

Three Hours To Change Your Life

An excerpt from:

YOUR **BEST** YEAR YET!

Jinny S. Ditzler



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“Three Hours To Change Your Life”

an excerpt of the book **Your Best Year Yet!** by Jinny S. Ditzler

*This document is a 35-page excerpt, including the
Welcome chapter of the book and
Part 1: The Principles of Best Year Yet –
three hours to change your life*

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Three Hours To Change Your Life

*- Introductory excerpt from **Your Best Year Yet!** -*

Welcome

I invite you to have your best year yet --- year after year --- for the rest of your life.

The Best Year Yet experience is designed to reach the core of how you think and perform, and to empower you to new levels of personal effectiveness and fulfillment. In a three-hour process of self-discovery, you stand back, take stock and then plan the next year of your life. The exercise of answering 10 simple questions helps you to clarify your thinking and make sure your next year is the best it can be. At the end of your personal workshop you'll have a simple one-page plan to guide you through your next 12 months.

This format has been used by thousands people over the past 20 years, and together we have shaped and simplified the annual life review and planning process to a point of profound power. Yes, we've been able to improve our ability to make things happen and many, many of us are more successful financially, in our careers and in our relationships. But more important, we've taken the time to gain an overview that offers us a better chance of giving meaning to our lives and what we do. It brings us to a new level of consciousness and awareness in the way we live and direct our own lives.

Many, many people have carried out this exercise on an annual basis for years; it has helped them to create a fundamental shift in their lives and the satisfaction of achieving the results that really matter to them. As one friend said so eloquently, "I saw that I wasn't living the way I want to be and now I've stopped postponing a lot of things that are dear to me."

So many have learned to take the lead in their own lives --- it's a beautiful sight. I've used this same process for myself and I'm astounded at what I've achieved and how I've grown as a person. Every year since

the first has somehow, in some way, been my best year yet. So, as I often say to participants in the workshop, “If a school teacher from Nebraska can do it, so can you!”

I welcome and invite you to join us on your own journey of increasing self-respect that comes from living your life in a way that reflects what matters most to you.

HOW TO USE THIS BOOK

Both the public and corporate workshops are half-day events, but over the years many people have been doing the workshop on their own, usually taking about three hours to get through the 10 questions. Watching them succeed so well on their own helped me realize this really can be a simple do-it-yourself process.

Many people create their Best Year Yet plan in January so they can plan the calendar year ahead. But the process of reflection and planning can be done at any time of the time of the year with equal success. Don't think of this as a book that's only about January through December --- if you're reading it now, then now's the time to answer the questions, believe you can do it, and get on with it.

This book is divided into three parts:

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| Part One | An introduction to the principles on which Best Year Yet is based, as well as sharing the experiences of many people who have participated in the process over the years. |
| Part Two | Each of the 10 questions has its own chapter in which I review the background material and provide further explanation to help you answer each question for yourself. |
| Part Three | Your own Best Year Yet workbook with space for |

you to answer each of the questions and write your own one-page plan for the next 12 months.

You have your own style of doing things, and depending on what that is, pick your approach to your Best Year Yet from these options:

1. Turn immediately to Part One and start answering the ten Best Year Yet questions. If you want help or explanations as you go along, turn to the chapter in PART TWO that relates to the question you're working on.
2. Read Part One and Part Two as preparation for your workshop, perhaps making notes as you read. When you've finished, set aside three hours and write your answers to the questions in Part Three.

Whatever your choice, enjoy the journey!

THE TURNING POINT

The idea started on New Year's Day in 1980, when my boyfriend (now my husband), Tim, and I woke up in our flat in London. We'd been working in the U.K. for less than a year and living together only a couple of months, having met shortly after we both arrived from the States the previous spring.

Perhaps I needed a bit of distraction, as I'd given up smoking the night before and had made such a public fuss there was no turning back. Or maybe it was the thought of the new decade ahead. Who knows? But for the first time in ages I began to think a bit more seriously about the year ahead. And before we even left our bed, I suggested that we run a marathon that year and Tim agreed.

This was the only goal I remember setting that year, probably because we hadn't decided to stay together and thinking ahead was a tentative business --- we weren't really at the point of planning a life together.

We picked the Paris Marathon, scheduled for May. The goal may not seem unusual today, but 1980 was a year before the birth of the London Marathon, and the sight of a runner on the road in England --- particularly a woman --- was reason for staring and pointing.

We started to train and, although we'd been in the habit of jogging a couple of miles several days a week, we were told we needed a new regime that would work us up to over 50 miles a week in the last month before the marathon. Gradually we began to lengthen our pre-work circuit of Bishops Park in Fulham to runs over Putney Bridge, up the towpath, under the Hammersmith Bridge and on, until we reached whatever point was halfway to our target time for the day, then turning back toward home along the same route we'd come. It was hard work.

By mid-March we began to see the end of the winter mornings and were starting to feel better about it all. As we talked with friends, some of them became interested, and soon what began as a ridiculous conversation on the first day in January took on a life of its own. In the end nearly a hundred of us went to Paris in two buses, had a great time, and raised thousands of dollars for charity.

But it was painful beyond belief --- I thought it would never end, and for Tim it was even worse. We ran the entire marathon side by side. At Mile 20 he was in such agony and so delirious that after a water stop he started running back toward the starting line! But we did it. And the feeling of confidence and elation at having set and achieved such an outrageous goal lasted long past the finish line. I learned, above all, how to keep going, and in doing so found new strength and ability I didn't even know I had. I would never have discovered this if I hadn't forced myself to go for this goal.

By the following New Year's Day in 1981 Tim and I were engaged to be married, still in the same rented flat, and starting to think about planning the year ahead. We'd had a good year. The marathon had

definitely been a big thrill, but little else had really changed. Late in 1980 we decided to try to buy a place of our own and in the process discovered that between us we had a *negative* net worth. It hadn't proven easy for either of us to build a career in London, and although we weren't too depressed about it all, the path ahead was not clear.

When had come for me to transfer back to the United States, I had left a good job because I wanted to stay with Tim, but hadn't found another one. We'd also had many long conversations about whether he really wanted to stay in the business world. We were happy together and having a good time, but we were broke most of the time, allowing ourselves one monthly treat of dinner out at a local restaurant. But looking back it's easy to see that New Year's day in 1981 was really a turning point for us.

It's on this day that the Best Year Yet workshop was really born, although I didn't start to lead the workshop for others until the following year. As we sat down to plan the coming year, common sense guided us to create this process. Before we started to think of the year ahead, it seemed natural to review 1980 and what had happened for each of us. Expecting the worst, we both found that we'd accomplished far more than we thought. We started to feel a bit more enthusiastic about ourselves and what lay ahead --- an experience which, by the way, has proved to be the case for nearly everyone who has participated in the Best Year Yet program over the years.

By the end of the day we each set over a hundred goals. 1981 was definitely the best year yet for both of us --- we were married, ran three more marathons and each of us started a business, both of which are still going today.

Still, we ended the year with a low "score" because the sheer number of goals we had set made the achievement of all of them impossible. When it came time to pass the idea on to others, it was obvious that having so

many goals made it impossible to keep track of even half of them! The exercise has now been simplified to help us find our top ten goals, and the whole process takes about three hours.

But setting our goal of running a marathon that first morning of 1980 was the start of a new way of living for us. And once I turned the process into a workshop, more people had the chance to do the same for themselves; together we all found out a great deal about how to use our brains and our common sense to learn from the past year and make the best of the year ahead.

Tim and I have used the annual exercise in good times and in bad, taking time out every year to make sure we did it, no matter what. Just going through the process of coming up with our top ten goals for the next year creates a powerful focus, even though there were some years when I would go for months before looking at the goals again. No two years are the same, obviously. Some years the focus of the goals is on money, some years fitness and well-being, some years relationships with family, some years working with a favorite charity, and some years just facing up to challenges I couldn't possibly have predicted the year before.

We certainly haven't achieved all the goals we've set, and have hardly tracked our progress with robotic precision the way we always felt we should. But Best Year Yet has continued to provide a framework for our lives, building year on year, making sure we at least have the chance to learn the lessons of our past year and move on to our next goals.

Sometimes when we come to the review at the end of the year, we feel like the Torville and Dean of personal planning; other years it takes quite a bit of courage to look back. But we've kept at it for all these years now and it's made all the difference. There's no similarity between my life today and my life then, in terms of either the goodies available to me or in the quality of my life. I'm blessed with a lifestyle that's beyond anything I imagined as a child.

It's the discipline of working the Best Year Yet questions year after year that keeps us going and helps us continue to grow and learn. Things have not always been as good as they could have been, but at those times I've learned to do my best to apply myself in the ways I've described in this book. Over the years, with the help of so many, Best Year Yet has evolved into a simple 10-question process that can be used by anyone, any time. While I hope I've learned by now that I have no right to impose my beliefs on others, I'm enthusiastic about passing this program along because of what it's meant for me and so many who have participated in it.

The best part for me has been my growing sense of myself, the confidence I now have, my appreciation for my particular talents, the way I'm able to work through life's knotty problems, and the deep feeling that I'm doing a bit better all the time at living a life that's consistent with what I believe. These are the most important things that have come from the exercise of annual evaluation and planning.

Turning around to face life's most painful challenges has given me a growing personal strength and a deeper sense of who I am. And every time I'm able to do that myself, my ability to coach and encourage others to do the same is increased. *If I can do it, you can do it.* The effectiveness of my work with people keeps increasing as I get better and better at practicing what I preach. But I'm still learning and always will be. I once heard a radio interview with Luciano Pavarotti in which he said he's never stopped taking singing lessons and doesn't intend to stop learning until the day he dies.

Inspired by Best Year Yet Tim and I have done a little personal version nearly every week. We both work long hours and often don't see each another much during the week; several years ago this was eroding deeply into the quality of our marriage. The way we confronted that challenge, eventually not only restoring our love but deepening it, is one of the best examples of the transformation we've achieved.

Several years ago we started having what we call our Friday night party, just the two of us. We get a bottle of wine, put on some music, and sit and talk with each other until we catch up.

To balance the effect of some painful times, we started taking turns making toasts to the best things that had happened over the past week. Even in the worst weeks there are those little miracles and things to be grateful for. It makes such a difference to remember to focus on how lucky we are rather than on what a struggle it all is.

And this is the real gift. If somehow we lost everything, we'd be strong enough to withstand it and start again or let it all go and live in a tent. I honestly believe that the inner strength we've developed can't be taken away and we'll be all right no matter what happens.

Above all, my motivation in writing this book is to make this kind of true success possible for you --- to help you design a more meaningful life for yourself by giving you the means to become the master of your own destiny.

I've seen so many people who have made changes in their lives by taking the time to think about what they really want and then taking steps to make it happen. Watching them over the years has inspired me to write about Best Year Yet and make it available to more people. You're never too old nor too young to make your coming year your best yet.

PART ONE

Three Hours To Change Your Life

INTRODUCTION

The Principles Behind Best Year Yet

GOAL SETTING

Successful businesses set goals and plan ahead. They know that in order to generate the kind of important changes and growth they're looking for, they must identify their priorities each year and then focus the energies of their people in such a way that these goals are achieved. The secret of realizing this kind of success for ourselves is the same --- setting goals and planning our lives a year at a time. In this way we too can deal with the bigger issues, address the concerns that really matter to us, and make the kinds of important changes we really want to make.

You know about goals --- we all do. We've set them and even been successful in achieving many of them. By the age of 8 or 10 we begin to get an idea of what we want in life. A picture begins to form in our minds of a degree, a job, a car, a house, a family . . . and as we move through our teenage years our goals become even more clear to us. Soon we're 25 or 30 or 35 and we've achieved many of these early goals and trust we're on the way to the others. And new goals are already forming in our minds.

However, as life goes on, goal setting becomes a more casual and far less specific process --- wants and desires seem to occur and plant themselves in our minds almost before we realize it. We don't often set goals within a one-year time frame, and we rarely make a conscious choice about which of our goals is most important to us. We find ourselves in pursuit of goals before we've really taken the time to think them through, determine their real cost, or consider what's really important to us.

Maybe you're in the habit of coming home exhausted and turning on the television rather than sitting at the table and sharing a meal with a loved one or listening to your favorite music or reading that book you've been longing to get to --- or planning the next year of your life.

After the initial spurt of growing up and becoming an adult, most of us don't stop to think about goals in the same serious way we did when we carefully planned our education, our career, or our first home away from our parents. We begin to follow our noses, reacting to circumstances and meeting our immediate needs and those of the people around us. All this becomes a full-time job and more.

Time goes by, and soon we begin to feel that our lives are out of control and there's nothing we can do about it. Things that matter most to us aren't getting enough attention, and life gets frustrating. We feel we're no longer in charge of our own lives.

In one of my recent "bibles," Sogyal Rinpoche says,

If we look into our lives, we will see clearly how many unimportant tasks, so called "responsibilities," accumulate to fill them up. One master compares them to "housekeeping in a dream." We tell ourselves we want to spend time on the important things of life, but there never is any time.

There are things that have to be done, and we feel we have no choice about it. And by the time we are finished doing everything that has to be done, we're too tired to think of doing anything else. Gradually we become cynical about things like New Year's resolutions and lifetime goals. Why bother?

We feel that our most frustrating situations and problems are out of our control --- there's nothing we can do to change things, so we give up and try our best to cope. The thought that we could actually *do* something about our deepest frustrations just doesn't occur to us any more. We

give up on creating a life that is more meaningful and fulfilling and settle for what we have. We give up on ourselves and our ability to make things happen.

Yet part of us is unwilling to settle --- the part that wakes up in the middle of the night worrying and contemplating things which matter most to us: *What am I doing here? What have I really accomplished? Why can't I make better use of my time? What can I do to take better care of my family? When is it going to be my turn? Surely there must be more to life than all these worries and frustrations? What's the point?*

Or perhaps when you're listening to music or watching a play or film, you're lifted out of your busy life and moved to remember who you really are and what you want for yourself and those you love.

And then morning comes or the play ends and these important questions fade into the background, covered over by ritual doubts and fears. The day takes over, as it always does, and you don't take the time to think about what you really want or how you could make it happen if you did.

**THE STRONGEST MOTIVATION FOR DOING BEST YEAR YET IS THAT YOU
FIND THE WAY TO LIVE YOUR LIFE SO IT SHOWS WHAT REALLY MATTERS
TO YOU --- SO YOU ARE TRUE TO YOURSELF.**

Probably you, like many, get frustrated and say, "*I've had enough!*" You set a goal and start to do something about making it happen, but then your drive fizzles once again. Too often our most important goals are not set with the belief that they can really be achieved, so that before long we lose momentum. We've forgotten how to keep our attention on what we've accomplished rather than on our failures and mistakes. We forget how to live our lives remembering what we do well and therefore stop building confidence in ourselves and our ability to succeed.

We human beings have an enormous capacity to remember our failures

while forgetting our successes. Memories of our failures cause us to lower our sights and lessen our opinion of ourselves. We become frozen in the shadow of our biggest problems and can't turn around to face them. While in parts of our lives we may be strong and capable, we seem to lose potency in the face of the concerns that cause us the most pain.

Here are examples of the kind of problems I'm talking about --- many of them have been shared by clients, and many I've faced myself:

- “My relationship with my teenage son has gone astray, and that brilliant, sparkling little man who used to run and jump on my lap and tell me everything seems lost to me. If I'd let myself think about it too long, I would weep.”
- “The success I've struggled toward for so long is here, but I'm working harder than ever and there's no time to enjoy it. The days go by so quickly and I'm not making the best use of the time I have. The dream for which I sacrificed so much has dissolved.”
- “The body that used to bound up stairs and give me the energy to work and think for hours and hours seems to have run out of steam, but there's no time to get it back into shape --- and it's probably too late anyway.”
- “I seem to spend most of my time at the office in meetings, handling last-minute emergencies or dealing with other people's problems. I can never seem to get around to sitting back from my job and thinking about the future and how we're going to get ourselves out of some of these messes once and for all.”
- “I want to make my mark, I want my life to matter. How can I find more fulfillment in my job? Should I leave this job and find another one that gives me a better chance to do this? Why don't I devote at least some of my time to causes I care about?”

- “I feel as if I’m chasing my tail most of the time. There’s always a deadline to meet and it’s always tomorrow. I know I should plan ahead and stop procrastinating as much as I do, but I don’t have time!”
- “What’s wrong with me? Why isn’t there one person in the world to love me and share my life? I don’t want to be alone.”
- “I feel stuck in this job --- I’m going nowhere fast. They don’t realize how good I am and probably never will. But I really don’t know how to find something with a better future. I can’t figure out what to do, so I do nothing.”
- “Why can’t I find some time to ‘stop the music’ at least once a day to meditate and contemplate and let the noise of the ‘to do’ list be silent for a moment? How do I stop the mental chattering when I do?”
- “What’s driving my life --- me or my debts? Most of my vital spirit and energy is spent in the pursuit of money and I don’t know how to get off this merry-go-round of survival.”
- “The person I married years ago who loved me so deeply is now too busy and preoccupied to really look at me or listen to me. But now I’m so frustrated, angry, and resentful that I don’t really care whether he does or not.”

The longer we go on putting up with these painful situations and not reclaiming our dreams, the more we diminish in our own eyes and then lose our ability to make the changes that mean the most to us. At some point we stop thinking about the possibility of changing any of it: That’s just the way it is; I mustn’t grumble. The idea of even setting a goal such as *Start enjoying the success I’ve achieved* or *Put some romance back in my life* or *Find a new job which gives me a chance to prove myself* simply never occurs to us anymore.

Sometimes we make promises to ourselves, such as:

- Tonight I'm going to go home and not touch the television.
- This weekend I'll take my son out for a drive and see if I can't begin to get closer to him.
- Next Monday the diet starts!
- Tonight I'm going to the gym on the way home.
- First thing tomorrow I'm going to look in the classifieds and pick a few jobs I could go for.
- On the way home today I'm going to stop and get some flowers and a bottle of wine . . .

But too often we don't keep these promises, and every time this happens we become somehow weaker and believe in ourselves a little bit less.

It is this way of thinking about ourselves that stops us more than our failure to think ahead or set goals. We come to believe that we're not capable of making the changes that matter, and therefore we stop setting goals and planning ahead in any meaningful way. And the life we really want for ourselves drifts out of reach.

**OUR LIMITING BELIEFS ABOUT OURSELVES BECOME LIKE BRICK WALLS
IN FRONT OF US, KEEPING US FROM EVEN THINKING ABOUT HOW TO
MAKE THE BIG CHANGES OR SET THE BIG GOALS.**

Once we've come to this point in life, we begin to protect ourselves with familiar defenses and excuses, such as:

- Once something's gone bad, you can't really change it.
- Why think about it; I know I can't afford to have what I want anyway.
- Goal setting and thinking about what I want is such a selfish and self-absorbed business.
- I want to keep my options open!

- Once I get through this busy time, I'm really going to take time to sort myself out.
- It's boring to know where I'm going and what's going to happen next.
- I'm not willing to sacrifice now for something in the future.
- I can't stand the thought of trying and failing one more time.
- You can't teach an old dog new tricks.
- I really can't be bothered.

And so, while we wouldn't think of getting in a car and not knowing whether we're going to Newark or Nashville, we gradually become passengers in our own lives. Years go by and we never get out of the car to see how it's doing or where it's going. We simply sit in the back seat preoccupied by our busy, busy lives, which are moving too fast to allow time to stop the car, take stock, consider alternate routes, or set goals to change direction --- in short, to get back into the driver's seat.

BEST YEAR YET

The Best Year Yet three-hour process forces us to get out of the car and take a better look at ourselves and our lives. What have we accomplished on this trip? What do we do well? What have we learned about travelling? Have we taken any wrong turns? And most importantly, how far have we come?

This exercise, although not always easy, becomes more of a pleasant and uplifting experience than a painful process of recrimination. It helps us face these important questions and take stock. The biggest challenge is finding three hours in a life where there is no time to do this kind of thing. But if we want to be more responsible about creating our lives rather than merely coping with our lot, we must do Best Year Yet *instead of* something else.

This is the most difficult part for most of us. Just *don't do* that thing you *think* you have to do right now. Do Best Year Yet instead. We've often

held our public Best Year Yet workshops on a Saturday, and it's easy for the people there to realize that in order to come to the course they had to forgo the weekly laundry, the Saturday errands, cleaning the house, writing the letters, paying the bills, seeing their friends --- or whatever else they usually feel they *have* to do on a Saturday.

Even though they will have spent a big part of the day at the workshop, they can see that they'll get the clothes washed and somehow get food in the house. Those things always get done. It's not *those* things that are the problem; finding time to plan your life is the problem. But once it's done, it makes far more difference than getting the laundry done. So grab yourself by the collar, get a pen and paper, and make yourself sit down and answer the 10 questions. Or take a lesson from the people who have come to the workshop: Book three hours with a family member, colleague, or friend, and do the exercise together.

The process asks you to look back over your past year and then begin to think about the coming year by asking yourself these ten Best Year Yet questions:

1. What did I accomplish?
2. What were my biggest disappointments?
3. What did I learn?
4. How do I limit myself, and how can I stop?
5. What are my personal values?
6. What roles do I play in my life?
7. Which role is my major focus for the next year?
8. What are my goals for each role?
9. What are my top ten goals for the next year?
10. How can I make sure I achieve them?

Best Year Yet is like successful gardening. While I'm not the first person to suggest a strong correlation between life and gardening, think about it for a minute: *We must prepare our soil before we're ready to plant the seeds we want to grow in the next year.* As we answer the first two questions, we look to see what grew and what didn't grow last season. The third question helps us discover what we've learned and what we want to remember for next year.

Reviewing successes and failures in the garden involves little guilt or self-recrimination --- a good lesson. We take a moment to enjoy the successes of the past year so we can be strengthened by them rather than weighed down by our failures. In other words, let go of your disappointments and failures --- pull them out as you would weed your garden. Why should they crowd the space and negatively influence what happens next year?

The fourth question is the last step before planting. Here we fertilize the soil --- enriching every clump by working in the lessons and the intentions we have for the year ahead. Enriching the earth in your garden means making sure that the way you're thinking about yourself will contribute to your success rather than poison your soil. Imagine what would grow in a garden polluted with a strong sense of failure. The secret of Best Year Yet is planting seeds in rich soil.

**TOO OFTEN PEOPLE SET GOALS WITHOUT PREPARING
THE PERSONAL ENVIRONMENT FOR THOSE GOALS
TO SUCCEED. BEST YEAR YET, REFINED BY SO
MANY OVER 20 YEARS, CLEARLY AND
EFFICIENTLY PREPARES THIS ENVIRONMENT.**

So the process starts by asking you to think back over the past year of your life, remembering what you *did* accomplish and focus on the causes for celebration. Yes, you. This first step allows you to balance your views of the past year and of yourself. So easy to remember our failures:

promises not kept, times we let others down, New Year's resolutions that didn't last a week, weight not lost, miles not run, mornings we didn't meditate, letters not written, closets not cleaned, books not read, friends not seen, lost hours with our children . . . here our memories are so vivid.

Being human, we forget what we've done well and how much we have accomplished. We lose sight of the strengths and gifts we do have and then fail to use these gifts to make the changes we want to make. We don't take steps toward the goals that are most important to us because we don't think we can.

But for all of us, the problem is not a lack of ability. It is a matter of focusing the ability we have while at the same time renewing our belief in ourselves.

Reviewing your past successes gives you the chance to balance the way you think about yourself and, having learned from both successes and failures, let them go. In doing this, as you begin thinking seriously about the year ahead, you are reminded that you *do* have the ability to set and achieve new goals. While it may be uncomfortable to think about yourself in this way, to do so is to know yourself again and begin to feel, as you did at age eight or ten, that you can be the master of your own destiny.

**MORE THAN ANYTHING, BEST YEAR YET IS ABOUT STARTING TO
BELIEVE IN YOURSELF AGAIN AND BECOMING MUCH TOUGHER IN
THE FACE OF LIFE'S BIGGEST CHALLENGES. THE APPROACH HELPS
YOU TO USE YOUR COMMON SENSE AND INTELLIGENCE IN NEW WAYS
TO CREATE A HAPPIER LIFE FOR YOURSELF.**

I remember Jane Fonda's story of how hard it was for her (she was then in her mid 40's) to get past her terror and learn to do a back flip into a lake for her role in *On Golden Pond*. Her co-star Katharine Hepburn her, and when after many days filled with hours and hours of practicing

she succeeded, said to her, “Everyone should know that feeling of overcoming fear and mastering something. People who aren’t taught that become soggy.”

“DON’T LET WEEDS GROW AROUND YOUR DREAMS”

This quote from H. Jackson Brown’s *Life’s Little Instruction Book* is one of my favorites and reminds me of people I know who have followed Miss Hepburn’s advice. I’d like to tell you about a few of the friends and clients who have had the courage, heart, and discipline to use the lessons of Best Year Yet in their lives.

It may sound a bit glib and easy when their lives are reduced to such short “success stories” but do your best to move past that point of view and become aware of how each in their own way decided to make a change in something that was important to them. Also notice if you find it much harder to believe these experiences than the earlier examples of people's problems.

One woman had left her husband for a confirmed bachelor. However, six months later this new love stopped telling her how much he cared for her; after five weeks passed without him saying that he loved her, she was afraid she'd made a big mistake. When she realized her focus was not on the result she wanted but rather her fear, she set a goal: “Develop a great relationship with Sam and learn to remember how much I am loved.”

She was able to keep this focus and dissolve her fears; within a year they were married.

A highly successfully entrepreneur in his late 50’s wanted to move on to something new and more exciting but felt guilty leaving the loyal people in the company he’d built up over the past 20 years --- and was worried that at his age he couldn’t really afford to go out on

his own. His goal: “Finish with my company and be ready to launch my new venture by the beginning of the year.”

He found and developed a new person whom he trusted with his company and his people. Now that he’s moved on and started his new business, he’s filled with new enthusiasm and energy for what he’s doing.

One woman, having spent her life taking care of her five children and supporting her husband’s career, longed to find a way to express herself and be more creative in her life, but had long ago lost the confidence to figure out how to do it. Her goal: “Find a way to build a successful business that allows me to express my sense of style and creativity.”

It took her a while to identify what type of business she wanted and then how to get started. But finally she opened a store selling the kind of jewelry and clothing she wore and loved.

A talented journalist was earning a small weekly wage as a television critic for a national daily newspaper and struggling with a ten-month-old daughter, a huge mortgage, and growing anxiety. She found that she never liked doing things she was afraid of and was afraid of pursuing what she wanted most. Her goal: “Build a career doing what I love to do that pays me what I’m really worth.”

She approached the project of her personal transformation with great determination and intelligence. It didn’t happen overnight, but she worked steadily and consciously and today is a best-selling author currently working on her sixth book.

The couple who had worked together for years to grow a successful

business, which now kept them overly busy and exhausted doing work neither one of them enjoyed. When early in the recession the bank put on intense pressure, they felt the burden of the business more than ever. Out of a strong sense of duty and a good deal of fear, they were both continuing to invest a lot of money and time in the growth of the business when that was the last thing they wanted for themselves. Their goal: "Move on to a work life that is more satisfying, creative, and rewarding for both of us --- and make this move as soon as possible."

Once they allowed themselves to set the goal they really wanted, the business began to turn around and they found a friendly buyer so they could back out and set off on their own again.

A successful company president had begun to feel like an old man before the age of 50 because of severe back and leg pain that kept him from doing much that he loved. He was deeply depressed because he felt like a prisoner in his own body; he was used to being able to pursue a wide range of business and personal interests without such restriction. His goal: "Feel physically, mentally and emotionally free to live my life as I choose."

He pursued this goal with relentless discipline, attacking it from many angles --- medical, emotional, mental --- and within months was walking straighter and moving without pain.

One couple had suffered severe money problems for years --- both actors, it had become harder and harder for them to get work. They had been forced to sell their home and move to a smaller one; soon they feared they would have to take their children out of the private school that meant so much to them. At the beginning of one

year, they made a strong commitment to “Put money problems behind us once and for all.”

Their approach was relentless, calling on friends for support and talking with experts to help them get things sorted out. Within a couple of months one of them was offered a major role in an international television series.

A young woman had left nursing for a sales job in order to make more money and better use of her skills, but had just finished a year when she hadn’t achieved her sales target. She was concerned she might lose her job now that the recession had really hit her company. Her goal: “Make this my breakthrough year.”

Even though it was the toughest year the company had ever known, she started shifting her perception of herself and doing things she’d previously not tried. By the end of the year she had cracked her target and became Salesperson of the Year. She was promoted to Client Services Director for the business and began using the same people skills that made her a good nurse to manage people in a business setting.

A designer was doing well in her career but miserable in a relationship where she was comfortable but that she felt she had probably outgrown. She desperately wanted to get married and have children, but with this man? She was afraid that if she let this one go, she might not find the one she really wanted. Her goal: “Move on and find the man I’m going to marry.”

She found the courage to end her relationship and move out on her own. Although uncertain, she kept her eye on the goal and eventually met a bright young lawyer with whom she could develop a

much stronger bond; they married and now have two beautiful daughters.

Within each of these successful people is an ordinary person who found the courage to act --- to face the big challenges and make their dreams come true. They built the inner strength to stop worrying about their problems and direct their focus toward the goal they wanted to achieve. They took the time to step back from the busyness of life and all its issues to put their attention on the goal that, when achieved, would make the most difference to them. And they did their best to avoid the pitfalls of explanation, complaint, and excuse so they could keep going until they got what they wanted.

MY BEST YEAR YET

As we've said many times so far, it's a challenge to set serious goals about things that really matter. If you're reading this book then you'll know I've finally been successful in achieving my goal of writing a book, a dream I've had for as long as I can remember. But nothing happened about this goal for years and years and years. In fact, even though I've been doing Best Year Yet for myself since 1980, it didn't make it to my list of top ten goals until recently. It just seemed an impossible dream to me, so I didn't give it any serious thought. Much longing, believe me, but no serious thought.

And even though I was leading Best Year Yet workshops and coaching others to have their big dreams come true, this goal lay dormant and untouched beneath a pile of regret and resentment. There was always a reason why now wasn't the time:

- I'm too tired at the end of the day and on the weekends.
- My business partners and clients need me to be doing something more important and far more urgent.
- The onset of menopause has stopped my brain from functioning.

- My writing a book wouldn't contribute to the direction we want the business to go.
- It would be a waste of time doing something that probably wouldn't earn us any money.

...and on and on.

The thread you can see running through my reasons for not writing is the mind-set *I'm a victim of circumstances beyond my control*. This is a common theme for me, and certainly one I've often spotted in other people. Over the years the tune in my head has been the same, though the key has changed from time to time: *I'd love to write. I'm probably a great writer. I really have something to say but I can't because _____* (fill in the blank from the list above).

Several years ago I even subscribed to a magazine for writers with the hope that it would stimulate me to do something, but every month when another issue arrived in the mail I was filled with guilt and frustration. I piled them in a neat chronological stack by my bed so that when the time came I could read them, learn about writing, and motivate myself to get started. But that time never came.

Until New Year's Day, when Tim and I spent the day with our friends Jock and Susie.

At some point in the day we were talking about Best Year Yet, and I was scribbling down the 10 questions for them to use, explaining how the process worked and telling them about the good time we'd had doing the exercise a couple of days before with our son Jeff, who was with us during his Christmas break from college. (He'd started the exercise with little enthusiasm as he listed four accomplishments and twenty-six disappointments for his past year! But later he told us how good it felt having let go of some of the terrible memories he had of the past semester. "That's done. I need to move on.")

Then one of them said, “You know, you really should write a book about this!” We laughed at the tired suggestion; we all know each other well and sometimes tease one another about dreams gone moldy. Mine is the well-known book. But somehow they got through to me that day, and I began to get excited about writing in a way that was different for me. I felt that they really did want me to write the book, and they convinced me that Best Year Yet was an important idea that could help a lot of people. Music to my ears. And so I started to believe in myself more seriously and redid my goals for the year, changing number four on my list of top ten goals to: *Write my first book and find a fabulous agent and publisher.*

And when I next spoke to Jeff, he looked at me with his smirk and said, “Yeah, Mom, just do it!”

When I got past my initial euphoria and actually tried to start writing, I was stopped for more than a month by another stack of limiting beliefs:

- I’m probably not nearly as good as I think I am.
- Every book I want to write has already been written.
- I can’t stand the thought of people reading what I’ve written --- they’ll probably laugh at me behind my back and never tell me.
- This is all so trite and stupid.
- How can anyone be expected to write a book when they’re already working 50-60 hours a week?
- No publisher will want to publish anything I’ve written anyway.

All this with a husband who kept encouraging me to write a book, telling me that he knew it would be a best seller.

WE LOVE OUR LIMITATIONS! WE MUST, BECAUSE WE CERTAINLY DON’T WANT TO LET THEM GO.

VICTIM OF CIRCUMSTANCE?

We become comfortable thinking of ourselves as smaller than our problems, feeling a victim of circumstances, and blaming others for the fact we don't have what we want. It's not that other people aren't terrible sometimes, but becoming their victim makes us powerless. Hopefully it's easy for you to see that my blaming other people and situations for not being able to write my book robbed me of this goal for years. I had made myself impotent. And yet it's just a small example of something we can see around us everywhere.

There is always someone and something to blame in our lives. Blaming becomes a habit, and not an easy one for any of us to give up. It's a comfortable old friend. Just yesterday I asked my friend Mary if she was doing in the coming three-day weekend. She said, "I'm going to the country to visit my aunt and her family. The prediction is for the weather to be beautiful, but with my luck it'll probably rain." What luck? Who says? How crazy to wallow in the perverse satisfaction of such statements whose empty reward is being able to say, "See, I knew it!" or "I told you so." We can hear evidence of this attitude everywhere if we listen for it, but we're so used to it we're largely unaware of it or its cost. Catching ourselves in this self-defeating approach to life, as I had to do with my writing, is the only way out.

Too rarely do we hear anyone say,

- "This weekend is going to be great!"
- "Leave it to me, I'll deal with it."
- "I'm sorry, it's my fault. It won't happen again."
- "We've made a couple of mistakes but we'll keep going until we get it right."

The alternative to playing the victim is to become tougher inside ourselves and start taking personal responsibility for our own lives.

I understand how hard it can be. But Best Year Yet works, and it goes on working, year after year, dream after dream. This is especially clear for me as I sit here tapping away on my computer, enjoying the process of passing it on.

As far as I can tell, life is more about learning than anything, and again and again I learn the lesson of the Chinese proverb which that says, “If we don’t change our direction, we are likely to end up where we are going.”

READY OR NOT?

By now you’ve read quite a bit about me and people I’ve known. Now it’s time to take a moment to think about yourself. The more aware you can be of yourself as you begin this process, the more successful you’ll be. Answer the following questions as honestly as you can. No one’s watching.

LIFE SO FAR

Circle either **T** or **F**, depending on whether the statement is true or false for you:

- T F** There have been times in my life when I have set and achieved goals.
- T F** When I take the time to think about it, I’m proud of what I’ve accomplished so far.
- T F** While I feel I have much to be grateful for, something is missing and I’d like to find out what it is.
- T F** I know I have more potential than I’ve used so far.
- T F** I can remember times in the past when I kept going regardless of setbacks and made something happen.
- T F** I know that I’ve lost confidence in myself over the years, but I’m not quite ready to give up.

- T F** I know that if I tackled at least one or two of the issues that trouble me most, I'd be much happier.
- T F** I find it easier to remember my failures than my successes, and I see how this has caused me to stop believing in myself as strongly as I once did.
- T F** It troubles me that although I have strong personal beliefs and values, the way I've lived my life so far hasn't reflected these as much as I'd like.

You don't have to be a rocket scientist to figure out that the more T's you have circled, the better chance you have to succeed in setting plans and making them happen. How many did you circle?

PERSONAL BELIEFS AND VALUES

Check those statements that express your personal beliefs and values:

- I am responsible for myself and what happens to me.
- Although I sometimes resist the idea, I'm aware that even a bit more discipline could make a big difference in my life.
- I believe that anything is possible if you set your mind to it.
- "As ye sow, so shall ye reap" or, "What goes around comes around."
- Keeping a positive attitude is vital to my success.
- It's wise to ask for help when I need it.
- It's all right to make mistakes because it shows I'm trying.
- The more successful I am, the more important it is to give back in some way.
- I'm committed to the happiness of my loved ones.
- It's very important to me to live up to my personal beliefs and values.

Obviously in this section the information is personal and there are no right or wrong answers. However, I believe most of these statements would be accepted by people who have become truly successful. What matters most is to know what *you* believe in and what *you* value.

Our sense that something is missing comes at those times when we're off the course set by our beliefs and values. One of the ten Best Year Yet questions explores this area more fully.

**WHAT MOTIVATES MOST OF US FAR MORE THAN MATERIAL
SUCCESS OR RECOGNITION IS OUR DESIRE TO BE TRUE
TO OURSELVES AND LIVE OUR LIVES IN WAYS
THAT DEMONSTRATE OUR PERSONAL VALUES AND BELIEFS.**

EXCUSES I HAVE KNOWN AND LOVED

Check the ones you've used in the past. I really want to do things differently, but I can't because . . .

- I want to keep my options open.
- Once something's gone bad, you can't really change it.
- Goal setting and thinking about what I want is such a selfish and self-absorbed business.
- I passed my "sell-by" date a long time ago.
- Once I get through this busy time, I'm really going to take time to sort myself out.
- It's boring to know where I'm going and what's going to happen next.
- If I fix my mind on a goal, I'll miss other exciting opportunities when they present themselves.
- You can't teach an old dog new tricks.
- I can't be bothered.

To be honest, I'd be suspicious of anyone who didn't check most of these excuses. Welcome to the human race. The challenge for all of us is to become more aware of the times we're using these excuses rather than doing what we want to do to move ourselves forward. Be especially wary of any you see as statements of truth rather than excuses. They have the power to stop you.

HOW MOTIVATED AM I?

On a scale of 1-10, with 10 being the highest, rate yourself on the following:

- I am committed to making positive changes in my life.
- Planning a year ahead and setting goals for myself makes sense to me. I'm ready to give it a try.
- I can count on myself to do what I need to do this time.
- I know a great deal about what I need to do to change my life.
- It matters to me that I live up to my personal beliefs and values.
- I'm willing to do whatever it takes to make this process work for me.
- There are other people in my life who would benefit if I took the time to plan the next year of my life.
- Even though I'm afraid to confront some of my problems, I'm ready to do it.
- I'm now ready to use my abilities and my intelligence more fully and courageously.
- I'm going to set aside three hours in the next week to answer the ten Best Year Yet questions. No matter what.

TOTAL SCORE

Total your score on motivation and refer to the chart below to see how ready you are for your Best Year Yet.

- 100** Congratulations. It's possible that life will never again be the same for you.
- 70-89** Although you may need to push yourself from time to time, you could be on your way to your Best Year Yet.
- 51-69** Hard to tell what's going to happen. You're not quite sure whether you're really ready to get in the driver's

seat.

If your score is below 50, you've just told yourself that you're not ready to make the most of the information in this book. Either improve your approach or wait until you're feeling more confident. However, any of you who scored a 10 on the last statement have the best chance of all.

JUST DO IT

In over twenty-five years of working with people, I've seen one big difference between those who truly succeed in making things happen and the ones who don't: those who do, act.

They think of an idea and they move on it. They get a feeling that something could work and they take the steps to try it out. They take a course and they find the discipline to put what they've learned into practice. They read a book, find an idea they like, and they take steps to use it in their lives. They hear about a meditation that could decrease their stress level and give them a stronger sense of who they really are and they set aside the time and get started. They just do it.

So if you're one of these people, stop now and turn to Part Three where you'll find the Best Year Yet workbook. Make a cup of coffee or pour a glass of wine, turn on some music and start writing your answers. It's that simple. And three hours from now you'll know even more about where you're going and feel more motivated to get there. Just make yourself do it --- the way you usually do.

According to Stephen Covey, the first habit of highly effective people is to be proactive. In other words, rather than letting life happen to you, make it happen. Even if you don't recognize yourself as one of those people who just does it, you could *become* one of them simply by moving straight to the questions and getting started on *your* Best Year Yet.

Some people are born to "just do it" --- they seem to have come packaged with a strong inner drive or compulsion to succeed, and they move full

steam ahead. But most of us have had to learn a great deal in order to do a better job designing our own lives; we were made rather than born. I'm certainly one of these. Compared to the consciousness with which I now live my life, I spent most of my early days in a sleepy fog, feeling jerked around by life but "doing my best given the circumstances."

So, even if you're not one of the high-drive people described above, you're not out of the race. You've already achieved so much in your life, and I hope you appreciate that about yourself. But in order to make the best use of this book you need the discipline to sit down and write your answers to the ten questions.

**THE TRUTH IS, YOU ALREADY KNOW A GREAT DEAL ---
MORE THAN YOU THINK YOU KNOW ---
ABOUT WHAT TO DO TO CHANGE YOUR LIFE FOR THE BETTER.**

The trick is doing it, taking that first step, making it happen. And yet often we don't. While it's important to find out what stops you and why (which we'll explore in later chapters) what works best is just getting on with it. Understanding your limitations can come later.

Answering the ten deceptively simple but powerful Best Year Yet questions can make all the difference. It's not always an easy exercise, but in the process of answering the questions you'll learn a lot about yourself, how you make things happen, and how you hold yourself back. You'll begin to see how to build a more meaningful life for yourself and soon you'll be looking forward to the year ahead. I promise. Just do it.

**ONE MORE WORD ABOUT GETTING ON WITH IT: IF YOU'RE
WONDERING, "IS THIS BOOK THE ONE THAT WILL REALLY HELP ME?"
THE ANSWER IS, IT CERTAINLY COULD BE. IT'S UP TO YOU.
AS YOU WELL KNOW, IT'S NOT ENOUGH TO BUY THE BOOK.
IN ORDER TO STOP FLOATING FROM ONE RESOLUTION
TO ANOTHER OR DRIFTING FROM ONE GOOD INTENTION TO THE NEXT,
YOU NEED TO ACT.**

Most of us trap ourselves by not being willing to take the necessary steps

to be the masters of our own lives, yet we'll be damned if we'll let anyone or anything serve as our master for us in the meantime! The result? No one's in charge. We get nowhere. Every bit of true progress I've made in my life has come from really listening to a loved one, a teacher, or an author, and having the discipline to practice his or her lessons until I have learned them. Action and follow through are everything.

There's another prevalent mindset that can stop us making the best use of the modern repackaging of ancient wisdom so popular in the past twenty to thirty years: cynicism. Those with this attitude attempt to take the intellectual high ground over any discipline of self-improvement or personal transformation by labeling it "silly ineffectual nonsense" or "psycho-babble" and displaying a general snobbery toward anyone who tries to support us in making positive change in our lives. This approach is just another path of avoidance that stops us doing what we want to do. I know; I thought this way for years.

So, if you've decided that this book could help you and you're ready to get going right away, turn to the questions and get started. Or if you are someone who prefers the more deliberate approach, that works too, sometimes better. This book is not about the quick fix or creating overnight miracles, although for some of you it might do that. Whoever you are, if you feel there are changes you'd like to make and you scored well on motivation, now is the time. Just do it!

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