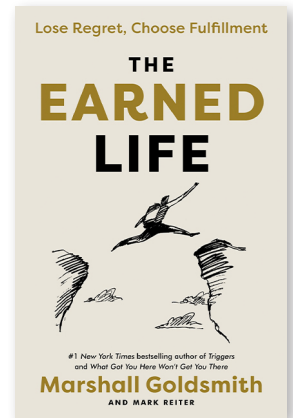


The Earned Life

Lose Regret, Choose Fulfillment

by **Marshall Goldsmith and Mark Reiter**



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THE SUMMARY IN BRIEF

Regret is the polar opposite of fulfillment. Our regrets are ours to create, they're not foisted upon us by others. To have them, we have to visualize making a different choice in our past that delivers a more appealing outcome. Regret is a devilish cocktail of *agency* and *imagination*. It is totally within our control, at least in terms of how often we invite it into our lives and how long we let it stick around. Do we choose to be tortured or bewildered by it forever, or can we move on, knowing that regret is not finished with us, that we will surely live to regret again someday?

Any decent advice book aims to help readers overcome a perennial challenge. The challenge Marshall Goldsmith and Mark Reiter are tackling in *The Earned Life: Lose Regret, Choose Fulfillment* is regret. Not just any regret...the supersized existential regret that reroutes destinies and persecutes our memories for decades. Readers will learn to accept that regret is inevitable but its frequency can be reduced. The primary theme presented is how to achieve a life of fulfillment—what the authors call an *earned life*—when the choices, risks, and effort we make in each moment align with an overarching purpose in our lives, regardless of the eventual outcome.

IN THIS SUMMARY, YOU WILL LEARN:

- What's stopping you from choosing your own life.
- The earning checklist.
- The five building blocks of discipline.
- When earning becomes a habit.

Part I: Choosing Your Life

Something truly earned makes three simple requirements of us:

- We make our best *choice* supported by the facts and the clarity of our goals. In other words, we know what we want and how far we need to go.
- We accept the *risk* involved.
- We put out maximum *effort*.

The deliverable from this magical brew of choice, risk, and maximal effort is the glorious notion of “an earned reward.” The long menus of human striving: from a corner office to the affection of our children to a good night’s sleep to our reputation and character, all must be earned. This is why we valorize the merited success; there’s something heroic about applying maximum energy, wit, and will to get what we think we want.

But we cannot place too much faith in the concept of an earned reward. It’s too impermanent and fragile a vessel to contain our wishes and desires to an earned life. The emotional lift we get from an earned reward is fleeting. Whatever prize we have earned—a big raise, a partnership, an ecstatic review—our victory dance is brief. Our sense of fulfillment and happiness simply doesn’t last.

Setting goals and earning the desired outcomes are essential first steps for success at anything. But they lack utility in achieving an earned life when they are estranged from a greater purpose in our lives. An earned reward not connected to a higher purpose is a hollow achievement. The reward of living an earned life is being engaged in the process of constantly earning such a life.

What’s Stopping You From Creating Your Own Life?

It is easier to create your own life today than it has ever been in human history. Freedom and mobility create what Barry Schwartz famously described as “the paradox of choice.” We do better with fewer choices, not more. Faced with thirty-nine flavors of ice cream, we often make a disappointing choice.

It’s the same with creating your own life in a complex, rapidly advancing world. Not only is it hard to sift through the myriad choices, but even when we know what we want, we don’t always know how to follow our dreams. The barriers holding us back in our choices and actions, frustrating

our will to live our own life, are formidable and numerous, beginning with these:

1. Our first option, unfortunately, is inertia.

Inertia is an active event in which we are *persisting* in the state we’re already in rather than switching to something else. Being inertia’s victim or escaping its gravitational pull is a choice that is solely ours to make. When people discover that they have a choice, they are usually empowered to change.

2. Our programming locks us in place.

All of us are programmed in some way by our parents. They shape our beliefs, our social values, how we treat people, how we behave in a relationship, even which sports teams we cheer for. More than anything else, they program our self image.

We become the smart one, the pretty one, strong one, nice one, responsible one. If we’re not careful, we not only accept the programming but adapt our behavior to it. The good news is that we have the right to deprogram ourselves whenever we want. Our programming’s biggest impact is how proficiently it blinds us to our need to reject it.

3. We are undone by obligation.

The beauty of obligation is that it directs us to keep our promises to others, implied or explicit. The misery of obligation is how often those promises conflict with the ones we’ve made to ourselves. In those moments, we tend to overcorrect, choosing between the extremes of selfless and selfish—and end up disappointing either ourselves or those who depend on us.

4. We suffer from a failure of imagination.

Curiosity is how we prepare to fire up our imagination and picture something new. If you’re among the 30% of Americans who have a college degree, you already know from your teenage years what it feels like to seek an identity reboot, a new presentation of self that will improve your odds of earning your place in the world. College was your opportunity to delete your adolescence and write a new script. You did it once; you can do it again.

5. We are winded by the pace of change.

You’re deluding yourself in pointless nostalgia if you think that, no matter the situation, at some point in the near future—when you finish the “rush” project or when the kids get older and your domestic life calms down—you can revert

We want to live a life that will increase fulfillment and minimize regret.

to a slower time when the pace of life and the speed at which it changed was more relaxed and gentle. It's not going to happen. Our failure to adapt to the quickening pace of change blocks us. If we cannot keep up, we get winded and fall behind.

6. We are narcotized by vicarious living

Because of social media and a smorgasbord of technological distractions, we have an abundance of opportunities to live through other people's lives rather than live our own. The damage from this trend toward vicarious living is one of heightened distraction. Anyone or anything can pull our focus from doing what we should be doing and coax us into doing what others want us to do. That's one definition of not living your own life.

7. We have run out of runway.

"Runway" is the time we've meted out to ourselves to achieve our destiny. When we're young, we tend to overestimate our runway. Money may be scarce, but time seems infinite, dampening our sense of urgency. The other extreme—when we're old—is more invidious: We foolishly believe there's not enough time to achieve our next dream.

These are the perennial barriers that freeze us in place and leave us yearning for a new path yet unable to take the first step on that path. But these barriers are not permanent. We possess offsetting attributes that enable us to find our way. They are latent powers such as motivation, ability, understanding, and confidence that reside within all of us. They are building blocks of our potential. And we need to be reminded on occasion how to deploy them for our own benefit.

The Earning Checklist

When considering making a major career decision, there are six must-have considerations. Without good answers for each of them, there is no next step.

1. Motivation

Motivation is the reason you try to succeed at a chosen task. It's "why" you do anything. Motivation may be the high-oc-

tane fuel that drives our achievement, but it cannot be divorced from the actual doing of the specific tasks required to achieve each of our goals. It's not merely a supercharged emotional state induced by having a goal. It is that heightened emotional state coupled with a supercharged impulse to do each of the specific tasks required to achieve that goal.

There is at least one universal baseline motivation guaranteed to clarify our desire to live an earned life, and it is this: We want to live a life that will increase fulfillment and minimize regret.

2. Ability

Your ability is the level of skill you need to succeed at your chosen task. Ideally, you know what you're good at and what you're bad at, and you take on tasks beyond your abilities only because you want to stretch. Otherwise, you stay within your wheelhouse of superior skills. Staying motivated to do something you excel at should not be a problem. And yet it is. If we can't embrace that which comes easily to us, what's the alternative?

Creating a career in areas where our abilities are less than optimal, where we're in the middle of the pack and not so special is not recommended either. Our ability is not one isolated talent; it's a portfolio of skills and personality traits that have to match up with the life we want to lead.

3. Understanding

Understanding is your knowledge of what to do and how to do it. Roles matter, but so do so-called "softer" attributes, such as timing, gratitude, kindness, listening, and most valuable of all, trusting the Golden Rule. These are the values that guide us in any situation, including the pursuit of an earned life. Part of understanding is knowing the difference between good and not good enough—and accepting that in any situation, we can be one or the other.

4. Confidence

Confidence is your belief that you can succeed. You acquire confidence through an imprecise alchemy of training, repetition, steady improvement, and a string of successful results,

each one feeding the other. The beauty of confidence is that it is the product of all your other positive virtues and choices, and then it returns the favor by making you even stronger in those areas. As a general rule, if you have motivation, ability, and understanding, lacking confidence is unfortunate, almost inexcusable. You have earned the right to be confident.

5. Support

Support is the external help you need to succeed. It comes to your rescue, like the calvary, via three sources. Support can come from an *organization* in the form of money, equipment, office space, or anything you consider a valuable resource. Support can come from an *individual* in the form of direction, or coaching, or instruction, or empowerment, or confidence building. Support can also be a defined *group*. Your support group can include anyone, even a family member or two.

6. Marketplace

It's romantic to think that we can pursue our most ardent dreams without regard to earning a living. The fact is, not only do the vast majority of us *need* to earn a living, if only to pay our bills and provide for our families, but through rearing or inclination, most of us can't help linking our sense of fulfillment and self-esteem to our material compensation.

Every day thousands of Americans start up a business, or go back to school, or quit their cushy job to strike out on their own—all hoping to improve their prospects for a fulfilling life—without asking the hard-nosed question: Is there a market? If there is no market for what you're offering, all your skill, confidence, and support will not overcome that hurdle.

These are the four internal and two external factors you have to consider and check off to gauge your chances of success at any challenging task or goal. Consider this earning checklist before taking on any new challenge that matters to you. Each of these six factors must be aligned, each one enhancing the other.

Part II: Earning Your Life

How We Earn: The Five Building Blocks of Discipline

We tend to think of discipline and willpower as the essential skills that deliver success but they are not. Rather, they are the *evidence* of our success, qualities only recognized after the fact. In a gross oversimplification, we label them as dis-

cipline and willpower but the building blocks are concepts that are much more concrete and comprehensible:

- Compliance
- Accountability
- Follow-up
- Measurement

We call on one or the other at different moments in the earning process. Together they become your template for structuring your pursuit of any goal. If you want to live an earned life, they work. Without them, you don't stand a chance.

1. *Compliance* reflects your adherence to an external policy or rule. Compliance is easy to understand but hard to do. Humans are woefully bad at compliance, whether we're flouting our doctors' recommendations, our teachers' summer reading lists, or our editors' deadlines. Here's a simple truth: You can't count on the people issuing the orders to hold your hand to ensure compliance. Nor can you count on every situation to compel compliance. You're on your own.

2. *Accountability* is our response to expectations we impose upon ourselves. The to-do list is a common example of private accountability. If we get through half the list, we carry over undone items to the next day. If some of them remain undone a week later, the frustration or shame is ours alone. No one else needs to know. When your intentions are public and out in the open, the stakes are automatically higher (people are watching) and so, hopefully, is your performance. Disclosure makes the effort to change visible; visibility elevates accountability.

3. *Follow-up* introduces the coercive force of the outside world to the mix. Suddenly, other people are checking up on us. We have been conscripted into a group for the purpose of being observed and tested and judged. And that conscription alters us. Like it or not, follow-up is a valuable process that heightens our self-awareness. It forces us to assess our progress honestly. Without follow-up we may never take the time to ask how we're doing.

4. *Measurement* is the truest indicator of our priorities—because what we measure drives out what we don't. If financial security is your top priority, you check your net worth every day. If you're serious about losing weight, you step on a scale each morning. But not every measurement that matters to us has to be a hard, objective number. Soft, subjective numbers can be just as meaningful.

If you are left with one piece of advice to increase your probability of creating an earned life, it is this: Ask for help. You need it more than you know.

As you start implementing the strategies for living a no-regrets life, these four components of the earning template will become second nature to you. Compliance and accountability will cease to be daily tests of your shaky commitment. They will evolve into autonomic responses, like your heartbeat or your breathing.

Follow-up and measurement will be the feedback loops that give meaning and purpose to your day. You will insist on data rather than cover your eyes and ears. This is how discipline and willpower gradually settle into your life. They're not bequeathed to you at birth. You earn them every day.

The Lost Art of Asking for Help

One of the biggest obstacles to living an earned life is not asking for help. The myth of the self-made individual is one of the more sacred fictions of modern life. It endures because it promises us a just and happy reward that is equal to our persistence, resourcefulness, and hard work. Like more irresistible promises, it deserves some skepticism.

It's not impossible to achieve success on your own point where it could be accurately described as self-made. The more salient question is: Why would you want to when you could surely achieve a better result by enlisting people's help along the way? An earned life is not more "earned" or glorious or gratifying—or even more likely—because you tried to achieve it all by yourself.

Too many of us try to go it alone. Our near-clinical reluctance to ask for help is not a genetic defect, like color blindness or tone deafness. It is an acquired defect, a behavioral failing we are conditioned to accept from an early age and one that continues being solidified on the job.

You would not hesitate to call a doctor if you were in extreme physical pain, or a plumber if your kitchen sink were clogged, or a lawyer if you were in legal trouble. You know how to ask for help. And yet there are moments in each day when asking for help is clearly the better choice and you decline to do so. Beware two situations in particular.

The first is when you are ashamed to seek help because doing so will expose your ignorance or incompetence. The

second situation begins when you tell yourself, "I should be able to do this on my own." You fall into this trap when the task you're facing is adjacent to knowledge or a skill you think you already possess. If you are left with one piece of advice to increase your probability of creating an earned life, it is this: *Ask for help. You need it more than you know.*

When Earning Becomes Your Habit

Achieving an earned life is hard work, often all-consuming. But we're all human. Our resources—energy, motivation, concentration—deplete. Earning your life is a long game. Check that: It's *the* long game. You need a strategy anchored in both self-awareness and situational awareness to sustain our urgency and avoid burnout—until earning has become your habit.

1. Earn your beginnings

In the course of a lifetime, you will experience episodes when one phase ends and another begins. We all experience these intervals between the old and the new. But we make a grave error if we treat a transition as a lull in the action that allows us to take a time out and passively wait for our next phase. Our transitions are not voids that we aimlessly roam until we find an escape route. They are opportunities to earn your next beginning.

2. Disengage from the past

Before you can effectively earn the next phase of your life, you have to disengage from the old phase you claim to have left behind. You not only have to let go of past achievements (you are no longer the person who earned those achievements), you also have to relinquish your old identity and way of doing things. It's okay to learn from the past, but it's not recommended to go back and visit it every day.

3. Master the "earning response"

If we respond poorly every time to the same stimulus, we shouldn't be surprised that we get the same disappointing outcome each time. Eventually our poor response becomes predictable; we've acquired another poor habit. The only way to eliminate the new habit is to consciously change our response to the unchanging stimulus with better behavior.

Change the response, then change the habit.

We can turn earning into a habit as long as we add a thoughtful pause between the stimulus and the outcome before we make our official response. The pause gives us time to respond rationally, in our best interest, rather than emotionally or impulsively.

4. Play the shot in front of you

Pro golfers go through a time-consuming assessment ritual on every shot. Every set of facts we see is situational—and there's something noble in dealing as best we can with what's in front of us. When golfers play the shot in front of them, they are being supremely rational and disinterested actors, divorced from past or future concerns that may cloud their judgment. They accept that golf, like most of life, is situational, never involving the moment before or after, only now.

When we fail to play the shot in front of us, we are failing at transition. We are failing to see that something in our world, big or small, has changed irrevocably and we have to deal with the new reality.

Earning ends when we accomplish what we set out to do, or when changing circumstances in the world or in ourselves make it unnecessary to continue what we've been doing. Earning begins when we decide we need to re-create our life, making it our own even if it's someone else's idea, in order to redefine who we are.

In between the beginning and end, we must let go of many things—our role, our identity, our allegiance to the past, our expectations—then scratch and claw to find our next new thing. This is how we earn each new beginning in our life. We must close the door on one part of our life to open a new door.

Five Recurring Themes to an Earned Life

Of the various exhortations and exercises contained in *The Earned Life*, there are five recurring themes that hover over each page like guardian angels of the idea of an earned life. Each of these is readily within our own control.

The first is *purpose*. Anything we do is more elevated, more exciting, and more connected to who we want to become if we do it with a clearly expressed purpose. (The expressed part makes a huge difference.)

The second is *presence*. This is the impossible ask—to be present with the people in our lives rather than missing in action. Although we can never achieve the summit of being

present at all times, it's still the mountain we should never stop climbing.

The third is *community*. Accomplishing something with help of a chosen community resonates more resoundingly, affects more people, and is often an improvement on the solo act because of the contribution of many.

The fourth is *impermanence*. In the grand scheme, we are here on earth for a brief moment. Nothing lasts, neither our happiness nor a day nor anything else. It is all impermanent. That inspires us to be present and find purpose in each moment.

The fifth is *results*. This is a negative theme that reveals a positive concept—because the aim here has not been to help you become better at achieving a result. It has been to help you try your best to reach a goal. If you try your best, you have not failed, regardless of the result.

In the end, an earned life doesn't include a trophy ceremony or permit an extended victory lap. The reward of living an earned life is being engaged in the process of constantly earning such a life.



Dr. Marshall Goldsmith has been recognized as one of the Top Ten Business Thinkers in the World and the top-rated executive coach at the Thinkers50 ceremony in London since 2011. Published in 2015, his book *Triggers* is a Wall Street Journal and New York Times #1 Bestseller! He's also the author of New York Times best seller and #1 Wall Street Journal Business Book *What Got You Here Won't Get You There*, winner of the Harold Longman Award as Best Business Book of the Year.



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