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YOU FIND THEM on the hard drives and bulletin boards of tweens and their grandparents, street musicians and hedge fund managers. You see them online, on scraps of paper, and, in at least one case, on the cardboard liner of a pantyhose package. They're life lists, a free-form jotting down of everything you want to do before you've ditched this earthly realm. Fueled, perhaps, by the uncertainties of global events (not to mention the movie *The Bucket List*), making the most of the life you've got—and not wasting time about it—is the order of the day.

The concept is simple: Write down your major life goals and, in the process, motivate yourself to actually achieve them. If, like me, you find the word "goals" too reminiscent of what you do from 9-to-5, then think "dreams," "intentions," "desires." Remember, it's a wish list, not a decades-long to-do list.

Are life lists gimmicky? Sure. But they're a gimmick with a strange tendency to produce results. "I'm not a fatalist. I don't believe things happen for a reason," says Jackie Keller, a wellness and lifestyle coach in California. "But I do believe that by putting elements of what you want in life at the forefront, those things will come to you."

What follows are the five immutable laws of life lists. Put them to work with your own list and see what happens. Who knows? You might even uncover aspirations you never even knew you had.

Think Like a Seven-Year-Old



I'd never heard of life lists until my seven-year-old daughter made one. One day Rachael produced a piece of poster board with the title: "Things I Want to Do." The entries were ambitious: Go to Paris. Go to China. Learn to scuba dive. Be in a movie.

I didn't want to dash her dreams, but it seemed like a good dashing was in order. I was a single parent without much money. We lived in a rented cabin in the Missouri Ozarks. "That's nice," I told her.

By age 12 she'd checked everything off her list. I snagged a writing assignment in Hawaii, and she tagged along and took diving lessons. We were invited on a group trip to China, then used the frequent flier mileage for a trip to Paris. She scored a role as a zombie in a low-budget horror flick being filmed near where we lived (her list didn't stipulate that the movie had to be good).

The point is, Rachael made her list when she was too young to fret about limits. It's a lesson we can all take: Get back to that place you were in as a child, when "limitations" was a word grown-ups said. When you think like a child, you expose your limits as mirages.

TRY THIS

What did you want to be when you were young? A painter? A zoologist? Make a list of your early ambitions. What can you do now to bring those dreams back to life?

When the List Feels Done, Keep Going



As you write your list, you might hit a wall after a few entries. Push through it. "The first 10 or 20 items will be easy to come up with," says Caroline Adams Miller, who created the Web site your100things.com. "You might write 'learn Italian, visit the White House, get the kids through college.' But after 20, you start to see what you've buried." In this way, life lists do more than catalog things you want to do. They also uncover hidden dreams.

When Rochelle Melander of Milwaukee wrote her first list a dozen years ago, down near the bottom was this entry: "Write about my time as a clergyperson." Her first child was an infant at the time, so memoir writing wasn't a high priority. But she updated her list every year or so, and somehow that clergyperson memoir stuck around. "Then one day I was folding laundry, and the question hit me: 'If you died within a year, what would you regret not having done?' I knew it was that memoir." Within three months she'd finished a first draft.

TRY THIS

Give yourself half an hour to write down 100 goals. Turn off your filter and keep the pen going. When you're done, look the list over. Did you uncover any long-concealed aspirations? Any surprises?