



**Own
Your
Words.**

**Own
Your
Life.**

by Erica Barnhart

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Introduction

“Actions speak louder than words.”

This phrase chaps my hide. Except when they are sitting in wait on the pages of a book or in an unread email, words *are* actions. We say them and type them and text them and utter them and sing them. At a minimum, words *are in* action. They have energy.

Take the following three words, for instance:

Skip

Walk

Trudge

All three words are describing a way that we get somewhere using our feet. But each puts off a distinctly different vibe. Skipping is joyful. Walking is neutral. And trudging is Eeyore-esque. Each word has its very own, unique energy. When you use the word, you put that energy out into the universe.

As with all things, words follow Newton’s third law of

motion: for every action there is an equal and opposite reaction. If this holds true for the whole ding dang universe that means there is an equal and opposite reaction to your words. As with the three words above, the reaction can be positive or negative. It is, in every instance, what you make it.

If you're reading this, I'm making three assumptions about you (outing these because of the whole ass-u-me thing):

1.) You want a fabulous life.

One that brings you joy and makes you grin and occasionally skip and clap with glee. Not a half-assedly lived life. But a woo-hoo worthy life.

2.) You like words.

You may not be a full on word nerd, but you see words have some power.

3.) Words influence the life you live.

You have a hunch there might be a connection between 1 and 2 above, i.e. that the words you use influence the life you live.

If these assumptions are accurate, read on, my friend, read on. Life is so big and the path forward can seem so murky, it's easy to take the lazy river approach to life: just get in your tube and float along with everyone else. The lazy river approach may be nice on occasion (we all need a little downtime) but it's not a recipe for a

woo-hoo life. It's a recipe for a life that makes you go 'meh'.

As cliché as it sounds: you only have one life and there's only one you. Let that sink in—really sink in.

One life. One you.

There's no shortage of advice, books, podcasts, blog posts, memes, and Insta posts about being your best self and leading your best life. Problem is it can all blend together forming a big ol' stew of blah, blah, blah. It can also seem either way too simplified or way too overwhelmingly complicated. The three word hacks that follow will (hopefully) hit a sweet spot: deep yet doable. They are:

- 1.) **Kill the Ants**
- 2.) **Get Your Being In line with Your Doing**
- 3.) **Mantra-fy Your Life**

Do these three things and you will own your words and, most importantly, own your life.

“
Our deepest fear
is not that we're
inadequate. It's
that we're
powerful beyond
measure.”

Marianne Williamson

Kill the Ants

I used to hang out with this lady and she was a total nag. She went on and on about how I should eat healthier and drink less, except water, which I should drink more of. She yammered away constantly. Incessantly. No matter how many steps I got in, or boxing classes I went to, or minutes I meditated, she'd be right there, wagging her finger at me to do more, do better.

And she talked in this super demeaning tone. "Only got in 9,469 steps today. Huh, couldn't get 'er done, could ya? Typical." She was totally annoying.

At some point, I got to wondering: why hang out with this lady if she's so darn mean?

Yeah, about that. The problem was I couldn't get rid of her. She was me. She was the voice inside my head. No matter where I went, there she was.

Then I kicked her out. (I'll tell you how in a minute.) And life took a sharp turn for the better.

Ever noticed how people talk a lot about squirrels

and brains, e.g. “The squirrels in my brain are on overdrive?” The squirrels are an issue, but ants are an even bigger one.

ANTs are Automatic Negative Thoughts. My friend and colleague Beth Kanter introduced me to this term and I instantly fell in love with it. And I instantly wanted to banish the damn ANTs forever.

My ANTs squabbled away mainly about body image stuff. But everyone’s ANTs are different. Maybe yours chatter on about you not making money, or getting a promotion, or finding a partner. There’s an ANT hit parade of sorts: money, career, relationships, and appearance.

“
You have power
over your
mind—not
outside events.
Realize this, and
you will find
strength.”

Marcus Aurelius

Most of us are hung up on one or more of these. Like, really hung up. And we have been for some time. These ANTs often come onto the scene when we’re still delighted by Ring Around the Rosie. That is to say: early.

This is why ANTs are so hard to get rid of. If you’ve ever had an ant infestation—with real, live ants—you

know it's no joke to get rid of them. You have to launch a vigorous and sustained attack to get rid of them. Ditto for ANTs.

So what does that attack look like? It's pretty simple: you yell at them. That's right you yell. You can decide if you want to yell out loud or just in your head, but yelling has to happen to kill the ANTs.

You pick something you're going to say that counters what the ANTs are saying. And you get in the ANTs face and YELL IT. In my case, my phrase was "Get the f•ck out!!!" That's right, every time they sauntered into my brain, I'd tell them to get the f•ck out. I tried it without the expletive and it didn't have the oomph I needed for it to stick. You don't have to swear at the ANTs to make them go away, but you do have to get bossy with them. I had to yell at them again and again and again before they kind of gave up. There are still stragglers, but they've more or less moved on to someone else's mental picnic.

Listen, you only have so much room in your brain. If it's filled with negative words (aka ANTs), that crowds out the positive, nurturing, happy, loving, kind, upbeat, joyful and otherwise splendid words that could be in there. And those words are the ones that are going to support you in creating an awesome life.

Identify your ANTs. Pick your phrase. And kill them with it. ***Cuz you can't own your life with an ant infestation going on.***

Get Your Being in Line with Your Doing

I once had a boss who got really vexed when people asked him how he was. He didn't mind the question so much as the rote replies: great, good, busy, or some other knee-jerk response.

He decided to start telling people how he actually was. He'd say, "Thanks so much for asking..." and then launch into whatever was going on with him that day. People were a tad taken aback, as you might imagine. "How are you?" is meant to be a back and forth that takes place while you're still in motion, not a let's-stop-and-really-talk-about-this type of thing. My boss' approach didn't make him popular, but he made his point. People stopped asking him the question unless they had time for the response.

If you think about it, the question "How are you?" is deeply personal. The un-asked cousin to this question is: "Who are you?" And this gets us to the pay-attention-this-is-important distinction between being and doing.

You might do a lot of things in an hour, a day, a week, a year, a lifetime. You might do things like go for a run, or clean out your closet, or blow your nose, or untangle all the friggin' cords in your house. You do things like work and parent. And support your parents, partners, and friends.

Doing is about verbs. Action words. Those actions come and go depending on time of day, phase of life, and whether or not you're having a good or bad hair day.

Being, by contrast, is about who you are fundamentally. It's about the essence of what makes you you. It's about nouns.

If all the duties and roles and to-do's were gone, who would you be? Who would you want to be? What's the thing, or things, that make you uniquely you. That if they were taken away, you wouldn't be you. Or you'd be a very sad, un-sparkly version of you.

I was recently talking to my friend Scott and he said, "I do fundraising. But I am a musician." His being is about music. If you took away his guitar, he'd be a shell of his awesome self. If you took away his donor database, he'd be sad for a beat or two...and then he'd move on.

Nouns are to being as verbs are to doing.

Here's a seemingly-simple-yet-actually-pretty-tough activity for figuring out the essence of who you are:

1.) Finish the sentence

“I am...”. Make a big ol’ long list. Don’t hold back. Mine would look something like this:

I am...

- A wife
- A mother
- a daughter
- a sister
- a friend
- a teacher
- a writer
- a boxer
- a runner
- a walker
- a tea drinker

2.) Now cross off everything that

a.) isn't optional or b.) could go away.

Leave anything that makes your gut go, "Hell to the no, you're not taking that away from me!" Winnow it down to no more than three.

- ~~a wife~~
- ~~a mother~~
- ~~a daughter~~
- ~~a sister~~
- a friend
- a teacher
- a writer
- ~~a boxer~~
- ~~a runner~~
- ~~a walker~~
- ~~a tea drinker~~

For the most part, familial roles are what they are. They may shift over time (for instance, after my divorce and before I got remarried, I was a divorcée and not a wife and now that has changed), but they don't change easily or often.

Boxer, runner, and walker are all variations on a theme: moving and exercise. I just started boxing so that's a total stretch. Ronda Rousey, I am not. And yes, back in the day, I ran a few marathons, but now my knees don't like the pounding so I might fancy a light jog on occasion, but running is in my rear view mirror. And I walk a lot but is it the essence of who I am? No. None of those are my essence.

I have mainly been a tea drinker and now can't drink coffee because of my persnickety stomach, but if the coffee option becomes available again, I might cheat on tea.

But friend? I cannot imagine a life without friends. Ever. Some people can, but not me. My girlfriends in particular are not up for grabs. Not having friends would be a showstopper for my soul. Definitely part of my essence.

“
Nouns are to
being as verbs
are to doing.”

Erica Barnhart

Also part of my essence are writing and teaching. I envisioned scenarios where I wasn't writing or teaching and they were bleak, tear-inducing scenarios. I may go through phases where I do one more than the other, but if they were entirely taken away from me, well, it'd be like someone taking away Scott's guitar. I just wouldn't be me.

3.) Now write a sentence with the 2–3 things that defines your essence.

Mine would be: “I am a friend, a teacher, and a writer.” If you look at it and your gut goes ahhhhhhh, you’re there. If your gut winces, try again. There’s either something there that shouldn’t be or something missing. But if you add something, remember you have to take something away. **This is about your essence; not your everything.**

The whole point of this soul searching is to get your doing in line with your being. I recently went through a phase where I wasn’t writing very much. It felt like someone had sawed off three of my toes. I felt off-balance, off-kilter. Just plain off. I was me but a weird, unfamiliar version of me. I walked around energetically cattywampus for months. Then inspiration struck and things snapped back into alignment. And the words poured forth.

Bottom line: Get your doing in line with your being and you’ll be on your way to owning your life.

Mantra-fy Your Life

Figuring out the essence of who you are is hard enough. Staying true to it can be downright exhausting. We're pulled in so many directions. Staying in alignment is tenuous at best.

You may wake up, meditate, guzzle a bunch of water and be feeling all virtuous and energetically in tune with the universe and then—bam!—you trip on a soccer ball, get a nasty email, and the ice machine in your refrigerator explodes. Your flow comes to a screeching halt and you are left muttering obscenities under your breath.

So what can you do to keep your awesome self in alignment and keep the flow going? Create mantras.

Yeah, yeah, I know. Mantras are woo woo. I get it. Here's what I'll say to that: they don't have to be super duper woo woo and they work. (If you think about it, "Just do it!" is a mantra and that's not woo woo at all. It's badass.)

To get into the mantra-fied swing of things, start with micro-mantras. These little ditties are words or

phrases that serve you for small bursts of time. Could be an hour or a day or however long the super-boring meeting you're sitting in will last. Point is: they're hyper-focused.

I find these particularly useful when I'm especially tired and have a long day ahead, especially if that long day requires that I form coherent sentences and show up wearing matching shoes.

A few days ago, I had one of those days. I was slouched on the couch staring off into middle distance with only one shoe in my hand. The immediate future was bleak. It was time for a mini-mantra. I picked: ***forward-motion***. A notch up from "one foot in front of the other", which sounds sort of plodding and uninspiring, but nothing too un-achievable.

Mini-mantra in mind, I went and found my other shoe and got myself out the door.

Once you've built up your mantra muscles, it's time to pick a mantra that will serve you for longer periods of time. Not indefinitely, per se, but longer than it takes to find your shoe. Say a few months or a year or so.

Your mantra can be whatever you want it to be. And it can, and likely will, change over time.

When I was going through my divorce, my mantra was simple: ***grace***. The idea of grace had a virtuous fluidity to it. So much is in flux when you're going through a

divorce and it's easy to get sucked in to least common denominator behavior. Repeating the word grace kept me mentally, and emotionally, above the fray. After grace, I moved on to quietude. (I was apparently in a one-word mantra mood for a number of years.) I needed to quiet my mind and soul to re-acquaint myself with myself.

Currently, my mantra is: **own it**. It came to me one day after I'd gotten a parking ticket. I had parked on campus and had forgotten to put my parking pass on my dashboard so it looked like I hadn't paid and I got a ticket. Totally fair.

But I was irked. I had the stupid pass in my glove box, I had just forgotten to put it out. I was tempted to go over to parking services, tail between my legs, and explain the situation in the hopes of getting out of paying it. Then, quite unexpectedly, I heard myself say, "Own it. You messed up. Own it." And so I did. I shoved the petulant, privileged part of me that had been temporarily running the show into the mental back seat and paid the ticket.

I find "own it" to be hugely motivating. Instead of wiggling out of a work out ("I don't have time to drive", "My favorite workout bra is dirty", "My knee kinda hurts."), I own it. I get in the damn car wearing my second favorite workout bra and stretch out my knee before laying one glove on the heavy bag.

Other examples of how this has plays out:

- Don't want to write that email? Write it. Own it.
- Too tired to walk up that gnarly hill? Walk up it. Own it.
- Don't feel like meditating? Sit down, shut your eyes, and zone out. Own it.

I like shorter mantras. You might desire to have a longer mantra. You might bust out with ***Lokah Samastah Sukhino Bhavantu***. It's entirely up to you.

The important thing is to have one that works for you. The right mantra will help you get your being in line with your doing. It's like the anti—ANT. It's a CPT—Conscious Positive Thought. Mantras will nudge (and sometimes shove) you in the direction you desire to be headed in life.

Go get yourself a mantra and put it on repeat.

Final Tidbits

You may be super fired up right about now. You may be ready to take the universe by storm. To do and be your most amazing, ebullient, joyful, cosmically awesome self. I hope so. Because you're pretty darn awesome. And the world needs your unique brand of awesome to be unleashed.

Pace yourself.

Change doesn't happen overnight (or at least not all the change you want to make happen). It's generally non-linear, which is totally irritating, especially for the hyper-rational among us.

“
It takes courage
to grow up and
be who you
really are.”

E.E. Cummings

Be kind to yourself.

Extra super kind. Being kind may look like fuzzy slippers and a cup of tea, or it may look like martinis with your gal pals, or it may look like skydiving. Whatever it looks like for you, do it. Take action so you can be you.

Switch up your words.

Play with them. And once you've landed on some that work for you, own them. With every fiber of your being, own them.

And own your big, amazing, awesome, custom-built-for-you life.



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Erica teaches, writes, and talks about language, leadership, and life. She is the author of *Pitchfalls: why bad pitches happen to good people* and the inventor of The Wordifier. She wrote the Stanford Social Innovation Review article, *Great mission. Bad statement: why the social sector should worry about words*, which was one of the most read articles of 2016. Erica is a Senior Lecturer at the University of Washington's Evans School of Public Policy & Governance where she co-directs the Nancy Bell Evans Center on Nonprofits & Philanthropy. She loves words in general and adverbs in particular.