

THE YOUNG PERSON'S GUIDE  
TO WINNING  
THE GAME OF LIFE



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*“If you want to change the world, start with yourself.”*

*Mahatma Ghandi*

## CONFESSION

Okay. You're right. Life isn't a game and it isn't all about winning. You busted me. But that doesn't mean there aren't things you definitely want to do and do well (That's kind of like winning ;-). And, you might also admit, it's usually more fun if you can make a game out of things, especially chores or tasks because if nothing else it makes them go quicker. Plus, if you make a game out of it you might enjoy stuff that previously drove you nuts.

Okay, so here we go. You're now aware this high-claim-making document is about being good at the stuff you want to be good at — you decide—and finding legit ways to enjoy it.

Before we get started you might like to know I view you: young person embarking on an incredible journey, adventure, sometimes amazing experience, often challenging set of obstacles, occasionally tragic and sometimes unbelievably horrible, and other times dynamic and fun-filled, joyous and in between times incredibly normal and average and perplexingly boring four-lettered word spelled l-i-f-e, as a born winner.

So listen up.

This is for you: all of you crazy folks caught between teenage angst and adult responsibility.



# ONE

**Y**ou're going to be okay.  
You really are.

Start with that in mind. No matter how outside the lines you draw, or how often you find yourself looking at your friends from a distance when they run off to play... without you. No matter what you see when you look in the mirror or how many imperfections you can list under the heading "Things I Suck At," you are going to be okay. This weird thing called teenager, or twenty-something, Gen X, Y, and/or Z. Wherever you stand on the treadmill right now, this will pass and you are going to be okay.

I know you're thinking "Easy for you to say. You don't have my life with adults pressuring me to do things I don't want to do and taking away the things I like." True that. However, I've been around this species enough to know there is a lot of consistency between the drama, the tedium and the glory. You're going to be okay, at a minimum, and if this guide and you get along well there's a good chance you'll crush it. So keep that in mind the next time the poop hits the whirling blades of the proverbial fan scattering you-know-what all over your dreams and weekend plans.



*I'm gonna be okay? I guess you haven't seen my report card.*

**Additional takeaway: Start each day determined to do one thing better today than you did yesterday.**

# TWO



*Start with where you are.*

**Y**ou're thinking, "It's fine to predict success in the long term but what of the here and now?" In the heat of the moment no amount of I'm-going-to-be-okay thinking will make your bad grade in biology go away or even inch upwards out of the quagmire of disgrace where it festers. Heck, you're equipped with a pretty fancy 'fight or flight' mechanism which helps you throw punches or run in the opposite direction when bad things come your way. Telling you yourself sweet nothings doesn't do anything to subdue the sucky-grade monster at your door. Let's binge on TikTok, that always make the grade monster curl up in the corner for a little while.

Point Two: wherever you are that's where you start. Don't imagine you need to already be a certain person, or have done something already to get started.

"If I had his smarts I'd be getting better grades." Sorry. That's a losing strategy. Start where you are with what you've got. Now! I mean it. Build from where you are standing. Start with the dirt (metaphor for sucky biology grade) under your feet. Don't for a minute allow yourself to rationalize away positive action on your part by blaming your less than ideal circumstances. Take what you have (a sucky understanding of amoebas) and learn more, and keep learning, and test your knowledge and show up for class on time, and take notes and put away your phone and ask questions and keep your focus on the subject of the moment, and review your notes.

Find something about what you learned in today's class to talk with a friend about, your parents, a grandparent if they're around. Start with where you're at. Right now! I mean it.

**Additional takeaway: If you make small, not even small, tiny improvements day after day you win.**

# THREE

**S**et a standard for yourself. A what? A standard. What do I mean by that?  
No worries.

Another way to say this is have expectations of yourself. In other words, don't rely on the people around you to set standards or establish expectations for you.

What's that look like?

When you do something that's important, set a standard for paying attention, exerting effort, looking for clues and patterns and overall comprehension of the topic. You're about to study for that biology midterm. Set your own personal this-is-what-I-expect-of-myself standards for how you study, the quantity of lecture notes you'll re-write in your own words, the way you'll organize the topics for review, how much time you'll spend on practice questions, etc. This stuff is left very vague by teachers and parents and that's fine. It's a free world. You decide what your standards are, no one else is responsible for that. Set a standard for yourself that matches your thrill at being a unique and irreplaceable individual, a standard that reflects your excitement at the possibilities ahead. There ain't another you. You get to decide how much effort to expect of yourself, how much attention to put on the topic, how many gnawing questions to have answered before the midterm, how many definitions to memorize. You set the standards for you. Caveat: when it's something important make those standards as high as you can without getting sucked into the perfectionist's tendency to sabotage any output that isn't perfect. Set standards for your input of effort, focus, curiosity, thoughtfulness and thoroughness. Period. Output, while important doesn't always match your input, especially in the beginning. With consistent effort output improves over time.



*You get to establish how much effort you bring to any task. Let that effort match your enthusiasm for your irreplaceable self.*

**Additional takeaway:** Don't go to bed until you've picked one thing that you are willing to do a tiny bit better tomorrow than you did today.

# FOUR

"Curiosity killed the cat." Terrible, terrible aphorism.

There certainly are times when urgency or other requirements dictate that you keep your focus on one thing and one thing only (shooting a free throw or listening to your math teacher explain a formula come to mind). Between those moments of intense focus are plenty of others when something pops into your head and you find yourself saying "I wonder how that thing works." Or, "How heavy do you think that is?" Or, "I wonder if I could figure out how to fix that."



*Curious about something. Or stuff doesn't make sense? Raise your hand. Find out what's going on.*

The questions that come bubbling up from seemingly nowhere other than the nether regions of your mind are clues. Pay attention to them.

Allow yourself to take them seriously. Don't brush them off as the silly musings of a distracted mind. Write them down. Return to them. Talk to someone about them. Keep coming back to these curiosities of yours until they either take

you deeper or they fizzle out. And even those that fizzle out will have been useful, provided you with something worthwhile in terms of knowledge gained, wonderment embellished, curiosity strengthened, research skills honed and something interesting to talk about when conversation with that pretty girl or handsome boy hits a snag.

However, it's the ones that don't fizzle that this is geared toward. That curious impulse, question and sense of wonder is yours. It's precious. The ones that lead you down meaningful roads can become the pillars of an extraordinary life. Be curious and don't worry about the cats.

*Are you clear, in your own head, exactly what that little thing is that you will do better tomorrow, guaranteed, than you did it today?*

# FIVE

I've alluded to this already but please, please, please have a healthy relationship with failure.

Yup. That bit where you come up short, say the wrong thing, choose the wrong answer, miss the goal, drop your ice cream, loose the game sucks. No doubt. Take a deep breath and realize the road splits and you have two choices. Number one and the

one that has become surprisingly popular of late is to throw in the towel, give up and walk away with your head hanging low and a silent commitment to never try that again, whatever it was.

Number two is to exhale after a deep breath and ask yourself, Okay, what can I learn from this that will give me a greater chance of success next time? Think. Stew. Replay the critical parts in your head. See if you can find out what you did (not what others did, what YOU did) that caused things to not go so well. You might not have been all of the cause things went south but chances are you were some part of it.

It is so important to allow yourself to feel the momentary disappointment of your failure and then to follow that deep breath with a dusting off and a good think. "Okay," you say to yourself, "time to figure out how to do better next time." Develop this healthy response to and relationship with failure and you will become darn near unstoppable.



*"Could I get another ice cream? I FAILED to get mine to stand up on it's own."*

**Persist. Persist with that thing. Persist day after day with that thing you'll do a tiny bit better today than you did it yesterday.**



# SIX



If you knew I was a former English teacher you could have seen this one coming.

Words. Words. Words.

Yup. Those things. As you may have noticed, I've used quite a few so far to make my point.

Get good at reading them. Get good at writing them. Get good at speaking them. Get good at using them to ask good questions. Get good at listening to them and playing them back to see if you understand them correctly. Get good at catching words that don't make sense and stopping the conversation with a pointed question until they do make sense.

Know that words are like a doctor's surgical tools. Words are the things that you use to cut through the outer tissue and find out what's going on inside a body. You already know that they are great for telling jokes, spinning stories, courting a pretty partner and telling a sibling to leave your room. On top of that words are used to cover things up, make you look the other way while someone picks your pocket. Words are used to get you to not think, to not question, to not investigate or dig deeper. Fortunately for the surgeon she doesn't encounter a scalpel wielding adversary when she starts her surgery but you do, or can encounter someone using words to silence you, embarrass you, frighten you, intimidate you, or put you down.

So, it's beholden upon you to become a ninja wordsmith, word user, word decipherer and word precisionist. Look up words. Write down their definitions. Learn each word's multiple definitions and how to tell which one is the right one. Practice using new words in your own sentences. Never stop learning and using new words. You're an English speaker, reader, writer and learner. English has over 600,000 words. How many do you know? How many can you use correctly in a sentence. Word it up. Daily. Word.

You're it. It's on you. You choose what it is that today you will do a smidgen better than yesterday. That's it.

# SEVEN

This word has become tarnished of late with its association with economies that promote it or discourage this idea but we shouldn't be afraid of it. We can understand it for what it is and engage it when appropriate.

The word?

Competition.

The point is to step boldly into competitive scenarios when and where it makes sense. The point is to see yourself as your one true competitor, as in: today you're in competition with that less polished

yesterday version of you. That's the game. Although let's not forget competing against others in a game of chess, a timed bike trial, a golf match or pickup basketball, a spelling bee and a baking contest are all healthy examples of competition. Therefore, it is your yesterday performance: the last time you wrote a paper, built a bird house or studied for a final, that you want to give a good beating to. If you catch my drift.

When you beat former you, the lousy tennis player you were yesterday, the poor math student you were last week, the klutz on the guitar you were over the weekend, this is when you start racking up the wins in life.

That being said, don't be afraid of competing, or going toe to toe against one who is a lot better than you. Under such competitive circumstances you supercharge your learning. You open yourself up to become a better version of yourself, even in a lopsided setting. That's not to say you should seek out a game of chess against the state champ. But, if you get the chance, grab it and take the guaranteed loss as a great chance to up your game.

**Pick it. I dare you. That one thing that you could keep getting a smidgen better at. Do it. Do it today. Do it a skosh better than yesterday. Don't wait. Don't hesitate.**



# EIGHT

So dear reader as we wrap up and say goodbye you are probably at your limit of winning points to retain for the moment. How very human of you. 😊

I am incautiously gonna slap down one more point before you turn me off and go to bed. As focused as this guide is on your growth and strength, let's not forget we need each other. Yet as already shared, Ghandi said, *"If you want to change the world [make it better for other people] start with yourself."*

Why didn't he say *"If you want to change the world get off your butt and change it?"*

Pardon the blunt reminder of something you are no doubt privately aware of, but... you're not worth much in the change-the-world department if you don't bring a strong set of skills, knowledge, critical thinking, collaborative or at least creative instincts and enthusiasm tempered with some hands on experience even if that part is rather light to begin with.



All of these life winning points are ultimately about winning the game for others. Pause. Let it sink in. By becoming a better you, you become a, chose your metaphor: a sharper saw, a brighter beacon, a stronger voice, a wiser guide in the game of making life better for others. If that doesn't help you knuckle down and memorize those algebra formulas, well at least it's something to chew on.

Point eight is captured by the word empathy. Empathy. Think listening to others. Think understanding others. Think setting your opinions and perspective aside and trying to see the world through someone else's eyes. Think accepting this other person as they are and walking a few paces in their shoes. Period. Remember, you are making yourself as strong an agent of positive change as possible. Drop your view of the world and listen to someone else explain, express, ramble on,

complain and even cast a few aspersions, regardless of how imprecisely or outrageously their words and thoughts appear on the surface.

Fear not, you won't lose your values, you won't lose your perspective in doing so. None of the things you hold dear are weakened unless they were weak ideas or values or beliefs to begin with. Empathize and you will be opening the door to those exchanges that go by the names of collaborate, cooperate, and community. Make yourself an expert at describing someone else's perspective, beliefs, rationale, point-of-view.

The biggest objection to this is when you find yourself interacting with people you disagree with. Don't agree with them. Listen to them. See what they are seeing. Neither do you need to defend your beliefs. If they are well formed and supported by reality they won't wash away when you do your best to understand someone else no matter how different they are from you. Empathize because you need others. Empathize because you want to make the world a better place to live. Empathize because it makes you a sharper saw, more aware and capable of not only doing more, but doing better.

Ah, so there you have it.

I can already see you standing at the top of your mountain, the one that represents your full potential realized. That mountain where you hold yourself up and raise your hands to the sky having checked off the boxes that represent what you are capable of.

To get to the top of your particular peak you met or exceeded all the raw potential you were born with. You sweated, grunted, persisted, picked yourself off the ground over and over to get there and that's why this is so rewarding. You're flush with the feeling that you're on the right path. You're excited by the possibilities that lie ahead. You are connected and involved with efforts big and small. The small ones are just as important as the big ones, and they nudge the world in a positive, hopeful, healthier, more harmonious and enlightened, peaceful and prosperous direction.

Bravo to you for reading this and considering how even one of these points applied to your own life might hoist you into a higher plane of execution and task completion, managing your time, organizing your stuff, prioritizing and planning your day, crushing the game of life and seeing a world better off because of it.



## About the Author

Aaron Garland taught high school English in the Roaring Fork Valley (Colorado) for 20 years. He was also a licensed special education teacher and during his teaching career he placed particular emphasis on helping students with their executive functioning skills. In 2018 he left the classroom and started TigerTiger, his coaching service, working with individual students and small groups to teach and strengthen executive skills.

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**At the risk of repeating myself, I also want you to find one thing you did today that you could do better tomorrow. Make it something that matters and commit to doing it. You rock!**

