THE LIFE AND TIMES OF A REMARKABLE MISFIT

By AJ Leon
DON'T FOLLOW WELL-LIT PATHS
(Grab a machete and hack down your own)
TO THE MISFITS,

I wrote these essays over the last two years, after leaving a lucrative finance career in Manhattan in order to travel the world & work on projects that actually matter. I wrote them at different times and for different reasons, and I never intended to publish them together. I hope you will forgive any repetitiveness or lack of cohesion. They are different thoughts for different moments, but I wrote them with you in mind. You see, I believe that you, like me, were not meant to live a life of convention and conformity. I believe that you were put here at this very moment, to change the world in a fashion that only you can. These essays were written while on my own path to do just that. And I hope beyond hope that they will help you in some small way to find yours. Here’s to taking over the world.

Your Fellow Misfit,

AJ
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

## ACT I

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A Necessary Revolution</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Maybe It’s Your Time</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A Brief Moment of Audacity</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>When We Have Dreamed Too Little</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Anatomy of Average</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What Kind of Tired Are You</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Absence of Fear Is Not Courage</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>When Perfection is Achieved</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

## ACT II

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The Opportunity Cost of Not Taking Yourself Seriously</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Any Child Can Poke Holes in a Balloon</td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Paralysis of Waiting</td>
<td>28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Beginnings Matter</td>
<td>29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Let It Go</td>
<td>31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>You Can’t Have It Both Ways</td>
<td>33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A List of 10 Essential Don’ts</td>
<td>35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16 Simple Ways to Make Money and Lose Self Respect</td>
<td>36</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

## ACT III

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>We Don’t Care About What You Know</td>
<td>39</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A Time to Reflect and a Time to Stop Traffic</td>
<td>41</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Arrogance and The War of Art</td>
<td>43</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Trap of Infinite Scalability</td>
<td>46</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Every Artist is A Thief</td>
<td>48</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Beer and A Bike Ride</td>
<td>51</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Destructive Creation and a Big Flying Horse</td>
<td>53</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Define your moments or they will define you.
act 1

MAYBE IT'S YOUR TIME
Greetings from a crowded coffee shop in Boston.

“There are times when we sail so far off course, when our dreams are so far from reach that they appear but balmy glimmers violently strewn on a distant horizon which we will never pierce. When complacency and compliance, when safety and security have so entranced us, that gradual reform is no longer possible. In these moments we have but one option – revolt.”

My name is AJ, and I nomad around the world and make things happen. I used to be an unremarkably average financial executive in Manhattan. I made six figures, had an outrageous bonus and a corner office. But there was this little problem. I despised my job. I was passionless about my work. And of course, I hated myself for trading the hours of my life away for more money at every turn. On December 31, 2007, I left my six figure, crazy bonus, Manhattan corner office job. Not for a raise. Not in a vertical move to another company. Not to get a change of scene. But to stop, once and for all, living some other dude’s life. That day I realized two things. There was more to life than working a job you hate, and more importantly, there was more to me than could ever be expressed in a place with so many rules. If you read this paragraph and have no idea what I’m talking about, you should probably stop reading now. For the rest of you, hopefully this will be helpful. I sure as hell wish somebody would have shared this with me.

The Game We’re Taught to Play

The day I graduated from school, the world handed me a pair of dice and pointed me towards a familiar board game. Except this time instead of a Rolls Royce, I was sporting a busted ass MetroCard. The parameters of this game were simple. Just follow the board, round and round, and the longer I stayed on the board, the more times I could pass Go, the
more stupid little green houses I’d get to buy, the more railroads I’d procure - the more wealth I’d accumulate. All of which would culminate into me turning into a happy rich guy with a white mustache and a top hat.

Of course, soon enough I realized that I was essentially spending the vast majority of my existence rolling the same stupid dice over and over again, following the same board to a completely prescribed life plan, taking no risks, tucking away every dream I ever had, living for the weekend, and peering off the board from time to time, dreaming of the glory of a life that could have been.

**Why Monopoly Sucks as a Boardgame and as a Life Plan**

It’s fun for about 10 minutes. It’s entirely about the accumulation of stupid things you neither need nor want.

The best you can do is win.

**A Life You Were Meant to Live**

If you are still reading this essay, you either have no idea what the hell I am talking about or you’ve already bookmarked it. If you’re in the latter camp, let me tell you something. If you feel like you don’t belong where you are right now, maybe you weren’t meant to just win. *Maybe you were meant to change the world.*

**A Necessary Revolution**

The time has come for you to plan your very own conspiracy. Not against your boss or your company or the system or the world, but against yourself. Against your inner critic who keeps telling you that you can’t make it outside the game of Monopoly that the world handed you. Who keeps telling you that you’re crazy to think you can. You’re selfish to think you deserve more. And you’re silly to think you’re important enough. The greatest obstacle any of us (in the developed world) have to living a remarkable life is not outside pressure or finances, it’s not economics or market conditions, it’s the lack of courage
to question the devils in our own mind that tell us we’re not special enough. I know. I spent the first part of my twenties believing them and the second part inciting a revolution against them.

**Three Ingredients**

Here are the first three ingredients you need to start cooking up your very own revolution.

#1 Stop Wasting Time

You get home from work, you’re drained and all you want to do is grab some Chinese left overs and watch reruns of Seinfeld until you fall asleep. I know. I’ve been there. But you know what? The French Revolution was fueled by old coffee and stale baguettes at midnight in Parisian bistros. The time you have in between work and sleep is sacred, it’s where you plan your insurrection.

#2 Start Taking Yourself Seriously

The greatest opportunity cost you have as a human is not taking your own ideas seriously. Write a 500 word description of what you want your life to look like in 2 years. This will act as your signpost. Then (and here’s the kicker) post it on your blog or email it to someone who will “get it”. It’s hard to go back on a revolution that you’ve already announced. Don’t have anyone to send it to? Email it to me at aj (at) misfit-inc (dot) com. Think this is a stupid exercise? It’s exactly what I did four years ago. I am now doing every single thing on that list, including traveling to 35 40 47 countries, raising millions of dollars for humanitarian projects, working every day with my beautiful wife and living a life on my terms.

#3 Create an Evacuation Plan

There is no sense dreaming about something you don’t actively plan towards. Every great revolution is a mixture of incremental changes and brief moments of courage. Start writing out precisely what you will do every day to breach the gap between the
life you live and the life you were destined to lead.

If you’ve gotten this far, then maybe you were meant to read this today. Maybe, it’s more than just sheer luck that you landed right here, right now, on this particular day. Maybe this isn’t all a game of cosmic chance. And maybe, just maybe this is your moment to change everything.

Here’s to taking over the world

Written from: Barrington Coffee in Boston
“Most men lead lives of quiet desperation and go to the grave with their song still in them.”

Most people look for reasons why they shouldn’t do something big. Why they shouldn’t try launching that idea sitting in that sketchbook. Why they shouldn’t spend the money and take that trip to Africa they’ve always wanted to take. Why they shouldn’t pack up all their stuff and live abroad for a few years. Why they shouldn’t consider leaving that job they hate - to do work that truly matters.

**For the most part we live insulated lives.**

We make choices that mitigate risk and keep us “safe”. And our mind ruthlessly maintains two diametrically opposed thoughts in our head at all times. On the one hand, we convince ourselves that we shouldn’t do anything too crazy, too unorthodox.

But on the other, those we admire and respect, those that inspire us, lead lives of courage and adventure seemingly unbound by convention. In other words, although we are programmed to value security and safety, it’s not like we stick up posters on our bedroom wall of 67 year old accountants with 780 credit scores, who never took a solitary risk in their lives but get to travel to the Caribbean three times a year during retirement.
But sometimes ... your mind will let you dream.

It will permit you a glimpse of a life that could be. A life that you desperately desire, but haven’t found the courage to pursue. A life just barely within reach. And sometimes you go as far as to move an inch beyond dreaming. Do some research. Tell some people. But the very second you put your foot on the pavement, and attempt anything resembling taking that idea seriously, the sirens go off. Your mind feels the traction away from safety and comfort. And your brain alerts you of the impending danger. The loss you might have. The rejection you might feel. The 401k that might evaporate. So there you sit. In a state of paralysis between the life you live and the glory of a life that could have been.

But Maybe.

Just maybe. This is your year. Maybe just maybe, you are lucky beyond reason to live in a time when starting a project. When traveling the globe. When living a life of adventure and passion. When changing the world is easier than ever before. And maybe just maybe. You were meant to be here. At this very moment. And you were meant to have these crazy ideas.

And maybe just maybe. You were meant to act on them.

In 2007, almost exactly around this time, I realized something very important. There was a stark difference between the life I was meant to live, and the life I was destined to lead. And that the chasm between the two laid squarely on my ability to overcome my greatest fear - that maybe I was just average after all.

Maybe you have been misplaced like I was. Maybe you are a remarkable misfit too.

And.

Maybe this is your time.

Written from: The Bean Coffee in the East Village (NYC)
It is so very easy to discount audacity as something for people who are either crazy or impulsive or worse, just those “special people”. But what if the people who do remarkable things are not that special at all? What if they are just normal, everyday people who make deliberate choices. Who live life so intentionally, that they simply pick and choose their brief moments of audacity.

Up until the winter of 2007, I lived a “successfully” unexceptional life. I was an unremarkably average finance executive in Manhattan who made a lot of money and lived for the weekend. I lived a life void of both purpose and adventure. But you know what? I’ve spent the last four years of my life traveling around the globe, growing a business that I’m proud of, launching humanitarian projects in South Sudan, Kenya, Ethiopia, Tanzania, Malawi, Indonesia and the Philippines. I can just hear the 2006 version of myself saying, “I’m just a __________. I could never do that”.

Here is the great dilemma of our time. We have been trained to view audacity as something to be revered and celebrated in the lives of others but avoided in our own. You’re just a __________.

You could never start your own business ... or travel across Southeast Asia ... or begin a new career ... or help people a world away from your own.

As you read on, please remember and jot down two very, very important things.
1. Cynics may run the world but you and I are the ones who change it.
2. Your life is always just one brief moment of audacity away from remarkable.

Written from: Isiolo, Kenya
It’s 1:45am, and I’m ruminating over the wisdom of Sir Francis Drake, the great explorer, and a prayer he uttered on a cold day in 1577 ... I think it’s applicable to you and I, right here, right now.

“Disturb us, Lord,
When we are too well pleased with ourselves,
When our dreams have come true because we have dreamed too little,
When we arrived safely
Because we sailed too close to the shore.
Disturb us, Lord, when
With the abundance of things we possess
We have lost our thirst
For the waters of life;

Having fallen in love with life,
We have ceased to dream of eternity
And in our efforts to build a new earth,
We have allowed our vision
Of the new Heaven to dim.
Disturb us, Lord, to dare more boldly,
To venture on wider seas
Where storms will show your mastery;
Where losing sight of land,
We shall find the stars.
We ask You to push back
The horizons of our hopes;
And to push into the future
In strength, courage, hope, and love.”
There is nothing more dangerous in life than comfort.

The repose of stagnation draws you ever nearer to a precipice where you begin to accept, settle, and acquiesce to the whims of whatever circumstance or paradigm or context the world has trapped you in.

But always remember, my friend, while society has been cultivated over thousands of years to provide you with limits, to keep order, to ensure that you don’t drift too far distant from the standard deviation lest you cause a commotion … *you* were not made to fit in, you are here to change the world … and people like us can’t afford to be too damn comfortable.

*Written from: A hotel with great beer in Europe somewhere.*
“Men at some time are masters of their fates: The fault, dear Brutus, is not in our stars, but in ourselves” - Cassius to Brutus

The business of average is thriving. It always has and it always will. There is enough Vanilla out there, enough homogeneous products and services and businesses and charities and life plans to fill up the seven seas three times over. I can speak to this with some authority because in a former life I was a spokesman for the business of average. Until that glorious day I realized that average is not inherited. Average is a choice.

And this choice governs and directs every problem we solve. Every item we produce. Every interaction we have. And every decision we make. But it’s not like the decision to put your socks on every morning.

This decision is so subtle that most days we wake up and don’t even realize we are making it. But we do. It’s the decision to be average, to be like everybody else. Or to deliver exceptional. To be remarkable. To be counted.

The Anatomy of Average.

Average seeks validation from “experts”. Average awaits sufficient case study to prove that it’s worth it, and is therefore late to everything. Average avoids any and all risk, thereby avoiding both adventure and failure (two of the best teaching tools the world has given us). Average praises incremental change because it is afraid of revolution. Average has no courage. Average marketing seeks attention like a high schooler with low self-esteem.
Average decision-making uses “playing devil’s advocate” as a way of masking fear and avoiding responsibility.
Average business seeks to be pretty good at everything instead of being the best in the world at a few (or one).
Average service focuses on mitigating complaints as opposed to delivering extraordinary.
Average teachers ensure their students never outgrow them.
Average charities grab for your wallet instead of your heart.
Average restaurants are forgotten before we leave the table.
Average people are governed by fear, but convince themselves it’s prudence.
Average finds comfort in standing for absolutely nothing in order to evade any possible attack.
Average is scared to death of remarkable misfits, like you and I.
Average never leads.
And most importantly, average is just average and nobody will ever remember it.

Most coffee shops don’t bother with latte art.
Most fundraisers don’t bother with innovative storytelling.
Most web applications don’t bother with an elegant user interface.
Most product companies don’t bother with beautiful packaging.
Most web designers don’t bother with footer graphics.
Most eBooks don’t worry about margin illustrations.
Most people mailing a letter don’t bother with handwritten.

Why?

Probably because it doesn’t make anyone more money (at least in the short term).
You want to know the secret of winning?

Calculate the expectations of those you are serving, and exceed them. Every. single. time.

Average is not inherited or thrust upon us. It’s a decision, a choice we make. The bad news is that we can’t change the past. But the very good news is that tomorrow morning we get another shot to choose which side we land on.

Written from: Box Brownie cafe in Stratford-on-Avon (UK)
Greetings. It’s 2 AM here in Amsterdam. Melissa is playing Nathan Angelo in the background. And I am so tired.

In the past week, I’ve been in 4 different cities, traveled 4,000 miles, worked on three projects, wrote a section of this essay, spoke at a workshop for the London Symphony Orchestra on two hours of sleep, and developed 7 hours of content for a Master Class I’m teaching tomorrow at a big conference in Amsterdam. I’ve also slept less than four hours a day. No, kids, I’m definitely not suggesting you try this at home. It’s not always like this, but sometimes the game gets away from you and you’re still tied with 4 seconds to go. So you put your head down and grind it out. The thing is ...

In my previous life, I used to be tired too, pretty much all the time. But a different kind of tired. The kind of tired that evolves from the hopelessness of living someone else’s life. The kind of tired that comes from pretending to be happy while mourning the courageous tale of the life you should have led. The kind of tired that evolves from denying the world of who you really are and what you are actually capable of.

The first tired is similar to the tiredness a maratho-ner feels as she rolls through the 25th mile. It’s a “f*ck yeah!” kind of tired. A badge of honor. A quiet victory confirming that you still got what it takes.

The second is a cancer. It will cannibalize you from the inside out until it kills you, until there is nothing left of who you truly are. Not the biological you, the real you. The you that knows you were made for so much more. That knows you were placed on this earth to do something truly unique, and to give more than you get.
If you are the first kind of tired, carry on soldier, pony up and mend when the project is done or chapter is written or the meeting with the Board has ended. If you are the second kind of tired, let me tell you something. There is a moment on the horizon right now, this very second. You aren’t reading this because you are curious. You are reading this because deep down in the chambers of your heart where your personal legend lives, you know you were meant to change the world. Maybe it’s time for you to push through the latter kind of tired, so you can feel the elation of the former kind.

Written from: a lobby somewhere in Holland.
The absence of fear is not courage, it’s insanity. A soldier situated on the front lines who races into the fray of incoming enemy fire without a care in his heart is not courageous, he’s a lunatic. Now the soldier who looks at the situation, knows the danger, who’s heart races, who’s mind is screaming to stay put, who’s palms are sweating, who calculates the odds, who is enveloped by fear and steps out in spite of it ... now *that* is courage.

Why does this matter for you?

Because people mistake courage for fearlessness all the time. People say, she’s fearless, that’s why she left her marketing job to work at a nursery school for war children in Uganda. He’s fearless, that’s why he put his last few dollars into that crazy idea he’s been ranting on about.

It matters because it becomes our first line of defense. The reality is we can’t really control the “feeling” of fear. As long as the people who live remarkable lives, who do things we admire are the few chosen “fearless” ones, then we can comfortably sit back and say, “I wish I could be like that”, “I wish I could do that”, and settle on the fact that the universe bestowed them with nerves of titanium steel.

But the moment we recognize that those individuals are not bankrupt of fear, they simply press into the dark mist, no matter how scared they are ... well, now that changes everything.

They aren’t super human ... they feel what you feel. The anxiety. The stress. The self-doubt. The uncertainty. The fear that everything will go wrong. That they’ll be ridiculed.
That they’ll end up weather-beaten, penniless hobos brown-bagging a half bottle of cheap Gin they found in a dumpster under the Brooklyn-side of the Williamsburg bridge.

It matters because everything in the universe is going to try to keep you from doing whatever plan you set for yourself. And because there will be quiet and deciduous moments littered throughout the next few weeks, where you will come face to face with the Fear that you know all too well. And that fear will want to suppress every dream in the quiet alcoves of your heart by gently whispering the dangers ahead and that you’re just not good enough.

So, in those moments, it’s nice to know that you don’t have to be fearless, you just have to muster the courage to do it anyways.

Written from: a train somewhere in the Northeast (USA)
Perfection is achieved, not when there is nothing more to add, but when there is nothing left to take away.

Antoine de Saint-Exupery

Many times people feel as if they are lacking something in order to start a new business, plan a new adventure, launch a new product, try a new approach. That’s rarely the case. One of the greatest threats to launching new ideas is quite simply more ideas. Any unruly child can grab a tin of paint and chuck it at a wall until it’s filled with an ungodly cacophony of pastels. But it takes a true artist to eliminate the unnecessary elements in order to find “it”, the art hiding underneath the excess. The painstaking work is in elimination, not in addition. Look at the iPhone. Then look at every other phone. It has only the elements necessary to be remarkable and nothing more. It’s perfection by elimination. Seth Godin says it best, “A woodpecker can tap twenty times on a thousand trees and get nowhere, but stay busy. Or he can tap twenty-thousand times on one tree and get dinner.”

You’ve got ideas. Lots of them. Maybe you’ve been allowing your ideas to strangle each other to death. You try and work on so many things at once, that you never actually launch anything. Believe me, I’ve been there. “Working” on a hundred ideas while never launching any was my quiet way of hedging bets so that I never had to amass the courage to expose my art, my work and myself to the world. I did it for quite a while. No need for you to do the same.

Written from: my favorite little cafe in England
ACT 2

THE OPPORTUNITY COST OF NOT TAKING YOURSELF SERIOUSLY
You have ideas, right? A new way to do an old thing? A new project you’ve thought about launching? A new blog you want to get going?

You know what I’ve been wondering lately, what’s the difference between people who make change and those who don’t? Here’s something I’ve noticed over the years.

**Everyone has ideas.**

Some people take their ideas seriously, some don’t. Of those who do, some people can handle failure and course correction and some can’t.

*The end.*

Opportunity Cost is a key concept in economics and is defined as “the next-best choice available to someone who has chosen between several mutually exclusive choices.” In other words, opportunity cost depicts the relationship between choice and scarcity. There is no scarcity of ideas, only scarcity of ideas **being taken seriously.** Oh and by the way, this is not simply a conversation for entrepreneurs.

The thing about ideas is that your first thought may not be “it”, but if you follow that thought, the trajectory might lead you in a new and unanticipated direction.

There is an opportunity cost associated with every time you have an idea pop in your head and don’t muster the self confidence to take it seriously.
Here’s a few tips that I hope will help you:

1. **Always carry a notebook.**
   I use a tiny Moleskine as my idea notebook. I jot down every business idea, prospect idea, project idea, potential blog post, poem, art or social project, whatever. Every single thing I’ve done in the last four years can be traced to one of my notebooks.

2. **Spend at least one hour a week dreaming or “sketching”.**
   Melissa and I travel a ton, about 75% of the year, and now I’m on an adventure to travel around the world in 1,080 days. But no matter where we are in the world, on Sunday afternoons, we shut everything off and talk about the ideas we’ve had that week. Sometimes, I’ll take the time to start sketching out or mind-mapping an idea we’ve already started playing with.

3. **DO NOT seek validation.**
   Let me drop some ancient verity on you, “a prophet has no honor in his hometown”. In other words, most of the people around you, you’re friends and family, they are never going to take you or your ideas too seriously. Most of my friends laughed at me when I decided to leave my successful career to travel the world and start my own business and humanitarian projects. Four years later, they’re not laughing anymore. It’s not that they’re bad people, its that they have constructed a neat little box containing all their presuppositions about everything you could possibly accomplish. If you seek validation from this group before moving forward, you will never go anywhere.

   You have great ideas. Some of them can become something. But only if you’re willing to push through the ones that won’t. There is no magic to it.

   Here’s the takeaway:

   **Don’t expect anyone to take you seriously before you take yourself seriously.**

   Written from: Dire Dowa, Ethiopia
It doesn’t take much to be the guy in the room who says “no” to everything.

It’s not hard work to identify the general excitement behind a new idea or the momentum of a new direction and call out all the possible ways it could fail. Anybody can do that.

Any three year old kid with a tantrum can knock down a sand castle. All it takes is brute strength mixed with a little jealousy and fear. But it takes a special child to have had the creativity to imagine it, the initiative to collect the wet sand from the shore and the vision to have made with her hands what she saw in her heart.

When working in teams with others, remember this. Fear may appear as wisdom or prudence when cloaked in a nice suit sitting across a conference table, but usually it’s just a kid poking a hole in your balloon because he’s mad he hasn’t got one.

So, what do you?

Do it anyways.

And next time, know better than to ask for permission.

Written from: a P&O Ferry crossing the channel between Caen and Dover.
There are few things on this earth more dangerous than waiting.

Waiting for the perfect time to launch. Waiting to have enough money to start. Waiting for your friends to think you can. Waiting for some blogger or regional manager or magazine editor to notice you. Waiting for God to increase the hours of the day. Waiting until the kids graduate. Waiting until you’re out of debt. Waiting for your dad to believe in you. Waiting for the boss to say it’s fine. Waiting for a case study to prove that it’s worth it. Waiting for retirement. Waiting to be chosen. Waiting to be validated. Waiting for a sign.

The obvious problem with waiting. Paralysis. The nothingness that comes with not trying.

The not-so-obvious problem with waiting. The more you do it, the better you get at it.

You want to know the truth? I’d rather slip backwards than stay put. Because at the very least I’m learning something for my next step up. And that something is usually more valuable than what I would have learned by doing nothing at all.

This is not a rant. I mean it. It’s overwhelming. Think of all the art that has yet to be created and all the web applications that have yet to be built and all the music that has yet to be written and all the dishes that have yet to be tasted and all stories that have yet to be told ... because somebody, somewhere is waiting.

Written from: a little cafe in Istanbul
“It was the best of times, it was the worst of times....”  
Dickens, *A Tale of Two Cities*

“Behind every man now alive stand thirty ghosts, for that is the ratio by which the dead outnumber the living.” *2001 - A Space Odyssey*, Arthur C. Clarke.

“The human race, to which so many of my readers belong, has been playing at children’s games from the beginning, and will probably do it till the end, which is a nuisance for the few people who grow up.” – *The Napoleon of Notting Hill* – G. K. Chesterton

“In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth.” *The Bible*

“As Gregor Samsa awoke one morning from uneasy dreams he found himself transformed in his bed into a gigantic insect.” Kafka, *Metamorphosis*

“There was a boy called Eustace Clarence Scrubb, and he almost deserved it.” – *Voyage of the Dawn Treader* – C. S. Lewis

“We were somewhere around Barstow on the edge of the desert when the drugs began to take hold.” Hunter S Thompson, *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas*

“Midway in our life’s journey, I went astray from the straight road and woke to find myself alone in a dark wood.” – *Inferno* – Dante

“Where’s Papa going with that axe?’ said Fern to her mother as they were setting the table for breakfast.” EB White, *Charlotte’s Web*

“If you’re going to read this, don’t bother.” Choke, Chuck Palahniuk.

“It was a pleasure to burn.” *Fahrenheit 451*, Ray Bradbury
The way you start matters.

When I was a kid, I used to love running. After my father unexpectedly died a few days after my fourteenth birthday, it was one of the very brief moments in my day where I didn’t have to hear my mother crying or my teachers threatening to expel me or my friend’s obsequious banter or the demons of my own despair and fear. I was alone. And for those moments, my only responsibility was to put one foot in front of another. There was something comforting about that. My love of running has always stuck with me.

Three weeks ago, I decided to start running again. In 10 days, I will be running in the annual Shakespeare Marathon. I will have gone from 0 miles a week to about 25 a week in training. The race itself is 13.1 miles. But of course, this essay isn’t about running.

There is an old (and dangerous) platitude that goes something like, “it’s not how you start, it’s how you finish”. I’m not sure that’s entirely true. Sometimes, I think it’s the way you start that dictates whether you will finish. I think the first act of your new play or the first page of your new website or the first slide in your next speech or the first couple measures in your new song or the first summer menu at your new restaurant or the first week on your new diet matters. In fact, I would stipulate that it matters more than anything. Of course, that’s assuming you have the guts to finish what you start. (We’ll see if I do next Sunday.)

You only get one Start, so if you’re serious about whatever it is you’re doing, make it count.

*Update:* I actually did finish the race, it was a horrendous rainy day with 45 mph winds. I completed it in just under 2 hours. :)

Written from: in my head while jogging on a cloudy day in the Welcombe Hills
Finish every day and be done with it. You have done what you could; some blunders and absurdities no doubt crept in; forget them as soon as you can. Tomorrow is a new day; you shall begin it serenely and with too high a spirit to be encumbered with your old nonsense.

Ralph Waldo Emerson

You can lament the one thing that didn’t work out.

You can dwell on the idea that flopped on its face.

You can focus on the book you never finished. The company you never started. The fundraising campaign with the terribly low click through rates. The client you never landed. The blog you never followed through with. The meeting that didn’t go as planned.

Or, alternatively ...

You can accept the distinct possibility that everything you have experienced up until this very moment was preparation for your next move. Your next project. Your next play.

And maybe, just maybe, you couldn’t have done it without the wisdom you gleaned from the things that didn’t work out.

Being wrong is not the antithesis of Innovation, being safe is. Recently, I heard someone say, “if failure is not an option then neither is success.” I agree. Not only do I believe that one must be willing to be usefully wrong, I also believe that if you’re on a quest to create something, to live deliberately and to do work
that truly matters - the arduous cliffs, the precipitous climb, the danger of creating a path instead of following one is far more important than the feeling you get resting at the apex.

Remember, Odysseus doesn’t breeze by the Sirens on a Carnival Cruise ship. Frodo doesn’t prance into Mordor with butterflies whispering around and gently toss the ring into Mount Doom. Luke doesn’t blow up the f*cking Death Star in the first 5 minutes of the film. And if they did, no one would give a shit.

It is the uncertainty of trial, the times they almost got it wrong, and their willingness to move on that gives the protagonists context, and gives us a reason to pay attention. Whatever happened yesterday, last week, last year ... that was all your world class MBA for right now. Because in the end, they that make no mistakes, make nothing at all.

Written from: partly from a little cafe in England, partly from a plane headed to Hong Kong and partly from my favorite brunch spot in New York.
Your work is either remarkable or it isn’t.

You are either changing the world, or you’re not.

You either show up every single time, and leave every last ounce of yourself in your work, or you simply create average things for average people.

Now, if that’s not scary enough, here’s the truly terrifying part. The decision is entirely yours. Contrary to popular belief, remarkable has nothing to do with luck, title, wealth, education or the perception of those around you. The definition of remarkable is “notably or conspicuously unusual, extraordinary.” That choice - to do work that truly matters, to produce something unexpected, to exceed the calculation of others, to surprise and delight - lies entirely in your corner.

But here’s the kicker. And this is what most people forget.

If you are going to make that choice, you need to bring it. Every. Single. Time. You can’t simply pour two or three perfect lattes a day, and expect people to care. You can’t merely design one or two exquisitely handcrafted websites while the rest of your portfolio is “meh”, and expect the world to take note. You can’t simply write one head turning short story, and mail in the rest.

Believe me, I know it sounds exhausting. To produce your best every time. To ensure that everything and anything that has your name on it also has your blood, sweat, tears and DNA baked into it.

You Can’t Have it Both Ways
But consider the alternative.

Those who create remarkable work sometimes and spew up average the rest are impostors, and will always be exposed for the frauds that they are. They may trick the other average cogs out there, but the disparity between their remarkable work, and their average work will always be visible to you and I. And when we end up on the average side of their work. When we’re the recipients of their report riddled with misspellings, or their conspicuously buggy line of code, or their lukewarm cup of coffee, we’ll sniff it out in half a second.

And we’ll know the insidious truth.

That they find no virtue in producing remarkable things because remarkable things are what the world deserves. That although they have it in them, they pick and choose when to be average, and when to bring it. And we’ll recognize the truly notorious verity - that either they didn’t care enough about us or our project, or they just think we’re f*cking stupid. But either way, we’ll never go back to them again. Because, in the end, you simply can’t have it both ways.

Written from: partly from my little cafe in Stratford-on-Avon and partly from a hotel room in Austin, Texas.
A LIST OF 10 ESSENTIAL DON'TS

We always give advice about what to do. But sometimes I think knowing what not to do is much more helpful. Here’s a list of 10 Essential “Don’ts” for people who were meant to change the world.

Don’t wait for permission.
Don’t spend your life chasing money.
Don’t quit because it hurts. (quit because you’re smart enough to launch the right thing)
Don’t try to be perfect.
Don’t believe everything they tell you.
Don’t expect the world to owe you something.
Don’t accumulate stuff because everyone else does.
Don’t listen to anyone.
Don’t squander the greatest asset you possess – the hours of your one and only life.
Don’t follow well lit paths. (grab a machete and hack down your own)

Written from: a restaurant overlooking the Acropolis in Athens.
**16 SIMPLE STEPS TO MAKE MONEY AND LOSE SELF RESPECT**

In no particular order...

1. Take on any client that is willing to pay you.
2. Rob a bank.
3. Make and sell products you wouldn’t be proud to own.
4. Never invest in yourself. Instead, sock every last penny in a 401k that may or may not be there to greet you when you turn 65.
5. Start an underground dog fighting ring.
6. Procure the very highest paying job you can out of college.
7. Repeat #6 every four or five years for the rest of your life.
8. Ensure that a lofty retirement sailing around the Caribbean on shitty cruise ships is at the epicenter of your future planning.
9. Never EVER spend money on some stupid adventure, like say, taking a train trip across America for no particular reason.
10. Allow “profit” to be the primary factor in every decision you make, business or otherwise.
11. Wait for some well groomed banker or publisher or employer to choose you in order to start something that matters.
12. Sell crack to kids.
13. Do not live your life deliberately.
14. Don’t waste hundreds of hours and thousands of dollars launching projects like this or this for no money in return.
15. Troll on eHarmony foraging for trust fund babies.
16. Do exactly what your parents and your teachers and your friends think is best for you.
Making money is fairly easy. Making money while doing work that truly matters is not.

The key is in possessing a paradigm that does not worship at the altar of wealth. Money is not the root of all evil, the love of it is. Being able to leave money on the table because it’s not the right kind of money for you or because you know that by accepting it you become a mercenary for a cause you just don’t believe in, in my experience, may not be the mark of every “successful” person, but it is of every fulfilled person.

Contemporary “reason” and conformity and economics say you are crazy to make business decisions that don’t map to profits, but I say you are crazy not to.

Written from: partly from the shore of Lake Malawi and partly from The Shakespeare Centre in England
act

3

Pursuit of Everything
We care about what you do with what you know.

The great (and possibly only) problem with the Information Revolution is that the act of Consumption has become ever so sexy that it is at times elevated to a flattering stature that it simply does not deserve.

We can quite literally spend an entire day answering emails on our sexy iPhone 4, reading Flipboard powered blogs on our sexy iPad 3, responding to Tweetdeck’s every beckon chirp on our sexy MacBook Air … and deceive ourselves into believing that on this day, we actually did work, that we actually made something.

Of course, upon further inspection, we recognize that we didn’t. We didn’t make or create. We spent the day consuming and responding at worst, and curating at best.

In the 80’s no one ever patted themselves on the back because they spent 12 hours a day planted on a bean bag watching Laverne & Shirley re-runs while snacking on a stale bag of Cheetos. No, those people knew they were losers.

The great difference being, of course, that watching television is primarily about consuming entertainment, while the day I’ve described above is primarily about consuming information, some of which is valuable, some of which pretends to be.
But it’s still Consuming, which should *never* be confused with Creating. I love reading, and reading a good book may feel good, but it is not the same as writing one.

But today, because Consuming looks good and feels so damn good, it is incredibly easy to trick ourselves into thinking it’s work.

There is no doubt that spending time ingesting and reacting to the thoughts of others is indeed helpful, but it is never to replace the time needed to generate your own ideas, your own works, your own art.

Consuming is not a virtue. And Curating is only *slightly* better.

Creating ... now, that is what you are here to do. Go make something, and when you’re finished, take a deep breath and do it again. The world needs you.

*Written from: a little cafe in Stoke Newington (UK)*
Greetings from Terminal 8 at JFK International Airport.

Eight days ago, I returned home to my beloved East Village. It was a perfect New York day. Blue skies. Cool breeze. Sun shining. Buzzing in the streets. Perfect. Whenever I return from a long trip, I have the same ritual. Before going to my apartment and dropping off my trusty backpack, I make the trek down to The Bean (the equivalent of my Cheers), I grab an Iced Coffee and I sit down and reflect on the adventure.

I try to remember the new people I met along the way, the unfamiliar foods I tasted, the interesting conversations I had, the new things I learned about myself, the laughs, the moments of panic, the hobo that got kicked off the train, and the old friends I had the opportunity to spend time with again. The novelty of any adventure begins to wear off the moment that it ends. And sometimes it is far too difficult to truly appreciate the experience from inside the room. Believe me, it is always vital to your next adventure to take the time to fully absorb the last one.

As my time of reflection was winding down, and I began sketching out my next adventure, I heard a bizarre humming, which evolved into a cacophony of horns and shrieks and what sounded like a million marbles being rolled down 12th Street. I’m from New York, so it takes a lot of noise to get me to turn around. Finally, I placed my pencil next to my tasty chocolate chip loaf cake, and looked out the window. And this is what I saw.

Hundreds (yes, literally) of skateboarders careening down the busy intersections of Broadway, ignoring every traffic light, every cab, every human and every well-fed puppy that ventured in from SoHo. They just zipped through everything. Forcing one of the busiest areas in Lower Manhattan to come to
a screeching halt for 6 minutes, which felt like an eternity. I have no idea why they were doing this. No idea at all. But I do know they got all of our attention. Not by asking politely, but by providing an experience, at least for a few moments, that none of us expected that day.

Now, if everyone acted like this everyday, it would most certainly be anarchy. But the reality is that very few people or organizations have the courage to do something outside the parameters of what is considered “normal”. Every individual, every brand, every non-profit, every product, every blog post *wants* to be noticed ... but most are not. Why?

Two reasons. Either they suck at what they do. Or they’re scared to stop traffic. Because it’s much more comfortable to find a role model or a competitor or a colleague and just emulate. I mean, swimming against the current is just ludicrous ... unless, of course, you’re the only person doing it, then people will start to wonder why and begin to gather. As we now know, regardless of politics, tent cities in Wall Street get peoples’ attention.

So, as you’re planning your next venture or social project or start-up, make sure that at the end of your to-do list, you ask yourself ... “how exactly am I going to stop traffic?”

Written from: 12th Street and Broadway in New York City.
In 1505, a well known, young sculptor named Michelangelo di Lodovico was commissioned by the newly elected Pope Julius II to paint the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel. Michelangelo was originally commissioned to paint the 12 Apostles against a starry sky, but lobbied for a completely different and incredibly complex concept depicting creation, the fall of man and the promise of salvation - conveying the complete context of Christian theology. Pope Julius, who was also known by his nickname Papa Guerriero, “the warrior pope” was basically the Tony Soprano of Rome, a scary dude whom you simply did not want to f*ck with. The battles between the artist and the pontiff are legendary.

From time to time, Julius would stroll through his Chapel, hoping to oversee Michelangelo’s work and provide feedback and guidance as he had done for so many frescos. Yet every single time he walked in, he found that Michelangelo had covered the entire expanse of his work as to hide it from the world (and from him) until the moment he decided it was ready. Soon, Julius began to demand that Michelangelo uncover the work so he could ensure it was good enough. Michelangelo reviled such requests as a breach on his creative perspicacity, on his art, his genius. So, like any true artist, he ignored such insipid ultimatums. This enraged Julius. One day he marched directly into the chapel, demanded that the fresco be revealed, and after Michelangelo refused, struck him across his left cheek with his golden scepter, forever disfiguring the artist. Michelangelo got up, wiped the blood from his face, climbed up his ladder and got to work.

Two years later, he unveiled one of the most elaborate, most breathtaking works of art the world had ever seen or has ever seen since. The best part of the story. Michelangelo was a sculptor, not a painter. The composition on the ceiling of that little Chapel in Rome was his first fresco.
Steve Jobs was arrogant. He never listened to anybody. At least that’s the general consensus of just about everyone who had ever worked with him. He thought he could revolutionize the music industry, convince the middle class to buy $400 phones and create a whole new generation of computing devices. He thought he knew what we wanted before we knew. He was right.

My friend Chris Guillebeau ended his World Domination Summit by handing out 100 dollar bills to all 1,000 people in attendance (yes, your math is correct), with a note that said effectively, “go make something”. If he asked any conference producer’s opinion (which I doubt he did), they would have said that was hubris. Guess what moment every single person at that conference will never forget?

I’ve been called arrogant countless times by many people.

Four years ago when I left a successful career to live life deliberately and build a business based on principle, while traveling the planet and breaking all the rules, they said I couldn’t do it and was foolish to try. When I said I could change the world by donating 20% of my time to launch projects like this, they said I was too small to make a dent. Recently, when I said I would personally fund the launch of a creative arts journal simply because I believe the current generation of poets need a platform from which to be heard, they said it’s pretentious to think it will matter.

We can learn from others, but have to resist the lure of uniformity.
The war of art is not always a battle with oneself, many times it is a battle with real people that will calculate you as arrogant for thinking you have a better way. You can spend a lifetime convincing these people, or you can saddle up, do the work and prove them wrong. The trick is, of course, you cannot do both.

And in the end, it helps to be right ... or to possess the courage to quit, iterate and try again until you are.
Infinite scalability is the White Stag of our times ... but don’t let the B-School grads in expensive suits fool you. I had to spend years “unlearning” before I could truly understand this verity.

We are taught as business people, as entrepreneurs, as corporate professionals to value nothing more precious than infinite scalability, as if somehow all the ills of the planet have been cured by the Walmarts of the world.

Sure, Ray Kroc may have found a way to get his unremarkably average burgers in the face of every middle class person in every developed country on the face of the globe, but as long as I’ve been using Foursquare, I have yet to see anyone check in at a McDonalds. It’s not special. It’s not unique. It’s just prevalent.

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It’s 12:34am and I’ve just returned to my hotel room after a day of adventuring. And as I write this post, sipping on a tasty Korean beer I can’t pronounce the name of, I can’t help but reflect on an entire day of meandering through the Bukchon village area. Throughout this gorgeous little neighborhood in Seoul, you can pop in and out of dozens of interesting “galleries” where artists produce everything from collections of designer spoons and lighting fixtures to canvases and rice cakes.

Everything is handcrafted.

Everything is made by a human who cares deeply about what they are doing. And because of that, anyone who buys anything from them, leaves with a deep sense of appreciation. It’s certainly not like buying the tacky I <3 Korea fridge magnet which you lose before hitting baggage claim.
Maybe these artists regret having only one shop, maybe they regret selling handcrafted goods that matter to them so much, that don’t scale and that make other people’s day ... but somehow I doubt it.

I’m tired, I have a plane to catch in 6 hours and I doubt I’m making any sense, but if you’re still reading, here’s what I’m trying to say from my dim-lit hotel room on the other side of the world.

Never allow infinite scalability to be the litmus test of whether an idea is worth pursuing. Because the truth is that by the time most ideas reach infinite scale, they are typically only sanitized versions of their original glory anyway. They are certainly available, we may even purchase them, in many ways we may even need them. But they are commodities. Nothing more. *anything Apple makes being the obvious exception, of course.* :)

There was a time when all we could do was dream of scale, of getting bigger for bigger’s sake. But now that we live in an age where creating art, where inspiring others, where connecting with a like-minded community and developing handcrafted work is easier than ever before, it seems like a squandered opportunity to do any different.

*Written from: A little drip coffee shop in Seoul, Korea*
Somewhere around AD 8 a pretty bright dude named Ovid completed a 15 volume epic poem depicting the history of the world from the moment of Creation through to the deification of Julius Caesar.

He called this prodigious piece of work Metamorphoses.

In it, there are a litany of stories of different types and from different epochs, some are pretty damn depressing, like opium-induced depressing.

In one such story, Ovid tells the tale of Pyramus and Thisbe, two star crossed lovers who live in Babylon, and whose parents loathe each other because of an old family rivalry. The two are not allowed to see each other because of this vitriolic feud. The young lovers decide to elope, and meet in a nearby graveyard to properly express their love for one another.

Thisbe arrives to the tomb first, but upon seeing a lion with teeth bloodied from a recent kill, she screams, drops her veil and runs the hell out of there. The lion meanders by the tomb, decides to chew on the veil a bit as a post hunt snack, then takes off.

When Pyramus arrives he is mortified to find his lover’s veil torn and saturated in blood. Shaken and crestfallen, Pyramus commits suicide by throwing himself on his sword. Just a few moments later, Thisbe returns to the tomb to see if her lover has arrived. She finds the love of her life lying in a pool of his own blood. She mourns, takes the Roman’s sword and kills herself.

About sixteen hundred years later, a playwright from Stratford-on-Avon wrote the now fairly well-known play, Romeo & Juliet. Sound familiar?
Every true artist is also a great thief.

Want to know the not so well-kept secret of creating work that matters, that will turn heads, that is truly sui generis?

Let everything in.

Read voraciously. (note: it doesn’t count if it’s a book in your field)
Go hiking.
Visit interesting art exhibits, especially if it’s “not your thing”.
Wake up at 5:30am, sit in solitude outside in the twilight, and write whatever comes to mind using a pen in a notebook that no one will ever read.
Listen to Kanye, then turn on some Vivaldi.
Skip the movie and go see some local theatre.
Take long walks in weird places.
Learn how to make the perfect cup of coffee.
Attend a poetry reading.
Train for a race.

Don’t ever stay inside when the stars are kind enough to dance for you.
Go to a local cheese shop (no, not Whole Foods) & ask them to suggest something.
Go to a local wine shop and do the same.
During your next lunch break, walk downstairs with a camera (or your phone), stand still, look at the world and take a photo of what strikes you.
Describe it in no more than four words.
Rent a movie produced before 1950.
Learn how to make your own pasta.
Read about how Henry Clay saved the Union, then pick up some of Tagore’s poetry.
Plan the adventure of a lifetime. Then go.
Read about the history of typography.
Draw something. Anything.
Find a restaurant with a cuisine that scares you, and invite someone to go and try it with you.
Go to an antique market and buy something you don’t need.
Spend your next Friday evening with someone who doesn’t do anything remotely similar to what you do.
Take a train when a plane would be much more efficient.
Create a piece of art.
Throw up your hands in places you shouldn’t.

Every great piece of work is only an amalgamation of existing work filtered through the mind of the artist creating it.

Take inspiration from anywhere you can find it. Then imbue it into the fiber of your next project proposal or fundraising spec or development sprint or speaking gig or preso to the marketing team.

And once you have, do it again.

Written from: on a train from Los Angeles to New York, but published in England.
After a very long couple of weeks, I arrived here yesterday from what seemed like endless jet lag and sleepless nights due to a bottleneck of project deadlines. You know what I’m talking about, you’ve been here before too. This past week was a long one. I had the honor and privilege of teaching a Masterclass and producing a workshop at IFC Holland, an international conference representing non-profit folks from 66 countries. The individuals that were in my sessions were remarkably bright and enthusiastic, but what I truly loved about them, was their authentic intent and desire to make the world a better place. They were far more inspiring to me than I was to them, and I’m just glad they gave me the opportunity to hang with them for a week.

But after 9.5 hours of speaking and teaching in two days on very little sleep fueled by sub-par coffee and lukewarm Heineken, I decided to extend my stay in Holland over the weekend to catch a breath. And there is no better way to procure a second wind than inordinate amounts of Dutch beer and bike rides down the romantically busy streets of Amsterdam. Lucky for me, I have an old friend who lives there half the year, and wanted to show Melissa and I the ropes. We had a lovely time.

Is there a point to this essay? Yes. And it is this.

You can only “floor it” for so long. Work. Yes? Launch? Absolutely. But always, always always take the time to rejoice when it’s over.

Because although it is indeed in the trenches where you find out what metal you’re made of, it’s in the repose that you remember why you’re doing it in the first place.

Written from: a pastry shop on the outskirts of Amsterdam
Because although it is indeed in the trenches where you find out what metal you’re made of, it’s in the repose that you remember why you’re doing it in the first place.
“What’s the world’s greatest lie?”, the boy asked completely surprised. “It’s this (said the mysterious king), that at a certain point in our lives, we lose control of what’s happening to us, and our lives become governed by fate. That is the world’s greatest lie.” - The Alchemist.

Walk around Florence long enough, and you will certainly come across the statue of a famous argonaut warrior dude with his left arm outstretched. In it, he is holding the decapitated head of a snake-haired Gorgon, named Medusa. She had this sneaky little habit of turning people into stone if they looked into her eyes. Needless to say, she was bat shit crazy.

When Perseus sought out to kill the monster, he prudently realized the only way he could do so was by gazing on her through the reflection in his shield. So, he crept into the squalid cave, used the winged sandals on his feet he received from Hermes to steady himself and cut off her crazy-ass head. For most people the story ends here. A glorious Perseus, hand full of f*cking snake hair, slays the stone-eyed harlot and is forever memorialized as tourists walk by with their cups of tiramisu gelato.

What’s often forgotten, and much more interesting to me at least, is what comes after.

When Medusa’s blood spills on the ground in that cave, Pegasus is birthed from the mixture of earth and blood. Pegasus. The divine winged horse, the icon of wisdom and strength, whose heel strikes Mount Helicon bursting forth a spring where the Muses would drink. Probably the most well-known creature in all of Mythology, whose silhouetted image appeared on the insignia of the 6th Airborne Division as they descended on Normandy, June 6
1944. The bridge they heroically fortified against the Nazi’s in Caen, to this day, is still known as The Pegasus. Soon after this heroic feat Perseus would need Pegasus, when he rode him into Ethiopia to save Andromeda, his future wife.

When I left my conventional and comfortable and prescribed life four years ago, I did not foresee what I am doing now. Traveling the world, part writer, part entrepreneur, part designer, part humanitarian, part artist, part guy with hair way too long. My goal was to tackle entrepreneurship, and just start my own little management consulting business. Boy oh boy, did my ship sail far off course.

There may be no moral to Ovid and Homer’s tale, and I’m open to that fact, but if there is, it may go something like this.

The inadvertent and collateral effects of the hero’s ventures are incalculable. The virtue is not in the fact that the hero wins, it’s that she was willing to risk it
all. And the greatest rewards procured are usually things she could have never envisaged when the journey began.

When you begin to seek out your own Personal Legend, you will likely never end up with precisely what you thought you would. Or exactly where you thought you’d be. The paths that you will tread have not even been dreamt up yet, but if Emerson was right, if “once you make a decision, the Universe conspires to make it happen”. Then the trick is not in five year plans, it’s in recognizing the unforeseen opportunities when they emerge, in that moment.

Put simply. Choose the tallest mountain to scale. The hardest novel to write. The most innovative fundraising campaign to craft. The craziest backpacking trip to plan. The most wild-eyed start up to launch. The hardest film to make. And keep your eyes open. The likelihood is that you may start out just trying to slay Medusa, and end up with your very own Pegasus.

Written from: Lake Malawi in Africa and Box Brownie in Stratford-on-Avon
THE PURSUIT OF EVERYTHING

LIVE YOUR LIFE WITH INTENTION

DO WORK THAT TRULY MATTERS

GIVE MORE THAN YOU GET
First of all, thank you for taking the time to read this piece of work. I cannot express to you how much it means to me. I hope it’s left you with some things to think about.

The only way that ideas spread is if people moved by the ideas share them, one at a time. I believe the ideas encapsulated in these essays are worth sharing, and because of that I’ve made them freely available to anyone curious enough to download it. If you found this manifesto at all helpful or inspiring or useful in any way, I would ask of you just this one thing.

Spread it.

If you would consider sharing this manifesto with your community, it would mean the whole wide world to me.

Not with everyone. Just with fellow misfits. With the chosen few that you know, deep down inside, were meant to change the world.

You can tweet, facebook, stumble, share on reddit or email the link to a friend.

Also, I’d love you to consider visiting my website, Pursuit of Everything, where I publish about living with intention, doing work that matters and changing the world. Also, I am chronicling my current journey to travel around the world in 1,080 days.

I hope to connect with you over there.
EPILOGUE

MAKE NO MISTAKE, MY FRIEND. THE WORLD IS WAITING FOR YOU. WAITING FOR YOU TO STOP ASKING FOR PERMISSION. TO STOP QUESTIONING YOURSELF. TO STOP LISTENING TO EVERYONE ELSE. WAITING FOR YOU TO START SOMETHING. THEN DO IT AGAIN. WAITING FOR YOU TO BRING THAT EXACT MIXTURE OF IDEAS AND CREATIVITY AND PASSION THAT ONLY YOU POSSESS.

MY NAME IS AJ. AND I NOMAD AROUND THE WORLD AND MAKE THINGS HAPPEN. WHO ARE YOU?
This free-range gluten free manifiesto was Baked and frosted by

misfit, inc.