“Start Finishing is a game changer, a modern-day classic that will dramatically change your work.”

SETH GODIN, author of This Is Marketing

Editorial Reviews and Praise

Named one of Publisher’s Weekly Top Ten Business and Economics books for Fall 2019

“START FINISHING lives up to its promise to help people get good work done... Clear and positive tones make it easy to follow along and learn how to act upon the book’s ideas right away for fast results. [Charlie Gilkey] has lots of energy and eschews hype, extremism, and prescriptive thinking in favor of strategies that are realistic, sustainable, and adaptable... “Good work” isn’t about completing a task; it’s about fulfilling a dream, making the world better, and becoming who we want to be.” — Foreword Reviews

“[Start Finishing is] a formidable accomplishment... [it is] a substantive look at how individuals can set about realizing their personal and professional ambitions in a systematic and steady fashion. Charlie Gilkey’s Start Finishing: How to Go from Idea to Done is a marvelous work that holds up under repeated reading and promises to offer something different with each new perusal of its pages.” — The Indie Source

“Start Finishing [..] has the right length, language, and tone to have that effect on any readers open to its ideas and those who are will likely find themselves consulting its pages again and again long after reading the book for the first time. This is, perhaps, the highest praise you can bestow on any work – Start Finishing has enduring value rather than fly by night virtue and, ultimately, is more interested in individuals from every walk of life than it is ideas.” — Mobangeles

“Start Finishing’s chief distinction for many will be the uplifting and empowering tone Gilkey takes throughout the work. He places our destiny squarely in our own hands and makes a strong case that only through action, rather than blind inertia or luck, can we realize our ambitions and goals. This is a timeless message, it never dates, and in Gilkey’s hands it comes across as indispensable wisdom applicable across a vast spectrum. Start Finishing: How to Go from Idea to Done is a work you can revisit again and again and yield quantifiable results through each time.” — Goodreads
Praise from Influencers & Thought Leaders

“Charlie Gilkey knows you have little trouble beginning new projects. But finishing them? That’s often another story. The good news is that Gilkey is here to help. His terrific book offers a 9-step program to turn those great ideas into finished products — and your dreams into realities.” — Daniel H. Pink, Author of Drive and When

“Start Finishing is a heartfelt hug, bundled with a loving kick-in-the-ass, a masterclass in getting un-stuck and a set of tools that finally get you out of your own way and send you sprinting toward that thing that, until now, you’ve wanted so desperately, but never knew how to make your reality.” — Jonathan Fields, Bestselling author and the founder of The Good Life Project

“Start Finishing is a brilliant handbook for professional excellence. It goes way beyond the rah-rah to offer doable, targeted strategies to accomplish what you may now think is impossible. Equal parts productivity guru, drill sergeant, and best pal, Charlie gives you what you need to do your work with joy, commitment, and, most of all, to completion.” — Susan Piver, Founder of the Open Heart Project

“Big dreams can feel overwhelming, but in this encouraging book, Charlie shows you how to get started, plan your projects, and just keeping going. You don’t find the time, you make the time — and Charlie will show you how.” — Laura Vanderkam, Notable writer, speaker and author of Juliet’s School of Possibilities

“My decades of helping people create their body of work and start businesses have repeatedly shown that the greatest threat to success is the lack of ability to get things done and out into the world. Charlie Gilkey is uniquely qualified to solve this problem, and Start Finishing will fundamentally change the creative and entrepreneurial landscapes. Read this book and reap the rewards for the rest of your life.” — Pamela Slim, author of Escape from Cubicle Nation and Body of Work

“Paths are made by walking, not waiting. In Start Finishing, Charlie Gilkey lifts us back up and walks us to the finish line of the important goals and ideas we’ve been sitting on. The result of this book is quite honestly a life filled with fewer distractions and a greater sense of daily fulfillment. It’s a must-read that we will undoubtedly be referencing and re-reading in the weeks and months ahead.” — Marc and Angel Chernoff, New York Times bestselling authors of Getting Back to Happy

“Start Finishing offers a step by step process to help you get from concept to completed, no matter the project you’re trying to tackle. So many books show you how to get going on projects but few focus on how to get beyond the beginning, through the middle, and to the end result. Charlie Gilkey has written a book that does that - and does it in a way that’s tried, tested, and true. Start Finishing is a book that, once read from start to finish, will allow you finish anything time and time again.” — Mike Vardy, productivity strategist and founder of TimeCrafting

“Charlie Gilkey has put together a masterpiece that defies simple classifications. To call Start Finishing ‘a guide to setting goals you actually want to achieve,’ or ‘a project management book that cuts the BS promises and actually helps you achieve those goals’ would both be true descriptions, but they would fail woefully short of the greater value Gilkey has gifted us. Start Finishing is exactly what it promises: your map and compass to bringing forth your best work. Helping the reader to get clear about what best work really means and how to distinguish it from all those other things in your life that keep you from it is in and of itself worth the read. But this brilliant, honest, and assuring book isn’t just about figuring out what or how to start — it’s a deeply thoughtful and completely engaging manual for finishing, in other words, for making that best work you’re dreaming of real. If you want to start finishing, clear space on your desk for this important work. You can forget about finding space on your bookshelf, because you’ll quickly find you want Start Finishing always handy and right by your side.” — Larry Robertson, award-winning author of The Language of Man: Learning to Speak Creativity and A Deliberate Pause

“Start Finishing is a game-changer for creative people. The productivity genre is filled with hacks, tricks, and half-baked strategies that oversimplify productivity, or turn productivity into an overly-complex organizational challenge that most people don’t have the patience to learn. Start Finishing reflects a paradigm shift in thinking about productivity that is grounded in both real-world application and solid academic theory.” — Cory Huff, author of How to Sell Your Art Online

“If you’re a productivity junkie, a frustrated creator who perennially puts other things in front of your most meaningful work, or anyone else who wrestles with those 168 hours, you need to read Start Finishing. This book hit me like the secret keys to life. It made me understand why I’ve always punted my reason-for-living work to the bottom of my list, and how to build the rock-solid, regular creative practice I’ve always wanted while also getting my “day job” done more efficiently (and with more happiness and satisfaction) than I imagined possible. The book is concrete, so you get actual strategies instead of cheerleading. Well, Gilkey cheerleads too, but it’s more about being kind to yourself, establishing right-sized expectations, connecting with others, and celebrating your wins—rather than just self-flagellating with the old self-discipline whip.” — Miranda Hersey, author of Press Pause: A Journal for Self-Care, Intention, and Slowing Down and Life by Design: 52 Lists, Questions, and Inspirations for Finding Your Happiness
“As a creative entrepreneur and business builder, it's imperative that I have a system for getting my work done while balancing all of the things that life throws at me. START FINISHING offers the most practical method out there for helping creatives manage the emotional and tactical sides of completing important work. I can easily become overwhelmed with all the urgent tasks that inevitably show up every day and this book is the first one I've read that offers a do-able approach to starting AND finishing my most important work. Gilkey's book offers a fundamental shift in the way we think about doing creative work and will help you stay in control of your days, weeks, months, and quarters with precision planning and clarity. If you struggle with and endless to-do list and never quite feel like you have enough time to get things done, do yourself a HUGE favor and get yourself a copy of START FINISHING. This is one of those books that will stay on your desk for a long time as you continue referencing Charlie's useful insights and applying his simple and effective method to getting things done.” — Michael Knouse, 5 Stars on Amazon

“Charlie Gilkey's book is amazing! I have been following some of the things he talks about on his website (Productive Flourishing) and book covers his system in one great package. This book for me has been a desperately needed life management help. I have been overworking, trying to do too many projects at once and totally burning out. His process for me was a reality check for what is really possible to do (without bringing yourself out) but how to do things, manage time, manage energy more efficiently. You an be quite productive without burnout and really it has helped me to be more successful. This book really has changed my life.” — Valerie M, 5 Stars on Amazon

“As some other reviewers have said, I have read my fair share (make that 10 peoples' fair share) of self-help, productivity, and business books in my life. A lot of books are good, but it's a rare book that I would call truly a game-changer, and Start Finishing is one of them. I'm not even done with the book yet (over halfway through) and already it has helped me discern and clarify some massive things, including picking my next big project, which I have been "thrashing" Peripheral around for at least a year. I have already big made progress with recruiting my Success Pack, which is a brilliant framework, and I know that the more of Charlie's strategies that I implement (instead of just read about and go "ooh, that's a good idea!"), this book will absolutely give me what I need to succeed with not only this project, but also the structure and flow of ALL my big projects to come, and the overall flow of my LIFE. This book is ambitious, but it's all value, zero fluff, and truly makes me feel both inspired AND like I have the concepts and tools I need to do more of my best work in the world.” — B. Kerschen, 5 stars on Amazon

“This is so much more than a productivity book - this is a book that will change your life. It goes beyond the tactical components of how to get things done faster/smarter/cleaner (fill in the blank) and gets to the heart of what needs to get done. Charlie doesn't hold back in us giving reality checks and calling us out on the barriers we create for ourselves and excuses we use to not start or get to done. But he does so with such care and compassion that you know it's only to push us forward and help us thrive.” — Maghan Haggerty, 5 Stars on Amazon

“Many of us have great ideas, plans and ideas that never really launch. This book is well written, laid out and broken down into the perfect bite-size snippets to get started and follow where the author is going. It’s almost like text book. I love the style, the writing and easy to digest information. I have post it’s and highlights everywhere. I can’t put it down. If you’re looking for a gentle push filled with great ideas and information you’ll go back to time and time again, then this is the book for you. Work, personal like, it works for whatever your situation is you need to start finishing.” — Myra View, 5 Stars on Amazon

“If you’ve wanted to do something but never got around to it, or had a great idea for a project but never put the pieces together, or you’ve got a project in your lap but it’s a mess and you’re stuck, not knowing what to do when or how...This book has got your back. Charlie understands. He’s been there. Like all of us, he’s failed plenty of times in life, but he’s failed enough to see what works, and this book shows how he gets things done. I’ve been reading how to ‘get things done’ books, productivity blogs and e-mails, for years. I love Charlie’s distillation of and importantly, gentle but accountable - methods to make plans, know why, and take action. It works. Heck, I applied the steps in the book to set aside the time to read the book! How many books have you started but haven’t finished? Start Finishing really does level up your productivity skill set. It works those muscles in the right ways so you get better at getting things done. And that’s something I now get to apply to my day job, side hustle, family projects, and creative work. Finishing work and getting it out in the world is a HUGELY important skill set that so many people lack nowadays (my hand raised first). There’s resistance, confusion, stagnation, distraction...Charlie gets it, addresses it, and gives you tools to work through it. Books are one of the best investments you can make in upgrading yourself and your life, and this one is surely worth it. Highly recommended.” — James M. Taylor, 5 Stars on Amazon
For Mom, who placed so many people’s thriving above her own, and Dad, who in another place and time would’ve stunned the world with what he finished.
Part 1: Clearing the Decks for Your Best Work

Chapter 1: "Someday" Can Be Today
Why it’s time to focus on projects rather than ideas • The link between your best work and thriving • How living in a project world gives us freedom at the cost of uncertainty • What to do if your interests are all over the place • Why projects are bridges and mirrors • What separates the change-makers from the sideliners

Chapter 2: Getting to Your Best Work
What’s really in the middle of the air sandwich between your big picture and day-to-day reality • Marc and Angel Chernoff: “What Else Could This Mean?” • The 5 keys to unlocking your best work • The difference between positive and negative boundaries • How we confuse courage and clarity • Discipline creates freedom • James Clear: “The Difference Between Professionals and Amateurs” • Getting clear about your competing priorities helps you make better plans and commitments • Ishita Gupta: “Build Your Courage Muscle”

Chapter 3: Pick an Idea that Matters to You
Why thrashing is a sign that something matters to you • How not doing your best work leads to creative constipation • We’re built to slay dragons • The 3 gifts of failure • Chelsea Dinsmore: “What to Do When Life Changes Your Plans” • How not being able to do everything at once is a gift once you accept it • Why you have to let go of some ideas to trade up to the best ones • Susan Piver: “Should You Break Up with Your Idea?” • 5 questions to help you sort through what matters most

Part 2: Planning Your Project

Chapter 4: Convert Your Idea into a Project
How to convert an idea into a SMART goal • The 3 levels of success and why you can’t do everything at the epic level • No date, no finish • The 4 kinds of people to put in your success pack • Pamela Slim: “The Principles of Enrolling a Guide” • The 5 steps to activate your success pack

Chapter 5: Make Space for Your Project
You don’t find time and space for your best work—you make time and space for it • What playing with building blocks taught us about bending time • How to use the project pyramid to break down your big projects into smaller ones • 34 common project verbs that make planning easier • Using the Five Projects Rule to prioritize and plan your work • The 4 kinds of blocks that power your best work and life • 3 focus blocks per week avoids a thrash crash

Part 3: Work the Plan

Chapter 8: Weave Your Project into Your Schedule
How momentum planning keeps you going • The 7 environmental factors to make work for you • Joshua Becker: “How a Minimalist Workspace Enhances Focus” • Why batching and stacking makes you more efficient • The relationship between frogs and your dread-to-work ratio • When you’re working can be more critical than what you’re working on • Mike Verd: “You Don’t Have to Be an Early Riser to Be Productive” • Rethinking “first things first” • The 5/10/15 Split makes daily momentum planning a breeze • Why planning too far in advance can be much worse than a waste of time

Chapter 9: Build Daily Momentum
3 ways to celebrate small wins—and why it’s important to do so • Srinivas Rao: “Don’t Break the Chain” • 6 routines that will help minimize decision fatigue • What Hansel and Gretel taught us about project management • 10 ways to mitigate distractions and interruptions • Cascades, logjams, and tar pits—3 ways projects get stuck and how to handle them • How to get your projects through the creative red zone

Chapter 10: Finish Strong
The under-appreciated reasons why we should run victory laps • Transition time and space between projects help us avoid burnout • Todd Kashdan: “Curating and Trimming Relationships” • The value of CAT time • How After-Action Reviews make your next projects easier • The 5 things you may have unlocked by completing your project

Part 2: Planning Your Project (cont.)

Chapter 6: Build Your Project Roadmap
The difference between a flat list and a road map • Using your GATES to fuel your project • Jonathan Fields: “Your GATES Point to a Deeper Spark” • The 5 categories to consider for every project budget • Jacquette M. Timmons: “Your Money Needs You to Give It Direction” • Deadlines guide your project • The 7 steps to building your project road map

Chapter 7: Keep Flying By Accounting for Drag Points
Why every plan has drag points • The 3 kinds of no-win scenarios we often don’t realize we’re telling ourselves • Jeff Goin: “The Myth of the Starving Artist” • Why we choose mediocrity and what it really costs us • Seth Godin: “Only the Tall Poppy Gets Full Sunlight” • Don’t be down with OPP (Other People’s Priorities) • 9 ways to handle derailers and naysayers • Jeffrey Davis: “Let Wonder Intervene with Derailers” • 6 questions to ask during your project premortem

Expanded Table of Contents
The day came when the risk to remain tight in a bud was more painful than the risk it took to blossom.
ELIZABETH APPELL, in a promotional pamphlet for John F. Kennedy University, 1979

PICK AN IDEA THAT MATTERS TO YOU

We’re paradoxical creatures. On the one hand, we all want to do our best work. On the other hand, we often avoid doing it.

This paradox only makes sense when we acknowledge that there’s a lot happening in our inner landscapes that’s keeping us from choosing to do our best work—and that makes choosing an idea that matters tricky. Unfortunately, with all the meetings, commutes, notifications, and things to do, we’re not often privy to everything that’s happening inside our hearts and minds.

What we can often see is that we’re doing a lot of work around our best work but not getting anywhere with it. Hours, days, and weeks can go by with us researching, mulling, procrastinating, and touching our best work just enough to keep it warm but not enough to push it along.

To pick an idea that matters, the part of you that wants to thrive and do your best work will have to overcome the part of you that wants to play it safe, be comfortable, and not ruffle any feathers. It’s time to embrace the thrashing you’re doing.
The more it matters, the more you’ll thrash

Thrashing is the term I use for this emotional flailing and metawork we do when we don’t fully commit to our best work. What’s really going on is that we’re working out our own head trash—the fears, impostor syndrome, and (sometimes) unconscious perceptions of our own inadequacies. When we’re thrashing, we’re like the rocking chair that moves a lot but doesn’t actually get anywhere.

But generating all that motion can be more exhausting than actually making progress. Even worse, at some level, we know we’re thrashing and can’t figure out why.

Here’s the thing, though: we don’t thrash about taking out the trash or doing the dishes. We don’t have an existential crisis of varying degrees of intensity when it’s time to cook dinner or go to the library. (Though if you’re anything like me, having to decide which books won’t be going home with you can invoke a mini crisis.)

If you’re familiar with Steven Pressfield’s notion of resistance, you might think that thrashing and resistance are the same thing. They’re not. Resistance is the inner voice or actor that’s often the mouthpiece for all the head trash we carry with us. Thrashing is what we do in response to resistance.

That may seem like a minor difference, but what I find useful in the distinction is that we can notice when we’re thrashing and decide that we’re going to do something different, even as the resistance yells at us ever more loudly and forcefully. Additionally, knowing about thrashing allows us to tell others what thrashing looks like for us so they can call us on it, rather than leave it for them to guess what’s going on inside our head and heart.

Some of us thrash:

- **Before we start working on an idea.** “Who am I to do this project?” “Does this project even matter?” “Is this original enough?” “Can I actually do this?”

- **At the end of the project.** “Is this good enough?” “What will people think of me?” “What about the haters, trolls, and naysayers?” “What if I miss something important?”

- **In the middle of the project.** “How the hell do I get this project back on track?” “Why is this project so hard for me?” “Is anyone even going to care if I finish this?” “Is this really the best thing I can be doing right now?”

- **Throughout every stage of a project.** We’re masters of the flailathon.

We only thrash about the things that matter to us: getting married for the first (or third) time; leaving a comfortable job to start our own business; writing a book; starting a nonprofit; doing an open-mic event; sharing our art with a new audience; kicking off a disruptive strategic project. Each of these can get us thrashing, and many people never actually get beyond thrashing.

The more an idea matters to you, the more you’ll thrash, precisely because its success or failure is deeply important to you.

While most of us don’t care about how perfectly aligned our trash cans are when we put them out on the curb, we do care about how perfectly presented our best work is. Our best work is a representation of our internal character, competency, and excellence in a way that the curbside trash cans aren’t. (At least, that’s the story we tell ourselves.)

Every project that matters to us will entail some thrashing, but where we’ll thrash is often quite particular to us.
A natural response to thrashing is to pick easier ideas to work on. Sheer exhaustion, frustration, and the desire to actually get something done make switching projects seem like a good idea. Ain’t nobody got time to wear themselves out for half of the day and not have anything to show for it.

You’re most likely to start reaching for an easier project when your project goes into a void. When your project is in a void, it can seem like it can keep going nowhere forever and there’s not a clear way to get the project out of the void. Best-work projects are particularly prone to have one or more voids, which is yet another reason they too easily get pushed to the side for an easier project.

Beware the siren call of the “easier” idea, though. If you switch to an easier project that matters, you’ll end up thrashing anyway, and it will probably be in about the same spot as the current project you’re thrashing with. It’s not like switching to an easier project automatically means you’ve addressed what caused you to thrash with your previous one. And if it’s an easier project, you might finish it, but you won’t feel nearly as satisfied as if you had finished the one you bailed on. And you’ll still be haunted by whatever undone project you switched from.

Thrashing is thus not a sign that you can’t finish the project or that you’re doing the wrong project. It’s a sign that you’re doing something that matters to you and that you’ll need to show up powerfully to get it done. It’s also not something you’ll ever get away from—as you become more powerful and accomplished, the ideas you’ll grapple with will scale with you, in scope, breadth, or difficulty.

AVOIDING YOUR BEST WORK LEADS TO CREATIVE CONSTIPATION

Your best work is always going to be challenging because it’s the work that matters to you. And because it matters to you, you’re going to be thrashing along the way. Best work is starting to look suspiciously like hard work, and our natural reaction is to avoid doing hard work and to instead find something easier to do.

When it comes to your best work, not doing it comes with two major costs: (1) you won’t be able to thrive, and (2) you’ll be stricken with creative constipation. Since I’ve already discussed the link between thriving and your best work, let’s talk about creative constipation, or the pain of not doing your best work.

Creative constipation is exactly what it sounds like. We take in ideas and inspiration that get converted into aspirations, goals, and projects, and at a certain point, if we’re not pushing them out in the form of finished projects, they start to back up on us. And like physical constipation, at a certain point, we get toxic. We don’t want to take in any more ideas. We don’t want to do any more projects. We don’t want to set any more goals or plans. We’re full and fed up.

That inner toxicity becomes the broth that flavors all our stories about ourselves and the world; our head trash gets more pronounced and intense, and what we see in the world goes from bright to dark. Creative constipation leads to behaviors in which we lash out at the world—and sometimes even more intensely at ourselves. We become resentful of others—even people we love—who are doing their best work. Our ability to feel positive emotional peaks is diminished at the same time that our ability to feel negative emotional troughs is amplified. You’ve no doubt encountered the
tortured, depressed soul who’s creatively constipated—and you may have been there yourself.

There’s a reason that nearly every spiritual tradition links creativity and destruction: the same energy that fuels creation also fuels destruction. The Jewish, Christian, and Muslim God creates and destroys; “beating swords into plowshares” works equally in reverse. The Hindu god Shiva is seen as a destroyer who makes way for creativity. Creativity and destruction are seen as a continual loop in the Taoist concept of yin and yang.

Spiritual insights such as these also show up in our everyday lives. Think about how often you’ve engaged in retail therapy—and thus destroyed your time and resources—because you’re unsatisfied about something in your life. Think about how often you’ve indulged in emotional eating because you’re not creating the change you want to see in your life. Think about how many people blow up their lives in a midlife crisis because the career and life they’ve made haven’t satisfied their deep needs.

Now think about the people you know or have read about who are doing their best work. Notice how they’re healthier, happier, (usually) more financially comfortable, and in good relationships with others? Doing their best work creates meaning for them at the same time that it cocreates who they want to be in the world. And these folks know that doing their work in the world is the wheel of change, meaning, and growth, more so than merely being stuck in their heads.

So at both deep and practical levels, we can choose to channel our energy to do our best work and thrive, or we can choose to leave it unharnessed to gradually destroy ourselves, our relationships, our resources, and the world around us. Better to do the hard work of creation than the hard work of repairing the destruction we’ve wrought.

WE ARE MADE TO SLAY DRAGONS

Your best work is hard work during which you’ll thrash, and if you don’t do the work, you’ll be feeling a different kind of pain. “There be dragons” on the journey to thriving and doing your best work. You can avoid some of the dragons—especially the ones you create for yourself—but you shouldn’t expect to avoid all of them.

It’s far better to be skeptical about doing the easy work or always picking the low-hanging fruit. Too many of us wake up after doing years of work that doesn’t stretch us or make us really show up to do it, and we realize that we’ve been phoning it in. Easy work can be like fast food: it’s quick, easy, and cheap, but it’s not fulfilling and too much of it can lead to dis-ease.

But here’s the deal: we are made to slay dragons. We have survived for hundreds of thousands of years using our creativity, grit, imagination, and cooperative spirit. We’ve harnessed fire and metal and the very energy of the universe to alter reality. We’ve survived countless plagues, wars, and famines. Physically, we’re the weakest and least capable of every predator and yet we’re the apex predator on this planet.

So what if there are a few dragons on this journey? They have always been there and likely always will be there. Lesser people than us have tussled with them and won, and we can too.

Dragons aren’t a signal that we’re on the wrong road but rather that we’re on the right road. So the next time you’re dismayed or hesitant because of a dragon guarding the way forward, embrace
that it’s there precisely because it’s the way forward and charge headlong at it. You were made to beat dragons.

**THE GIFT OF FAILURE**

You may be made to slay dragons, but it doesn’t mean you’ll always be able to do so. Failure is inevitable, and if you’re not failing and making the occasional bad decision, you’re not doing your best work. Really showing up and dancing with the uncertainty that comes with doing your best work means you’re going to underestimate, underprioritize, and underprepare for a challenge that then gets the best of you.

But failure isn’t a mark of character but rather a sign that something was out of alignment. Maybe you . . .

**CHELSEA DINSMORE WHAT TO DO WHEN LIFE CHANGES YOUR PLANS**

There are many things in life out of our control, and when life changes our plans it’s hard not to feel helpless. I learned this the hard way when my husband, Scott, was killed in an accident while we were hiking Mount Kilimanjaro. Not only was I having to process this sudden and tragic loss but I was also doing it in front of the global community we had built. What happened was out of my control, but my response to it was not.

This is why I encourage people to have a practice that allows them to intentionally respond rather than simply react to any given situation. We must first accept that what happens around us isn’t what dictates our feelings; it’s our thoughts that create them. We go in and out of emotions based on our thoughts, which often come as a result of what we focus on. Our circumstances may be facts, but our emotions are fleeting—focusing on what we can’t do creates hopelessness; focusing on what we can do creates motivation.

When we begin to notice the thoughts that create painful and pleasurable emotions, we reveal patterns, understand triggers, and gain insight into where we can better direct our focus in any given moment. The better we can learn to manage our minds, rather than react to them, the better we can handle any situation, regardless of the level of difficulty.

This is a power no circumstance can take away from you!

Chelsea Dinsmore is the owner of Live Your Legend, a business that helps people discover how to live their lives with a deeper sense of purpose, meaning, and mindfulness.

- Charged ahead by yourself rather than asking for help.
- Said yes too quickly when you were already overcommitted.
- Had a streak of easy wins that unlocked a new level of challenge that you weren’t ready for.
- Chose an idea that didn’t match your actual priorities, and the projects that relate to your priorities won out.
- Put the wrong people on your team for the wrong reasons.
- Needed to spend more time honing your skills or collecting your resources.
- Had a beautiful plan that reality shattered in wonderful or terrible ways you couldn’t anticipate.
- Needed to spend more time honing your skills or collecting your resources.
- Had a beautiful plan that reality shattered in wonderful or terrible ways you couldn’t anticipate.

Your past failures are in the past. They aren’t predictive of what you’ll be able to do in the future. Your best bet is to follow this Cherokee proverb: don’t let yesterday eat up too much of today.

But that’s not to say the sting of failure isn’t real. A corollary of “the more it matters, the more you’ll thrash” is that the more it matters to you, the more it will sting when you fail. This truth is another reason we choose to avoid our best work.
The gift of failure is that it reveals what matters to you, shows you when you’re out of alignment, and reveals a growth edge.

Each day is a new day to try again with the lessons of yesterday as a guide, not a straitjacket.

Failure is thus like that friend who tells you what you need to hear rather than what you want to hear. But it’s not the only friend keeping you on your game.

DISPLACEMENT IS YOUR FRIEND
(AFTER IT’S YOUR ENEMY)

One of the biggest dragons seems to be time. There’s never enough, and we don’t get it back.

The more years I spend on this planet, the more I see that we need the constraint of finite time for the meaning making that matters the most to us. That constraint creates displacement, and taking displacement seriously allows us to make better choices. Displacement is simply the reality that every action we choose to do displaces countless others we could have done in the same space and time.

That’s all very general and spiritual, I know. To make it more concrete, let’s consider *Whole Earth Catalog* creator Stewart Brand’s idea that significant, impactful ideas will require at least five years of focused action to complete.1 Subtract your current age from eighty-five and divide by five—that’s how many significant projects you have left to do.

---


By the time this book is published, I’ll be cresting forty, so that means I have nine significant projects left. That’s only so many nonprofit boards I can serve on, pillars of my body of work that I can build, ways I can serve my community and nation, and places I might move to and truly experience. Yes, knowing I only have nine buckets to pour my life energy into feels like the universe is sitting on my chest. But it also makes me extra discerning about what significant projects I choose to do and how my days go toward those projects.

No matter how we choose to spend our hours, we each get twenty-four of them each day. That finite limit is a hellish constraint for many of us.

But that finite limit can be a gift of heaven just the same. Consider how much more we waste when we have more to waste. How many times have you looked back over a day or week that had too much unplanned time and been frustrated that you squandered that time precisely because it was too open? Or how many times have you clicked over to Facebook because you were bored—that is, you had open time where you weren’t engaged?

Another major gift of displacement is that it can help you assess the cost of being spread across too many projects and responsibilities. For example, I’d like to write more than one book every five years, but to do so, I’ll have to do like other prolific authors and cut more things out of my life to do so. If I decide to cut or not take on something that consumes ten hours per week, I could then apply those ten hours to a book. In that scenario, I’d be able to write one book a year pretty easily. There’s even a helpful constraint there as well, in that there’s only so much creative energy available per day and it’s far less than many people think.

We could quibble about whether Brand’s correct about impactful ideas taking five years to complete or what counts
as a significant project, but doing so wouldn’t change the fact that we have a finite amount of time and whatever we do in that time displaces other things we might do.

As you get better at using the five keys and focusing on your best work, displacement will become an even better friend. When stuff that really doesn’t matter and isn’t worth your time, energy, and attention shows up, you’ll feel it right away, and you’ll also feel the potential cost of letting your current project go. We’re wired to feel the pain of loss more than the pleasure of possible gains. Losing the grip and momentum you’re currently building will make it easier to wick away the drops of nonmeaningful stuff as if it were water on a rain jacket. Your fear of missing out (FOMO) will shift from missing out on what other people are doing to missing out on what you could be doing with time well used.

But in the beginning you’ll fight and thrash against displacement. That’s just the infinite part of yourself straining against its bindings. Part of the struggle of the human condition is being an unlimited sentience trapped in a limited body; part of the beauty of the human condition is being an unlimited sentience that gets to use its power through space and time.

I’m highlighting this tension with displacement because we’re heading toward a choice that will catalyze that tension. At the end of this chapter I’ll ask you to pick one idea to start working on and to use it as the lens to understand the ideas ahead. You’ll likely struggle with choosing, and a major part of that struggle may be resistance to the premise that you have to or should choose.

When that time and struggle come, remember these three things:

- Everything you do displaces something else you could have done.
- The work that really matters will require a concerted amount of time to finish.
- The more you channel your energy toward one project, the faster you’ll finish it and therefore can move on to the next project.

Not choosing is a choice that costs you far more in the long run than choosing and finishing one significant project at a time. We can’t run away from displacement, but we can use it to start finishing our best work.

TO TRADE UP, YOU HAVE TO LET GO

While we’re on displacement, it’s useful to think about all the ideas and projects you’re carrying and what they’re displacing. You’re currently carrying a mixed bag of projects and responsibilities, the majority of which aren’t related to your best work or the activities and ideas that are most going to move you toward thriving. The minority of stuff that’s close-ish to your best work is likely stagnant, existing in the same progress status as that closet you stuff full of things you don’t want to process right now but can’t outright get rid of.

I’m not judging. As I’ve been saying all along, it’s far too easy for stuff that doesn’t matter to end up on your to-do list while the stuff that does matter languishes as you wait for days where you won’t have the rest of the stuff to do. Those days
are coming, we all swear, despite the lifelong evidence that they won’t.

While we will begin to eliminate some of the work that doesn’t matter, we’ll need to start with that closet of ideas and projects we really want to do. This may seem like a counterintuitive place to start. Wouldn’t starting with the bigger list of stuff that doesn’t matter as much give the biggest bang for the buck? After all, if it’s 80 percent of where our time is going, and we remove 25 percent of it, then we can apply that time, energy, and attention to the stuff in the closet, right?

Probably not, for two reasons. First, the stuff that’s currently on our list is there for a reason, and if it were so easy to let go of, we would have done it already. We either had it imposed upon us or we accepted it at some point in the past. In either case, it has some energy and story attached to it, and it will take some active effort to dissipate the energy and rewrite the story.

The second reason why it’s unlikely that we’ll automagically start doing our best work is because our existing pattern is to fill the space with stuff that doesn’t matter as much. If you’re a people-pleaser, you’re more likely to fill that space with stuff that “pays off” the people-pleasing you haven’t been doing because you’ve been too busy. If you’re a perfectionist, you’re more likely to go about shoring up something you feel you half did in the past, regardless of whether it’s still alive or not.

If we don’t consciously make the effort to change things, our default habits and patterns will keep filling the holes we make. We have to start by filling those holes with work that matters. This is how displacement can be a gift. We can put something that’s harder to displace in those cracks and holes, and, with practice, we can replace the go-to chicken wire and duct tape of ephemera with the more solid brick and mortar of our best work.

But to get some headway with your best work, you have to fight the natural inclination to work on all the things you’ve hidden away in that closet. That road ends with your being unsatisfied by your lack of progress and focus, with a strong possibility that you’ll just shove even more undone stuff back in the closet. You’ve probably walked this road before and don’t want to walk it again.

Instead, you must decide from the get-go that you’re just going to let some of those ideas go.

The best way to finish something is often to just drop it, midstream and undone, even while feeling the sting of remorse, regret, and sadness of not seeing it through.

And let’s not pretend as if the choice of letting some of those projects and ideas go is primarily a mental activity. It’s an emotional activity—your soul, emotions, and creative energy are tied up in those ideas. Sometimes there’s money and social skin in the game as well, and none of us want to walk away from money we’ve sunk into something or feel the shame of not seeing our commitments through. Better to hold on to them, as you might get around to them someday.

This reminds me of my dad, a brilliant and industrious jack-of-all-trades. Dad would often salvage things from the construction sites and jobs he worked on because he was “fixin’ to” use them on some unspecified project he was going to work on. He’d kept almost every vehicle he

The best way to finish something is often to just drop it, midstream and undone, even while feeling the sting of remorse, regret, and sadness of not seeing it through.
ever owned because he was “fixin’ to” fix them up and use them. He’s going on eighty and currently has dementia, and my siblings and I are left with over an acre of stuff collected over the last sixty years that Dad never could let go of because he just knew someday all that “fixin’ to” would turn into something he actually did. Even now, on bad days, he thinks about all that stuff and how he’s going to get to those projects. How much of his soul is tied up in things he’ll never get to?

My father is a product of his time, when physical stuff was what was collected in order to build real stuff in the world. In the near eighty years since he was born, our society has shifted from atoms to bits, to use entrepreneur, TED Conference curator, and author Chris Anderson’s phraseology. More of us work in intangibles, including services, than in tangibles anymore. We don’t have an acre of unprocessed stuff, but we have the same analogous amount of space in our souls occupied with things we’re “fixin’ to” get to.

In the next section, I’ll be asking you to pick one idea or project to work on or use as an anchor to apply the insights from this book. But in this section I’m asking you to pick some ideas that you won’t be working on anymore so you can free up that energy to fuel what you do work on. It’s a hard ask now, but it will make the next exercise easier because you’ll be working with a shorter list.

So let’s start to unpack that closet of ideas and projects. Here’s how I suggest doing this:


Once you have this list, start asking yourself the following questions and put an asterisk behind items that meet the criteria of the questions:

- **Give yourself two uninterrupted hours for this exercise.**
- **Do it somewhere other than where you work most of the time.** Coffee shops and libraries are particularly good settings.
- **Use a pencil and paper.** Use a pencil so you can erase when you need to—and you’ll need to. Use paper so you don’t collapse into fiddling with technology and checking stuff that doesn’t need to be checked right now.

Mindmapping can be more useful than a linear list, but this is not the time to learn how to mindmap if you’re not familiar with the process.

- **List all of the ideas and projects you want to do.** Think beyond “professional” ideas and projects—yard and house projects, community initiatives, events with your community, traveling to Nepal, sorting your finances, or getting a puppy all count. It can be items on your bucket list, but they don’t have to be bucket-list level.

Once you have this list, start asking yourself the following questions and put an asterisk behind items that meet the criteria of the questions:

1. **Which of the items wouldn’t actually hurt at all if you cut them?** Be on the lookout for projects and ideas that some previous version of yourself put there that aren’t relevant for where you are right now. For instance, this could be a degree or certificate to get a job you no longer want or that you already have. It could be a creative project that past-you desperately needed to prove yourself that current-you no longer needs because you’re no longer seeking approval.

2. **Which of the items would you feel relieved to no longer be carrying?** Pay more attention to how it will feel once it’s no longer on your plate than to what you would need to do to let go of it.

3. **Which of the items are “shoulds” or items that relate to OPP (other people’s priorities), but you don’t see how they’ll directly lead to your thriving?**

4. **Which of the items are good ideas but don’t relate to something that frustrates, annoys, angers, inspires, nourishes, or calls to you?** You can’t build the flame to temper your project from a good idea that doesn’t have an emotional spark to start with.
Conventional wisdom says that success is dependent on your intelligence, skill, drive, connections, and resilience. Should you encounter obstacles, just work harder. When things seem hopeless, hustle more. Eventually your idea is bound to work.

But this is simply not true. There’s something missing from this view.

Obstacles aren’t merely stumbling blocks to be gotten around; they’re a source of wisdom. Sometimes the wisdom shows you a better way, but sometimes—and this can be very hard to accept—the wisdom is telling you to stop. Give up. Move on.

How do you know when you should push harder or let go? To discover the answer, it’s useful to take yourself out of the center of the equation. We all think our work is about us and our talents and aspirations. It turns out that this is only partially true, because in order for your project or idea to work, it has to, at some point, spark. A relationship with the world—whether that world is the consumer marketplace, a business sector, or a single client—has to arise.

Ideas are like blind dates. Either may appear perfect on paper—smart, interesting, and attractive—but if there’s no chemistry, it won’t work. You can go out on a million more dates, but that will never change. It’s a matter of history, timing, and the mysteries of destiny. What looks good on the surface is only the beginning.

When the world falls in love with your work, you’ll know it. In the meantime, stay strong and confident in yourself, but develop the capacity to read the signs clearly, respond fearlessly, and remain open to what comes next. It may be better than you ever dreamed.

Susan Piver is a Buddhist teacher and the New York Times bestselling author of nine books. She is founder of the Open Heart Project, the largest virtual mindfulness community in the world.

If you really engage with the questions, you’ll be able to eliminate a lot of items from your list. How many depends on how long you’ve crammed stuff in that closet without purging it. If you’re a frequent purger, you may have a short list. If it’s been a while, you may have a long list.

Now the important part:

eliminate those items rather than defer and put them back in the closet later.

Whenever that later comes, they’d be asterisked all over again. You’ve done the hard work of making the evaluation once—don’t do it again.

Some people find it helpful to do a send-off process for each item. Think about the item, how you came to it, how it’s helped you, and how sending it off will open up more energy for something that’s relevant now. A simpler process would be to say something such as “I release you” or “we’re complete.” Burning the list has been particularly cathartic for me and others I’ve led through a similar process. How you do it is less important than making the clean, intentional break.

Now that you’ve let go of stuff that matters less, you can trade up to what matters more. To prep for that, rewrite the list you started with so that it only includes ideas and projects that made the cut. For the projects you’ve let go, there’s no need to see them anymore.
FIVE QUESTIONS TO HELP YOU SORT THROUGH WHAT MATTERS MOST

If you did the exercise above, you may have been surprised to see that what you originally thought was important to you really wasn’t, and what you pushed aside as unimportant really was. If you’ve experienced a roller coaster of emotions, great—that means you’ve been open and honest with yourself. You’re right where you should be.

Much as we learn to live by living, we learn to do our best work by doing our best work. And the best way to do our best work is to pick a specific idea to work on, which means it’s time to choose that specific idea. Your task is a lot easier if you followed the exercise above and have let go of ideas and projects that aren’t as important. A bunch of little, less important ideas can add up to overwhelm in the same way that a bunch of little, less important requests can.

Before we get to the questions that will help you pick the one idea to work on, know that “not now” isn’t the same thing as “no.” By picking one idea, you’ll be saying “not now” to others—that is, displacement in effect—and it can often feel like “not now” means the same thing as “no.” Intentionally not working on an idea typically feels more uncomfortable than unintentionally not working on it, but deciding not to work on an idea frees up that energy and focus to intentionally finish and work on another. Better to use the five keys (especially courage and discipline) to intentionally finish one idea than to not use them and unintentionally not finish a bunch.

You may also avoid choosing because you’re afraid you’ll pick the wrong thing. Remember, if you finish the idea sooner, you can move on to something else sooner without the baggage and debt of the current idea and will thus finish the next idea faster.

Take the short list from the section above and use the following five questions to pick the project that matters most.

1. Imagine that you’re celebrating with a friend or loved one the most important thing you’ve done over the last year. If you could only pick one of the items on the list, which would it be?

2. Which of the items on the list causes the most gut-level anguish when you consider cutting it from the list completely? If you’re not sure of what I mean by gut-level anguish, imagine your most cherished object being destroyed in a fire. Which item, if removed, causes that feeling the most?

3. Which of the items on the list are you most likely to wake up for two hours earlier, stay up for two hours later, or steal time elsewhere to create two hours to do?

4. Which of the items on the list, if finished, will matter the most in five years, in terms of having done it or how it sets up your future self for thriving?

5. Which of the items on the list is worth claiming one of your remaining “significant project” slots? Recall from the section on displacement that you have a number of significant project slots equal to (85 minus your age) divided by 5 (rounded down).

Ideally one idea will emerge as the clear winner, but in the real world, one or three might be relatively tied depending on which of the questions gets the most weight. In the case of this kind of tie, go with the idea that wins on question 3, not because question 3 is the most important one, all things considered, but because it’s better to get momentum on one idea that you’ll create time for than others that you won’t.
Once you’ve made the choice, do the following three steps:

1. Circle the idea you’ve chosen to work on.
2. Put a date on the top of the piece of paper you’ve been working from so you know when you made this choice.
3. Take a picture of the piece of paper so you have a digital record of it and put the physical piece of paper someplace where you’ll see it a few times a week. This could be on a corkboard or whiteboard, your refrigerator, or framed on your desk.

The three steps above will free up a significant amount of energy in the long run because (a) you won’t have to make the choice again; (b) if you lose your list, you have a backup; and (c) you’ll be reminded of the ideas you didn’t choose at the same time that they’ll get some background incubation while you’re finishing the one you did. The few minutes it will take to do the three steps above will give you weeks and months in the future.

It’s time to start finishing your idea. If “finishing an idea” sounds funny, you’re ahead of the game, for we don’t do ideas; we do projects. Converting your idea into a doable project that you’ll finish is what we’re getting into next.

CHAPTER 3 TAKEAWAYS

- The more something matters to you, the more you’ll thrash, precisely because its success or failure is deeply important to you.
- Not doing your best work leads to creative constipation—at a certain point, you’re too toxic to take new ideas in because you’re not getting them out.
- We are but the latest in the line of gritty problem-solvers—we were made to slay dragons.
- The gift of failure is that it reveals what matters to you, shows you when you’re out of alignment, and reveals a growth edge.
- Displacement—the fact that doing something now excludes doing anything else—can help you focus on what matters, but only after you accept the limitations of time and energy.
- You have to let go of projects and ideas that aren’t allowing you to thrive so you can trade up to the projects that do.
- “Not now” isn’t the same thing as “no.”
If you've enjoyed Chapter 3 and are ready to bridge the gap between your current life and the life you most want to live, pick up your copy at the following retailers. Start Finishing is available in hardback, ebook, and audiobook formats.

![Amazon Icon](amazon.png)
![Kindle Icon](amazon_kindle.png)
![Audible Icon](audible.png)
![Barnes & Noble Icon](barnes_noble.png)
![IndieBound Icon](indiebound.png)

Outside of the US? Use Book Depository