet-style annual report that I published and shared on my blog. On the final two pages, entitled "2012 Reimagined," I shared a story, and an invitation:

"What inspires you?"

That's what an audience member asked during my keynote at a conference last summer.

Little did she know, I had something hidden . . . something the audience couldn't see . . . a little piece of paper resting on the monitor next to my notes . . .

It was there to remind me what really mattered. I could crash and burn on stage, but this piece of paper would make it all okay.

It was a heart. Drawn for me by my 10-year old daughter before I left. No matter how my keynote went, she'd still be there to place her hands on my cheeks when I walked in the door and share a few butterfly kisses and a hug that said, "You're everything I need."

I held up the heart in response to the question and said, "This. My daughter," then explained what it was. Standing there, with the piece of paper raised high in the air before 500 people, I nearly burst into tears. So did many in the audience.

That piece of paper with the hastily drawn heart comes with me when I travel. If I'm on stage, it's there with me. But there was more. An invitation bundled with an announcement. Ten ideas, a different approach to building not just a living, but a life. And a new venture, one that would take my (until then) very personal exploration of life well lived and turn it far more public than I'd ever planned.

"What if I shared my quest," I thought. Sitting down with teachers, known and unknown, filming and recording the conversations, then not only learning but offering these people and ideas up to the world. What if I made it my full-time pursuit to find, learn from, and share people with pieces of the puzzle? People like the ephemerally wise and wickedly funny Brené Brown. People like polio survivor and education revolutionary Sir Ken Robinson. People like Shambhala Buddhist lama Sakyong Mipham Rinpoche, a fiftysomething Tibetan lama whose name literally translates to "Earth Protector." People like iconic graphic designer Milton Glaser, who, when I sat down with him at the age of 85 remained stunningly prolific, deeply committed, creating, teaching, and playing with his wife of some 60 years. People like acclaimed illustrator Lisa Congdon, who stumbled into art in her thirties and made it her life. Or famed behavioral economist and psychologist Dan Ariely, whose fascination with human nature and subsequent vocation were triggered by a three-year stint as a patient in an Israeli burn ward at the age of 18. What if I could travel the world, visit with these beacons of life-earned wisdom



and light, learn at their feet, integrate what I learned with my own experience of life, my own unique view, voice, and channel, and then share it all with the world?

With that, Good Life Project® was born. And without intention, the very early seeds of this book were planted. Now years into this quest, those seeds of an idea that began as a deep yearning to learn and share have grown into a media and education venture with a global community, an acclaimed web series and podcast with hundreds of thousands of listeners and viewers in more than 150 countries. We've also grown a catalog of courses, gatherings, events, and even an annual celebration, Camp GLP, where "GLeePers" from all over the world converge on a summer camp for three and a half days of pure magic.

Along the way, the incredible access to extraordinary minds and gorgeous souls began to cross-pollinate with my own experiences, and something profound began to emerge, a simple model I began to call the Good Life Buckets™. This easy-to-digest framework offers a way to look at the life you're living, quickly and easily assess what's working and what's not, and instantly know where to focus your energy to make things better; then it tells you what to do. I began to share the Good Life Buckets™ with increasingly large groups and within our courses and gatherings. The response took my breath away.

Mel Charbonneau, a married mother of three young kids and cofounder of the emerging women's movement Fellow Flowers, was one of the first to learn about the buckets. In the middle of one of our intensive seven-month training programs, she shared some great news. She was pregnant with her third child. And, much to my surprise, the Good Life Buckets™ played a major role in both her decision to have another child and how she would completely reconfigure her life to continue to flourish as a mom and an entrepreneur and live a great life. In her words:

Having another child was a big deal. I'm in major start-up mode with my business, giving it a ton of my time, creativity, and energy. And I already have two little girls, ages 7 and 4, who get all my love and attention

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