


*"The Life Brief... will transform the lives of everyone who reads it." —Lori Gottlieb,
New York Times bestselling author of Maybe You Should Talk to Someone*

The LIFE
BRIEF



*A Playbook for
No-Regrets Living*

BONNIE WAN

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THE
LIFE
BRIEF

*A Playbook for
No-Regrets Living*

BONNIE WAN

SIMON ELEMENT

New York London Toronto Sydney New Delhi

TO CHIP, MY BELOVED ONE.

Thank you for letting me tell our story, bumps and all.
I love you madly.

ZIG, ILA, RUBY, AND MABEL.

This book was written with you in my heart.
May you find your voice, live your truth, and carve a path of your own making.

INTRODUCTION

GET READY

LET'S BE BRIEF

What do you want?

It's a simple question, right? We ask it all the time, when deciding what to eat, how to spend our day, or what we'd like for our birthday. But that's not what I'm asking.

I'm not asking, what are you in the mood for, or what do you *think* you want? And I'm definitely not asking, what do your parents, your partner, or your friends want for you.

What I'm asking is this: In your heart of hearts, *what do you really, really want?* What do you want in your life that you haven't even admitted to yourself?

This is the driving question of the Life Brief.

THE CHAOS BEFORE THE CLARITY

It was April 2010, and my life looked picture-perfect.

I was married to a handsome, emotionally present man. We lived in a one-of-a-kind house at the edges of wine country in Northern California. I had just returned to work after giving birth to our third child to run one of our agency's biggest accounts.

On the outside, things looked damn good. But inside, I was drowning and depleted and full of questions. *Am I with the right person? Is Chip the right partner for me? Can I keep up with and hold on to this life we've created?*

And perhaps most unbearable, *What happens if my answers are no?*

To be honest, these questions terrified me. What answers would I uncover on the other side? The sheer act of asking felt like an admission of weakness or failure, prompting punishing self-talk. *What's wrong with me? Why can't I see how good I have it? Why can't I suck it up and get on with it?*

After all, I'd never doubted my husband's goodness. I was instantly attracted to him from the moment I spotted him on the other side of a packed conference room. At the time we were working at the same agency on a big car account—hardly a romantic setting—and yet when I looked over, his vitality instantly captivated me.

Who is that? I wondered.

The answer, I would discover, was Chip, someone who is inquisitive, openhearted, and lit up from within.

But you know the way time and everyday stresses can dull your senses? That's what was happening with us. We were juggling careers and childcare for three kids under the age of five. Chip was launching a documentary film business while my job as an advertising strategist demanded long hours, travel, and a two-plus-hour round-trip daily commute even when I wasn't meeting clients on the other side of the country.

When we weren't "dividing and conquering," we were negotiating, deliberating, or downright arguing. Crushed by the weight of work, caregiving, and housekeeping, I grew increasingly critical and borderline resentful. We were wrecked from sleeplessness and wracked with financial anxiety. It felt as if we were constantly on the verge of spinning out of control.

As our lives grew more chaotic, so did the distance between us. Yes, the business trips pulled us apart. But the distance took place at home, too. We would be right there in the same room, caught up in our own worlds—different headspaces and emotional states. I might be lost in a barrage of work emails or navigating a tricky client request, while nursing or rocking the baby. Meanwhile, he'd be a few feet away, absorbed in his next production or watching a football game while entertaining two toddlers.

"Babe, what should we have for dinner?" he'd ask, innocently enough.

Dinner? Our biggest client just put our account into review.

The urgency and intensity of my stress ratcheted up with every text or email. Irritated, I'd snap, "I can't think about dinner right now."

And with that, we dropped back in our bubbles.

At the highest levels, our interests and values aligned—social creatures fueled and fed by our connection to family, friends, and community. But our styles clashed—across everything from how we viewed money to how we parented and made decisions. I was impatient, demanding, and a perfectionist. He moved slower, taking his time to navigate the madness, overwhelmed by my standards, not to mention his own. This hadn't mattered much when it was just the two of us—when the pace was slow and stakes were low. But now, with three young kids and intense work pressure, every small thing felt big.

I spent countless nights weighing the pros and cons of our relationship.

One rainy day after a particularly heated argument, I sat in the grocery store parking lot, unable to get out of the car. I listened to the rain as it hammered against metal and glass. I phoned a dear friend and laid my frustrations bare, giving voice to questions I had not previously dared to ask aloud.

What if we're just too different?

What if I don't have what it takes?

Are marriage, parenting, and life supposed to be this hard?

Does staying in this marriage mean losing myself?

Once admitted and voiced, these questions became vividly real and impossible to ignore. But the answers did not appear that day in the grocery store parking lot.

WEEKS PASSED AND THE UNCERTAINTY continued to swirl in my mind. There was a time when I might have brought my worries to Chip, but my gnawing questions felt too raw, too dangerous—I feared that if I said them aloud, I would set in motion the beginning of the end.

Not long after that parking lot call, I took a business trip that brought me back to my hometown. After a long day of meetings, I was physically exhausted, but my brain was still churning away. Instead of staying at a hotel with my team, I decided to spend the

night with my parents. Part of me hoped that the familiarity of family and my mom's cooking could calm my emotional turbulence.

But there was something about being back in my childhood home that intensified my angst. I might be a mom of three and a strategy director at a major ad agency, but inside I felt like the kid I'd been twenty years before: someone who'd learned to override inner unrest and stuff it behind a bright smile and confident, can-do spirit.

Shutting the door to my old bedroom, I breathed in the remnants of my childhood. The rainbow bedspread, mixtapes, and *Interview* magazine covers were long gone, but the glossy white furniture set was arranged just as it had been in 1988. There on the floor against my bed, I let my tears flow, face buried into a pillow, hoping my parents wouldn't wake and wonder what the hell was going on.

Not that *I* had a grasp on what the hell was going on. My teenage self would have been wowed by the life I had created. I was the vision of success she had imagined and dreamed of, down to the hot-pink suede Miu Miu pumps I kicked off across the room.

So why the hell was I so miserable?

What was *wrong* with me?

Something had to give, but what?

There were those questions again, looping back and around, no closer to a decision or solution. They were quiet yet insistent:

I can't do this anymore.

I really can't.

Then, something unexpected happened. As soon as I allowed my despair to hit bottom, the moment I committed to change yet admitted to not knowing how, I was hit with a sense of strange familiarity.

Wait.

I recognized this confusion.

I had met a similar feeling, hundreds of times before, with my clients and their brands. For much of my professional life, I had sat across from people asking themselves questions about purpose, values, and vision. For years, I had cultivated a list of questions that I could use to help clients get to the heart of their truths and use that clarity to unlock real and lasting change.

Was it possible that I could turn those questions on myself to achieve the same outcome?

After decades as a strategist, I knew how to uncover the essence of what matters to others and translate that into clear and actionable strategies. But I had lost sight of it for myself. I was so caught up in the busyness of each day—back-to-back client meetings, pumping milk in dirty airport bathrooms, long commutes to and from the office, often not returning until my husband and kids were fast asleep. My own sense of what mattered and why I was working so hard had all but evaporated from my consciousness.

I had been circling in confusion for months. And it wasn't until that night that I began to turn this curiosity and precision on my own life, cutting to the heart of what I wanted most. For the first time in a very long time, I felt a glimmer of hope that I might be able to make meaning out of my own emotional mess. But first, I realized, I had to do what I advise my clients.

To get to the essence of what I really wanted, I would need to cut through the clutter of my confusion. To make it manifest, I'd have to clearly and boldly declare what I wanted so that I could act on it. And for it to be meaningful and genuinely motivating, I had to make it sticky and brief.

Pulling myself off the floor, I rummaged through my old desk, found a half-used Mead spiral notebook. I started scribbling, mad and messy. Away from Chip, our kids, and work, I was forced to acknowledge the things that weren't working. I was willing to leave everything on the page if it helped me find my way home.

Lost, desperate, with my sleeves wet from snot and tears, I was on the way to writing my first Life Brief.

HOW TO USE THIS BOOK

I make meaning out of messiness. It's my job and my passion. As partner and head of brand strategy at the storied advertising agency Goodby Silverstein & Partners (GS&P),

my job is to help companies understand why they exist so they can find the simplest path through chaos, complexity, and confusion.

With the Life Brief, I now do the same for everyday people.

A moment to state the obvious here. You are not a brand. You're much more complex than a car, an app, or a bag of chips. But we *all* need a way to cut through the noise—and that's what brand strategy is designed to do. The Life Brief distills the practice of brand strategy into its simplest, clearest, and most effective form to help people get clear about their careers, their families, their creative outlets, as well as their relationships to themselves, their communities, and the world.

I created the Life Brief as a tool to cut through the mess and muck in my own life—the critical voices, the limiting beliefs, the self-doubt, and, at times, the paralyzing fear. Only then was I able to surface and see my own values and vision for my life. The Life Brief transformed my life in ways that are profound, exhilarating, and empowering. And since I've begun sharing it with others, I know I'm not alone.

What Is a Life Brief?

The most important tool used by every strategist and creative agency is what's known as a "creative brief." This single-page, single-minded document concisely yet vividly captures a company's essence and ambition. Great briefs distill complex problems into sharp and sticky strategies that focus our attention, unlock solutions, and inspire action.

When drafting creative briefs, strategists use questions to guide, if not *force*, clarity about the essential building blocks of a brand. The flow of these questions on a single page pushes you to connect the dots and culminates in a single-minded strategic idea for a company's future direction.

The Life Brief is, at its simplest, a creative brief for your life.

But because you're not a brand, the Life Brief doesn't follow the same format as the creative briefs we write for brands. What we're aiming for here are five clear, bold, declarative statements about what you want in the areas of your life that matter most,

summed up in a sharp and sticky phrase that you can use to guide your decisions and drive your actions.

This sounds simple, but it's a transformative process. In order to get to statements that are focused, specific, and above all, penetratingly honest, we first need to go wide—with warm-ups, exercises, reflective prompts, and questions designed to unlock your curiosity, creativity, and clarity.

Ultimately, the Life Brief is a practice of alignment between who you are, what you believe, and how you live—one that begins with that crucial question:

What do you really, really want?

That was the question I asked myself that weepy night in my childhood bedroom.

And it was the one I posed to the standing-room-only audience in my very first workshop for the Life Brief. My agency had invited senior leaders to teach something personal to our colleagues as part of our employee wellness program.

When it came to my turn, I was initially stumped. Our agency president led Run Club, our managing partner taught yoga, and others shared their passions and crafts. I couldn't think of any hobbies or interests I felt inspired to teach. But then, I was hit by an idea. What if I shared the way I had saved my marriage, harmonized work and family, and reconnected with my sense of joy, by writing a creative brief for my life?

My nerves intensified as the class approached. Teaching this practice would require me to share some very private and dark moments in my personal life. One of the limiting beliefs we've collectively harbored as a society is that leaders, especially women, should present an impeccable front at all times. Wear your game face, be the badass, and strut your swagger. These were the mantras of the moment. And here I was, about to get vulnerable: throwing open the closet doors of my life and allowing my personal mess to spill out. Would I lose the respect of my colleagues? Would I lose face? Would I ruin my career?

The session was open to all employees at the agency. I couldn't tell what terrified me more: getting personal with people I didn't know or exposing myself to those I worked alongside every day. I paced the hall as I awaited my turn to speak. I meandered in and out of the restroom. I considered calling everything off and blaming it on a mysterious illness.

But because I was already relishing what my very first Life Brief had made possible—a more fulfilling marriage, a beautiful, creative, and colorful life in Portland, Oregon—I knew it was something I wanted to share with others.

Once I got in the room, I was shocked by the mix of attendees—creative teams, the head of production, junior employees, and interns. My boss was there, next to our head of HR. My fellow strategists were there, along with people I mentored and people I had never met. I took a deep breath and said to myself, *Here we go*, diving into my story as the room hushed.

I unpacked the Life Brief practice to the crowded room. I disclosed the marriage troubles that started it all. I openly admitted that I struggled with juggling my career and family. I explained the steps I had taken in creating the brief, the kinds of questions I asked that pushed me to answer them with naked honesty, and the way this process had led to personal and creative breakthroughs. I shared how I had used the tools of our trade to examine my personal challenges in a new light, and in doing so, I had uncovered a practice and path to clarity that might work for others.

So. What do *you* want?

I asked the question as a palpable tension gripped the room. There was quiet rustling as folks sat up straight in their seats. Then the room went dead silent—I could see that people were thinking deeply about their own lives and asking their own gripping questions.

If you cringe at the question or find it off-putting, that's okay. I've been there myself, resisting anything that smells of or signals self-help.

But here's what I've learned. If we never allow ourselves to ask and honestly answer this simple question, we run the risk of never getting what we want. If we don't check in with ourselves about our own dreams and desires, we might end up following someone else's plans, feeling confused about our own, or lost as to why we're feeling unfulfilled.

Applying this practice to my life has deepened and saved my marriage (not once, but twice), centered my parenting, and propelled my career far beyond what I could have imagined. It's helped me turn those nagging questions that once felt agonizing and unthinkable into springboards for action.

It's why I've come to think of the Life Brief as the shortest path between where you are now and what you really, really want.

There are many wonderful healing tools, practices, and programs out there—I've certainly benefitted from some of them—but what sets the Life Brief apart is that it's specifically designed to cut through the clutter and get right to the heart of what matters most.

So, here's my invitation to you. Suspend your doubts and disbelief. Jump in and give this practice a go. Ask the question. Let it sink in and stir. Your answer might end up surprising you.

Start Practicing, Stop Planning

The Life Brief is a practice for getting clear on what you want, not a plan for how to get there. Don't get me wrong: I'm a fan of plans when it comes to finances, ad campaigns, and organizing events. But when it comes to navigating life, plans prevent us from seeing the possibilities around us. When we're so attached to one path or one outcome, we lose our peripheral vision and fail to see the unexpected invitations emerging around us, beckoning for our attention.

As the poet David Whyte once said, "What you can plan is too small for you to live." Plans are usually based on facts we already know or can see from where we're standing, opinions we already hold. But life is peppered with surprise and serendipity that are impossible to plan for or around.

Plans are about seeing every step, executing each action as we see it from right here, right now. They dictate, often in great detail, the "how." It's that dictating that we want to move away from. That's why in advertising, we use creative briefs to capture a clear ambition, idea, or desired outcome, but we leave open *how* we get there.

I get the appeal of plans. They give us the *feeling* that we're in control—that we can control life itself. Yet, the expansiveness of life lies in that which we cannot plan or predict. Instead of a plan, I think of the Life Brief as a practice—a practice of exploration, for seeking, examining, and acting on your innermost truth. It's a process of getting clear about what you really want in life and opening yourself to receiving it as it comes. It is a

method you can revisit every time you need to reconnect with your own sense of purpose and agency.

The Life Brief practice is also not something you have to leap into overnight—it's not about making drastic life changes or holding yourself to restrictive resolutions.

Instead, the series of writing and thinking exercises in this book will help you tune in to your inner voice—the one that you push aside in favor of what's "practical" or what's right in front of you—so you can hear the essence of your calling. You'll distill your desires into a short list of what you're ready for right now. You'll be able to wrap it in a specific phrase that brings your entire Life Brief into focus anytime you need to remember what really matters.

And you'll learn how to create different Life Briefs for different parts of your life—starting with the four areas where people spend most of their time: relationships, work, community, and self. Your "Big Four" don't need to fit into traditional cookie-cutter boxes. A relationship can mean anything from romantic relationships to relationships with your colleagues, children, parents, or even pets. Your work can be your livelihood, side hustle, education, or other areas where you want to grow. Your community consists of the safety net of trust and understanding that you're a part of, whether that be a circle of friends, your place of worship, or a cause to which you're committed. And "self" can contain everything about how you feel, see, and treat yourself in relation to the world around you.

In his book *The Three Marriages*, poet David Whyte refers to our relationships with others, work, and self as "marriages." He warns us that we cannot choose between them. Each of these marriages is nonnegotiable—meaning that if you allow one to fall, the others will eventually follow. Yet, it's easy to sacrifice one aspect of our lives seemingly in service of the others. For many of us, our relationship with ourselves is the hardest to prioritize or fight for—few of us are encouraged to care for ourselves, nourish ourselves, stoke our own fires. The Life Brief will guide you to connect to what matters most within each of your vital relationships, especially the one with yourself.

What matters most to you can and will shift over time. The Life Brief isn't a one-and-done list. You can create one whenever you need to break through the noise around you and re-establish clarity in your life. I do one every time I feel stuck, lost, or confused in

any given part of my life. At pivotal moments, I have created a Life Brief for every area of my life.

This book will help you do the same. The more you practice and allow your Life Briefs to guide you, the faster you'll start to recognize when you've lost your way and need to hit the page and create a new Life Brief. And as with any practice, the more you use it, the easier and more automatic it will become.

This book is meant to create a safe place for experimentation. It's an invitation to free your inhibitions and open up in low-stakes yet new ways. This process is designed to help you take leaps in the privacy of your own existence—try on ideas, test out truths, say them aloud, get into relationship with them, notice how you feel, and get comfortable with things that used to be uncomfortable.

It's a strategy that transforms vulnerability into action.

Get Messy, Get Clear, Get Active

The Life Brief has three distinct parts: Get Messy, Get Clear, and Get Active. The first phase, Get Messy, will guide you through the disarray and confusion clogging your mind, blocking you from realizing what's underneath: your sacred soul desires. It gives you the space to explore what you really, really want with honesty so that you can be present with what arises. Getting Messy will help you identify the brilliant and deeply personal “threads” of your life—your unique collection of values, beliefs, and desires—and shake them all out onto the table, using questions and creative exercises to stoke, stimulate, and cajole them into expression.

Once you've given yourself permission to Get Messy, the next step is to sort and separate what matters from what doesn't. Getting Clear is about working with the vibrant yet chaotic pile of threads you've collected when Getting Messy—to understand the role each plays in your life so that you can weave them together into a beautiful tapestry. This stage is a process of distilling, sharpening, and zeroing in on the essence of what you want—then pushing it to its boldest place.

Finally, Getting Active is where we walk the walk of our Briefs, harnessing our personal agency and understanding that it is we who are the creators of our lives, not our circumstances. This is where the dance between you and the world takes place. You'll see how your actions invite new reactions and interactions from people around you. This is a dance where tiny movements generate huge effects, where surprising outcomes are revealed in serendipitous ways. You'll practice staying committed to your Life Brief, working through fears as they arise. You'll be tested, taken to the edges of doubt and disillusionment before each breakthrough. So many times, I've come to the cliff of giving up or giving in, when surrendering to *what is* unlocks the magic of *what will be*.

During each phase, I will share questions, prompts, and exercises to help you break through the clutter, identify the fears and beliefs holding you back, and create a Life Brief—and a life—that is wholly your own.

I'm also going to share my story, along with the stories of others who used this practice to declare what they so desperately desired. But make no mistake: this book is about you. These stories are here to walk you through the practice of moving from mess to clarity to action, but while everyone's life circumstances are unique, the journey is universal.

The Life Brief is designed to light you up and awaken parts of yourself that have been dormant. It asks you to use muscles you may not have used in a while. So, if Getting Messy is hard, know that Getting Clear is just around the corner. If taking action is overwhelming, remember that you only have to take one step at a time. If you feel uncomfortable with one of the exercises, trust that another one is on the way. Do one part, take one small action, look at one tiny area for change at a time. You'll be surprised by how much a tiny step forward can affect everything—and how little momentum you need to keep pushing ahead with it.

Fight back against your impulse to settle for a life full of agonizing what-ifs. Fight back against the fear of what you might find on the other side of your mess. On the other side of fear is hope. And just beyond that hope is the change you've been searching for.

If you've ever thought, *It's over. I'm done. Or, I can't do this anymore...*

If you've ever made pros and cons lists about a job or relationship...

If you've ever lain awake at night as the questions swirled but brought you no closer to resolution... trust that this practice is designed to turn these painful experiences into tools for self-discovery, clarity, and *action*.

Trust that what you really, really want is already inside you, simply waiting to be unlocked.

PART 1

GET MESSY

Getting Messy is a practice of permission—permission to create space for messiness in our lives. From an early age, we’re taught to color inside the lines and keep things tidy and orderly to survive and thrive in a chaotic world. Getting Messy is the playful, “let loose” part of the Life Brief practice. I liken it to a child playing freely in the mud. Let yourself explore, imagine, sling ideas, and reframe your world.

So, clear some space—a table, a spot on the floor, whatever you need. Put on your favorite sweatpants. Pour your beverage of choice. Do whatever you need to do to get comfortable so that you can step into the playground and relish the mud.

The exercises in this part of the book are designed to help you identify and gather the unique “threads” of your life—your values, beliefs, dreams, and desires—so that later in the book, you can distill your Life Brief down to its sharpest and boldest expression.

If one technique doesn’t work for you, try another. As you move through this part of the book, keep a pen and a notebook close for moments when inspiration strikes.

Most importantly, trust that the messiness will give way to meaning and bring you closer to a life that is uniquely yours.

CHAPTER 1

SITTING WITH THE MESS

I am ready to... drop into myself.

The question: Where do I start?

The practice: Surrender to your fear.

The action: Find Your Quiet.

That long night in my childhood bedroom was my moment to get the chaos out of my brain and onto the page.

I cried and I wrote. I scribbled and underlined, tore out pages, and kept writing. After an hour, I was exhausted, but had a confident feeling that this was the first step. I had to sit in my mess, without avoiding or denying it, in order to gain clarity on what I really wanted... what mattered most.

Practicality be damned; fear be double damned. The only way through the misery was to be uncompromisingly honest with myself, without putting boundaries on my needs. What could my life look like if I stopped dictating what was unrealistic or impossible before I'd even tried it? What could my future look like if I dared to admit what I wanted and needed without fear or shame?

I had placed boundaries on my life based on beliefs that Chip didn't want the same things I did, that we were tethered to our existing way of life, that I could only do my job the way it had always been done by others before me, with no room to consider anything different.

But were these beliefs real? Or had my fear dreamed them up?

Many of us are hostages to fear. It's one of our primary boundaries, what holds us back from the life we want. We fear change. We fear disappointing others or ourselves. We fear that the answers to our own questions will create disruption from which we will never recover.

Fear limits the possibilities of alternative stories and outcomes. It makes the path forward seem impossibly narrow, our lives and worlds oppressively small.

Yet getting curious about the fear is the fastest way to unshackle its binds. Accepting, embracing, and reflecting on it—rather than denying or running from it—allows life to unfold in unexpected and unimaginable new ways.

So, I faced my fears head-on. The scary stuff came out first, the anxious stories and raw emotion: fears about the way I'd shut Chip out when I was stressed, anger at how little control I seemed to have over my life and my time.

This isn't working.

Our family is going to fracture and fall apart.

I've pushed him away one too many times to ever bring him back.

Then out came a lot of "if only" dreams—followed quickly by the reasons they could never happen.

If only I could quit my job and have more time with the kids. But we'll be forced to sell the house and ask our parents for support.

If only we could move somewhere more affordable. But Chip will never go for it—he loves our community, as do I. Besides, the agency will never allow it. On and on I went, until I ran out of worries and worst-case scenarios. After I put my pen down and took a deep breath, I felt something I hadn't felt in a while.

I felt space.

Something fascinating happens when you face your deep fears and intense emotions—when you bring them out of your mind and onto the page. You see them for what they