

TEN THINGS TO DO BEFORE THIS ARTICLE IS FINISHED

By ALEX WILLIAMS

1) Write a catchy opener.

“Zen has no goals,” according to a traditional koan. “It is always on its way.”

If so, Rachael Hubbard, a preschool teacher in Salem, Ore., will not be accompanying it. Ms. Hubbard has many goals — 78, to be exact. And it is only by dutifully ticking them off, she said, that she has found her path toward enlightenment.

Two years ago Ms. Hubbard compiled what is known as a life list, a contract with herself enumerating dozens of goals she hoped to accomplish before she died (build a house for [Habitat for Humanity](#), read “Pride and Prejudice,” etc.) and posted it online.

“I just felt like I was slowly getting older and was looking around saying, ‘Well, I haven’t really done a whole lot with my life yet,’ ” she recalled.

But once she began the journey prescribed by her list, it quickly became an addiction.

“Earn a master’s degree” (No. 5): check.

“See a dinosaur fossil” (No. 27): check.

As for her latest challenges, “become quadrilingual” or “swim with dolphins,” well, she is only 24.

“Hey, I am actually accomplishing things with my life,” she said, “even if it’s little by little.”

2) Distill the point of this article in a “nut graph.”

Once the province of bird-watchers, mountain climbers and sufferers of obsessive-compulsive disorder, the life list has become widely popular with the harried masses, equal parts motivational self-help and escapist fantasy.

3) Demonstrate the popularity of life lists.

Evidence of the lists’ surging popularity is all around. The travel writer Patricia Schultz currently has two “1,000 Places to See Before You Die” books lodged on The New York Times paperback advice best-seller list, two in an avalanche of recent life-list books, like “1001 Books You Must Read Before You Die” and “101 Things to Do Before You Turn 40.”

In December, Warner Brothers will release [R0ob_Reiner](#)’s “Bucket List,” starring [Jack_Nicholson](#) and [Morgan_Freeman](#) as cancer patients who set out on a

series of life-list adventures, including a Harley ride on the Great Wall of China.

Multiple life-list oriented social-networking Web sites have cropped up, inviting strangers to share their lists and offer mutual encouragement. Even Madison Avenue has chimed in. Visa is currently running a print campaign built around a checklist called “Things to Do While You’re Alive” (and credit-worthy, presumably).

4) Offer an explanation of the phenomenon.

And no wonder life lists are so ubiquitous. They are, proponents say, the perfect way for anxious time-crunched professionals to embark on spiritual quests in a productivity-obsessed age. The lists are results-oriented, quantifiable and relentlessly upbeat. If Aristotle were alive, he might envy the efficiency of a master list in which the messy search for meaning in life is boiled down to a simple grocery list: “get a tattoo,” “learn to surf.”

5) Consult the experts.

“People are dying to make this list, and most haven’t been given a chance since grade school,” said Josh Petersen, a founder of the Robot Co-op, a Seattle company that runs the Web site [43Things.com](#), which since 2004 has enrolled 1.2 million members who post customized life lists, find others with similar goals and encourage one another to check them off. Sky diving ranks 24th in popularity; losing weight, unsurprisingly, is first. “Pull a prank involving 100 lawn gnomes” is a goal shared by 65 members.

“In school you’re asked, ‘What do you want to be when you grow up?’ ” Mr. Petersen said. “Then people stop asking the question.”

Caroline Adams Miller, a life coach and motivational-book author in Bethesda, Md., asks that her clients create their own list of 100 things to accomplish. “What it does is give you a road map for your life,” she said. “To check items off your list gives you a sense of self-efficacy, or mastery.”

Gary Marcus, a psychology professor at [New York University](#), agrees that people are happiest when making progress toward clear-cut goals, but said that

those who set unreasonable goals (or overly ambitious timelines to meet them) set themselves up for stress. “Evolution vested us with a carrot — happiness — and a stick — anxiety,” he explained. “We feel happy when we make progress toward our goals, anxious when we don’t.”

6) Include the celebrity angle.

There was a time when life lists seemed mostly favored by overachievers who viewed their years on earth as heroic narratives. As recounted in “Chicken Soup for the Soul,” the motivational speaker and self-described adventurer John Goddard wrote a list of 127 life goals when he was 15 — pilot the world’s fastest aircraft, milk a poisonous snake — and now, at age 88, says he has checked off 110 of them. (He has yet to visit the moon.)

The college football coach [Lou Holtz](#) jotted down a life list of 107 items that included telling jokes on the “Tonight” show and winning a national championship. By 1988 he had done both.

Last year [Ellen DeGeneres](#) asked celebrity guests to share their lists on her talk show. [Orlando Bloom](#) vowed to learn to play the bongos. [Beyoncé Knowles](#) promised to take ballet lessons.

7) Return to the experiences of everyday people.

Non-celebrities tend to use their lists to overcome more-fundamental hurdles. Stacey Morris, 40, a sales manager at a housewares company in Ventnor, N.J., created a 100-item list after consulting with Ms. Miller, the life coach, because she said she felt unmotivated and “needed more focus.” Several of her items seemed vague (“develop a more positive attitude,” for example), but the goals have forced her to take specific steps toward self-improvement, she said.

To make good on her vow to “develop persistence,” she trained herself to pause at work every 15 minutes to record the activities she had just finished. The point, she said, is to eliminate distractions like inessential phone calls. She says she has doubled her daily productive hours.

“Having a life list,” she said, “changed my life.”

When she turned 40, Jill Smolinski, a single mother and freelance writer in Los Angeles, drew up a life list that unearthed ambitions she hadn’t known she had. “The first thing I wrote was ‘live in a beach house,’” said Ms. Smolinski, now 46. “That’s weird. I didn’t even know that was important to me.”

“Within a week, I was going for walk and noticed a beach house for rent,” she said, adding, “and I’m standing in it right now.”

The list also yielded a novel. Her book “The Next Thing on My List,” about a woman who vows to live out a dead friend’s life list, was published in April by Shaye Areheart Books.

8) Explore grand theories about the lists’ popularity.

Ms. Schultz, the travel author, who has sold 2.5 million copies of her first book and has seen it spun off into games, desk calendars and a Travel Channel show, surmised that there were demographic factors behind the sudden interest in this alluring, if gimmicky, pursuit.

“Seventy-nine million of us baby boomers are at a point in our life that this is the moment to stop and take stock,” she said. Ms. Schultz, 54, added that she had visited 80 percent of her 1,000 must-see places. “If ever there was an awareness that this is no dress rehearsal, this is it.”

Those in midlife, wrestling with issues of personal worth, seem to be the target for many of the life-list books, like “Fifty Places to Play Golf Before You Die,” by Chris Santella (Stewart, Tabori & Chang, 2005).

But Justin Zackham, 36, who wrote the screenplay for “The Bucket List” and was one of its executive producers, argues that the life-list impulse is actually strongest among members of Generation X, like himself: those who have grown up watching boomers stress out over high-paying conventional jobs and have vowed to chart their own course.

“We grew up as a generation questioning all that,” said Mr. Zackham, whose own life list includes sky diving (check) and “get a bunch of movies made” (check). “People do more lists now because they are actually thinking outside the typical progression of what life is supposed to be like.”

9) Postulate that life lists show a universal longing for adventure, fulfillment and grace.

The concept of the life list is as old — and American — as the self-improvement regimen that the young Jay Gatsby scribbled inside his tattered copy of “Hopalong Cassidy,” in which he vowed to “practice elocution, poise and how to attain it.”

Decades later the life lists of average Americans do not seem unlike those of people who strived to be extraordinary, and became so. For a companion book to “The Bucket List,” Mr. Zackham collected life lists from dozens of celebrities and high achievers. [Jerry Rice](#), the football great, said he wished to visit Rome. Mr. Freeman, the actor, said he hoped to attain the perfect golf swing.

“These people pretty much want the same thing you do,” Mr. Zackham said. “So how extraordinary are they — or how un-extraordinary are you?”

10) Find a humorous “kicker.”

Then again, some Americans lead lives too extraordinary to augment with a life list.

For his book, Mr. Zackham visited Hugh Hefner at the Playboy Mansion and asked him what he still hoped to experience.

“Nothing,” was Mr. Hefner’s answer to him.
“He said, ‘I honestly can’t think of anything I don’t
already have.’”