“Do what you love, not what you’re good at.” — BRET BLAINE, AUTHOR OF BE FIERCELY CURIOUS

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ADVANCE PRAISE FOR DIE EMPTY

"A simple, masterful manual for leading a fulfilled life. I couldn't put it down. Bravo, Todd Henry!" - David Allen, author of the international bestseller Getting Things Done

"In a field crowded with rivals, Todd Henry stands out as a unique and original voice.... If you can read this book and not be inspired, you need a 100% full-body-and-soul transplant. Outstanding!" - Steven Pressfield, bestselling author of The War of Art and Turning Pro

"You have a limited number of days on Earth. This book sends an urgent message: make them count!" - Chris Guillebeau, NYT Bestselling author of The $100 Startup

"Die Empty looks past simple slogans to highlight detailed strategies for building a meaningful life; a must-read for anyone interested in moving from inspiration to action." - Cal Newport, author of So Good They Can't Ignore You

"We all want confirmation that our life compass is pointed in the direction and that we are on course. Die Empty provides practical methods for reflecting and then immediately taking action that keeps you on the right path and helps you unlock your full potential on a daily basis." - Tim Schigel, founder and Chairman of ShareThis
In February 2011, the artist, designer, and urban planner Candy Chang transformed an abandoned home in her New Orleans neighborhood into a living work of art. She had recently lost someone she cared for deeply, and was reflecting on the meaning of life and what truly mattered to her. She was curious to know if other people had similar thoughts about living with a sense of urgency and purpose so she created an enormous chalkboard running the height and width of one side of the abandoned home. She then stenciled the words “Before I Die . . .” at the top of the wall, and created dozens of spaces with the words “Before I die, I want to ____________” in grids across the
DIE EMPTY

surface. Chang provided the chalk needed to fill in the blanks, and waited in anticipation to see what would happen. Would people participate? Would it be vandalized? Would anyone even notice?

She didn’t have to wonder for long. The installation was an immediate hit, as neighborhood residents and passersby filled it with their hopes, dreams, and aspirations. Some of the contributions were impersonal and matter of fact, and some were deeply personal:

“Before I die I want to . . . sing for millions.”
“Before I die I want to . . . write a book.”
“Before I die I want to . . . understand.”
“Before I die I want to . . . tell my mother I love her.”
“Before I die I want to . . . be someone’s cavalry.”

Word quickly spread, and visitors began showing up from throughout the region to inscribe their dreams and creative aspirations on the wall. It wasn’t long before others were inquiring about creating installations in their own communities. At present, there have been more than one hundred “Before I die . . .” installations in cities across the globe, and Chang and her collaborators have developed a tool kit and detailed instructions for spreading the movement.

Why did Chang’s project take off quickly and become so widely covered by international media? I believe it’s because the “Before I Die . . .” wall resonates with what we both know and fear to be true: we have only a certain amount of time available to us, and how we choose to spend our days is significant. We’re also aware that there are things we would like to do and experiences we would like to have before we die, many of which are desires we’ve suppressed for months or even years. We feel the
ticking of the clock, and the accompanying sense that we may be missing our opportunity to make a contribution to the world. However, we often ignore these impulses as a result of the relentless pragmatics of life and work.

Your days are finite. One day, they will run out. As a friend of mine likes to say, “You know, the death rate is hovering right around one hundred percent.” Many people I know spend their entire life trying to avoid this fact. They fill their lives with frantic activity, bouncing from task to task, and no matter how successfully they perform in their work, as they close up shop for the day they are left with the question “Did the work I did today really matter?” Others I’ve met are incredibly successful at, vested in, and highly compensated for their work, but over time they’ve grown stagnant. They sense they have something more to give, but they can’t quite put their finger on why they’re stuck in first gear. They have a nagging suspicion that they are capable of contributing more—maybe even being truly brilliant at something—but have no road map for unlocking what that contribution might be.

This begs the obvious question: How do you set in motion a course of action that will allow you to unleash your best, most valuable work while you still can? The marketplace is filled with (often simplistic and unhelpful) platitudes about living a life of fulfillment, landing your dream job, and discovering your purpose, but when you are in the midst of the fray it can feel futile to think about anything other than hitting your deadlines and chasing the next promotion. It’s easy to get lost, and wake up many years later in a strange land asking yourself, “Who am I, how did I get here, and how do I go back?”

The only way to avoid this scenario is to instill consistent
practices into your life that keep you on a true and steady course. An ounce of preventative discipline today is worth a pound of corrective action later. This book is about cultivating the mind-set and the methods you need to unleash your best work each day, and to increase the odds that, at the end of your life, you will not regret how you spent your days.

Don’t Die Full of Your Best Work

In my first book, *The Accidental Creative*, I recounted a meeting in which a friend from South Africa asked a strange and unexpected question: “What do you think is the most valuable land in the world?”

Several people threw out guesses, such as Manhattan, the oil fields of the Middle East, and the gold mines of South Africa, before our friend indicated that we were way off track. He paused for a moment, and said, “You’re all wrong. The most valuable land in the world is the graveyard. In the graveyard are buried all of the unwritten novels, never-launched businesses, unreconciled relationships, and all of the other things that people thought, ‘I’ll get around to that tomorrow.’ One day, however, their tomorrows ran out.”

That day I went back to my office and I wrote down two words in my notebook and on the wall of my office that have been my primary operating ethic for the last several years: Die Empty. I want to know that if I lay my head down tonight and don’t wake up tomorrow, I have emptied myself of whatever creativity is lingering inside, with minimal regrets about how I spent my focus, time, and energy. This doesn’t happen by accident; it takes intentional and sustained effort. But I can say with
confidence from my own experience and the experiences of others I’ve worked with that the effort is well worth it.

You’ve probably heard “No one ever lay on their deathbed wishing for another day of work.” I think this saying is wrong, and perhaps a little dangerous because of what it implies. First, I believe a great many people do regret not having treated their life with more purpose, and would give anything to have one more chance to approach it with the kind of intention and conviction that imminent death makes palpable. They know that they consistently ignored small twinges of intuition, inspiration, and insight. They recall how they cowered away from risk in favor of comfort. They spent their days regretting their past decisions rather than taking aggressive steps to redirect their life in a more hopeful direction.

Second, this saying presupposes that work is an inherently miserable act that people engage in against their will, or that it’s something that necessarily pulls us away from the people and activities we really care about. But work encompasses much more than just how we make a living. Any value we create that requires us to spend our time, focus, and energy—whether in the context of occupation, relationships, or parenting—is work. Humans, it seems, are wired to find satisfaction by adding value through toil. Thus, for centuries work has been a deeply ingrained part of our identity and our understanding of our place in the world. I believe that the more you apply self-knowledge to how you engage your labor, the more satisfaction you will find in the very act of work, and thus the more joy you will find in life.

If there is one overriding goal of this book it is this: to bring a newfound clarity and sense of urgency to how you approach
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your work on a daily basis, and over your lifetime. I hope to help you lock on to a focused understanding of what’s really important and help you make a commitment to chase after it with gusto rather than simply settling in for the ride.

A Confession

I’ve struggled to write this book, and in full disclosure, I realize I’ve got some things working against me. Here’s the honest truth: no one really wants to think about death, let alone adopt it as some kind of motivational slogan. In fact, my colleagues and I often laugh as we imagine the words “Die Empty” inscribed on a giant banner behind me as I take the stage at a conference. It’s not exactly the kind of feel-good, warm and fuzzy sentiment that large public gatherings are typically designed to cultivate. It would be much safer (and perhaps more lucrative) for me to stay squarely in my lane and continue to write about innovation or collaboration.

And still, I can’t not write this book. As I’ve shared this message with thousands of people over the past few years, I’ve received countless e-mails from around the world about how it’s changed their life perspective and challenged them to approach their work with more urgency. At the same time, I continue to encounter professionals every day who are abandoning their contribution and forfeiting their best work because they’re stuck or deceived into believing that the path they are on will eventually become more bearable. It pains me to think about their unfulfilled potential while knowing that implementing a few simple, daily practices to eliminate areas of ineffectiveness could set them on the right path. Thus, in writing this book I’m
taking my own advice to not leave inside me the work I care about the most.

**What Die Empty Doesn’t Mean**

The phrase “die empty” could easily be misunderstood to mean spending every ounce of yourself on your career. I can imagine a sinister, evil-mustached boss manipulating employees with a motivational poster containing the words “DIE EMPTY!” in the effort to squeeze a little more effort out of the team. This, friends, could not be further from what I hope this book will accomplish.

It’s not about getting everything done today

Karōshi is a Japanese term that means “death from overwork.” In the past several decades, it has become more common in Japanese culture, which in the years since World War II has heavily emphasized the importance of work productivity over all other aspects of life. Many high-ranking executives have died in the prime of life for no apparent reason other than the ill effects of overwork. To be clear, this is not what I mean by “die empty.” It’s not about ignoring all areas of your life so that you can exclusively focus on getting work done. In fact, working frantically is actually counterproductive in many cases. Emptying yourself of your best work isn’t just about checking off tasks on your to-do list, it’s about making steady, critical progress each day on the projects that matter, in all areas of life. Embracing work with this mind-set will not only increase your chances of tackling your goals, but will also make it all more gratifying.
It’s not the same as “live like there’s no tomorrow”

Opportunity is always accompanied by its twin sibling: responsibility. Today you have a chance to make a difference through your work, but you must also be mindful of how today’s actions will affect tomorrow’s outcomes, and how your work impacts the lives of others. You must be conscious of how today’s choices beget tomorrow’s regrets.

It’s not about following your whims

You have a responsibility to leverage your passions, skills, and experiences to make a contribution to the world. You also need to make sure that you are delivering on your expectations and honoring the people who are paying you to produce results. The most frustrating part of work for many people is the tug-of-war between making a contribution you believe in and honoring the expectations of your manager or client, even if it means doing work you are less proud of. But as you’ll see throughout the book, the tension between these two forces can often be remedied with a subtle shift in mindset, which will also lead to more satisfaction, and ultimately, better work.

What Die Empty Does Mean

Throughout the rest of this book we will be operating by a set of core beliefs that underlie the practices and principles you’ll learn along the way. These beliefs will help you be more purposeful in how you approach your work.
Your days are numbered—finite—someday they will run out.

This is indisputable. We live with the stubborn illusion that we will always have tomorrow to do today’s work. It’s a lie. We need to live with a sense of urgency about the work we do today. It matters not just because an opportunity lost today is an opportunity lost forever, but because the way that we engage in our work ultimately affects the way that we engage in our life as a whole. As you grow in your capacity to engage in your work, and as you discipline yourself to make continuous growth a part of your daily approach, you will find that latent capacities arise in every area of your life. Don’t waste the opportunity.

You have a unique contribution to make to the world

This is not self-help mumbo jumbo; it’s the truth. It’s easier to dismiss this notion than to own up to it and do something about it. You possess a one-of-a-kind combination of passions, skills, and experiences; there is something you bring to your work that no one else could. If you relinquish that power, then it will never see the light of day and you will always wonder “what if?” The price of regret is incalculable.

No one else can make your contribution for you

Waiting for permission to act is the easy way out. Everyone has to play the hand they’re dealt. This means that you can’t make a habit of pointing fingers, blaming others, or complaining. As painful as it can be, unfairness is baked into every aspect of life,
and to make a contribution and empty yourself of your potential, you have to come to terms with it and refuse to be a victim.

Your contribution is not about you

You cannot function solely out of a desire to be recognized for what you do. You may be rewarded with accolades and riches for your work. You may also labor in obscurity doing brilliant work your entire life. More likely, you’ll fall somewhere in the middle. There is an overemphasis on celebrity and recognition in our culture, and it will eventually be the death of us. Cultivating a love of the process is the key to making a lasting contribution.

Avoid comfort—it is dangerous

If making a significant impact was easy, it would be commonplace. It’s not common because there are many forces that lead to stagnancy and mediocrity. For example, some people, whether co-workers, managers, or even friends, may not want you to fully engage in the pursuit of great work because it places an onus on them to do the same. If you begin to rise above the pack, they will quickly try to bring you back to earth. Also, organizations often make it easy to settle in, providing you with a good salary, a nice title, or a sense of stability—the proverbial “golden handcuffs.” It’s easy to fall in love with these comfortable perks, but the love of comfort is often the enemy of greatness. There’s nothing wrong with experiencing comfort as a by-product of your labor, but you can’t make it your chief goal. Greatness emerges when you consistently choose to do what’s right, even when it’s uncomfortable.
Take a stand—don’t shape-shift

You are better positioned to make a contribution if you align your work around your values. Don’t be a mirror, passively reflecting the priorities of others. You must dig through the rubble to the core principles that guide your life, come hell or high water. Then commit to engaging your work with a clean conscience, knowing that you are holding true to those principles. There is plenty of room to experiment and try new things, but if you don’t stand for what you believe in, you will eventually lose yourself in your work.

Your understanding of your “sweet spot” develops over time like film in a darkroom

In baseball, there is a place on the bat called the “sweet spot,” the best part with which to strike the ball. It will send the ball soaring a lot farther than if you hit it even a few fractions of an inch off the mark with the same effort. Similarly, you have a “sweet spot” in your life by which you will add the most unique value through your efforts.

Too many people want to come out of the gate with a clear understanding of their life’s mission. There is no one thing that you are wired to do, and there are many ways you can add value to the world, while operating in your sweet spot. However, these opportunities will only become clear over time as you act. They will develop slowly like film in a darkroom, giving you clues as you experiment, fail, and succeed. You have to try different things, and devote yourself to developing your skills and intuition, before you will begin to see noticeable patterns and
understand your unique value. Patience is required. This is a long-arc game, but it must begin now.

You must plant seeds today for a harvest later

What you plant today you reap tomorrow, or farther down the road. You must structure your life around daily progress based on what matters to you, building practices and activities that allow you to plant new seeds each day, with the knowledge that you will eventually see the fruits of your labor.

While the universal principles outlined above are not overtly expressed in the remainder of the book, you will find that they inform many of the specific practices you will learn. In the end, my hope is that you will embrace the importance of now, and refuse to allow the lull of comfort, fear, familiarity, and ego to prevent you from taking action on your ambitions.

How to Read This Book

Die Empty is divided into three sections. The first three chapters discuss the nature of contribution, why work matters, and why so many brilliant, skilled people end up settling for less than they’re capable of. Chapters 4 through 10 share specific principles that will help you cultivate the mind-set and methods to unleash your best work. The final two chapters offer strategies for applying these principles in your daily life, and using them to uncover a deeper sense of cohesion and purpose.

While the entire book is intended to be practical and immediately implementable, there may be some chapters that resonate more than others. If this is the case for you, I’d recommend
spending extra time with these chapters and doing the exercises and questions contained therein before continuing with the rest of the book. Doing this may provide an extra measure of clarity as you consider other, less pressing issues. There are also suggestions for sharing the ideas in this book with people you know and work with. I’d encourage you to do so, as one of the best ways to internalize a concept is to teach it to others.

A final word of caution: the following chapters don’t contain quick fixes or shot-in-the-arm tactics designed to make you look on the bright side of life. (Of course, in picking up a book titled *Die Empty* I suspect you probably weren’t expecting lollipops and rainbows.) While I believe that a positive outlook is critical to maintaining traction, no one is served by false promises of effortless bliss.

Rather, my goal is to tell it to you as straight as I know how. I believe you’re capable of more, and that your best work is still ahead of you. However, all the positive thinking in the world will not amount to anything without decisive action. The rest of us need you to act, because if you don’t, you’re robbing yourself, your peers, your family, your organization, and the world of a contribution that only you can make.

The cost of inaction is vast. Don’t go to your grave with your best work inside you. Choose to die empty.
Coming September 26, 2013

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