



GET SMART



How to Create a Life With No Regrets

By Jim Huling

On a Sunday evening, I was sitting in one of my favorite restaurants with my wife and daughter, enjoying an excellent meal. Virtually every aspect of my life was going beautifully, from my family, to my career and my health. Truly, I was riding the crest of the wave.

Three hours later, I was lying in an ambulance with no heartbeat registering on the monitor. A severe allergic food reaction had spiked my fever and literally made my heart stop. When I regained consciousness, I looked out the glass panels of the ambulance door to see Donna and Sarah following in the car closely behind as we sped to the nearest hospital. In that moment, as I saw their faces and also saw in my mind the face of my son, I had a startling revelation . . . I had no regrets.

Can you imagine this feeling? Lying in an ambulance, absolutely certain that these are your last moments on earth, and feeling an overwhelming sense of peace and gratitude?

Truly, it was a miracle.

Don't misunderstand me. Without question, I wanted more days to live, and I also knew that there were things I would do differently, and better, given the chance.

But what I'm saying is that *I had lived the life I wanted to live*. I had loved the people in my life with all my heart. I had spent time with them and had truly been present. I had also pursued my life's work with passion and dedication, found activities that I loved and made time for them, and had given myself to those causes that were important to me.

If this moment was to be my last, then I would pass from this world to the next knowing that I had done what I wanted to do. No regrets.

Isn't this what you want? Isn't this what everyone wants?

I believe it is. I've found a way to create this kind of extraordinary life and I probably have no greater talent, drive, or ability than you do right now. The only difference between us is that I have a plan and a way to execute on it every day. And that's why I have written this book: to share what I've learned with you.

I want you to have your own extraordinary life; one that will enable your last moment, when it comes, to be one of joy with no regrets. But I also want you to make each moment from this day to that the most fulfilling and exciting experience you can imagine.

Everything contained in this book comes down to three questions. I call them The Questions That Matter. And I have come to believe that they are the most important we can ever answer:

- Who are you?*
- What do you want?*
- What are you prepared to do?*

As I look back across the last 25 years of my life, I see the results of having a clear vision and intentionally pursuing it every day, and I know with absolute certainty that it has been worth it.

Who Are You?

Set the direction of your life by creating a deeper definition of who you are

"I don't have time to plan my life. I'm too busy deciding where to eat." Sound ridiculous? Think for a moment of all the cumulative hours you've spent choosing a restaurant: *"What do you want? I don't know. What do you want? Fast food? Take out? Italian? Chinese?"* You know the dialog by heart. Now, contrast that with the total time you've invested in mapping the course of your life – not daydreaming – but actually creating a vision of who you want to become, what you want to do, and what it all means. I know the answer because I was there once. I also know what happened in my life when I became clear about what I wanted: a miracle.

The first step in creating an extraordinary life is about finding "true north," about setting a clear direction for your life before spending years running the race. And you're going to do it by answer-

ing a question that is deceptively simple: *Who are you?* (There's a special form at www.JimHuling.com/forms entitled "Who Are You" which will help you with this exercise.)

Begin to Define the Life You Want

Use the form to make a list of the dimensions of your life you care most about. Remember to include everything, from family, to work, to personal activities and causes that matter to you.

Your list may include family roles such as dad, mom, sister, son, fiancée, or aunt. It may also include roles that express your daily work like manager, homemaker, graphic artist, accountant, or vice-president. Once you've written these, think about other aspects of your life that matter to you. These could include softball coach, spiritual seeker, room mother, athlete, or friend. For example, my list includes roles such as Donna's Husband, Sarah and Scott's Dad, CEO, Martial Artist, and Friend, among others.

Now take a moment to make each role more meaningful by personalizing it to your life. For me, there is a real difference in the role of "husband," as opposed to "Donna's husband." I'm not just anybody's dad; I'm Scott's Dad and Sarah's Dad. Including this extra dimension brings in a level of emotion that makes it more powerful in defining my life. Make sure you add this personalization to each role where it applies.

Finally, review the list to ensure it has every role you want your life to include, even if you're not investing in it right now. For example, if you know that the true definition of who you are includes being a writer, then make sure it's on your list, even if you're not writing anything yet.

Now let's take a look at the life you've started to define.

You're probably struck first by how many roles you listed beyond the basics. Do you feel a sense of excitement when you think of your life including regular engagement in these roles? Sometimes just seeing them written down is a breakthrough moment; a feeling of *"Yes! That's the life I want!"*

In listing your roles, did you also find that you remembered something you once dreamed of but had forgotten? This happens often. When you finally slow down to ask yourself real questions, you start to get real answers. And you remember the dreams you once had before the pressures of your day-to-day responsibilities started to consume you.

A Candid Assessment of Your Life Right Now

Take another look at your list and think back over how you've spent your time in the past month. Now, place a check mark beside each role on the list where you invested five or more hours in the last thirty days.

How many roles had no check mark? Stunning, isn't it? An exercise like this clearly reveals the gap between the life you want to live and the life you are really living.

To go a step further, circle the *most important role* that does NOT have a check mark beside it. This is what's called a BFO – a Blinding Flash of the Obvious. Usually, the particular role that is circled is a source of real pain, both because it's truly important to you, and because the inescapable reality is that you are doing almost nothing about it. Accumulate enough of these and your deathbed experience will be one giant BFO of all that you missed out on in life.

The most powerful way to answer the question "Who are you?" is to first decide what's important to you. Like a compass pointing to true north, knowing who you really are sets the direction for life. But if you live with the fantasy that "everything is number 1," then nothing really is. Only when you decide how important each role truly is can you begin to know yourself completely and make real decisions about how and where you will invest your time and energy.

To do this, take all the roles you've identified and assign them an absolute priority using the column on your form. Start with the role that is the single most important one in your life and put the number 1 beside it, then continue to number the roles in order of decreasing importance. I want to warn you, this is not for the faint of heart.

With your priorities assigned, you're ready for the final step: evaluating where you are in each role. Use the final column on your form to assign a letter grade of A for excellent, B for good, C for mediocre, D for poor and F for failing. But remember that these definitions are your own. Don't try to think about the grade that anyone else would give you. In this step, you are measuring yourself against your own standard.

Congratulations. You've just spent more time thinking about your life than most people do in a year. Two additional thoughts are pivotal in setting the direction for your life.

First, you must *choose your life* in the sense that it's *your* life, not someone else's, that you're living. Until you understand yourself and what's important to you more deeply, you are more likely to adopt the definition and the priorities offered by your parents, your spouse, or your company. Whether good or bad, this definition will never be your life, and as a result, will never bring you fulfillment.

Second, you literally must *choose* the life you want in hundreds of individual moments throughout every day. You must not only be willing to make these choices, but you also need a compass to ensure that they are creating the life you were born to live. Defining who you really are is the beginning.

You can live your life "on purpose" with a sense of identity and direction, or you can just show up

every day and try to hit life's curveballs. The choice is up to you.

What Do You Want?

Take control of your life by building a compelling vision

How many tomorrows do you have? Thousands? One? The answer is that you don't know. But the real question is about how you are living your life. Are you living on the assumption that there will always be a tomorrow to do what you wanted to do, to become the person that you wanted to be?

Do you have a vision for your life? Do you know exactly what you want in each area that's important to you? Or are you waiting for tomorrow to figure all this out?

Here's a powerful exercise to enable you to answer these questions: I have been given the miraculous ability to fulfill your three greatest desires for your life. The only catch is that you are required to state them in the next 60 seconds *exactly* as you want them fulfilled. Only three desires can be stated and you can't ask for more. Go!

Did you know what to ask for? It's a tough exercise, isn't it? Welcome to life.

The exercise I've just described is the process by which you live. Each day you make the choices that define who you are and what you really want. The only question is whether you will make those choices unconsciously by just getting through each day and hoping that everything turns out right in the end or whether you will take responsibility from this moment forward for choosing the life you want.

Why not do the work now to discover what you want most? You can start to take control of the direction of your life by building a compelling vision.

Look back over the roles you defined and choose one to work on. Now, think about what you really want in this role. What kinds of experiences do you want to share? What do you want the relationship to have meant throughout your life?

The answers to these questions will comprise your vision and the single most powerful way to develop it is to write your own eulogy. To do this, you must imagine what you want the people in your life to be able to say about who you were, how you lived, and what you meant to them when there are no more tomorrows left for you to get it right.

I have a written statement of what I really want as Donna's husband, CEO of my company, and many others. These vision statements are the defining charter of my life – a meaningful and passionate expansion of each role that defines me. They give my life focus and a sense of meaning, and they enable me to live with a sense of purpose, knowing that I'm creating the life I want.

If you want the writing of your eulogy to be an experience that changes your life, remember these things:

1 Start with a role that matters most to you, for whatever reason. Eventually you will develop a vision for all your roles, but starting with one that you are most passionate about will launch you strongly into this process.

2 Choose a place to write where you can be alone and undisturbed.

3 Allocate a minimum of one hour.


4 Write the words as the person who is the focus of this role would say them. For example, if it's your son, he would say "My dad," instead of "Jim." Write it as a script that he would read, not as a newspaper obituary.

5 Use real language. The loftier the language the less meaningful the content.

6 Be specific. There's a real difference in your spouse saying, "He was a thoughtful person," and saying, "Every Friday that I can remember he would walk through the door with flowers in his hand. Sometimes it was a big bouquet and sometimes it was just a bunch of wildflowers that he'd picked on the way home that still had ants crawling on them. But the important thing was that he remembered. It was his way of saying I love you." I know you can feel the difference.

7 Most important of all, find your own emotional content. Without it, nothing of real impact can come from your words. If you don't feel anything when you read them, you're not there yet. But also remember that emotional content comes in layers. You may need several sessions to finally drill down to your real core of passion and desire. When you do, I promise it will be worth the effort.

Developing a vision for each role of your life is the most important work you will ever do. Is it a demanding assignment? Yes. I won't mislead you. But in the scope of your life you will spend less time creating your vision than you will watching your favorite series on television. It's not a question of the work involved. It's a question of how intentionally you want to live your life.

In an emergency room one night, I was reminded that none of us are guaranteed a single tomorrow. Don't wait. Start today to create a vision of your extraordinary life. 

Excerpted with permission from the upcoming book, *Choose Your Life! A Powerful, Proven Method for Creating the Life You Want*, by Jim Huling. Huling is CEO of MATRIX Resources, a national IT staffing and solutions company with 2006 revenue of almost \$200 million.

