



Living as your ideal self

Jen Fisher (Jen): As children, we were told that the world is our oyster, we can be anything we want to be, do anything we want to do, and the possibilities are truly infinite. But as we grow older, those possibilities, they just don't seem to be infinite anymore. As we grow up, we start to focus on limitations instead of opportunities. So how can we go back to that childlike mindset of endless possibilities? How do we pursue and achieve our most radical goals and dreams? Well, sometimes, it starts with something as simple as a list.

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This is the WorkWell podcast series. Hi, I'm Jen Fisher, chief well-being officer for Deloitte and I am so pleased to be here with you today to talk about all things well-being.

Teaser - Ben Nemtin (Ben): First you just have to forget everything you think you know about a bucket list before we begin because I think what happened was this journey really changed my core belief system—and really, I think most of my DNA—about what I believe is possible.

I am here with Ben Nemtin. Ben is a bestselling author and star of the show "The Buried Life." He is an acclaimed speaker who has shared his message of radical possibility with audiences all over the world.

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Ben Nemtin (Ben): I have to take you back to where I grew up in Victoria, B.C., which is just off the coast of Vancouver and I was in high school . . . I had just graduated from high school and I was going on to university and life was really good. Like I had a lot of things that I thought were really important going for me. I had a scholarship to the university, I had a great circle of friends and family, and I had worked really hard to make the U19 National Rugby Team, which was a big deal in Canada because it's sort of a big sport there, but on the West Coast that is the epicenter of rugby in Canada. So, I was training for the World Cup—as the U19 team that I was on. I had always put a lot of pressure on myself to

succeed, whether it be academically or with sport, and so as we got closer and closer to the World Cup, I started worrying about my field goals because I played fly half, so I was kicking field goals and I was also like calling the plays. I had missed a big kick when I was in my last year of high school at a championship game and I didn't want that to happen again. And so, I kept thinking, "I *can't* miss an easy field goal at the World Cup, that would be like *the worst* thing I could ever do." And these thoughts continued to come in my mind at night and it caused me to have trouble sleeping and this trouble sleeping got worse and I got more anxiety and I was still putting a lot of pressure on myself and ultimately this lack of sleep, this anxiety, caused me to slide into a depression where I started having trouble making decisions. So, if I couldn't decide whether I should go to university for a certain day, I would ultimately not go because my decision would be my decision not to go and so I ultimately dropped out of school. And I couldn't get myself to go to rugby practice, so I got dropped from the National Rugby Team and I became really a recluse and just kind of stayed in my parent's house and for someone who was very social, had a ton of friends, and sort of traditionally was a "high achiever," now I couldn't leave the house. And so, I was really just was going for a 15-minute walk every day—which sometimes I would just hide in the driveway and just pretend and tell my parents that I went for a walk. So, I was really crippled by this depression. And it was a very scary time.

What happened was my friends ultimately came at the end of the semester that I dropped out of and they kind of rallied me, corralled me I guess is a better word, to come and work with them in a new town for the summer. I was sort of forced out of the house, I was forced to get a job, I was forced to connect with people, I was put in a new environment, and I started to get some confidence because I got a job. I started talking about what I was going through to my friends and realized that this wasn't a feeling that just I was having—that my friends had gone through something like this before and there was comfort in that. At the end of summer, I was starting to feel back to myself. It wasn't that easy, it wasn't just like I left home and then I was out of this sort of depression that I was in. There are many things that contributed that we can talk about later. But effectively, I came back and I thought, "Wow! I met all these really cool people in this new town."

Coming out of high school, I realized that you can choose the people you surround yourself with, and this one kid started a clothing line that I knew from high school and I was like "Wow, that is so cool! I want to hang out with more people like that." So, I decided to only surround myself with people that inspire me and I called up this kid from the neighborhood named Johnny who was a sort of film maker, self-taught film maker, and my friend had started this clothing line, and I thought, "Wow, if he did that, what could I do? I always wanted to make a movie. Let's make a documentary. I am going to call Johnny who I don't really know."

[Jen laughs]

He just took my sister to prom, that is all I knew about.

I said, "Johnny, let's make a movie!" We've got another friend and Johnny's brother together into this sort of movie-making mission. This was 2006. Johnny at that time was at McGill, he was in English class and he got assigned an old poem called "The Buried Life" and the "Buried Life" is a poem written in 1852 by a poet named Matthew Arnold who effectively articulated what we were feeling, which was you have all these things that you want to do in your life but they kind of get buried by the day-to-day. Sometimes you have moments when you are inspired but that inspiration gets buried with just the sort of things you *have* to do,

with life, with work, with school. So, we thought, "Yeah, that's exactly how we feel! But wait, this guy wrote this poem 150 years ago, so we are not the first people to feel like this? Why don't we call this movie that we are talking about, 'The Buried Life?'"

So, we had the name, but we didn't know what it was going to be about and then we asked, "Okay, let's unbury our dreams and how do we do that?" Ironically, the thing that did that for us was death. Thinking about the fact that we were mortal, and our time was limited, made us think about *life*. And so, we asked ourselves the question, "What do you want to do before you die?" because it made us think about the things that were really important to us. And there were many answers, and the bucket list began from there. So, the question spawned this list and now we had this list of all of our biggest dreams, and we pretended that anything was possible when we wrote the list. So, we thought, "Okay, let's go after this list. Let's take a road trip. Let's do whatever we can to hit the road, go after our list. And because this list is—some of these are outrageous dreams, we are going to need help of other people. So, let's help other people cross things off their bucket list as well." So we'll do this road trip, we'll cross things off our list, and then everywhere we'll go, we'll ask people the same question: "What do you want to do before you die?" And if we can help them, we will. And we'll do it for two weeks and we'll make a movie and we'll show it to our friends. *[Ben laughs]* So that was the mission. We begged, borrowed, and stole enough money so that we could get an old RV. We bought a camera on eBay, we built a website with our one hundred dreams, we pretended we had a production company and cold-called companies. We got a juice company to pay for our gas, we got Red Bull to give us Red Bulls, we got a skate company to give us skateboards to give away, and we made matching t-shirts.

[Jen and Ben laugh]

So now we hit the road in this beater RV and what happened was, you know, initially we didn't really tell anybody what we were doing because we thought it was a little bit self-serving to go after this list and we didn't think anyone would understand. But as word started to spread, all these people came out of the woodwork and we started getting all these emails and people were saying, "Hey I saw your list of 100 things, I can help you with number nine, ride a bull, or I can help you get up in a hot air balloon." Everyone wanted us to accomplish our dreams and then they sent us their dreams asking for our help. So, we got these people pouring in, you know, "My dream is to sing a duet without Elton John. Can you guys help? My dream is to play Augusto, or to find my dad." So, all of a sudden, we were overwhelmed with the response and it was national news and it was international news. This two-week road trip, ultimately, ended up lasting over 10 years. And the list items that we put on the list, initially that we were convinced were impossible, that we kind of wrote just as a joke . . . *play basketball with President Obama, write a number-one New York Times bestseller, make a TV show, have a beer with Prince Harry, sit with Oprah* . . . things that we really had no business doing. Over time, they happened. We sort of hit this point where we are like, "I guess you can do anything." Ultimately, the funny thing was when we helped other people accomplish their dreams, it gave us more satisfaction than even accomplishing those big, audacious goals. So we learned some really interesting life lessons through this crazy road trip about life, about giving back, about purpose, about really achieving goals, but I think what happened was this journey really changed my core belief system and really I think sort of my *DNA* about what I believe is possible and I think what it did was it shifted my perspective around. If I look at something, I don't think now, "Can I do it?" I think, "Do I *want* to do it?" Because I know I can do it because you can do

anything you want, but I also know it is going to take a whole lot of work, so it is, "Do I *want* to do this?" And that's just a different way of looking at it.

Jen: You know, I followed you and listened to some other things that you talk about when it comes to a "bucket list." And I know many of the things on your list are big, audacious goals but you talk about bucket lists in a different way, perhaps than I've heard it before. Can you tell us a little bit about your philosophy around a bucket list? Because I think it's pretty inspiring.

Ben: First, you just have to forget everything you think you know about a bucket list before we begin. Because the only definition that I adhere to is a bucket list is a list of things that are going to bring you joy, happiness, and fulfillment. And I think our knee-jerk reaction is we think about adventure list items like travel or skydive or things that will kind of fill that small bucket. But if you open up your definition of what a list is, then there are really 12 or so categories of life that you should think about when you're writing your list. So, whether that be emotional or spiritual, physical, professional, material—right, it's okay to have material—you want a beautiful watch or a place on the beach, giving back, how can you make an impact. So, there's all these different buckets of life that I think should be represented in your list. So that's the first thing, it can be anything. It could be spending Friday night with your kid. It could be hiking Everest. Both of those are equally important as long as they're important to you. I always shied away from a bucket list, we always just called it a "list" but I think bucket list is just a universally known term for it . . .

Jen: It's list of answering the question of "What I want to do before I die?"

Ben: Exactly. So, once you sort of have that, then you sort of look, "Okay, what is the purpose of a bucket list? Like *why* even have one?" Well, the purpose is that you need a reminder that your goals and dreams exist because if you don't have a device that reminds you that your personal goals exist, they get buried. That's why the poem was written, this is human nature, this has been happening for hundreds and hundreds of years. The purpose of a list is really to help you not have regrets at the end of your life. So, if you really step back and I think of "Okay, why am I doing this?" My goal is to bring down the high percentage of people that get to the end of their life and their biggest regret is not living their ideal self. So, living a life for someone else, not themselves, and that can happen subconsciously or that can happen consciously. We think in the short term it's not important.

Jen: Because we have a long time to get it done.

Ben: You've got your whole life—yeah! You will do it next week, you will do it next year, you have all the time in the world. Well 76% of people do that and they realize on their deathbed that it's too late. This comes from research from a psychologist named Tom Gilovich who did a study called "The Ideal Road Not Taken" published in the journal *Emotion*. He found that 76% of people, their number one regret in their entire life when they are on their deathbed is not living my ideal self. So, people die with regretting the things they *didn't* do, they don't regret the things they *did*. So how do we get more people into the bucket of the 24%? How do we increase that percentage of the people that die thinking, "Yeah, I did these things that I really wanted to do, and I feel good about my life?" I can't imagine getting to the end of my life and having that big regret. So, in order to be really successful at work, you need to be really successful in your personal life. There's just no line between work and life.

Jen: I find it fascinating that at a young age, your college age, you and your friends were thinking about death. Where do you think that came from because I would say for myself, I know at that age, I wasn't thinking about death. As a matter of fact, I thought I was invincible, and I was going to live forever. So, I am fascinated by the fact that you all kind of came to this like . . . "What do we want to do before we die?" And I think it's a brilliant concept, but any insights on kind of what led you there?

Ben: So, one of the guys, Duncan, who is the oldest, he went for a camping trip with his friends. This is about the time we started "The Buried Life." One of his good friends accidentally drowned. This was the first time that he had really experienced death personally, and us by one degree of separation as well. So that was one instigator. The other was that we just wanted something that was actually going to shake us, and that was the only thing that we could think of that would get our attention and will get the attention of our friends, and we *liked* that it was taboo, we *liked* that people didn't talk about it, and that if we go up to a stranger on the street and we say, "Hey, do you mind if we ask you a question? What do you want to do before you die?" that they are sort of taken aback. But what it did was it planted a seed and, ultimately, what would happen is if we ask people on the street what they want to do before they die. If they didn't know what they wanted to do, they would come back to us, run us down the street, and say, "Hey you know what, actually, it's this." Like, "I want to write a book because of this, this, and this." We liked how it just got straight to the point in a world where we thought everyone was sort of being very . . . we just felt we were walking through a fog.

Jen: Everybody was buried.

Ben: Mm-hmm.

Jen: You mentioned your struggle with mental health. How has that shaped your journey and the message that you share with your audiences now?

Ben: I think it's shaped—well, the reason I start speaking is because I started really learning about the suicide epidemic and I thought that I had an obligation to tell my story openly and honestly so that it might help other people that feel the same way. So, I started speaking two, three years ago and it wasn't an easy thing to do to open up about like this story I just told you about. But I had a feeling that I was ready to do it and that was really the most important thing. I knew it wasn't going to be comfortable, but I was in a place where I felt that, fundamentally, I was okay to talk about it publicly with people that I didn't know and care about. So, I did, and it was really scary, and I was shaking, and it got easier and easier and now it's not. I love talking about it because I can see the affect it has on people real-time. I can actually feel that it's impacting people when I open up about it and afterwards when I talk with people it's something that resonates with them. And so, I think that I guess how I've evolved the speaking is that now I really also like to talk about resources and tools that I use to help myself, pick myself up, when I feel down, or get myself through a tricky situation.

Jen: Alright, let's kind of switch gears a little bit here. I want to talk about when we don't achieve our goals and what happens when you fail?

Ben: I don't want to be cliché, but I just think failure is great. I think that *usually* what failure is, is a pivot in the right direction. So, it forces you to recalibrate and then you move on. It's really . . . by putting yourself in that vulnerable position, something good will

happen. Anytime I've put myself into a situation where I am scared, just out of my mind whether it's like going into a Crump battle in Compton or surviving on a deserted island in the Cook Islands or giving a commencement speech in front of 15,000 people, as soon as I'm approached with the opportunity, I immediately say to myself, "No way, no way I am doing this, like *why*? There is no way." And then a little voice inside me goes, "Well you know that's why you have to do it." And then I am like, "ahh damn it," but something good will come out of it. I'll give you an example. I know that you want to do a TED Talk, I am going to say that now, so you are accountable.

Jen: So, it's now recorded. Thank you, Ben. [*Jen and Ben laugh*]

Ben: I got approached to do a TEDx talk and immediately I thought "No way, it's a lot of pressure and I've got to prepare, and I don't have time." So, I almost wrote back "no" and then I put it off and I listened to that inner voice, I was like, "Oh, you know you really should do this, Ben."

Jen: I agree.

Ben: So, I did it. That was 2015 and the first time I had ever spoken on my own and it was the first time I had ever given any time of like, actual takeaway that I thought was important. And then someone saw the TEDx talk and invited me to speak in Minnesota. So a random speaking engagement, 2017 or 2018, and that sparked this sort of word-of-mouth that got around that I was getting invited to speak and it changed by complete direction of my life where now I'm speaking 100+ times a year. So I very easily and almost replied to that email, "Thank you, but I'm completely booked up that week. I'm sorry, but keep me in mind for next year," but I didn't. I put myself out there and amazing stuff happened. And that's what happens when you get over that fear of really like, "What is the fear when you unwind it and unpack it? It's just usually the fear of what do people think or the fear of failure? Both of those fears, assuming you have your basic needs met, are sort of made-up fears, but they're ingrained in us from generations of people having these fears. By the way, from very real life or death situations, right? So, the fear what people think dates back to when we were hunter-gatherers and if we went out for a hunt and we came back without a kill, then we are at risk of getting kicked out of the tribe. If we did something wrong in the tribe, you got kicked out or you died. So that has been passed on 'til now where we still have the fear, but the risk is not real. So, I'm not saying that the fear isn't real because I feel it, everyone feels it. It's real feeling, but the *risk* is not as real as we think. It's not as catastrophic as you think and, ultimately, people are just thinking about you much less than you think they are. So that's the other thing. So that's the fear of failure and the fear of what other people think. So, the fear of failure is, again, like if you're afraid to go after your goal or you're waiting for the right time, you failed. So, when you *try* and fail, then you learn something.

Jen: Interesting. So how do you motivate yourself? I think a lot of people have these goals, but they are kind of waiting for the right time, as you put it, or waiting for the right motivation, or waiting to be inspired in order to go out and finally do something about their goal.

Ben: Smaller steps of action, writing it down, all of a sudden, your goals exist; they are not just a thought . . .

Jen: So that's the list.

Ben: You have your list, yeah, so now you are 42% more likely to achieve them. Sharing your goals. Talk about them, then people can help you, but then you also feel accountable. So we want to create accountability around personal goals so that we can drive ourselves forward, just like we have accountability at work and that works. You want to write them down, you want to share them. I think when you're thinking about sharing your goals, it's important to also consider that you want to be intentional with your sharing. If you want to write a book, ask people if they know an author and say, "Hey, your uncle wrote a book, I saw that. Do you mind if you introduced me to him and I can borrow 50 minutes of his time? I just want to know: how do you get an agent? Or how do you write a book proposal?" And maybe they become a mentor. So you can be intentional with your outreach and just ask for help. Everyone that is up at the top at some point, for the most part, was in your position at some point and they remember someone helping them. So you want to continue to try and reach out intentionally to people that might be able to help. And then if you want to increase your odds to 77% more likely to achieve your goal, you have an accountability buddy or a friend, someone checking in on you down the line, ideally with some sort of consequence if you don't.

Jen: Let's talk about your 100 goals. What are some of the most memorable goals that you've accomplished to date—or maybe a better question is the goals that you've helped others accomplish? Because I know that you've said those have been the most rewarding.

Ben: Yeah, I'll do one for each. The one on our list I think would be, the most meaningful was playing basketball with President Obama at the White House because it was such an outrageous goal for us to have. I remember writing it down and laughing and just thinking "this is absurd, why are we, I mean okay sure we will write it down," and three years later we are at the White House basketball courts and President Obama surprised us all on the court. Going from that place to actually accomplishing it really was the straw that broke the camel's back in my mind when I thought "Wow, I guess anything's possible." And so that's why it's most meaningful because it really shifted, after a couple of those big dominos fell, those bigger list items leading up to that with like maybe the TV show or some of the other things. President Obama was the sort of ultimate moonshot and it really shifted my core belief system. And the most meaningful help that I think we've done is if I guess I would say for me personally, perhaps, it's the first person that we helped because that shifted, I think, the direction of the project.

In 2006 we met a guy named Brent, who emailed us and said my dream, and it was sort of, he had written us in English that was not correct grammar and we thought he said, "I want to bring pizzas down to the homeless shelter," and we said, "okay, well, let's go meet this guy." And we meet him, and we learned quickly that he had lived in this homeless shelter and he wanted to bring in food because he said when people came in with food when he lived there it felt like it was a great day because someone cared about him. And so, he had pulled himself out of that homeless shelter by starting a landscaping business and this landscaping business relied on his truck and his truck had broken down. When we even asked him if we could help, he wouldn't mention this sort of situation that he was in where his whole business was in peril. He'd always bring it back to bringing the pizzas to homeless shelter and so we ended up pulling our money which is about 480 dollars, Canadian, and a used car salesman gave us a \$2100 truck for \$480 and we drove it up to Brent, we tossed him the keys, and the moment he saw the truck, he just immediately bearhugged me and started to cry and just held on for a long time and that moment was . . . changed just what we thought about in terms of like what we knew was important and like the real heart of

this project, which was helping other people. And so that's sort of when we decided, "Okay, we've got to keep doing this."

Jen: So, are there big goals on your list that you haven't accomplished yet? I think you said you have accomplished 91 of the 100, so what's holding your back?

[Jen laughs]

I mean *come on*.

[Jen and Ben laugh]

Ben: Come on, slacker! Yes, we have. There's been a lot of list items that I've added to and changed list items off, as you grow your list changes. But this 100 is kind of the original 100. We've done 91 of the initial 100. The two that I would love to cross off and that we're kind of actively working on right now, number 91, which is make a movie. This film that we started in 2006 that we thought would take two weeks to finish and we'd show to our friends, is not done. But we've shot a thousand hours of footage and you've seen this whole story over 10 plus years and we were like all different types of footage and this is like a really cool medium and so we want to finish that by crossing off number 100 which is: go to space. Go to space is a tricky one to figure out, but we are working on it, so those are the two big ones left.

Jen: And even though that scares you, you are probably going to say yes, right?

Ben: Yeah, probably.

Jen: Because that's what you do.

[Ben laughs]

Ben: Are we recording that?

Jen: We are, because I'm going to hold you accountable.

[Jen laughs]

So, Ben, circling back to the beginning of your story, I would love to know if you ever went back to kick that goal?

Ben: Yeah, it's a good question. So, what I realized about that initial time when I went through that hard time and when I was playing rugby and I was putting a lot of pressure on myself. As I reflect, I realized I actually didn't really like rugby that much. And as I thought about times in my life where I've hit lows, I started to understand that okay, I'm probably doing something in my life right now that is making me unhappy, and with rugby I did it because it was cool, like I did it because that's what everybody did. It's like football in the South, like that was the thing to do, but I didn't love it. And so, what the consequence was is that I was suppressing my creative expression, and what I learned is that creativity as an outlet is something that I need to do to be operating at my full potential. And so I was suppressing that because I didn't have time to do it and then buried what became my creative outlet. I hit that again recently, three years ago when I was running our production company that we started, I wasn't able to be creative and I ended up deciding to not do that anymore and that's when I pivoted into speaking and now speaking is my creative outlet, podcast, content, all that stuff. So, I just learned throughout this, as I was growing

up, that sometimes when I felt depressed it was because of what I was doing. In hindsight, this decision to be more intentional about the people that I surround myself with people that give me energy versus take energy was the thing that changed my trajectory. And it's easier said than done. Because sometimes it's complicated, you can't just leave people that are . . . whether they would be family or really close friends that may not be giving you energy and that's okay. I understand that you can't just sort of take a left turn and you are gone forever right, you don't want to do that, but you can be aware that they are sort of taking that energy consistently and build your own sort of barriers around that and just be aware of that, it's just the awareness, but the thing that you *can* absolutely do is you can find people in your life that really inspire you, give you energy, and hang out with them more and hang out with their friends more. Because once you start to change your circles of your tribe, then you just by osmosis you start to believe in yourself a little more, you start to think that more things are possible because you see your friends doing things that are amazing and you know that they're no different than you. And so you think, "Wow, they just did that, that is so cool, I want to do what I can do?" And that was the real change for me and that is really about like when you do what you love, you inspire other people to do what they love, and that creates a ripple and so when my friend, who I didn't know very well started a clothing line, I went to him, I said, "Hey, this is so awesome. I don't think I can be of any service here, but is there anything I can do to help?" He said, "Well, you could like try and get us some press," and I was able to get the clothing line in a big cool hunting blog and I thought, "Wow, that was really easy! He did that . . . what should I do?" And so just if you can gravitate towards people that inspire you in your life, that really fire you up—that can have an amazing impact.

Jen: It's the old adage that you become most like the five people you surround yourself with.

Ben: Yep.

Jen: So, Ben, is there anything else you want to leave our listeners with before we close?

Ben: I would love if people could do two things at the end of this podcast: One, is take 20 minutes to sit somewhere quiet and write your list and just think about anything that you've ever wanted to do, think about all the different categories of your life and just stream of consciousness, write your list. And then now that you've written it and it's real, take a photo of it and if you don't have an accountability, I'll be your accountability buddy and you can share with me, tag me on Instagram or Twitter which is @BenNemtin, which is just my full name and that's just a great way to also share with your community so you'll then feel even more accountable because you posted, so I think those two things are just simple ways you can sort of build inspiration through action and start to build accountability.

Jen: That's awesome. Well, I will be the first one to take you up on that.

[music]

I am so grateful Ben could be with us today. Thank you to our producers and our listeners. You can find the WorkWell podcast series on deloitte.com or you can visit various podcatchers using the key word *WorkWell*—all one word—to hear more. And if you like the show, don't forget to subscribe so you get all of our future episodes. If you have a topic you'd like to hear on the WorkWell podcast series or may be a story you would like to share, please reach out to me on LinkedIn. My profile is under the name "Jen Fisher" or on Twitter

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