

## THRIVE! - Stop Wishing Your Life Away

Robert Middleton Interviews Alan Weiss

**Robert:** Alan, you've written a new book called *Thrive!* I commented on it early on a blog or something. I said it was sort of like a modern-day *Think and Grow Rich* for entrepreneurs, with really practical ideas on being successful. It's not a book so much on marketing or being a consultant, but just being successful.

What was your idea in doing this? Was this a book that was sort of, I don't know, sort of percolating for a number of years?

**Alan:** That's a good word. You put me in kind of lofty company there, but that's exactly right. I had written all these books on marketing, and I've written more books on consulting than anyone in history.

**Robert:** Wow.

**Alan:** Yeah, ever. Well, my 41<sup>st</sup> through 44<sup>th</sup> books will come out in 2011, and of all those books, about 35 or 36 have been on consulting. No one's written that many books.

I was thinking that I'd write a lot about success in my consulting books for people in professional services, but I wanted to distill out a lot of what I had learned about success in life, period, that had nothing to do with what kind of profession you were in. That's what *Thrive!* is about.

Most people have been talking, oh, unconsciously and by default about surviving, especially during the recession. I thought that's just death. You have to talk about thriving. The subtitle of the book is *Stop Wishing Your Life Away* because so many people say, "I wish I would have said this. I wish I would have done that."

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If you listened to my father-in-law, God bless him, when he was alive, he would have owned every important piece of property in the world.

**Robert:** I wish I'd bought that, right? I wish I'd done this.

**Alan:** Exactly right. I had a chance to buy that. I wish I would have bought that.

**Robert:** You have three chapters in the beginning of the book that are all about wishing your life away, some aspect of that. I think it's worthwhile to get into that in a bit more depth. What do you see people doing in their lives with wishing? I agree with you 110%, if that's possible, but wishing is really a problem.

**Alan:** Well, it's an excuse, and it's procrastination. It's a substitute for action. The reason people wish they did something is because they didn't do it, and the reason they didn't do it is they had fear. And the fear was of failure, or the fear was of being seen as an imposter, or the fear was of not living up to someone's expectations, or the fear was of success. I've dealt with a lot of people who fear both failure and success, and I can't help those people.

People say, "I wish I would have done this. I wish I would have done that," and there are variations, Robert. People will say, "You know what I should have said? I should have told them this. I should have said to her that." The problem is this stuff festers.

I found that when people regret what they didn't do, or they hold something against another person whom they felt justifiably or unjustifiably did them wrong, you are

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enslaved to that person, or you are enslaved to that situation. You have to get rid of that stuff.

**Robert:** Was there a time in your life where you had a transformation or shift? Everybody's experienced wishing no matter who they are. I can't remember when it was for me, but it was sorta like one day I realized I just had to make it happen and stop wishing. Do you remember that for you?

**Alan:** They say that anybody who's really successful has had something like four transcendental moments in their lives. The one that comes closest to this is when I was an exchange student as a junior in high school.

I went to an inner-city high school. We never had an exchange student program, and one year, just by happy circumstance, a reporter from a local newspaper arranged for a kid from Finland to come over and spend half of a year, one semester, in each of the two public high schools in Union City, New Jersey, the most densely populated city in the country.

He did that, and then the city sent one kid from each high school back with him. Since nobody could speak Finnish, the idea was to go back over the summer.

There was a competition, and it was the old-style competition. It was the captain of the football team, the president of the class, the editor of the yearbook, and the president of the student council and editor of the newspaper. Both of those last jobs happened to be mine.

They were arbitrarily picked by the principal, those positions, and we had to make a presentation to 17 faculty

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members, a committee. Of course I was on my feet speaking, so I won 16 to 1.

I went on the old Queen Mary, the original Queen Mary to Europe.

**Robert:** What do you mean you won 16 to 1?

**Alan:** There were 17 votes. I won 16 to 1.

**Robert:** Wow.

**Alan:** The one vote against me was from the homeroom teacher of one of the other kids who told me he thought he had to be loyal and then gave me five bucks to take on the trip, which was pretty big in 1963.

Two of us went, one from each high school. We returned with the kid from Finland, and we sailed on the old Queen Mary. The other kid, he was sort of a blob, but me and the kid from Finland got along great, Esko.

Today, Esko is the Finnish ambassador to France.

**Robert:** Really?

**Alan:** Yeah. Esko and I would sneak up from the lower classes on the Queen Mary and stick our head in the first class and get thrown out repeatedly, but we said, "Someday."

When I got to Europe, we went through Europe. We went through nine countries, wound up in Finland. We took the boat train, the steamer, across the English Channel and froze because we had the cheapest tickets imaginable. We had to stay on the deck. The crew kept throwing us out of cabins, throwing us out of stairwells. We just froze. Took the long train up to Paris.

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Long story short, though, is I saw the world in color instead of black and white.

**Robert:** Yeah, up front and you were there.

**Alan:** I was there. I was in Berlin when the U.S. tanks and the Soviet tanks were 30 yards apart with their muzzles loaded.

**Robert:** Wow.

**Alan:** I got to see Europe. Esko and I still correspond on occasion.

Last year, about a year ago, my wife and I took the new Queen Mary, the Queen Mary II, and we had the largest suite anywhere on the seas. Esko and I always said, “Someday we’re gonna do this right.” We had a 2,500 square foot bi-level suite, none like it anywhere else.

**Robert:** That’s bigger than my house, Alan.

**Alan:** Well, there you go.

**Robert:** For a few days, right?

**Alan:** We had a butler. Every other day you dress, and every time I put on my tuxedo, I’d call the butler to make my bowtie, and my wife would have a fit. I’d say, “A little to the right, little to the left.”

This is what happened in 1963, and it taught me there was a huge world out there. That’s when I realized, Robert, that we were not meant to just survive, which I did on the streets of Union City, New Jersey, running from larger kids and meaner kids and everything else.

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We were meant to thrive. We were meant to drink it all in, and I resolved, what could stop me?

**Robert:** You were only how old when you took this trip?

**Alan:** I was 17. The luck was I was in my junior year, so we'd go over the summer, and I'd be back in my senior year, and they would only take juniors as candidates. It was sheer luck, but on the other hand, you can make a point that there are no coincidences.

**Robert:** Something else might have happened, but wow, what an opportunity. Then you went on to university, and jobs, and ultimately started your business. I've heard the story of that.

As you know, you're a very successful person. You're happy to be a successful person. You've made great money. You've helped thousands of people. You've written over 40 books, etc. Have you gone back and sort of looked at, "Here are my laws of success?"

Again, I'm thinking of Napoleon Hill here.

**Alan:** Yeah, I have.

**Robert:** Law 1 for you.

**Alan:** Law 1 is, and I can tell you this because I've been asked it so often since I do mentor and coach people globally, and I'm asked this all the time, Law 1 is intellectual firepower.

When I went through undergraduate school at Rutgers, I read every word on every page in every book 'cause that's what I thought I was there for. I thought that's what I was

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paying for and taking out government loans for, so I could learn.

I watched these people around me use Cliffs Notes and cheat and try to get through on a minimal basis. They had the complete wrong idea. They thought the idea was to try to get through as easily as they could and get a diploma, when I realized I didn't really give a rap about the diploma so much as the learning that was available. As usual, other people were confused about input versus output.

The first thing is intellectual firepower, and close behind, a close second place, is high self-esteem. You have to understand your own self-worth.

I do a lot of self-esteem workshops and things like that, and I often start it by pulling a hundred-dollar bill and asking people what it's worth. Then I crumple it up, and I throw it on the floor, and I say, "What's it worth now?" They say, "Well, it's still worth \$100." I say, "That's right. No matter what happens to you, no matter how you get beat up, no matter the defeats and the setbacks and everything else, you're still worth what you're worth, so you'd better arrive at that." Intellectual firepower includes a strong sense of humor, coupled by high self-esteem.

Then thirdly, you need a loving support network. I've been fortunate. I've been married for 42 years to my high-school sweetheart. She met me in my junior year when I was going off to Europe. Not everybody's that fortunate, but it doesn't matter. You need to find whatever works for you.

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What had better work for you is some kind of support network where you can share love, where you have support, where someone can commiserate when you're down, rejoice with you when you're up, and tell you, on occasion, "Knock off the crap and get to work."

**Robert:** That really does make a difference. Alan, a lot of people could say, "Well, that's nice for you, Alan. You're a really smart person to begin with. You were born with some intellectual gifts; therefore, you produce great results, and that made you feel good about yourself, so you have high self-esteem."

I'm sure people have said that, or at least thought that. What do you say to people like that?

**Alan:** I tell them to knock it off.

**Robert:** You tell them to knock it off.

**Alan:** Oh, I don't wanna hear it. Listen to me. Let me tell you a couple of things. The first is there's this big debate. For as long as I've been in consulting and everything else, there's been a debate a leader is born or made. It's not a debate. There's only one answer to it. Leaders are made. Leaders aren't born. They're made.

You learn things, and you adapt things, and you grow, and you experience and so forth. You make yourself. You make who you are.

Is there DNA flowing and coursing through your veins?  
Yeah. Is there a nurturing heredity aspect to who you are?  
Yeah, but the most important thing is what you find in the environment and how you make use of it.

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I did my doctoral dissertation using Marine Midland Bank, Merck and Hewlett Packard for my research to prove that behavioral disposition will determine innovation. If you look to hire people with certain traits like creativity and assertiveness, you'll get more innovation.

Do you know what, Robert? I proved the exact opposite. The point was that people were innovative despite their behavioral set based on the environment in which they were placed. What I'm saying is, my learning from that doctoral dissertation, is that people can put themselves in environments, and in fact create environments, in which they will be successful.

So please don't tell me that I'm gifted. I came from a family that was poor. We played on the streets with holes in our sneakers, but like I said, I read every word on every page in every book. I did the assignments. I risked things. I was never afraid to try to learn. I am not afraid of failure.

**Robert:** I've often said that one of the keys to success is simply doing your homework, which is what you're talking about here. You did the work. You took the time. You put in the effort, the blood, sweat and tears, etc.

**Alan:** The same thing applies today. I work about a 20-hour week, and I get more done in 20 hours than most people do in 60. The reason is I don't sit around triple-guessing myself. I sit down and do the work.

If somebody says, "Well, it takes me two days to write an article," I say, "Well, it takes me 45 minutes to write an article. Am I that much smarter than you are?"

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After we get it down, now they're writing an article in two hours. They said, "I'm still not doing it in 45 minutes." I said, "Yeah, but two hours is a lot better than two weeks."

**Robert:** Sometimes it's not two weeks. Sometimes it's six months, for god's sake. It's like forever and ever trying to get it perfect, etc.

**Alan:** I'm writing more books right now than most people are reading.

**Robert:** That's true. We're not gonna catch up with you, Alan.

**Alan:** My web guy says I'm providing so much content that his technical team can't put it up fast enough. I said to him, "That's your problem."

**Robert:** I've been doing an ezine every week for 15 years, which is better than most people. It's not 40 books, but it's something. People say, "Well, how do you do that, Robert?" I say, "It's very simple. I schedule it for Monday, and so it gets written." As if there were some big deep, dark secret to it. It's just doing it. Now I'm blogging every single day.

**Alan:** You're prolific too. You've created this marketing empire, and you communicate with people in a variety of different ways. I tell people if you're gonna blog, you have to be there at least three times a week like you.

I do it in multimedia. I do it in print. I do cartoons. I do it audio. I do it video. What the heck? If you're gonna do it, do it so you stand out in a crowd, right?

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**Robert:** Absolutely. Here's a question people ask me. "Where do your ideas come from, Robert?" I could ask you. All those books, where in hell do all those ideas come from?

It's amazing to me that people struggle literally sometimes for months in writing an article. I know the information is inside there. I know they've got hundreds of client problems they've solved, for instance, that are a great basis for writing stuff and various insights, etc. How do you answer that question, "Where do the ideas come from?"

**Alan:** I actually run exercises about this with people because it's come up so often. I look outside here. I'm sitting right now with my feet up on my credenza in my den, and I'm looking out at our backyard. We live on six acres, and I've got all these birdfeeders out here. I see the squirrels on the birdfeeders, and what occurs to me is that most people are trying to keep the squirrels off their birdfeeders, and they go into great lengths to do this.

I've never met one soul, not one human being who has ever been successful keeping squirrels off birdfeeders. What strikes me is why are they birdfeeders? Why aren't they squirrel feeders? I've got so many out there that the squirrels have their food and the birds have their food. Neither one can possibly eat it all.

**Robert:** It's kind of fun to look at squirrels too.

**Alan:** It is. They're animals out there just like birds are. Why don't you feed both of them and stop getting in such an uproar that one is stealing from the other? It's ludicrous. That's where my ideas come from.

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Now I transfer that to a client basis. You can't look into a client and say immediately, "Well, this guy who asked me to come in, he's the problem. I can see that right now."

First of all, you're regarding him as a squirrel. Secondly, if he's smart enough to ask you to come in, how come he's also stupid enough to be the cause of the problem?

Doesn't make any sense.

I'm constantly looking around me for examples, and I'm transferring them to actual work. I'll give you one more quick example. Margaret Wheatley wrote a book called *Leadership and the New Science*. In there, she makes an interesting commentary. She says, "Consciousness is a factor of processing information, so a dog has a higher level of consciousness than a snail because a dog processes more information than a snail." We know this.

I started thinking about that, and I realized that a lot of people process information at different speeds and at different amounts and that people have a different level of consciousness. I had an epiphany, and I realized that the people I'm dealing with, my clients, my mentorees, people I coach, and so on, they're dealing with different levels of consciousness.

One of my goals, therefore, has to be to open up everyone's consciousness to get them to process enough information to get them to approximately the same place where they can start to hear things and see things and appreciate things that everybody else is. That's been a revelation.

That's the kind of thing you can take from the world around you and apply it to your work.

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**Robert:** Alan, how do you start a book?

**Alan:** I start a book with a premise. The premise might be, for example, *Million Dollar Speaking*. If I can do *Million Dollar Consulting*, I can do *Million Dollar Speaking*. I decided to write one more comprehensive book. *Million Dollar Consulting* is in its fourth edition, been on the shelves for 20 years. I said, "Let me write one more." Wiley was interested, so I wrote *The Consulting Bible*, which will come out in another month.

I start with a premise. Then the next thing I do is I create the chapters, just chapter headings. After that, it's a piece of cake.

**Robert:** It's sort of fill-in-the-blanks, right?

**Alan:** Yeah. Here's how I write. You need about 220 pages or so for a commercially published book. I do some self-publishing on some unique things, but otherwise I commercially publish basically from McGraw-Hill and Wiley and occasionally with someone else.

If you need 220 pages, 10 chapters would mean about 20 pages a chapter because the other 20 pages is front material and back material. Twenty pages a chapter. If you have four or five subheadings, you have four or five pages in each subheading, and boom, there's your chapter.

You sit down, and you write one or two subheadings at each sitting. If a publisher wants a book in six months, I promise it in four. I usually write it in two or three.

**Robert:** Do you do much editing?

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**Alan:** Never. I never edit anything ever, never.

**Robert:** Do you have an editor that cleans things up?

**Alan:** No.

**Robert:** We could only wish it was so easy for most of us, Alan.

**Alan:** I write from the edge of the screen. I use a spell-check, but I never go back and reread a paragraph and change it. Life is about success, not perfection. When people self-edit and self-censure, which *Thrive!* talks about, you kill yourself. The last 20% you invest in perfection is dysfunctional. If it's a speech, the audience never appreciates the last 20%. If it's a book, they don't appreciate the last 20%. No matter what it is, 80% is good enough.

Now, I'm not saying 80% is good enough if you're making airplanes, but they have four redundant systems on them. When you're working on something like this, you don't self-censure.

The publisher will have a developmental editor, and the developmental editor will get back to me and say, "This chapter is somewhat unclear. Can you straighten that out?" or "You repeated a story twice," or "Could we use more of a description here?" Sometimes I'll go with their recommendations, and sometimes I won't.

Then they have proofing editors who do nothing but clean up any grammatical errors I've made and things like that. It's a very streamlined approach, and you shouldn't make it any more complicated than that.

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**Robert:** How long did it take you to write *Million Dollar Consulting*?

**Alan:** Probably about five months, four to five months. That book was originally *Confessions of a Consultant* and got rejected 15 times. My agent called me. I had one of the first car phones in New England, and he called me on my car phone. He said, "I'm at McGraw-Hill," and I said, "McGraw-Hill, holy god, they liked the book." He said, "No, they hate it."

I said, "Jeff, this is an expensive call. Why are you calling me?" He said, "Cause they wanna know if you can write a book about how you made \$1 million as a solo consultant." I said, "I can do that." He said, "Hold on." I heard him put his hand over the mouthpiece, and a minute later he came back, and he said, "I'll make the deal. They're interested."

I wrote the book. Then I was in the editor's office in New York about a month before production. She said, "The book's about to go into production. We can't call it *Confessions of a Consultant*." I said, "Yeah, I guess not. I'll think about it." She said, "You're not leaving this office until you give me a name." I said, "I've got an appointment." She said, "Sit still and give me a name of the book."

I said, "Look, Betsy, what can I tell you? It's about million dollar consulting." She said, "There's the name of the book." Sometimes it's better to be lucky than good. It turned out to be one of the most powerful brands in the professional services world.

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**Robert:** I remember reading it almost 20 years ago, a little less, I think. It was a revelation to me. If anyone listening to this call, just a little commercial aside here, Alan, that hasn't read this book, you're crazy.

I'm still using ideas from it today. My proposal process, which is outrageously successful, comes from that book. The proposal is the big thing for me.

**Alan:** I'm in the middle of writing *Million Dollar Proposals*. It's coming out this year.

**Robert:** Alan just wrote *Million Dollar Coaching*. I've got it and haven't finished it yet. More and more people are doing coaching, so I think that's a great title if you're a coach, and a lot of people in this program are.

Where to go from here? I wanna talk a little bit about goals and vision. Some people take this very methodically. Some people it's just pow! There's an idea and they run with it. What do you do? Do you flesh out your goals? Do you think about them a lot? Do you dream about them a lot, or do things just sort of pop in?

I know you move a lot faster than the average person, Alan. You really do.

**Alan:** I'm not carrying a lot of weight around. I'm not carrying guilt. I'm not carrying arbitrary obligations. I'm not carrying goals. My feeling is that I wanna lead a productive life. I wanna contribute to people. I wanna contribute to the world around me. I want to make sure that my family is safe and happy.

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As much money as I make, I've never said to myself, "I wanna make X." I have a phrase TIAABB, there is always a bigger boat. I never need the biggest and the best. I drive exotic cars. We go on great vacations, but I don't need to have the most expensive car, or the largest house or seven cars. I'm not tripped up over what somebody else has. I know what makes me happy.

I also know that I have to keep reinventing myself, which is why goals are dangerous, by the way.

**Robert:** Well, you become sort of the victim of your goal, or the effect of your goal, if you're not careful. Is that what you're talking about?

**Alan:** Yes, that's right.

**Robert:** It's like it's in stone. I have to do it. No, you don't. You can change a goal.

**Alan:** That's why these bucket lists are so stupid. You create this thing, "Before I die, I wanna do 27 things." Well, if you don't do one or two or 20, you think, "I'm a failure." For god's sakes, chill out. Be opportunistic. If you see something that's attractive, do it, but don't do something just because you checked something off your stupid list.

You've gotta be enjoying yourself, and you've gotta rejoice.

**Robert:** Absolutely. Maybe this is another book for you, Alan: *The Dumb Things People Do That Sabotage Their Success*. If you write that, I want 10% commission.

**Alan:** It's a deal.

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**Robert:** I work a lot with independent professionals, self-employed professionals, consultants, coaches, trainers, people that are one-person businesses. The stuff that they do or don't do is kind of astounding to me sometimes. I'd like to hear your take on it.

One is they wished their life away. That's kind of a given. What other things do you see, and what kind of insight can you give into that? I know this could be very long list, but I'm sure you have some things at the top of your head.

**Alan:** What happens, I think, is that they feel like imposters. Robert, there's a huge mindset difference between saying, "I have huge value, and it would be remiss of me if I didn't offer to as many people as possible," and "Gee, I wonder if I'm bothering them."

If you feel you have huge value, you're never bothering anybody. You're never trying to make a sale. You're never imposing. If you don't feel you have huge value, and you're confident about it, then you always feel like you're interrupting, or you're imposing, or there's a danger, or it's adversarial. They start to make that mistake.

Another mistake they make is they look at price instead of value. Instead of charging what they're really worth because of the value they provide, they're always worried about trying to compete on cost. You can never compete on cost. There's always gonna be somebody bigger who can commoditize things and make it cheaper. That's not the point.

The other thing I'd mention is that they don't take a holistic view of life. They seem to compartmentalize their lives. "This is work. This is play." "We take three vacations

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a year.” “I can’t do this on a Wednesday afternoon because I should be working the telephone.” “I can’t do a proposal on a Saturday. That would be a violation of life balance.” All that’s nonsense.

**Robert:** Interesting. I buy a lot of music, a lot of jazz. I’m a jazz fan. I’m a rather fanatic jazz fan. I have a lot. I buy it. I play it in my office, and I think of it as part of my business. That’s kinda silly, but it’s a bit what you’re talking about. Everything’s part of your life, your business. It all sort of merges together, right?

**Alan:** Yes, and if you make it synergistic, each aspect helps the other. If you’re in the spirit to write a proposal on a Saturday, write it. It’ll probably be great. On the other hand, if your daughter has a dance recital or your son’s playing ball at 2:00 in the afternoon on Wednesday, go see it. You’re not gonna have another opportunity.

When people tell me, “I don’t have time,” what they’re really saying is, “I choose not to.” Time is not a resource. It’s a matter of priorities. Time is never a resource. There’s 24 hours every day. We all know that.

If you tell me, “I wish I had time, but I can’t see my son play soccer,” what you’re saying is that you think you have more important things to do.

**Robert:** Isn’t this kind of a smokescreen for other stuff, though? Everyone will buy into it is I find, all their excuses, all their reasons. So “I don’t have time,” is a lack of priorities, but it also means “I’m scared to make the call. I don’t know what to do,” blada-blada. It’s one that everyone will buy into, “Oh, yeah, things are so busy. It’s crazy. I know you don’t have time.” I think it’s nonsense.

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**Alan:** It is. The whole point of *Thrive!*, and I think one of the responses to your question, is we have to take responsibility and accountability for our lives. We have more control over our fate than we think, but we flush most of it away either deliberately or accidentally. We don't think we have as much control as we do.

**Robert:** How about just self-management? I use the term "randomness" a lot. People are kind of in random patterns. That is, they don't really know where they're going. It's sort of you get up and run off in 15 different directions. You don't really have a marketing plan or strategy.

How do you plan your month, your week, your day? Do you have any particular methodologies?

**Alan:** I use a Filofax. I don't believe you can plan anything on an electric gizmo, and I am very electronically-oriented. I've got a huge Mac desktop here. I've got the latest Mac laptop, which just came out a week or two ago, which is super fast. I've got an iPad. I've got an iPhone.

I tell you all that, however, my entire future is planned in the Filofax on my desk here. I can see a year at a glance. I can see a month at a glance. I can see a week at a glance. I know what's in each day, and I simply work backward from things I have to provide and produce.

You cannot see that juxtaposition on an electronic device. You need a physical planner, and you plan out your day. I have pads wherever I am. There's a pad on my night table. There's pads in the kitchen. There's pads wherever I happen to be, so if I have good ideas or I think of

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something, I can jot it down. In my car, I have both pads and recorders in case I'm driving and I can't write.

You need to be able to organize yourself. I'm doing something in May called "The Time of Your Life." I'm teaching people during that day in Vegas how you organize your year, your month, your week and your day because it's a chronic shortcoming of people.

**Robert:**

I think it's interesting that you say not an electronic device. I agree the same. I could never make it work on a computer. I don't use a Filofax. I use a Day-at-a-Glance kind of thing, week at a glance. I have another binder that I've created of my weekly priorities. I have major lists for various different projects. I'm always sort of shifting things and bringing it down to the day.

It's funny. I think people feel, "Well, I've got this iPhone. I can put all my appointments on it." It's funny. When I go to set an appointment, it takes me five seconds because it's right in front of me. It takes them two minutes to find it in their program.

**Alan:**

Of course. It's simple to do. I can't tell you how many times I've been with three or four people, and we'll say, "Let's talk again on the 14<sup>th</sup>. What date is good for you? What time's good?"

I say, "I can do the 14<sup>th</sup> at 10:00," and they're clacking away like berserk woodpeckers trying to come up with something. Then somebody says to me, "Oh, I can do 11:00 on the 14<sup>th</sup>." Then three minutes later, they'll say, "Wait a minute. That's 2012. I have the wrong year."

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**Robert:** It's funny. We seem to have to be mobile and on the go and getting messages every second. It feels that people are not necessarily moving toward productive activity every day knocking big things off their list. They've just got a lot of stuff happening, or they're looking at a list of 100 items. How can you manage that?

**Alan:** My policy is move three things forward a mile, not 100 things forward an inch. Every day you have two or three probably top priorities. Do something substantial on them. Then take care of some small stuff, both personal and professional.

When I get off the phone with you, it's gonna be around 4:00 Eastern Time. I'm gonna head out to the garage and work on a model I've been working on for the last two weeks. My wife's making corned beef cabbage 'cause it's St. Patrick's Day today. Then we'll have dinner, and then I'll make sure I watch *American Idol* tonight. Everything fits.

Nietzsche said that a day has 100 pockets if you know what to put into them. People aren't taking advantage of the time available and the potential to organize themselves around it. They allow themselves too many interruptions, far too many interruptions.

I talk about this in *Thrive!*. For example, my phone is almost always forwarded. Now, my service guarantee is I'll return calls within 90 minutes during Eastern business hours. People are aghast at that. They think it's wonderful.

In return, if I'm sitting here at the computer writing something or figuring out something, the phone's not

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gonna ring and bother me and I have to pick it up. I've never had any computer where I've allowed it to tell me I have email. It's none of the computer's business. Just sit there and do your job.

When somebody sends me one of these meeting alerts, Robert, "You know you have a meeting in two days. You have a meeting in one hour," I tell them I will never speak to them again if they don't take that off my machine.

**Robert:** All of a sudden, it starts to dominate your life.

**Alan:** Get it the hell away from me, or we're not gonna talk.

**Robert:** Alan, let's talk a little bit more about fears. Fear's the killer. The imposter syndrome, "I'm afraid I'll be rejected. People won't like what I have."

**Alan:** "It'll turn out I'm not as good as people think I am," which is a big problem.

**Robert:** "I'll be successful, and then what will they ask of me, for god's sake?" It seems there always is some kind of fear that prevents people from taking the next step.

Alan, my guess is I had a bigger issue about this than you did. I don't know. Maybe you had a ridiculous number of fears, ridiculous. It took me a long time to get going and finally understand what it was, and worked through them and conquered them. Now I feel relatively fearless. It took a long time for me to do it.

Nevertheless, now that I've said that, what was your strategy? What are some of the fears that you faced early in your life? What was the shift that made you get past them?

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### **Alan:**

I was a frightened little kid. I was running from the bullies. When I was in school, there was no such as bullying. Everybody just killed you. There wasn't any bullying. Please. Give me a break. People would say, "Give me a quarter, or I'm gonna break into your locker and steal your stuff," and you found a quarter to give them. You stole someone else's quarter. Come on. That was school back then. I was a scared little kid.

I remember when I first got into the training business, when I was recruited out of Prudential, and I went into the training business with a firm in Princeton. The first time I stood up in front of a group of adult businesspeople, I was scared out of my mind.

After I did that two or three times, I realized those people were there to learn. They weren't there to critique me. I wasn't even 26 years old. Everybody was older than I was. They didn't wanna see me go down in flames. No healthy person, aside from a few borderline personality disorders, wants to go hear someone speak and say, "Oh, I had a great time this morning. The guy was awful."

Consequently, I learned that I was valuable to these people, and I'd better get good at it, and I did. I'm in the Speakers Hall of Fame right now.

That's how I overcame fears. I understood that I can be of value to people, and then that the worst thing that can happen is that they throw you out. You pick yourself up, dust yourself off, walk down the street, and you find something else to do. My common response is I've been thrown out of better rooms than this one.

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Nothing you or I do, Robert, is going to affect the course of Western civilization for better or for worse.

**Robert:** Rejection, Alan.

**Alan:** Rejection is a factor of self-esteem, though.

**Robert:** Tell me more.

**Alan:** If I tell you that you and I aren't gonna change the course of Western civilization and the worst thing that can happen is you get thrown out, the only thing that gets bruised is your ego. The ego is the part of the body that's most easily recoverable, like within a nanosecond.

If you're still afraid of those things, if you're still afraid that, "Oh my god, what if they don't like me? What if I'm not good?" that's a real self-esteem issue. Bandura's written tons on this stuff, but there's a difference between efficacy and self-esteem. Efficacy is the ability to do something well. Self-esteem is the feeling of self-worth no matter how well you do something.

If you have both in a given endeavor, then you're a very healthy individual. I'd like to think I have both in the consulting world. If you look at, however, playing musical instruments, I have no efficacy to play a musical instrument. I can't play. I can barely play the radio, but I still have high self-esteem. I think well of myself.

Now, if you have high self-esteem and no competency at all, you're an empty suit. The fact is that people don't allow themselves to build their esteem where they're not afraid to fail. That's because they don't build the proper skills along the way. My feeling is the more skills you

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develop and use successfully, the more self-esteem you're gonna have.

I regard self-esteem as sort of a verb on the way to self-confidence, which is a noun just in my lexicon.

The most important skill of all is language. If you can use language, you control discussion. Discussion controls relationships, and relationships control business.

Language is the primordial skill. It is the tool of our craft, and not enough people understand language.

When I hear somebody confuse "imply" and "infer," which do not mean the same thing, or "prone" and "supine," it rankles me. It's like nails on a blackboard because they haven't educated themselves to the point where they can really be effective in social and business intercourse.

**Robert:** That begs the question, of course, is how does one improve one's language skills?

**Alan:** It's pretty easy, actually. You improve your language skills through these methods. First, you read voraciously. You read fiction and nonfiction, and you understand the kinds of words that are put together that make people effective. You understand metaphor. You understand analogy. You learn how to use these things to give color to your speech.

The second thing you do is you do crossword puzzles and acrostic puzzles. That will increase your vocabulary hugely. You don't just throw them down when you can't do something. You figure out how to finish them.

**Robert:** I think you've hit my weakness, Alan. I never liked those.

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**Alan:** Every time you see a word you don't know, you rip it out, or you copy it, and you look it up and you use it. Whenever I see a word I don't know, I am personally offended.

Years ago, I used to copy down a dozen words a week. Today I might copy down one word every two months, and I'm a wider reader than ever before, but that's how my vocabulary has grown. You don't just pass over words you don't know and guess at them.

The final thing you do is you enter into debates. You argue. You discuss both electronically and interpersonally so that you hone your skills. You hone your ability to use words.

Never ever abide by the advice that people give you to dumb down your speech or dumb down your dress. This advice is given by people who are themselves so insecure they wanna drag everyone down to their own level of inferiority. Never dumb down.

Successful people wanna be around successful people. You have to show that you're a success, and you do that in the way you dress, and your demeanor, and the kind of words you use.

**Robert:** Wow, makes sense. Don't you feel also that writing itself increases your capability to communicate?

**Alan:** It does as long as you don't write the same old thing all the time. Let's take your example from before. If you're posting three to five times a week, your posts should be diverse. You should be talking or writing on different topics of different lengths. If you do that, you're right,

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your vocabulary should improve, and your writing should improve.

**Robert:** It seems to build a muscle. I found that probably the biggest transformation in my business is when I started my ezine. By writing every single week, I found that then I was able to articulate much more effectively what it is I did, how I was different, who I worked with, the various techniques of marketing and selling. Before, it was all just sort of jumbled around in my head. Writing organized it.

In a way, Alan, you're drawing on 40 books that you've written. You've written those. You've thought them through. They've been organized. That becomes part of your lexicon or your sort of mental storage library for all these ideas.

**Alan:** That's my repository. The fact is, though, I've also read about 5,000 books. That's been probably even more impressive in terms of being able to influence how I write, how I think, how I express myself. I'm just voracious in trying to take in other people's ideas and understand how they communicate them and why they have impact and so forth.

**Robert:** How many hours do you read a day, typically?

**Alan:** Are you including the newspaper and things like that or just books?

**Robert:** Everything.

**Alan:** Probably 90 minutes.

**Robert:** Just 90 minutes.

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**Alan:** That's all. I read the newspapers every day. I read the magazines that come in that I follow, and then I usually read while I'm watching TV. I finish great books while I watch football because there's so much inaction between action in football, so I read while I watch TV. Then I usually do a crossword puzzle before I go to bed, and that also helps me to sleep.

**Robert:** Brilliant. That's great. At the end of Alan's book, by the way, he has a list of recommended books, mostly fiction and nonfiction, but no business books, which I think is interesting. Tell me about that.

**Alan:** Most business books are awful. They're just dreadful. You can count the exceptions. Peter Drucker, read anything he ever wrote. He invented strategy. He's just a terrific thinker. He was writing into his 90s, and he's a great loss and a fascinating guy. There are some books like that. John Gardner *On Leadership* is another one I would recommend without thinking twice about it.

Most business books are about fads. They're about illusory trends, and they're written by people who don't deserve to be writing the books.

Moreover, when you read some of these business biographies, you have to take into account that they can virtually never help you because they're just talking about that individual who did that thing in that particular time in those circumstances, and there's very little to learn from it.

I read Iacocca's book about Ford. While it was kind of interesting about what he did there, there's virtually nothing transferable. There was a book out called

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*Execution* by Larry Bossidy, who came out of GE, ran AlliedSignal, and the consultant, what's his name, Ram Charan or something? The two of them got together, and the book's just awful. It's just dreadful. It doesn't tell you anything. It doesn't help you with anything. Most business books are written for the writer and not the reader.

**Robert:** It's a bit of a conundrum here, though, because writing a book is a great thing for your business, but the chances are you're not gonna put out a great business book.

**Alan:** Think about it. If you know why so many business books are bad, you can make an exception. People tell me I write the way I speak. You can always become an exception.

Secondly, always think of your audience and who you're writing for. Pretend you're having a conversation with those people who are in your audience. That will make your book lively.

Most of these big-time business books are ephemeral. Six months later, they're gone. Occasionally, something like a Malcolm Gladwell comes along, and he writes *Outliers* or *The Tipping Point* or things like that, but I don't even consider that a business book.

**Robert:** Yeah, but they're very insightful. They're based on good research and interesting synthesis of ideas.

**Alan:** You're right, and I like them, but to me, that's not a business book. It's almost a sociological book.

**Robert:** Very interesting. What is life mastery? I'm looking through your index here.

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**Alan:** Life mastery is when you don't need feedback from others to tell you how well you're doing. You have an internal governor that tells you that you did well here. You didn't do so well there. You can improve this. You really can't improve that without a ridiculous investment of time and energy. It's fine the way it is. That's what life mastery is. It's the ability to self-regulate.

There are two types of feedback, the solicited feedback where I ask you because I respect you, "What do you think about this?" Then there's unsolicited feedback, which adds to the problem with self-esteem because it spins you around the curves like a ping-pong ball or one of those pinballs in one of the machines. You just can't listen to unsolicited feedback because it's always for the sender.

**Robert:** Very interesting. These days the economy seems to be in a meltdown. Unemployment is at an all-time high. Businesses, we hear one corruption thing after the other. Is there hope for American business? What the hell is going on, and what is your solution?

I think about this a lot. I thought I should ask this of Alan because he seems to have a better perspective than almost anybody on stuff like this. I'm concerned. I'm really worried about it. What the hell is happening, and are we ever gonna get back? Go ahead.

**Alan:** I'll try to help you here. I'll try to buff you up. There's huge prosperity and huge promise ahead because everything you just said is wrong.

**Robert:** Except for the bottom 10%.

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**Alan:** Well, hold on. Right now we're speaking here, just to be accurate, in late March or mid-March of 2011. We're in the midst of a pretty sizable recovery. In fact, it's one of the greatest recoveries of the last half-century.

**Robert:** I.e. businesses are being more profitable.

**Alan:** Businesses being more profitable. The stock market has undergone one of its most remarkable bounce-backs ever. While there'll still be hiccups ahead, and you can't predict things like Japanese tsunamis knocking out nuclear plants or revolutions in Libya, nonetheless, that will be discounted and overcome too.

First of all, we're in the midst of a big recovery. I would advise all your readers, and I'm not accusing this of you, Robert. Don't get me wrong, but don't hang out with economic pessimists. The fact is things are looking pretty good right now.

The second thing you mentioned, I recall, was the unemployment rate. The unemployment rate has been far higher in the past. It was far higher in the Great Depression. Right now it's about 9%, but the fact is that 5% of people unemployed don't wanna work, and they're not gonna work. Those are hardcore unemployed, which means there's really only about 4% of the people who could be employed and wanna be employed who aren't, which means that 96% of people who wanna be employed are employed.

You can also make a case, as some people do, that you have sort of the working poor that a lot of people who are employed aren't employed in the jobs that they would prefer, or that they had or are making enough money.

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**Robert:** Or wages are being pushed down more than ever.

**Alan:** That's right, but that's a problem in any evolving economy. I said to you before I'm always reinventing myself. Last year I made more than \$2 million. Let's put it that way. Seventy-five percent of that came from stuff that didn't exist three years before.

We have to constantly reinvent ourselves. If you're just gonna drive a bus all your life, and I mean no disrespect to bus drivers, but you cannot expect that your income is gonna improve by 20% a year. There's no increased skill there, and the jobs in increasing commodities are even becoming automated.

Now I forget the third thing you said, but that was wrong too. Let me tell you something else. I don't know where your members are. The members of my communities are global.

**Robert:** Mine too.

**Alan:** In the United States, we are about a quarter of a century, 250 years or so, into the greatest experiment in democracy and freedom and liberty ever launched. The fact that we're still living off the original document is just astounding. It's astounding.

**Robert:** It is.

**Alan:** Here we are engaged in two wars overseas. Whether or not we should be in them is a different point. I'm not making a political point here. Here we are having gone through razor-sharp presidential elections where at the very last vote on the Supreme Court there were no tanks

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on the street. There was no militia called out. People accepted the rule of law.

We're in a country where people come here. Our issue is keeping immigrants out, which I'm not making a political judgment either, but we're a country of immigrants. I was just in Ellis Island two weeks ago, and people from the industrialized West, and Asia and Latin America and all over the world wanna come here because they can be innovative and they can be rewarded on merit and so forth and so on.

We have this wonderful capability here. We're blessed by geography, but we're blessed by the foresight of these people who a quarter century ago said they pledged their lives, their fortune and their sacred honor and may be hanged if they lost, and they knew that, and here we are.

The future is bright. You have to take context into consideration. Most people in school today, and for the last 20 years, have not learned geography and history. Geography and history are essential to frame and to place in context what's happening today. Historically, things are not as bad as they seem, and contextually, we are in a great place in the world.

Now, can things get better? Yeah, but if you get up in the morning and say, "Woe is me," you've got a problem. If you get up in the morning and say, "Not perfect, but awfully good," you got a good shot.

**Robert:** What I see a lot is people let the recession trigger them. You know what I'm saying?

**Alan:** Yes.

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**Robert:** It's, "Well, business isn't good. Therefore, my business isn't gonna be good, so I'll sort of hunker down, and I won't do a lot of marketing because what's the use right now? People aren't hiring. Of course, why would they need a consultant?"

It's funny. We have all kinds of external conditions. It's all we have, right? This is happening. It's good. It's bad. It's indifferent. We let that shape our actions instead of taking the initiative.

You know the story of the shoes in Africa, the apocryphal story.

**Alan:** Yeah, I do.

**Robert:** Great, there's no shoes. Send more. Nobody wears shoes. We don't think like that. It's more we think like the other guy, "Oh, everyone's already wearing shoes. What's the use?"

**Alan:** This is the issue, Robert, and the issue I raise in *Thrive!* You talk about the external forces that drive us, but the trouble is there's no countervailing internal force.

If you are self-confident, and if you have self-esteem, and if you are positive and optimistic, and if you have skills and can use language, you have countervailing forces. You know how to get through the worst, and you know how to rejoice in the best. You're not just buffeted by what happens out there.

Too many people are buffeted by the winds and tides of the oceans. They're like jellyfish with no propulsion. What

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you need to be is a large, mean fish with teeth and a tail that propels itself through the ocean.

**Robert:** And the intention to do that. I just filled my biggest, most successful program ever and got 22 people in it. It was 18 last year. It was easier to fill. Seventy percent of the people I talked to signed up. It was like, “Hmm, what recession?”

There’s a need out there for whatever service that you have, but you have to take the initiative and not wait for things to happen.

**Alan:** And not make excuses. If you wake up making excuses that the economy’s bad, the competition’s tough, technology is passing you by, you’re never gonna get anywhere.

If you wake up and say, “How can I take advantage of technology? Competition opens markets. I’ve got more talent and value than anyone else,” you’re gonna have a very different kind of day.

**Robert:** We’re sort of jumping all over the place depending on what you’re saying. I noticed one of the biggest weaknesses of self-employed people is follow-up. We wait for people to call us. We don’t persist in any kind of way. What have you noticed in that area, and what are some of your ideas in that?

I found, for instance, if someone can follow up, if they have no fear of follow-up, if they just make the call, I’d bet on them any day of the week as opposed to someone that has 27 degrees.

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**Alan:** You're right. I think it refers back to what you were saying earlier about discipline and about having some kind of planner. You have to plan to follow up. You have to understand that follow-up is in the best interests of the other person with whom you're following, and you have to be unafraid of the worst possible outcome. The worst possible outcome here is simply "No." It's as simple as that.

**Robert:** The other aspect, you talked about the imposter syndrome. There seems to be this thing, "Well, if I market myself," "If I call people," "If I do something somewhat unusual," whatever the heck it is, "people will think I'm unprofessional." You know what I'm talking about?

"They'll think I'm hypey. I don't know. I couldn't be that because I'm a professional, so I have to be just so careful." That drives me crazy, but it's a real big issue for a lot of people.

**Alan:** Well, they need to stop that.

**Robert:** Alan has spoken.

**Alan:** You know the Bob Newhart routine where he says stop it? It's on YouTube. He's a therapist. A woman comes in, and he says, "I have a different therapeutic approach. I only charge you \$5. It's five minutes."

She says, "Well, I'm afraid of being buried alive in a small box." He says, "Stop it." He says, "You have four minutes left." She says, "Well, I have relationship issues." He says, "Stop it." I won't say the rest of the thing. I won't go on, but the fact is that you need to stop it.

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A lot of therapy is helpful, but a lot of therapy is just an excuse to keep talking about things you shouldn't be talking about. Just stop it. You go through life afraid and timid that somebody might see. Whereas I feel if I'm different, I'm gonna stand out, but you feel if you're different, you're gonna be pointed at and mocked.

**Robert:** Ridiculed, embarrassed, everyone will not do business with me anymore.

**Alan:** It goes back to self-esteem. You're afraid of being embarrassed.

**Robert:** Yeah, so everybody stop it. Get over yourselves. Make the follow-up calls.

**Alan:** Pragmatically, ask yourself, "What's the worst that can happen?" What's the worst that can happen is minor in the history of the world. It's nothing.

**Robert:** Very minor. They don't return your call.

**Alan:** Stop worrying about it.

**Robert:** How do you handle unreturned calls or slowly returned calls?

**Alan:** If I don't get a return call from someone, my policy is three tries and a letter. The first time, they might have lost a note. The call might not have gone through. They might have forgotten about it. The second time might be the same thing, but not three times. Once is an accident. Twice is a coincidence. Three times is a pattern.

After the third time, I write a letter. I simply say very positively, "I'm sorry we couldn't make contact. I did my

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best, but if you need me, here I am.” That’s it. I move on. I don’t worry about it. I don’t take it as a personal rejection.

I don’t have much of a problem because I deal with peers. I don’t deal with lower level people. The people who are most likely not to return a call are human resource people, training people, learning and development people, people at the bottom of the organization ‘cause that’s one of the few straws they can grasp to prove that they’re important not returning a call. I don’t deal with those people.

**Robert:**

Good. We’ve had some interesting things with people in our group where it didn’t seem they were ever gonna get back. Then a month later, they’d call and say, “You’ve got the contract,” or “Let’s continue the conversation.” I think we often sort of fantasize that something awful has happened. Usually the case is people are just busy.

We make up stuff, and then we beat ourselves up about it instead of just realizing everyone’s busy these days. What’s new with that, for god’s sake? Just keep at it.

What other pieces of wisdom can you give us, Alan, in this last piece? I’m a self-employed professional. I wanna be successful. I’ve taken all these ideas. What else would you share with me that’s gonna increase my chances of success in business and life?

**Alan:**

I think that if you wanna increase your chances of success in no particular order, surround yourself with bright people. Never allow yourself to be king of the hill just for the ego of it. People say you should never be the brightest one in your mastermind group. Well, somebody has to be. After a while you change mastermind groups. Surround yourself with bright people.

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Secondly, take prudent risk. Don't be afraid of failure. No risk, no reward. William Penn said no cross, no crown. Don't be afraid to take some prudent risks because without prudent risk, you can never really be innovative or creative.

Thirdly, understand that life is about contributing, and it's about reciprocity. It's about helping others and expecting to be helped, not in the exact same transaction, but it's reasonable to reach out for help when you need it. It's reasonable to provide help even when people aren't expecting it.

For example, every session I run, every workshop I run, there's always at least one person, sometimes more when they're on scholarship, and I never give these free seats to people who ask for them. I identify people I know could use them, and I make the offer. You want that kind of mutuality of help.

Finally, I'd say dare to dream. Think big thoughts. We're not here to stick our toe in the water. We're here to make waves.

### **Robert:**

Waves you have made, Alan, in many people's lives. I wanna thank you for taking the hour to do this. I got some great ideas. I hope everyone listening really takes this to heart.

We'll have a transcript of this. Listen to this a few times. Read it a few times. Alan is the kind of success we all wanna be. Maybe we won't be as successful as Alan, but if we do just half as much, we'll exceed our dreams beyond our imaginings in most cases.

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Thank you, Alan.

**Alan:** My pleasure, Robert. Thanks. It's always great talking to you. The time just flies by.

**Robert:** Great. Thank you.