



*"My new
favorite book
about goals!"*
—MEL ROBBINS

The **3-Step Plan** to Ditch Regret
and Tap Into Your Massive Potential

JON ACUFF *NEW YORK TIMES*
BESTSELLING AUTHOR

ALL IT TAKES IS A GOAL

The **3-Step Plan** to Ditch Regret
and Tap Into Your Massive Potential

JON ACUFF



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For Mrs. Harris,
my third grade teacher
in Ipswich, Massachusetts,
who taught me that writing was easy
if you make it a goal.

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INTRODUCTION

Frustrated and Curious about Potential

I didn't think about living up to my full potential until I was forty-five years old. What can I say? I'm a late bloomer.

When I finally did, I got frustrated and curious.

The frustration started when I took a college tour with my oldest daughter one crisp October day. I wasn't expecting to feel anything but excitement for her in that moment, but a rogue wave of disappointment knocked me over midway through the visit.

My wife and I were standing next to each other, overlooking the quad at Samford University in Birmingham, Alabama, but we were having completely opposite experiences.

She was remembering our shared alma mater with fondness. Her wistful eyes were sweeping the campus, and she was having a hard time deciding which of the hundreds of memories was her favorite. "Wasn't college just the best?" she asked me, squeezing my arm for emphasis.

"What? No. It was a mess," I said, scanning the same exact acres she was but instead seeing my collegiate train wreck.

I had arrived in Alabama from my hometown of Hudson, Massachusetts, with a *Good Will Hunting* level of sarcasm that quickly got me rejected from every fraternity on campus. I was put on social suspension for a year after a disastrous Halloween prank, and I ended up working at the shaved ice stand outside our local Walmart. This wasn't inside the Walmart—this was an unaffiliated street cart that a man named Kevin just rolled onto the sidewalk near the entrance. Is that what you did during your first semester of college? Unlocked “shaved ice guy” level at Walmart?

I'd like to say I turned things around after my freshman year, but then we'd have to overlook my foray into rave culture. Yes, I wore reflective clothing and danced in warehouses with glowsticks at 3:00 a.m. during my senior year. I guess I wanted to put a neon cap on my college career, an electronic bow on what might have been.

Standing there twenty-five years later, I was so frustrated that I had wasted all the potential of college. A university campus practically crackles with possibility. The opportunity to be something, do something, become something is everywhere you look. My oldest daughter was about to make the most of it. My wife had already made the most of it. But I hadn't. How could I have missed it?

On the drive back home to Nashville and in the weeks ahead, that question weighed heavy on me. In the past, that sense of regret would've turned into bitterness and resignation. Have you ever felt that way after bumping into an opportunity you missed or a chance you blew? That's my normal response, but this time was different. I'd spent the previous two years researching and writing about the power of mindset for a book I published

called *Soundtracks*. I knew that one of the best things you can do with a negative soundtrack (my phrase for a repetitive thought) is ask, “Is this helpful?” Bitterness never is, so instead I decided to see if I could flip my frustration into curiosity.

Maybe it was my age. Your forties hit different. They make you more introspective about where you’ve been and where you’re headed. My wife and I were also two years away from being empty nesters. There were significant changes on the horizon, and I started to ask the questions about my life that smarter people ask in their twenties and thirties.

I didn’t live up to my potential in college. That’s true and I can’t change it, but I started to wonder if I could change something even better—my future. Could I change this week? Could I change this month or even the whole year? College was only four years long. I still had decades of life ahead of me.

I was late to my thirties, so I wanted to be early to my fifties. I didn’t make the most of my twenties and ended up in my thirties without a real plan or foundation for my life. I wasn’t about to let that same thing happen again for my fifties, sixties, and beyond.

I didn’t know if living up to my full potential was possible, but I had a sneaking suspicion that I was capable of more, and I wanted to know what I could do about that.

Turns out I’m not the only one who feels that way.

Tapping Into Our Potential

When I got curious about tapping into my full potential, I did what I always do when I get curious: I commissioned a research study with Dr. Mike Peasley, a professor at Middle

Tennessee State University. He and I asked more than three thousand people if they felt they were living up to their full potential.

Only 4 percent of them said yes.

That's a surprisingly low statistic, but it's not the one that stood out to me the most.

According to our study, 50 percent of people feel that 50 percent of their full potential is untapped. That means half of us are walking around with half-lives. No wonder Twitter is so grumpy.

Imagine if every Christmas you only opened up half your gifts. You could see the rest—a whole pile of them in the corner

of the room—but you never got to open them. The crazy thing is that no one was stopping you. There might even be friends and family members encouraging you to open them all, but for some reason they just felt out of reach.

Would that make for a happy Christmas, a happy house, a happy job, a happy anything?

It wouldn't, but what if it didn't have to be that way?

What if you could have a fulfilling career?

What if you could enjoy a thriving marriage and strong friendships?

What if you could be in the greatest shape of your life?

What if you could write that book, start that business, declutter that garage, and pay to fly your immigrant parents first-class back to the Netherlands so they could finally see the tulip festival?

According to our study, 50 percent of people feel that 50 percent of their full potential is untapped.

What if each day felt like a gift and each year progressively got better?

If you're in your twenties, what if that could be your favorite decade, followed by your thirties, which was even more fun, and then your forties, which somehow managed to top those two?

That would be the best.

Let's Keep This Simple

What if I could turn potential into a goal? What if all it takes is a goal? That would certainly simplify an otherwise confusing challenge.

You can't take action on an idea you can't even define, and *potential* is such a fuzzy word. It's like trying to win a race without a finish line. You don't know if you're headed in the right direction, you can't tell if you're making any progress, and you tend to get frustrated by the whole process.

That's what I sensed people were struggling with when I asked them to define *potential*. Their answers were all over the map:

A feeling of purpose

Joy

No regrets

Freedom to do what I choose

Maximum effectiveness

Those seemed like aspects of potential, but they didn't add a lot of actionable clarity to the conversation. Feelings are an

important light to monitor on the dashboard of your life, but they can also be inconsistent and flighty.

What about joy? How do you measure that? Is there some sort of scale or color system? “I’m deep orange today, which is the amount of joy I can expect on a Tuesday. I hope I’m magenta by Friday.”

No regrets? Daniel Pink’s book *The Power of Regret* proved that while “No regrets” is a popular tattoo, it’s also an impossible thing to achieve. The average person makes up to 35,000 decisions a day.¹ Have you ever gone 35,000 for 35,000 on a Monday? Me neither. Even the most calculated, careful life ends up with some regrets.

Maximum effectiveness? That sounds like a robot. “I HAVE ACHIEVED MAXIMUM EFFECTIVENESS BUT REQUIRE SUSTENANCE.”

What if life was simpler than that though?

The more I thought about it, the more I kept coming back to one critical question: What if all it takes is a goal?

Could I trigger a host of easy goals that would cascade into big accomplishments by turning this thing I suddenly cared about—my potential—into a goal?

Could I use that idea to become part of the 4 percent who say, “Yes! I am living up to my full potential!”

I only had the tiniest sliver of belief at first, but that was all I needed to start.

Equipped with that one idea, I began to seriously explore the concept of potential. Everything was great for about fourteen seconds, until I ran into the same wall you’ve hit before.

THE LIST

1

Go Back to the Future

“What do you want to be when you grow up?” That question paralyzes me.

I wish it didn't. I wish dreaming about the future was something I was better at. I wish I didn't freeze up when people ask, “What's your big, hairy, audacious goal?” but I do.

This is my seventh self-help book, so you'd think I'd be better at imagining the future, but I'm not. When I initially started working on my potential, I ran into the same obstacle I'd bumped into a thousand times before—the Vision Wall.

The Vision Wall is the gateway that stands between you and your potential. It has only one rule: in order to fulfill your potential you must first create a detailed, compelling, long-reaching vision for your life. I didn't invent this wall; nearly every life-planning book ever written has added to it brick by brick.

The most famous example is from Stephen Covey's *The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People*. Habit number 2 is “Begin with the end in mind.” After millions of copies sold and millions of

misinterpretations were shared, that idea has mutated to “If you don’t know the end, you can’t begin.” Covey didn’t write that, but that’s what the Vision Wall tells you he meant.

More recently, the Vision Wall turned Simon Sinek’s popular *Start with Why* into “Don’t try until you know why.”

**The Vision Wall
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potential.**

This brilliant book doesn’t actually set up the concept that way, but the Vision Wall doesn’t fight fair. What started out as an insightful directive meant to help companies like Apple figure out their ethos became a mythical key individuals needed to acquire before tapping into their potential. I once watched a friend spend six months trying to figure out his why with books, coaches, and personality tests. He was convinced that as soon as he knew that, everything else would fall into place.

Who can blame him? The Vision Wall tells you, “No why? No try.”

Entrepreneurs hit the Vision Wall when experts tell them they must know their microniche before starting a business. You can’t be a florist; that’s too broad. You should decide to focus on selling Gold of Kinabalu orchids from Malaysia to redheaded interior designers from San Diego who are named Alexis. It took me twenty-five years of full-time professional writing to hone in on my niche and target audience, but you should know yours before you start.

Living out of your full potential is easy then. All you have to do is predict the end, discover your why, and correctly identify your microniche with laserlike precision. Then you can begin.

Fake Deaths, Fake Cars, and Real Problems

In order to scale the Vision Wall, we often try gimmicks like imagining we're dying as a backdoor to motivation. If you only had six months to live, what would you put on your bucket list? These sorts of exercises, which I've written about before and tried in my own life, immediately fall apart in the real world. If I were dying, I wouldn't bother to pay my taxes, file invoices with clients, be nice to difficult neighbors, fold laundry, or a million other annoying things a full life requires. I'd be too busy skydiving, Rocky Mountain climbing, watching an eagle as it was flying, and the sundry other items in Tim McGraw's appropriately named song "Live Like You Were Dying."

Although positive post-traumatic growth has been shown to occur for people who survive illness and loss, I haven't met a single person who had a sustained life change after rallying around an imaginary health scare. Momentary motivation? Sure. Long-term fulfillment? Nope.

You haven't met that person either. "What really changed my life? An imaginary car crash off an imaginary bridge into an imaginary river. I swore when I finally swam to shore that I was going to imagine being a new person!"

I didn't know my end, and I didn't know my why. If anything, I felt completely divorced from my desire. We saw each other on holidays and occasional vacations, but for the most part desire felt like a total stranger to me. "To thine own self be true" is helpful if you know who you are, but I didn't, which is why for years I thought I was a Jeep guy.

In my thirties I dreamed about one day owning a Jeep Wrangler. I built them online constantly. I oohed and aahed

every time I saw one. I imagined a future where I required a snorkel on the side of my rig because I was regularly fording creeks and whatnot. Shovel attached to the hood? Need it. Spare gas can on the back for particularly long off-road expeditions? Add it. Tiny three-rung ladder offering two feet of additional visibility? Better throw that on there, too, because I plan to constantly be on that roof. I talked to Jeep owners and promised that I'd start doing the Jeep wave when we passed each other on the road as soon as I owned one.

After hearing me talk about Jeeps for a decade, my wife Jenny finally had enough. When we sat down to talk about buying a new car, she surprised me and said, "I don't think you'd even like a Jeep."

I was flabbergasted. I should've just told her, "It's a Jeep thing, you wouldn't understand," but we've been to a lot of marriage counseling, so instead I practiced reflective listening.

"When you say, 'You wouldn't like a Jeep,' what do you mean?" I asked her.

"You're not an outdoors guy. You hate getting dirty, you mildly tolerate camping because I love it, and you're furious when you step on a melted ice cube in the kitchen and get your sock wet," she said.

"Yeah, because it's like carrying around a puddle with you all day on your foot. But I've always been a Jeep guy. If I'm not a Jeep guy, what am I supposed to do with this 'Salt Life' sticker?"

"I don't know about that, but I think you're a hot hatch guy."

I didn't even know what that phrase meant, but a week later we were test driving a little red Volkswagen GTI hatchback. A week and ten minutes later, I was in love. A month later I

was trying to Tokyo drift my way into parking spots because my go-kart-like car was so fun to drive.

That's how disconnected I was from what I really like. And that was just the car I drive. Imagine how confused I was about my vision for the future. One is a vehicle; the other is what I want to do with the rest of my life.

If you have to know your future to change your present, I was screwed. I couldn't even envision the type of car I'd like.

There had to be another way.

The Rearview Mirror

I had decades of evidence that the popular approach to potential didn't work for me, and I bet it doesn't work for you either. That's because when you sit down and try to plot out the future, you wake up every insecurity you have. Every doubt, fear, and past failure gets real mouthy when you gaze out over the horizon and attempt to better yourself. "Whoa, you think you can write a book? You think you can start a company? You think you can be a runner? At your age? With your background? No way."

The blank canvas you were planning to draw your potential on gets littered with obstacles, excuses, and challenges before you've even taken the first step.

Staring at that stubborn, stupid Vision Wall again, I decided to try something I'd never done before. Instead of looking forward, I looked back.

It wasn't a particularly strategic decision on my part; it was just the only option I had left. I wasn't living up to my potential in the present. The future wasn't providing any helpful answers. Guess what that left me? The past.

Looking back felt counterintuitive at first and flew in the face of every driftwood sign that told me, “Don’t look back—you’re not going that way.” But the minute I did it, I knew I had stumbled onto a tool that would change my entire life. It turns out the path to full potential starts in the last place we all thought to look—the rearview mirror.

The Past Is the Future

Let’s do a quick, one-question quiz.

Which activity would be easier for you?

1. Describe the best life you could achieve over the next twenty years.
2. Describe the best things that have happened to you over the last twenty years.

One is fantasy; the other is history.

One requires the courage to push through every fear, the vision-casting ability of Warren Buffett, the future-shaping creativity of Elon Musk, the unbridled positivity of Oprah, and the grit, persistence, and patience of a Navy SEAL.

The other requires a pen and a piece of paper.

I’d tried the first option for years and never had any success. I was zero for one million against the Vision Wall. Finally, sitting in the Augusta, Georgia, airport one afternoon, I decided to give the second option a spin.

I wrote “Best Moments” on a page in my notebook, and then I just started to write things down. I imagined that my

past was a book and I had a bright yellow highlighter in my hand to easily identify what mattered the most.

I started my list in that small southern airport because I'd just experienced one of those moments and it was fresh in my mind. Speaking the night before to a sold-out crowd at the Augusta Metro Chamber of Commerce was the best. So I wrote that down in my notebook. I continued with some classic moments because that was the easiest way to get into the exercise. I scribbled:

- My wedding day.
- The birth of my two kids.
- Traveling to places like Santorini, Costa Rica, or New York at Christmastime.
- When I paid off my student loans.

Once the obvious ones were out of the way, some more unusual ones popped up:

- The time my friend and I ate a nine-pound lobster on Martha's Vineyard. It was the size of a carry-on suitcase and had to be opened with a circular saw.
- Petting my neighbor's dog Scout when I'm cooling down after a run.
- When one of my favorite authors, Steven Pressfield, sent me an encouraging note about a book I was writing.

Not all of the best moments I wrote down were singular events. Some were things that happen frequently.

The List

- When a new month begins and I have a fresh thirty days at my disposal.
- Looking out the front door and seeing a package on our porch.
- Making my wife and kids laugh.

Some were just seemingly insignificant things that I personally like:

- Walking around Costco, especially at Christmastime.
- Sitting in a booth instead of a table at a restaurant.
- Seeing birds on our bird feeder.

I wrote down two dozen best moments in the airport that day and continued adding new ones as they came to mind over the next few days.

I didn't put any restrictions on what qualified as a best moment. I wanted it to feel like play, not a task. Whether I wanted to put down something major, such as "Getting the phone call that my book made the *New York Times* Best-seller list," or something minor, such as "The satisfaction of cleaning off the top of my desk at the end of the workweek," I could.

The list had only one rule: *It all counts.*

I fired that surly nightclub bouncer in my head who judges all my ideas harshly. There was no admission board reviewing applications. There was no HOA making sure the mailbox was the right color. Every moment of any size and any significance got in.

It was easy to create the list because you're guaranteed to win a game when you make the rules.

Your Past Is Full of Surprises

Even though I knew I'd learn at least a little from creating a Best Moments List, I didn't expect much from this exercise. I'm a goal nerd and have tried just about every technique of self-improvement, but for some reason this one was full of surprises.

The first surprise was that the list made me feel amazing. In hindsight, this revelation shouldn't have shocked me because it's impossible to make a list of your best moments and not feel better. I essentially told my head and my heart, "Please google up the best moments I've ever experienced in life. Find the friends, memories, and mementos I really care about the most."

I assume my head and my heart were both confused by this request because they tend to believe their job is to do just the opposite. They're undefeated at recalling mistakes I've made through the years and then replaying them at random times. It's like a constant series of surprise parties, except instead of "Happy Birthday!" the banner always says, "Remember that terrible thing you did?"

From wince-inducing things I shouldn't have said to mistakes I made at jobs I haven't worked at in years, my catalog of regrets is epic. Scientists call this *negativity bias*. It's just how our brains function. They overemphasize the negative and underemphasize the positive as a way to protect us against threats. "At the age of just eight months old, infants will turn

You're guaranteed to
win a game
when you
MAKE THE
RULES.

JON ACUFF

#AllItTakesIsAGoal 

more quickly to look at an image of a snake rather than a frog, and a sad face rather than a happy face.”¹

But for the first time I was deliberately looking for moments that gave me joy. This made me feel like a bit of a rebel because for the last few decades modern psychology has been obsessed with sadness. In his book *Authentic Happiness*, Martin Seligman points out, “For every one hundred journal articles on sadness, there is just one on happiness.”²

I experienced this in my own life in countless counseling and coaching sessions. In one group setting, I was instructed to draw a “trauma egg.” On a big piece of paper, you draw an egg shape and then fill it in with doodles of everything horrible that’s ever happened to you from birth to present day. In small groups with other married couples, when we “share our stories” at the beginning of a new group, it always ends up being a litany of the terrible things we’ve done or had done to us.

I’d never once been asked to create a list of my best moments in life, almost as if they didn’t matter or have anything to teach me. The Best Moments List changed that. Instead of digging around in a coal mine for mistakes, it invited me to look inside a diamond mine for hope.

The second surprise I experienced through this exercise was that the list made me grateful. I won’t bore you with the science on gratitude, but study after study has shown how good it is for you. I know that’s true, and deep down that makes sense to me. But I’ve personally always had a hard time practicing gratitude without a plan. When someone says, “You should be grateful” or “You should have an abundance mindset,” I always think, “Agreed, but how?”

I want practical, actionable steps. That's exactly what the Best Moments List gave me. The list became a shortcut to gratitude for me. Creating it made me grateful for so many things in life that I had either forgotten or taken for granted.

The third surprise was that the list taught me self-awareness, which is a superpower all its own. If you're not self-aware, you can't have real relationships, succeed at work, stay in shape, or accomplish any other goal that matters in life. How could you? Without self-awareness, you don't have an accurate picture of reality. The leader who thinks they're passionate is shocked to get fired one day for anger issues. The dad in his fifties is insulted when his doctor warns him he's dangerously overweight. The young woman in her late twenties is confused why she keeps attracting losers to date, never once wondering if she's the one who needs to change first.

Self-awareness is like when you hand a pair of full-spectrum glasses to someone who has been color-blind their entire life, or when you turn on cochlear implants and a toddler finally hears their mother's voice for the first time. Look at all the colors I can see! Listen to all the sounds I can hear! Check out the moments of life that make me come alive!

You can't tap into your potential if you don't know what you really care about. Guess what happens when you make a list of what you personally consider the best moments? You instantly figure out what you care about. The list is a fast pass to self-awareness.

The fourth surprise was that the list taught me mindfulness. That's a popular word right now, isn't it? We all want to be more present. We want to live in the moment, right? Do you know the easiest way to do that? Start paying attention to the

things that are lighting you up. Being present is just learning to be nostalgic about the moment you're still in.

If you tell your head and your heart to look for awesome moments in your past, they naturally start looking for them in your present. As it's happening, you find yourself saying, "Oh, this moment is awesome, I should add that to my list!" You become present.

Those four surprises alone were worth the price of admission—which, again, was a pen and a piece of paper—but the list wasn't done yet.

Being present is just learning to be nostalgic about the moment you're still in.

Back to the Future

As I read back through the list that had now grown to 170 items, I was struck by a profound thought that would change every day going forward: "I want more of that." I didn't want to stop at 170 items. I wanted the list to have a thousand items, ten thousand items, one million items!

That might feel far-fetched, but that's what happened when I reviewed the list. I couldn't help but think, "I want those moments to happen more often." Forget more often—can I make those moments happen all the time?

I'm a negative person by nature. I'm sarcastic. Despite believing in self-help, I'm highly skeptical of most of it. I was raised in New England with a wicked big chip on my shoulder about people who overpromise. But if I could pause that for a second—if I could suspend my disbelief for a minute—could I figure out a way to make my best moments the rule, not the exception?

The List

Could I build a life where I leaped from one best moment to the next, deeply engaged in every part of my day, not just certain hours in certain weeks in certain months?

Could I do it on an ordinary Monday when there's not a trip to an exotic location or a big, obvious win on the calendar?

Could I live in my potential full-time instead of just visiting occasionally?

Could I ditch regret and make the rest of my life the best of my life?

If I could do that, could you do it too? And most importantly, could it really start with a list?