

## Making Lists

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One of the best pieces of advice that I was ever given was also one of the easiest to follow: Make lists.

Make lists of things you want to do, and then go do them.

My fascination with lists began the summer before I left home for college. (I had chosen my college because of a flier I had been sent in the mail. On it was a list of the greatest books of the Western world. I looked at that list and said to myself, "If I read all of those books, I'll be really smart." My lists have yet to let me down.)

I started my own book list that summer, a list of kids books I always meant to read but never did: *Watership Down*, *Lord of the Flies*, *See Spot Run*.... And I actually got through most of them before school began in the fall. By that time, I had another - more ambitious - list going as well: things I wanted to accomplish while at college. First on that list was "get a date."

Admittedly, my lists have not always been high-brow in nature nor even particularly commendable, but they give me focus and a tremendous sense of accomplishment when I go back to them to check things off.

By the time I was out of college, I was making "real life" lists. Besides the usual grocery lists and things-to-do-today lists, I was making lists of places I wanted to live. New York City was high on that docket. I had grown up in Sarasota, Florida (home of the newly wed, overfed and nearly dead, as my father the doctor gleefully likes to call it), and the bright lights of New York really beckoned me. I spent three years in Manhattan, riding subways, eating food I could not pronounce, and developing a really cool accent, after which time I felt that I could not only tick that place off my list-of-must-dos but also put a big black line through it. Boston, too, was on that list, and even though I had to take my now-infamous job in a women's prison to live there, it has afforded me so many first-rate stories that I am delighted that I did.

One of the many beauties of putting something on a list - of actually writing things down as whimsical as "go live in Alaska for a while" - is that it gives you a sense of real belonging and purpose when you actually do. In fact, BECAUSE you have put it on a list - "planned it," so to speak - there is almost none of that requisite "displaced person," "deer in the headlights" feeling when you get there. Your very presence in that position itself is an accomplishment of some goal, a living out of a dream.

Just before I moved to California - also on my list- my list-making moved into a more radical stage. I was suddenly writing down things like "jump out of an airplane," "dive the Great Barrier Reef," and "run with the bulls." The inspiration behind this change in tone was, oddly enough, a high school graduation speech.

I was teaching at a prep school in Massachusetts, and George Lipton had a daughter who was graduating. At any rate, he was giving what can be classified as the old *carpe diem* speech to the class of '89 and he mentioned an acquaintance of his who had always wanted to sing at Carnegie Hall. In fact, she wanted it so much that she had made it her life's goal. Unfortunately for her, she couldn't carry a tune in a basket. However, she COULD earn money, and through THAT talent, she was able to live out her dream: one evening in her early fifties, she called together all of her closest friends, hired a small symphony orchestra, dressed like Helga from a Norse tragedy, RENTED Carnegie hall, and sang her heart out.

Those who know me will be happy to know that that is not on my list, but the idea really got me thinking. I would hate to get to the end of my life and have to say, "I always wanted to do such-and-such, but I never made it happen," or as Thoreau feared, "when it comes time to die find I [have] not lived." But it seems to me that in order to find success and fulfillment in life, we need to figure out what we want out of it. And I'm not even talking about the big stuff- I mean, there is no point in putting things like "be happy" or (God forbid) "get rich" on a list. You need to start with some specifics, and if you are lucky, you will find the big picture in the process. If nothing else, you will always have something to talk about at cocktail parties.

In my life, lists have taken me places. I remember being a very little kid and seeing Nixon standing on the Great Wall of China. I really wanted to go there and walk along that tremendous piece of history. So a couple of summers ago, when the school I was working for first offered to take students to China, I went too. Walking the Great Wall was living out a dream for me.

And ever since I first picked up a National Geographic at the dentist's office and was fascinated by the wildness of Africa- and the fact that people are allowed to read pornography in waiting rooms - I wanted to go there and see the animals for myself. I did, too - up close and personal. In a way I shall never forget. (Sometimes you get more than you bargain for from those things on your lists.)

Finally, I would just like to mention one last kind of list that has been very useful in my life, and that is my "comfort list." Whenever I am feeling particularly unhappy (maybe I've failed in some important effort or I've gone a little too far afield and am homesick or lonely), I sit down and make a list of everybody who has ever loved me- or whom I have even suspected of loving me. And then I stare at that list of names and force myself to consider all of those brilliant and attractive people who have found in me something worthwhile, and I have to admit that things aren't as bad as they seem. 'Cause as Bill Murray once said, at least "I got that goin' for me, which is nische."

Make lists.