Getting What You Want
By Barbara Sher with Annie Gottlieb

Goals needn't scare you. Here is a step-by-step program on how you attain them.

In her new book, Wishcraft, Barbara Sher gives the blueprint for success that she has taught to thousands. In Part I, which appeared in our last issue, Ms. Sher told how to find out what you want -- by paying attention to your earliest ambitions and your present day dreams, to the things you like to do (not merely the things you do well), to what you would consider an ideal day, to analyzing your personal style and to seeing yourself as others see you. Once you have learned what you need to be happy—that is, successful—you can go on to achieve it. In this excerpt she tells you how.

It's easy to dream; with just a little encouragement you can close your eyes and conjure up a whole new life for yourself. But if you want to make that life come true, you will have to start by choosing one little part of it and deciding that that's what you are going to go for first. You need to set goals.

Setting a target date for any goal is the beginning of all effective planning -- the antidote to both procrastination ("Oh, I'll get there someday") and despair ("I'll never get there"). If you know you have committed yourself to a goal, then time suddenly becomes a quantity you can work with --and had better start working with right now. You can make your goal any specific, concrete action or event that will satisfy you.

It took quite a bit of coaxing before Andrea, a twenty-six-year-old New York secretary, admitted with embarrassment that her goal was to be famous -- she wasn't even sure what for. "I think it's really kind of sick that I feel this way," she said. "It keeps me from being able just to do things and enjoy doing them."

I asked Andrea whether she could name some of the things she thought she might enjoy being famous for.

"Well…movie star or director, singer, photographer, fashion designer. It's fame for performance, for a kind of continual performance, not a one-shot deal. The trouble is, I don't' know whether I'd really like to do those things, or whether I'd just like to be famous for them!" I asked her whether she would like to be respected for what she did-- for the quality of her work. She said yes, that would be important. So Andrea's goal could now be defined: "Fame for continual quality performance."

Next we had to figure out how she could get some of that flavor of fame into her life as quickly as possible. She said she'd done some photography, and had even become so involved that she'd stayed up all night developing prints in a friend's darkroom! So photography it was. Now we need to find out what kind of photography would allow Andrea to be the celebrity she wanted to be along the speediest route. Andrea's quickest route to fame with quality might very well be taking good pictures of famous people.

From there it was a short step to defining Andrea's first goal: "To have one or more photographs of celebrities published in a quality national magazine." It was beautifully tailored to Andrea's needs, it could be planned for a target date -- and she knew she'd love it. Andrea became a successful photographer: showing that often if you have a dream, a series of smaller goals achieved can lead to getting what you want.

The sooner you start getting some of what you really want, the more energy you'll have to continue. You'll also be happier, healthier and nicer to be around. That is why it is so important to pick a goal that gets at least a shining chip of it into your hands right way. I'm not a believer in "delay of gratification." Never take the long way around if you can get the essence of your goal by a shorter route.

For June, a theater student whose goal was "getting my first Oscar," the problem was different: "I know what I want, but it's so far away -- how will I ever get there?"

June, a senior at a large state university, had fallen in love with acting in student productions and had gotten rave reviews in the school paper. She was bravely aiming high, but she didn't even know whether to move to New York or Los Angeles after graduation, much less how to put her new ambition on the shortest road to success. Since June's touchstone was "recognition for fine acting," her first goal was "to star in my first Off-Off Broadway show." She might make her next target landing a major part in a student or a low-budget movie.

When you have a long-range goal like June's, it's still a dream. You can and should set a date for it -- that will help to make it real -- but it isn't a goal you can plot your path to, reach out and grab -- at least not soon enough to give you joy and hope. So you will need to set yourself a first target: a smaller goal that is both a step on the road to your ultimate destination and a little triumph in its own right.

Remember that goals exist only to serve you and make you happy. You don't exist to serve them. If a goal isn't serving you, you are free to change it. It's just that sometimes there's no way to find out whether or not a particular goal really suits you except by trying for it. If it doesn't suit you, you will still have gained something priceless: the experience of making real progress toward a goal -- and the practical skills...
for doing it. Those skills can be applied to any goal—just as your hands, once they've actually built a bookcase, can easily craft a kitchen cabinet.

**KEEP A JOURNAL**

I'm going to equip you with a useful tool for your success survival kit. It's called an Actions and Feelings Journal and in it you will make a brief, simple notation at the end of each day. Starting today, make a brief note each evening of what you have done that day—no matter how small or unimportant it may seem to you. You might start with "Decided on my goal," or "Started notebook." As you start moving toward your goal, you will be recording things like phone calls you made, letters you've written, visits to the library or an employment agency, a helpful conversation with friends, a page or a paragraph or even just a sentence toward the article or thesis you have to write. Just buying a pad of paper, some stamps, or a pair of new shoes for an interview is enough.

If you think you haven't done anything that led toward your goal, put down whatever you did do that day. Never write "Nothing." Write, "Pronounced house" or "Went to the movies" or "Stayed in bed and ate a whole pizza all by myself." You need to begin to realize, now that you have a goal, that your whole life is headed toward it. Even what looks to you like backward steps are positive actions of another kind. They express some real and valid part of you, and they serve a purpose. Maybe you were pushing yourself too hard and needed a rest. Maybe you were feeling scared. Maybe you needed to have a reward. That's OK. Just write down what you did.

Under the heading "How I felt," you might put "Great," or "hopeless," or "I feel that I'm getting somewhere," or "Scared," or "Bored," or "Angry over all the time I wasted before," or even "Fed up with the whole thing." Don't judge your feelings. Just record them honestly.

One purpose of your Actions and Feelings Journal is to keep a simple record of what you accomplish day by day. You can't imagine how important this is. Most of us have a very distorted notion of how things actually get done in this world. We think that accomplishment comes only from great deeds. We imagine our heroes striding toward their goals in seven-league boots—writing best-selling novels in three months, building business empires overnight, soaring to stardom out of nowhere—and this gives rise to painfully unrealistic expectations of ourselves. And yet nothing could be further from the truth. Great deeds are made up of small, steady actions, and it is these that you must learn to value and sustain.

Often you feel you've done nothing when you've actually done a lot. That's because what you did do seemed beneath notice—it was so small that it didn't "count." But it did—just as each stitch counts toward a finished dress, each brick or nail toward a house you can live in, each mistake toward knowing how to do things right. Directed action, no matter how small, moves toward its point. When you write down what you've done, you will have to realize you've done it—and you'll begin to see how small steps add up.

The second purpose of the Actions and Feelings Journal is to let you discover for yourself how your feelings and actions are related—or unrelated. You will find that they don't match up in any consistent, predictable, cause-and-effect way. You can often do as much when you're feeling negative as when you're sparkling. When I started keeping my journal, I discovered that I often made the least substantial progress on my high days—I was too busy celebrating, knocking on wood, wondering how long it will last, and so on. In a low mood, it's harder to appreciate what you've done. You may not have the jubilant sensation of progress even when you have the fact of it. That's why an objective record of your actions is so important. The daily entries in your Actions and Feelings Journal will represent gained ground: real progress you can see and savor, whatever your mood of the moment may be.

**SURVIVAL MESSAGES:**

**PREPARE.** Suppose you have something to do that you've never done before that involves presenting or selling yourself: going to a job interview, asking for a raise, or taking samples of your handmade greeting cards around to gift shops. You're scared. Being scared just makes you feel more inadequate, more sure that you're going to lose the power of speech and trip over your own two feet.

The survival message here is an urgent request for preparation: information, instruction, and rehearsal. You aren't supposed to be born knowing everything—although some men and women think they are. If you don't know something, say, "I'd better find out."

Get all the information and instruction you can. Someone who's had experience is the source to go to. If you're scheduled for a job interview in a particular company, it will help you to know in advance as much as you can about that company. Read about the company. Talk with somebody who works there. It may seem silly to you to actually practice a phone call or an interview, but it's one of the most reassuring things you can do if you're nervous.

Whatever it is you've got coming up, sit back in a comfortable chair, close your eyes, relax and imagine how you'd do it if you were perfect. Flawless performances by the person you wish you were, the person you've only seen in movies and daydreams...who doesn't exist.
I disagree with people who think it’s possible to be “over prepared.” I really don’t think there is such a thing. Just as long as you don’t forget that the real situation will be different from your practice sessions, that it remains fundamentally unpredictable, preparation can do you nothing but good.

**LOWER YOUR STANDARDS.** When you’re starting a project, what I want you to do is lower your standards until they disappear. That’s right. You’re not supposed to be any good at the beginning. Why not give yourself a liberating gift of joyously expecting yourself to be bad?

First steps are supposed to be small and manageable. That’s what makes it possible to do them. And “Become a good painter” or “Write a best-seller” is not a small, manageable step. It’s a major goal. If you ever want to get there, take my advice and make your first steps toward your goal something like, “one bad page a day” or “one roll of bad photographs a week.” You will tighten up your standards later -- when you have the experience to match them. In the meantime, remember the worst you can produce can’t possibly be as bad as the worst you can imagine. And you might also like to remember this cheerful piece of advice from Robert Townsend, author of the book, *Up the Organization*: “anything worth doing is worth doing badly.”

As your competence grows, it can be given simple tasks to master, then gradually harder ones; it can be introduced little by little to wider and more discriminating audiences. You’ve got to pace new challenges and demands so that your skill gets stretched a little more each time, but never snapped or hopelessly outdistanced. A good basic principle is: “Your reach should always be one step ahead of your grasp.” You can build this kind of graduated risk right into your planning.

The safest arena is solitude. It’s the place to start if other people’s eyes make you feel judged and self-conscious. When none is watching, you can play freely, and that freedom of movement is crucial for discovering and developing the natural direction of your talent. Training and discipline can come later. The next step should be to set a target date for venturing out and showing your work to someone else. Make it your family or close friend -- someone who is not an expert in your chosen field. At this beginning stage of the game you don’t want professional critical judgment, you want loving appreciation. Your family and friends will think you’re fabulous, and their praise and suggestions will help you discover that it’s safe to be your growing self in front of others’ eyes. Only then can you move into a more impersonal and demanding arena.

No matter how prepared you are, each time you move to a higher level of performance or to a more exacting audience, you are going to get scared -- like a diver who’s comfortable on the three-foot board but feels sick the first time he has to go off the ten-footer. You cannot be over prepared, but it’s equally true that you will never be ready. That’s why you have to set definite dates for each step in your plan.

**BE SCARED.** If you feel scared before you make a difficult move, don’t fight it. Let yourself be scared. It’s your body’s natural response to novelty and uncertainty, and it’s designed to tune you up to peak readiness -- not to paralyze you.

The hard time is the day or hour before you go into action. This is when all the frank physical symptoms of fear show up. You may feel like you’re going to have a heart attack. But all that’s really happening is that you’re anticipating, the energy of readiness is revving up, and it doesn’t have an outlet yet. So give it an outlet. Move. Pace the floor, punch the wall, shred paper, shiver, and dance. Make noise. Moan, complain, growl, swear, scream and cry.

Then, when the heat is on, be a pro. When you come “offstage” and it’s all over, you can go to pieces -- you have that relief to look forward to. It will help you concentrate on the action itself.

**FOCUS:** when the moment comes: *Do it right, do it wrong, but do it.* Squeeze your eyes shut and jump because a wonderful thing happens then. Your focus shifts from yourself, your nervousness and your imagined inadequacies to the task at hand.

You may have noticed that at the times you are feeling best, you do very little thinking about yourself. You are background of awareness, not an object in the foreground. You focus attention on yourself only when you feel bad. And then, of course, you can’t see anything else.

The funny thing is that the minute you switch your attention from the unsolvable problem in front of you, you feel a surge of energy and relief.

**DON’T BE AFRAID OF MISTAKES.** “Yes, but what if I make a terrible mistake? What if I fail?” you ask yourself.

Well, what if you do? What’s so terrible about that? Many adults feel that one failure, setback or mistake will be a sign of ultimate defeat and worthlessness. But look at any child learning to walk. That child will have to fall down at least a hundred times before he masters the art, and instinctively he knows it. Watch what any one-year-old does when he falls down. He has a fit -- not so much in pain as in impatience and fury. Then he crawls over to the nearest chair leg, pulls himself up and tries again. If that child fell down once and gave up, he would never learn to walk. And that’s a beautiful model for every kind of learning.

You will never learn or accomplish or create anything of value if you cannot let yourself make mistakes. All successful people know this. You tell a top achiever in any field, “I failed. I feel like giving up.”
and she or he will say, "You're crazy." Herman Melville, author of *Moby Dick*, went so far as to say, "He who has never failed somewhere...cannot be great. Failure is the true test of greatness."

There is a strange and comforting relationship between failure and preparation. It's a common assumption that if you really try your hardest to get something and don’t get it, you'll be shattered --so it's safer not to risk going all out. The exact opposite is true. If you've prepared for every contingency you can imagine and then it doesn't work out, you won't feel so bad. You'll just say, "Drat! Well, three cheers for me, I really tried," and go on to the next thing. You never feel really bad when you've given something your best shot. You may be disappointed, but you don’t blame yourself. But if you haven't given it your best shot, you feel awful. Because you never really know whether you could have done better...but you do know you could have done more. Win or lose, all-out efforts leave you feeling good about yourself.

**REWARD YOURSELF.** I do not happen to be a believer in the cliché that "virtue is its own reward." As far as I am concerned, the reward for virtue should be at least a chocolate sundae, and preferably a cruise to the Bahamas. Virtue is hard work and frequently uncomfortable. Yes, the results are satisfying in themselves -- immensely so. But the satisfaction of accomplishment is much too complex, adult and uncertain a reward to promise the frightened child in you. You need something simple, sure and sweet to look forward to.

There is not one but two kinds of rewards you should plan to make a regular feature of your success program. The first is the kind of reward you can earn. You get to look forward to it before you do a hard thing, and then to savor it afterward. It could be a big helping of your favorite food -- or your favorite avoidance pattern: a John Wayne movie, a fat paperback family saga, a long-distance phone call. It could be a daydream of lying on the beach on the most beautiful island in the Caribbean, or of the life you'll lead when you've reached your goal. It could be a day in the country, a new pair or earrings, or the Picasso poster you've been wanting so long. Give yourself little extravagances for little steps, big ones for big steps, and a real whopper when you reach your goal: a whole new wardrobe, a set of matched golf clubs or a fabulous vacation.

The second kind of reward is the kind you should give yourself often just because you're you, and worth it -- whether it's cooking a gourmet meal for yourself, taking a long, hot bath or buying yourself a jazz record or a theater ticket. This kind of reward is as important for the health of your self-image as physical exercise is for the health of your body. You must treat yourself like a first-class person, no matter what you've done or not done.

Don't ever punish yourself for skipping a step--or ten steps --in your plan by cutting out these little ways of being good to yourself. You need them more than ever when you're feeling down. You need and deserve some pleasure at all times. When you've accomplished something, you get an extra helping on top of that for having been willing to undergo the discomfort of risk and change.

Remember that each small step you accomplish is going to feel like success -- not just the big ones.

Each new level of success (and this is true of even the smallest steps) brings new tasks, new challenges, new stress, as well as new opportunities. The operative word is new. You're navigating in unknown waters now. Don't think that means all your old, familiar fears and uncertainties are going to vanish as if by magic. No way! You bring them right along with you. If your history is anything like mine, for a long, long time you're not going to believe you can do something even when you've just done it and the evidence is right in front of your eyes!

At this point, it is also in the nature of the human animal to say, “What next?” When you have attained self-confidence in one thing, you will start looking around for something new to do in which you have no self-confidence. But you've got something much more important than self-confidence now. You've got experience and skills. When a friend of mine said, “I know now that I can do anything,” that wasn’t a delusion of grandeur. It was a statement of fact. She could go on from painting to playing the piano because she had learned to learn, she had gained mastery of the process by which things get done. When you reach your first goal, you've done this too. Now you get the luxury of choice.

Are you ready for the next goal? Do you still want to run a printing press, or would you rather study the Spanish Civil War? Do you want to go on running a business or would you like to be a beachcomber for a while? The shape of things has changed. Your efforts have changed it. So what about the shape of things to come? What would you like to do now?

Now you’ve discovered the ultimate secret all winners know: “The journey, not the arrival, matters.”

Being on your path is what is important. Each destination you reach opens out into wider horizons, and new and undiscovered countries for you to explore.

THE END 😊