



Wrecked for the Ordinary  
*A Manifesto for Misfits*  
Jeff Goins

# Most people don't know who they are.

It sounds trite, but it's true.

Of course, they aren't willing to admit that. You're probably not. I certainly wasn't. But that doesn't change the reality that most people, young people especially, are suffering from an identity crisis. They're struggling to find meaning in their everyday lives. They're floundering, lost in a cloud of insignificance and mediocrity.

And they can sense this void. So they make up for it with performance: working late nights at the office; getting involved in church activities; spending hours on the internet; even reading self-help books.

Or they overcompensate with activity: they join community groups or study the Kabbalah; they subscribe to countless magazines and never read them; they end up falling in love with romance novels or pornographic films, both of which are (sadly) wildly popular these days.

They strive. They long for what they can't have and thus despair, perhaps growing a bit disillusioned.

Why should it come as a surprise? They're searching for meaning and ultimately ending up feeling tired, worn out, and frustrated. If we were entirely honest, you and I would have to admit that we've been there ourselves. Perhaps far too often.

"Something's missing," John Mayer wrote, "and I don't know what it is." Something is missing. Something important. Something necessary to making a difference in the world. And most are afraid to find out what it is.

This is a manifesto about the discovery process of finding what's missing. It's not as glamorous as a get-rich-quick scheme or as mystical as New Age spirituality. It doesn't shine with the veneer of a car salesman's suit or catch your eye like a pretty girl. No, it more likely grabs your attention like a week-old bag of garbage sitting in the corner or piques your interest like nails on a chalkboard. Yes, it's hard, but it can't be denied.

A couple of years ago, I started helping missionaries tell their stories. I realize that not everyone reading this may be able to relate to that line of work, but nonetheless, I believe the lessons I learned from this group were extremely relevant and universally important. As I kept hearing people—twentysomethings, in particular—recount their stories of serving some of the poorest of the poor in the developing world, I began observing certain trends.

These people were *getting* it—really understanding life and what it's supposed to be about. In the face of intense pain and suffering, they were shedding their culture-driven narcissism and getting something else in return. They found compassion, selflessness, *freedom*. They were sinking their teeth into the finer points of what it means to be human. They were actually making a difference on this seemingly futile ball of dirt, and it was inspiring.

No matter where they were, the outcome was essentially the same. In the jungles of Peru, meeting aboriginal peoples while floating on a barge down the Amazon. In the inner-city neighborhoods of Philadelphia, surrounded by poverty and crime, prostitutes and crack addicts. In South Africa, in the company of dying mothers and babies infected with HIV. Everywhere that there was pain, these people were there. They weren't fleeing from it; they were *embracing* it.

In the midst of despair, there was implicit hope. In the face of suffering, there was true redemption. And I *wanted* it.

For a season, these well-intentioned do-gooders would live amongst the poor, learn from them, and return a changed person. Their paradigm had shifted. Their worldview was now infected with a contagion that spread to every facet of their lifestyle. More than one person would say, “I’ve been wrecked.” In fact, I started to hear this phrase a lot in different contexts. It wasn’t just from missionaries, either. I heard it from Americorps students serving in urban public schools. I heard it from suburbanites who had had a brush with the less fortunate and couldn’t bear to return to their Wal-Mart lifestyles. I heard it from businesspeople who had learned that their gift of entrepreneurship was intended to not only bless themselves, but others, as well.

These people were all being wrecked by the promise of a better world, of a way of life that didn’t revolve solely around the self, but made room for others. It was an awakening of sorts, a coming to grips with the fact that the American dream is a disappointment. As the rock group Switchfoot sings: “Man-made never made our dreams collide.”

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## What does it mean to be wrecked?

To be “wrecked” is to be disabused of the status quo. It means to have a redemptive transformation, often catalyzed by a brush with the pain of a dying world. The process is anything but pretty. It’s harsh and real and painfully honest. Finding out who you are and what your place is feels like a sweater unwinding thread-by-thread. Your old life begins to make less and less sense in light of your new priorities, and it seems futile to rebuild the old way of living.

At first, it’s disorienting—maybe even distracting. It calls out of you the greatest parts of you—the parts you might be afraid to let out.

To be wrecked begins with an experience. It pulls you out of your comfort zone and, consequently, out of self-centeredness. Whether you want it or not, this is what happens—your old narcissistic dreams begin to fade in light of something bigger, something better. The process leaves you with a paradigm that is still left standing after the “real world” has slammed into your ideals a couple dozen times. It’s hard, but only because all things worth fighting for are hard. Being wrecked means that everything you believe about this world, yourself, and your destiny is now in question. Because you’ve seen something larger.

In the end, you’re not who you were before. You’re different. You’re changed. You may even feel like your old values have been, in a sense, ruined by this new worldview. As confusing or as difficult as that may sound, it’s a good thing.

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## Being wrecked is more than a self-help program.

Phrases like “finding yourself” and “discovering your purpose” have become so cliché that they now sound ridiculous to us, especially for those who tend to think of themselves as members of the postmodern generation. The phrases conjure images of blue-haired church ladies on TV or a Zig Ziglar book series (nothing against Zig). They may have the best of intentions, but ultimately, they fall short.

Words like “initiation” and “rite of passage” tend to ring more authentic to our 21st century ears. Even “pilgrimage” is a moniker we can more readily adopt. We realize that we as humans are on a journey, and like all great voyages, we know that we will discover things about ourselves that we didn’t before know. “Enough already,” we say of programs and systems and 12 steps to a better life.

There’s something ultimately insincere and unfulfilling about the promise of a “better you” that doesn’t involve pain and sacrifice.

The real road of meaning is dirty and full of jagged rocks, even pieces of glass. It’s long and difficult, and that’s how we would prefer it. Jesus called this “the road to life that was so narrow few actually found it.” John Bunyan depicts this as an epic struggle in which the hero must fight his way through opposition into paradise. Emily Dickinson wrote about it in a poem: “Success is counted sweetest / By those who ne’er succeed / To comprehend nectar / Requires sorest need.”

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Despite the fact that the self-help section at Barnes and Noble taunts us with half-truths and false hopes, we keep searching. We want purpose. We long for it.

Every day, we're looking for meaning. You can see it in people's eyes at the mall, in the products we buy and never use, in the books on our shelves, in the clothes that we buy that somehow never make us look how we dreamed they would. When you encounter the world's deep need and have a revelation of how you can be a part of something greater than the consumerist pursuit of self, that all changes.

The result is being "wrecked."

Personally, I first got wrecked in Spain. I was a college student studying abroad in Seville, a city rich in culture and history. The beginning of Flamenco music can be traced back to this city where Christopher Columbus is allegedly entombed. For me, it wasn't so much about where I was as much as it was who I was becoming.

I was wrecked by the community of gypsies that were confined to the outskirts of town, where they would sell scarves and bags and knock-off DVDs. My heart was stirred by the beggars outside of the third largest cathedral in the world and the lonely faces I passed each day. I was wrecked by a world that I had never before known—a world that was becoming real for the first time to me.

It's the unfamiliar that calls us to be more than we could ever be on our own. And in that period of discomfort, we learn something about life—*real life*—that we didn't know before. Something cataclysmic or maybe even gradual happens. Nonetheless, *something* has to set all the subsequent events into motion.

## To be wrecked requires a Moment.

In each of our stories, there is a moment when all of our priorities, all of our concerns, are shifted. Our identity begins to change with it. We sense a disparity between what is and what should be. There is a nagging feeling in our souls that something's been wrong with the world for a while, and when this Moment happens, the feeling is no longer bearable. You no longer "fit" into the old world. You've seen too much, heard too many things, and you can't go back to ordinary living.

Good. That's the point. That's how it's supposed to be. Yet, this new heightened awareness doesn't come intuitively. You have to stumble into it. In a way, *it* happens to you. For many people, it comes with the birth of their first child. However, the Moment is necessary.

This is when life begins to mean something. It's when your place in the world makes more sense. And it's not all rainbows and butterflies. It's tough—full of real hardship and real challenges. There will be defeat along the road, immense tragedy that doesn't make sense or resolve right away. And you wouldn't have it any other way.

In Po Bronson's *What Should I Do with My Life?*, a book that details the lives of those who have sought something more than the status quo, this shift is drastic. And the effect is a person whose life is not lacking substance or depth. Bronson writes:

[W]hen I say that these are ordinary people, I mean they're real. They're messy and complicated. You hold in your hands the antithesis to all those books which pretend their one-size-fits-all formula will result in rosy, happily-ever-after Hollywood endings. I'm a chronicler; this is (foremost) a social documentary of people's lives; it just so happened that I learned a ton in the observation. The result might lack the comforting ease of a cure-all, but it makes up for it with integrity. (You want a step? Step one: stop pretending we're all on the same staircase.)



Setting aside all pretenses—not a bad place to start. This manifesto isn't meant to give you answers, but to further provoke your questions. If you can begin to honestly ask these questions of yourself without giving pat answers, you're on your way:

What if you were made for a purpose?

What if there was more to the meaning of life than your own story, but rather an overarching narrative in which you had a crucial part to play?

What if you had to give up your own dreams and sense of security to play your part? Would it be *worth it*? Bronson elaborates more on this:

We are all writing the story of our life. We want to know what it's "about," what are its themes and which theme is on the rise. We demand of it something deeper, or richer, or more substantive. We want to know where we're headed—not to spoil our own ending by ruining the surprise, but we want to ensure that when the ending comes, it won't be shallow. We will have done something. We will not have squandered our time here.

I submit that we all want to lead more meaningful lives, so that one day we can tell better stories to our grandkids. So that our children can be proud of their name. So that we can have some ground on which to stand when God asks us what we did with this time we were given.

Maybe it's messier than you thought. Maybe something can only be born when something else dies. Maybe your "coming alive" initially feels like being dragged through the dirt. Maybe you and I are hanging by a thread of grace for most of our lives; maybe we're expected to be humble, not haughty, with the breaks we've been given in life. Maybe we're supposed to pay good deeds forward. Maybe we're supposed to think about ourselves and what we "get out of it" far less than we do. Maybe we need to sacrifice more.

*Maybe we'll actually enjoy it.*

It's time, friends. Time to give back. Time to step out and risk more than we want. Time to dream dreams bigger than we imagined. Time to mourn with those who mourn, to bring beauty where there were ashes before, to announce a new season in the world. This isn't just altruism or compassionate living; it's something more than a tax write-off or publicity stunt.

It's a shot at living the lives that we were meant to live, that we're scared to live, that the world *needs* us to live. And that we need us to live.

This is the uncomfortable part of reading this manifesto: It's time to act, to actually *do* something. I've put you in an uncomfortable position. You see, you have to respond to this call. You have options, of course. You can dismiss it or take it to heart. You can throw it out or let it keep you up at night. But you have to do something with it.

I'm hoping you'll mull this idea over and consider the life you've been living. I hope you'll wonder, as Jack Nicolson's character did: "Is this as good as it gets?" Frankly, I'm hoping you'll step out and experience a Moment that changes you forever. And I hope that it wrecks you. If it does, it will not be the end, but only the beginning of something more.

This will not be easy, but you don't *want* it to be. If it were easy, then everyone would do it. And everyone *won't* do it, but you could. If you've been wrecked, you know that there is no choice. You've seen a fourth dimension, collided with a new reality. And there's just no going back to the same old life you had before.

**You know this. I know it. It's *time*. It's time to act. 📄**

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## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Jeff Goins is a freelance writer, nonprofit marketer, and founder of [Wrecked.org](http://Wrecked.org), an online magazine and community for “spiritual misfits.”

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