Living With Purpose
How to Make Every Day Count

QUICK OVERVIEW
Deeply affected by the sudden death of a 14-year-old classmate, Robert D. Smith learned early that life can end unexpectedly. So he resolved to live each day as if it were his last. Yet when he reached the 20,000th day of his life, he felt the need to reassess. He took 48 hours and made a plan for the next 20,000 days.

In 20,000 Days and Counting, Smith shares his thoughts and his plan. He encourages readers to ponder the kind of life they want to look back upon when they die. What would they want to be known for? What should be their legacy? Live each day with that purpose in mind. Remember, every big thing can only be achieved by taking many, many small actions. Recognize each day’s importance to the whole of your life.

APPLY AND ACHIEVE
Sherlock Holmes often found a solution when no one else could. He did that by approaching problems from a different perspective than did those around him. Each of us has our own problems, some of which may seem to have no solution. But, like Holmes, if we can look at them from a different perspective, we may find ways to manage or even solve those problems.

Changing one aspect of your thought process can often change everything for you. Rather than assuming you are the victim, instead become your own problem. This may seem harsh or even unfair, given the circumstances. But stop and think: When you’re the victim, you lose power. You shut down your creativity. On the other hand, if you’re the problem, then you have control. You can do something about it. You can make changes. When you own the difficulty, more often than not you’ll be able to come up with a solution.
In 2009, midway through my fifty-fourth year living on this planet, I came to a realization that changed my life forever: I had been alive for nearly 20,000 days!

That’s 480,000 hours; 28,800,000 minutes; 1,728,000,000 seconds.

Yet even with all those days, all those hours, all those minutes and seconds that had already passed, I had this overwhelming feeling that I still had so much more to do. I am aware of the fragility of life, yet somehow I continue to be shocked at how rapidly the days fly by. To this point, my life has slipped past so quickly I can hardly comprehend it.

But enough about the past; let’s talk about the future.

What can you and I do right now in order to make the most out of the years in front of us? What can we do to accomplish more, to celebrate more, to touch more lives in our remaining years than we have to this point?

How can we live our next days to the fullest?

I am definitely one to plan things out. However, on my 20,000th day, I did something entirely out of character. I packed a few things, hopped in the car, and drove. When the time seemed right, I stopped and checked into one of The Leading Hotels of the World with a single objective in mind for the next forty-eight hours: to celebrate my first 20,000 days by putting myself through a crash course in planning my next 20,000 days.

Consider this book your personal crash course. Following are the specific breakthroughs I took away from my 20,000-day planning period. Here are the thoughts and actions I have pledged to implement daily for the rest of my life in order that I live with intense purpose, constant joy, and lasting influence.

5/5/55

My birth date, May 5, 1955, causes some people to speculate that the date must mean something. If so, I don’t know what. I was honored and privileged when Andy Andrews and his wife, Polly, threw me a surprise fiftieth birthday party. Out of gratitude, I called Andy late that night because I wanted to share something I had never told anyone.

In my ninth-grade PE class, a good friend of mine tripped while playing basketball, hit his head hard on the outdoor concrete court, and died. Gone at fourteen years old. I was stunned. Shocked to my core. It was my first realization that I am always, very literally, only one step away from dying. Any moment. Any day. Anywhere.

If you’ve ever experienced a tragedy, you probably have a good idea of how I was feeling. It was a pivotal point—a transition of some kind. Almost immediately, I began to reassess everything I thought I knew about life. We’ve all heard that life can change in an instant, but when that change results in the loss of life itself, it can become a huge and incredibly defining moment.

Ask: What am I doing that will count two hundred years from now? For eternity?

This experience and the feeling it fostered in me created a unique sense of urgency. Even at a young age, I began to seek out ways to fulfill my purpose. Every day became a major mission to find out why I was here and what I was supposed to do with my life.

I may not have fully realized my life’s purpose as a freshman in high school, but I reasoned that it had to be a ton of little things adding up to something big. I had no idea what “big” looked like, but I understood little things. Consequently, I felt a pressing desire to accomplish these little things—make a phone call, write a letter, research an idea—as soon as they occurred to me. I constantly asked myself, What is important now? What is next? I could never escape those two questions as they spun around in my mind.

To this day, those same two questions keep me up late, get me up early, and create a never-ending quest of enormous possibilities and accomplishments.

LIVING EACH DAY AS IF IT WERE YOUR LAST

I know that “live this day as if it were your last” is an old and tired cliché that is often written or spoken with little thought to it. But there’s a reason why it is used so much. Let me explain.

The reality of that statement is this: if you were actually told that today was your last day, you’d waste hours trying to figure out exactly how you should be spending your final moments.
That’s why “live this day as if it were your last” isn’t about action. If it were about action, most people would blow off work and ignore 99 percent of their daily responsibilities, just trying to decide what to do. You wouldn’t accomplish much for the long term. So it’s not about actions. It’s about mind-set. It is a thought process.

The reason why most people are unable to live with this mentality is that it’s tough. It takes discipline, patience, and even courage because it requires you to live in a way that is contrary to how the majority of people around you are living their lives.

There is no thought that will purge your priorities of worthless and worldly tastes like that of your impending death. Ponder the kind of life you would like to look back on when you come to die. There is enormous wisdom in such thoughts and meditation.

IF WE CAN LEARN HOW TO DIE, WE’LL KNOW HOW TO LIVE

Never before in human history have so many people been ready to discover their purposes in life. But you don’t need a complicated system to get you on your way. It’s simple, and by now you may have guessed. The best preparation for living well is to be prepared to die at any time. As we discussed, imminent death inspires clarity of purpose, a rearranging of what really matters. How many times have you heard of people having near-death experiences and then making radical changes in their lives? Why not pledge to live better right now? Choose to be fully alive, purposeful, and loving today.

What are you searching for? Maybe it’s a search for meaning, for an answer, for a solution to a problem you know you’re equipped to solve. What is standing in the way of your search? Are you getting so bogged down in the day-to-day minutiae of your life that you overlook the power of each moment? Your search is your purpose. Remind yourself of it daily. Remember that it’s the little things that add up to the big picture. Do not wait for impending death to light the fire of action inside yourself. Act today. Start small. There are opportunities hiding in the “day-to-day.”

THE STATE OF INTENSITY

Many people may think that intensity is a state of mind. But it is not. Intensity is a state of emotion. Intensity goes from the heart to the head. Intensity is enthusiasm. Intensity is passion. Intensity is being in love. You have to be emotionally connected to what you are doing in order to pursue it with intensity.

In order to make every day count, you must have that emotional connection—the fanatical commitment to follow through. Most likely, you have already created that desire, the intensity, the passion that will pull you forward. Now it’s just a matter of tapping into it on a consistent basis. Deep down, you know what counts in life. Simply focus on it.
EAT DESSERT FIRST

You know when you’re out to dinner and that really amazing, decadent dessert on the menu catches your eye? You file it away in your mind and think, I’ll get that after the meal. Then, by the time you’re done and it’s time for dessert, you’re too full to eat anything else! Sound familiar?

Celebrating your life is kind of like that. We always think, Now’s not the time to stop and celebrate. I’ll do that once I’ve (insert lofty goal you want to accomplish here).

Here’s the problem with that philosophy: if you don’t stop to celebrate the little steps along the way, you get burned out! You get “too full,” just like when you put off dessert.

Order the dessert before you have time to fill up, before you have time to think about the calories. You can work those off! These are similar to the excuses we try to use for not celebrating: “I don’t have time; I’m too tired; I haven’t accomplished anything major yet.”

Forget about those excuses. The little steps must be recognized and honored. The main goal would be unreachable without them. Don’t even wait for the opportunity to arise. Spreading celebration and joy is the only way to withstand the intensity of your mission. There is much work to be done and much to be celebrated!

MOTIVATION IS A MYTH

You may hear people saying all the time, “Take action!” “Do something!” “Do better!” We all know how difficult it can be to get someone to make a move, especially ourselves. But how do you get yourself—or anyone else—to do it?

Let me give you a hint: it’s definitely not a question of motivation. Why? Because motivation is a myth.

Believe me. You cannot motivate people to do any one thing. Even yourself. Never try to motivate yourself or anyone else to increase productivity. Instead, do the opposite:

Increase your productivity, then the motivation will follow.

We are always trying to get ourselves to find a better or more efficient way to do things instead of getting ourselves excited to do better. But when we actually do better, we get excited, and the cycle continues!

YOU ONLY HAVE TWO CHOICES

Of all the decisions we have to make every day, how many real choices do you have? There are only two. That’s right, just TWO.

You only can decide yes or no. How simple is that? But not always easy.

This is where little actions add up to big ones. Constantly saying no—to lunch, to that project, to a vacation, to whatever it may be—diminishes opportunities for discovery and growth. If you want things to change in your life, you have to be open to change, to new possibilities. To yes.

Ask yourself this question: Who do I have to become to achieve (fill in the blank)? What’s your desired outcome? I guarantee that 99.9 percent of the time this will involve becoming someone who is willing to say yes more often. As a rule, nos do not move you forward.

It’s not always easy to say yes. Yes means taking chances, putting yourself out there, embracing the unknown. But when you open yourself up to yes, amazing opportunities, exciting possibilities, and good results come your way. Marvelous memories are created. You expand your territory and that of others.

What challenge can you own and say yes to right now? As Yoda put it in The Empire Strikes Back, “Do or do not; there is no try.”

HOW TO CONQUER REJECTION FOREVER

Rejection is a part of life that we have been trained to find unpleasant. But what if every rejection only meant you were one step closer to a yes? What if you considered rejection to be a crucial part of your search instead of an obstacle?

That’s the mind-set I had when I sold books door-to-door for Southwestern back in college. If there’s one profession where you’ll learn a lot about rejection, it’s door-to-door sales.

Here’s the part that made dealing with rejection easy: my goal was not to sell a single book. I didn’t care about the sale. All I cared about was doing thirty presentations every single day. Even if I got thirty nos, I still would have accomplished my goal.
But the interesting thing is, I never got thirty nos in a row. If I did my presentation so many times in one day, there was at least one person (sometimes more) who would inevitably give me a yes.

Years later, I applied this same principle when I was trying to get bookings for Andy Andrews, the comedian I was representing. My goal was to get him into the college market, so every day I would sit down with a telephone and cold call at least thirty colleges.

In my mind, I was always hunting for nos. That is where the production came from. Ultimately, I would always find my one yes after wading through a sea of nos. Never once did I ever succeed in getting thirty nos in a row.

It wasn’t long before he was the most booked comedian in the college market. It became a platform that pushed him into the national spotlight.

So often, I have friends come up to me and lament about their inability to accomplish some kind of goal, like publishing a book. When I ask them how many times they've been turned down, they usually respond with nothing greater than three or four. They take those three or four rejections as evidence that they should give up. That’s when I give them the good news: they’re just getting started!

That same comedian I was booking all those years ago eventually wrote a book. It was called The Traveler’s Gift. As his manager and someone who greatly believed in the book, I was responsible for finding a publisher. You know how many publishers completely rejected it? Fifty-one. That’s right, fifty-one publishers told me that what he had written was not worth putting on paper.

But you know what happened after we finally found our yes? The book got published, became a featured selection on Good Morning America and a New York Times bestseller, was translated into over twenty-five languages, and launched Andy Andrews’s writing career. He has since authored many more books, including multiple New York Times bestsellers.

What would have happened if Andy and I had given up after three or four nos?

What have you given up on? What do you want so badly that you would pitch it to thirty people who will tell you no?

No reward can be offered to find lost hours, for they are gone forever. The present moment is the only moment you totally control.

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**Three Steps to Catapult Your Life**

These are the steps I set out to take as I sat in my hotel suite, recounting the 20,000 days I’d been alive. This is what powered me to act with determination, boldly launching into the future, like a stone from a catapult. These steps gave me the sense of urgency I needed to begin living my next 20,000 days with more intensity and purpose than ever before. I am positive they will do the same for you if you truly push yourself to take them.

Sit down with a notebook or a laptop, and do this for yourself:

**Step 1:** Determine how many days you have been alive. Are you shocked? Amazed?

**Step 2:** Determine immediately the answer to these two critical, ongoing questions.

1. What is important right now to you?
2. What is next for you?

**Step 3:** Draft your life's story, then live it!

That last one sounds like a huge task, I know. But it’s easier if you think of it as a biography. Picture your own episode of Biography being written. In fact, you can write it now. This is your show. This is who you will become.
About the Author

Robert D. Smith tried a variety of jobs after graduating from Samford University with a degree in psychology. When Smith was 25, Andy Andrews, a friend he met seven years earlier, asked Smith to manage his career. Three decades later, he’s still at it.

Under Smith’s management, Andrews transitioned from a comedian working cruise ships and the college circuit to an internationally known speaker and New York Times best-selling author. Smith endured 51 rejections before what was to become Andrews’ best-known work, The Traveler’s Gift, was published. A behind-the-scenes kind of guy, Smith shares his personal wisdom in 20,000 Days and Counting.

Action Steps

Get more out of this SUCCESS Book Summary by applying what you’ve learned. Here are a few questions, thoughts and activities to get you started.

1. How many days have you been alive? Use the 20,000 Days Calculator at TheRobertD.com and find out.

2. What is your life plan? This is your life to create, so start writing your biography now.

3. How does today fit into your overall life plan? Choose how you will live and make this day count.

4. Focus your morning vision. Remember that how you start your day sets the tone for the rest of your day.

5. What have you given up on? What do you want so badly that you would pitch it to thirty people who will tell you no? Reject rejection. Eat nos for breakfast.

6. Transport yourself one year into the future and look back. How would you advise yourself right now?

7. What can you celebrate today? Recognize and honor the little steps you take—without them, your main goal would be unreachable!

Recommended Reading

If you enjoyed the summary of 20,000 Days and Counting, check out:

- The Traveler’s Gift by Andy Andrews
- The Greatest Salesman in the World by Og Mandino
- The Compound Effect by Darren Hardy