

SUMMARY THE PROMISE OF A PENCIL

ADAM BRAUN



Summary of “The Promise of a Pencil” by Adam Braun

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Founded on just \$25, international charity Pencils of Promise has built more than 200 schools in developing countries around the world. This book tells the story of the charity’s growth and the mission of its founder, Adam Braun

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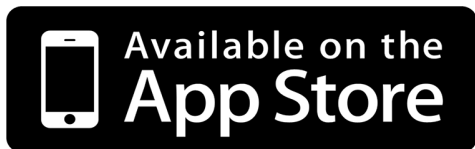


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Introduction

The first half of Adam Braun's story is not unlike that of many others. As a college student preparing for a promising career, Braun had his future pretty much figured out: he was going to work on Wall Street and become a very successful investor. And like many other students who have the foresight and privilege to be relaxed about their futures, he took a gap year to go backpacking across the globe. As is also the case with many students, he encountered an overwhelming amount of poverty and lack of basic education in a number of the developing countries he visited. But most students on gap years start there. While almost everyone is moved by what they encounter and find it hard to forget, most people attempt to do just that as they return to their own happy, privileged lives.

But Adam deviated from the norm in this regard and abandoned his career in finance to start a school in Laos through launching his new charity, Pencils of Promise. Through the course of this summary, you'll learn:

- What motivated Adam to change his life
- How you can make your own dreams a reality
- Why your intuition is invaluable and
- How saying "thank you" can actually save you money

Follow Your Dreams

That advice probably doesn't sound any more important or motivational now than it does when you see it on a tacky pillow. In fact, the phrase is so common that it's almost lost its power to really reach us. But have you ever thought about what would happen if you really did follow your dreams? If, instead of thinking, "That's a crazy idea," or, "I couldn't actually do that," you went for your dreams even when they seem unreachable?

One of our biggest obstacles to taking that risk is the fact that following our dreams often goes against the expectations our society has for us and many people are scared by that. It's easier to take the safe path and so, most of the time, we just do that. But if we really paused to reflect on the fact that we only have one life and we get one shot to make the most of it, what would we do differently? Hopefully, we would start to place less emphasis on what others think of us! That's what Adam Braun did when, in 2008, he first got the idea to start a school in a Laotian village. His initial goal was to raise enough money to fully fund the construction of the school, along with financing the costs of staffing and running it. But his family considered his dream to be a waste of time. So far from helping him accomplish his goal, they actively discouraged it and tried to convince him to focus on his career in finance.

Adam could have listened. After all, the necessity of securing a stable future and career for himself is a valid point and definitely an easier pursuit. But instead of giving in to their criticism, Adam forged on, full steam ahead to meet his goal of raising \$10,000. And by 2013, Adam had not only founded a new school, but an entire charity organization which he named Pencils of Promise. And his organization had experienced such tremendous growth that, in just 5 years, they were already launching their 100th school, this time in Ghana. How did it happen? It happened because Adam was committed to his dream. Although neither he nor anyone else had imagined he would ever achieve that level of success, his persistence and belief in his

goal enabled him to turn a seemingly unreachable goal into a proven success.

Success Isn't Forged in a Bubble

We all have a personal bubble. It's our comfort zone and its insulated by friends, family, and routines that make us feel warm and fluffy inside and, most of all, safe. Sure, we might experience some occasional ups and downs in life, but for the most part, as long as we're in the bubble, nothing's going to happen to rock our world. And we can also guarantee that while we're in the bubble, we're unlikely to succeed. That's because success never occurs through doing what's comfortable. If it did, we'd all become millionaires just by staying home in our pajamas! But we can't create change without doing something different and that's why it's vital that we pop the bubble.

Our personal bubbles look different for everyone. For Adam, it was a happy, untroubled childhood with a loving family, a great education, and the promise of a successful future. And it would have been really easy to stay in that bubble. If he'd done so, he probably would have gone on to have a very profitable finance career and, by anyone's estimation, made a good life for himself. But he also wouldn't have changed lives for the better or stepped outside his comfort zone. If he'd stayed in his own little bubble, he might never have done anything new or exciting.

But by being willing to take risks and think optimistically, he was able to embrace opportunities that would not only change his life but the lives of those around him. One perfect example of this can be seen in an experience he had while traveling, when a local man in Guatemala offered to let Adam stay in his home for free in exchange for some English lessons. Adam accepted the offer, although he didn't know the man or what he should expect and was even a little concerned for his safety. But in the weeks that he spent in that man's home, Adam not only expanded his host's linguistic horizons, he learned Spanish himself and made many new friends! And none of these experiences would have been possible if he hadn't said yes to a new opportunity.

Follow Your Intuition

Some of us may have a stronger sense of intuition than others, but at one time or another, each of us have experienced the sensation of feeling very strongly about something without knowing why. Whether it's the feeling that someone is up to no good or that there's a bigger purpose for doing something, we've all felt our intuition at work. And because our intuition often knows what's best for us before we do, it's important that we let it guide us in the pursuit of our dreams.

That's exactly what Adam Braun did in the days leading up to the launch of his charity. While attending a concert at the New York Philharmonic, Adam was struck by the passion he witnessed in a pianist's performance. Captivated, he began wondering what it would be like to feel so blown away by your love for something and how he could cultivate that type of passion in his own life. And as he turned the idea over and over in his mind, he kept coming back to the people he met and the poverty he witnessed while traveling the world. Mulling on the joy he felt while helping them, it hit him that a life spent helping others would bring him far more passion and fulfilment than a career on Wall Street. And that very night, he sat down and wrote the mission statement for Pencils of Promise.

Adam listened to his intuition and it lead him to pursue his dream. And that trust in his own instincts continued to guide him as he faced difficult decisions. Because the struggle didn't end once he made the commitment to build his charity; if anything, the choices got harder. For example, because he needed money to finance his goal, he hung onto his job as a financial consultant and used his free time to develop Pencils of Promise. However, the conflicting demands on his time soon lead to tension at his job, ultimately prompting his boss to ask him which was more important to him: his career or Pencils of Promise?

Conflicted, Adam hesitated to answer, and he was still mulling it over on the drive home. But when he passed a cardboard box graffitied with the

simple phrase, “Become your dream,” his mind was made up. That phrase resonated with him and he took it as a sign, so he quit his job, devoted himself entirely to Pencils of Promise, and never looked back.

Don't be Afraid to Start Small

When we're brainstorming our dreams, we're often not at our most realistic. Sometimes we start out with monumental goals like, "Change the world!" and fail to calculate the small steps we need to take on our way to that final goal. But remembering to think small can help us take advantage of important opportunities we might otherwise miss. And that's exactly what Adam found when he met a little boy while he was backpacking through India. Stricken by the boy's poverty, Adam asked him what he'd like most in the world and was stunned when the boy told him. His greatest wish in life was a pencil.

Of course, Adam immediately opened his backpack and gave the boy one of his own pencils, realizing that what was small and insignificant to him was the fulfilment of a child's greatest wish. One small gift opened a new world of possibilities for this little boy, enabling him to practice reading and writing, and Adam was so moved that he named his charity after this encounter. It just goes to show that the smallest gestures can make the biggest difference, no matter where we apply them. Another great example of this is the startup money that funded Pencils of Promise.

Because Adam decided to start the charity almost as soon as he'd come home from traveling, he didn't have much money at all. But nevertheless, he believed in the importance of acting on his dream, and so he started a Pencils of Promise savings fund with only \$25, the minimum amount required to open an account. Soon, that \$25 grew as he started to crowdfund his idea, and before he knew it, he soon had a few thousand dollars that he could use to meet his goal. And all because he lived into his dream, taking small, practical steps to make it come true. So, no matter what your dream is, don't be afraid to start small!

Keep up The Confidence

Just like success can't happen in a bubble, you can't achieve your dreams without combating some challenges along the way. However, remaining confident in the face of adversity can help you power through. Adam learned this the hard way while traveling to Africa for the first time. To get to one place in particular, it was necessary to travel by boat. And through the course of that journey, the boat was caught in a storm that caused considerable damage to their ship and left his fellow passengers understandably panicked.

But though giving in to panic was tempting, Adam tried to force himself to hang on to the shred of hope inside him, that little spark which reminded him that he had to hang on so he could fulfil his purpose. And so, instead of losing himself to the fear of what might happen, Adam made a conscious effort to draw confidence from that sense of hope and focus on the promising future ahead. And as he got his own fear under control, he was soon able to help his fellow passengers stay calm. Although it was pretty terrifying at the time, Adam emerged from this experience stronger and more emboldened than before. He also found that he'd learned the value of staying in control even in the face of danger.

This knowledge proved invaluable later on as well, when he found himself in a similar situation while traveling through Nepal. As he rode through town in a taxi, Adam noticed the congested streets overrun by protesters, congregating for a political demonstration. The atmosphere was so tense, he could feel the anger even through the car and he began to get a little scared that they might attack him. But once again, instead of giving into his fear, Adam forced himself to remain confident. Upon arriving at his destination, he calmly exited the taxi, spoke kindly to the protesters, and asked them to tell him about their cause.

By simply staying in control of his emotions, Adam was able to move through the situation with no problem (even though he was still pretty

confused and had no idea where to go). The takeaway from this story is that fear, like obstacles, are unavoidable. You're going to face them at some point in your quest to make your dreams a reality. But instead of shrinking from your fear, learn to embrace it and let it make you stronger.

Talk the Talk

You might not think the words you choose can have that much of an impact on your goals, but you'd be surprised! Because while it's amazing to have a good idea, the way you present that idea to people can mean the difference between success and failure. That's why we have to make an active effort at using language to our advantage. If it helps, think of presenting your dream like it's a commercial. How would you "sell" your idea to others? What words would you choose to motivate people? How would you convince others to support you?

Adam was faced with each of these questions when he was seeking funding for Pencils of Promise and he learned about the power of language the hard way. Initially, because it was a charity organization, Adam used the term "non-profit" to describe what he was doing. But although "non-profit" is definitely a good thing and simply means that your organization is doing charitable things for the sake of doing good, some potential donors still object to the negative vibe of "non." So, Adam opted for a more positive tone by pitching Pencils of Promise as a "for purpose" organization, and in so doing, he generated more interest and more funding.

Another important use of language is the communication of ideas. Communication is, of course, essential to sharing your dream with others and communicating the right thing at the right time can often grow your success beyond your wildest dreams. Adam discovered this when he first began toying with the idea of expanding his organization's work to Ghana. Although they had been concentrated in Laos since the charity's genesis, Adam was inspired by their almost overnight success and wondered if they could afford to expand. And though he kept the idea to himself for awhile, thinking he'd wait and develop a more concrete gameplan before sharing it with others, he wound up pitching it on impulse during a charity gala. In a spur-of-the-moment appeal for donations, Adam told the guests that if they could raise one million dollars that evening, Pencils of Promise would open

a new school in Ghana. Just a few months later, they were breaking ground on their very first Ghanaian school.

Be an Inspiration

Remember our earlier discussion about how success can't happen in a bubble? Well, one of the biggest reasons for that is the simple fact that you need other people. Just like we can't live our best lives without receiving the support of others, we can't fulfill our dreams without support either. Throughout the course of our lives, we should be serving, listening, and supporting our fellow humans and allowing them to do the same for us. But when you're trying to change the world for the better, these steps become even more vital, along with one more requirement: inspiring others. Because it's great that you believe in your dream, but you need others to believe in it too.

Whether their support comes in the form of volunteer work, encouragement, or donations, inspiring others to believe in your goal is one of the most crucial parts for achieving any dream. So, as you're thinking about how to recruit others to your cause, it might be helpful to implement Adam's tips for inspiring others. One of the most important things he's learned is that you only get one shot at a first impression. We all know that anyway, but what we might not know is the importance of practicing that on both an individual and mass scale. It might be easy to make a great impression when you're only meeting one person, but if you have the opportunity to speak in front of large crowds, you've got to make an active effort at making every person in your audience feel important.

That probably sounds like a tall order, especially if you're speaking to a crowd of hundreds, but Adam recommends tackling this through the "one person, one thought" rule. That means that while speaking, you should establish eye contact with one person in your audience for the amount of time it takes you to talk about a certain thought. Once you've finished that thought, move on to another listener and do the same throughout your entire speech. Doing this will help people feel as though you're talking directly to them, which will help them connect with you and get invested in what you're saying.

In conjunction with this rule, you should also keep in mind that it doesn't matter how many people listen to you, it matters how much you inspire them. And that's true even if you only inspire one person. Adam learned that firsthand when Pencils of Promise was just getting off the ground. At this stage, he and a few friends were touring the country, speaking at universities and inviting people to volunteer with them. But the very first speaking engagement was attended by only one person. And although he was very disappointed and tempted to leave, Adam decided to pour all his heart and passion into his speech, the same way he would if an entire crowd had showed up. And it paid off, because that one listener wound up becoming a dedicated volunteer!

Thank Others for Their Support

Now that we've discussed the importance of acquiring support, it's even more important that we talk about acknowledging that support. Adam knows the necessity of saying thank you and it's something he puts into practice every day as he acknowledges the invaluable contributions of those who help him keep Pencils of Promise running. One of the ways he showed his gratitude was in dedicating the very first school he opened to his grandmother. Although his grandmother hadn't directly contributed to the creation of his school, Adam believed that her legacy of love and sacrifice had given him the life and opportunities he enjoyed. A survivor of the Holocaust, she had immigrated to the United States with nothing in the hopes of creating a better life for herself and her children. Without her bravery, Adam felt that he might never have grown up with the love, strength, and family support that inspired him to pursue his dreams.

But in addition to thanking his family, Adam also consistently practices thankfulness in his business interactions. For example, two years after Pencils of Promise had gotten off the ground, he realized that he'd never personally thanked the very first donor who gave a substantial amount of money to his cause. So, in order to feel like he'd done the right thing, Adam wrote a belated thank-you note and apologized. He thought that was the end of it; the kind donor had given and Adam had finally thanked him. Case closed, right?

But much to his surprise, the donor wrote back! He was so touched by Adam's commitment to personally thank him that he made another donation, this time ensuring that the Pencils of Promise headquarters would be built for free! So, in this case, Adam not only did the right thing by thanking others for their support- he also learned that saying thank you can sometimes save you thousands of dollars!

Learn How to Fail

Failure sounds pretty easy; we do it all the time. So, when it comes naturally despite our best intentions, why on earth would we need to learn how to fail? Well, as you might have already guessed, our failure is defined by how we handle it and what we choose to learn from it. And that's why knowing the right way to deal with failure is crucial to our success. Adam learned this from personal experience as well, because although his charity was doing great, he found that his preoccupation with running it was affecting his relationships. This wake-up call hit Adam when he received an email from an employee, letting him know that he and a colleague had been robbed in Nicaragua.

Instead of asking about his employee's well-being, Adam's first response was to say that the company wouldn't be reimbursing them-- even though the man hadn't asked him to do so! Understandably, his employee was genuinely hurt by this response, and as Adam reflected on his actions, he had no choice but to admit that he was clearly in the wrong. So, he took advantage of this opportunity to learn from his mistakes and promised himself and his employees that, in the future, he would never put money ahead of people. And by using his failure as a learning opportunity, Adam developed a better style of leadership that made himself, his company, and his employees more successful!

He also made a conscious effort to seek out and confront his weaknesses in other areas of life. One thing he noticed was that, throughout the entire growth of his organization, he had never once asked anybody for money. Although he had orchestrated donation appeals and shared his cause with as many people as possible, he had never directly said, "Would you be willing to donate?" and he realized that this was simply because he was afraid of rejection. Recognizing that this fear was holding him back, Adam set out to tackle it and confessed to the board of directors that he was struggling with this. Once he asked for help, they worked with him by

giving him practical advice and offering him the opportunity to practice by asking them for donations for directly.

Take the Time to do it Right

Making your dreams a reality requires making some tough calls, as we've seen throughout Adam's story. We've also seen that it's normal for these choices to be infused with fear. And because these are high-stress situations, it's often easy to get overwhelmed and choose the safe path or the less stressful path in the anxiety of the moment. But that's why it's crucial that you take the time to slow down and make the right decisions. Adam learned the importance of this just a few years after Pencils of Promise had taken off, because that's when he received a very tempting job offer. Although it was a full-time job with a great salary and awesome benefits, it also would have required him to abandon Pencils of Promise.

Moments like these are exactly when smart decision-making is critical, and that's what helped Adam to choose between the stable job he wanted and the life of purpose he loved. So, develop your self-awareness and think about the circumstances and thought patterns that are likely to influence your decision. For example, if you're stuck in the same routine and you're desperate to get out of it, that could influence your decision-making if you're faced with an opportunity that might get you out of your rut in the short term but be a bad idea for the long term. Taking a minute to identify your biases, evaluate your priorities, and seek the advice of people you trust so you can truly make the right decision.

Final Summary

How do you want to be remembered? When you look back on your life and when others recount the impact you had on theirs, what do you want to be said of you? Most likely, we all want to know that we lead lives of joy, kindness, and inspiration, and for others to feel that we changed their lives for the better. So, if you want to live in that reality, if you have a crazy idea that could change people's lives, go make it happen! Although you will encounter some obstacles along the way, pursuing your dreams and making a difference will not only be worth it, it will change your life too.



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