# THE BULLET + JOURNAL WE THE

TRACK THE PAST

ORDER THE PRESENT

DESIGN THE FUTURE

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The following is an excerpt from THE BULLET JOURNAL METHOD by Ryder Carroll, to be published by Portfolio, an imprint of Penguin Random House, on October 23, 2018.

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# PRAISE FOR THE BULLET JOURNAL METHOD

"Bullet journaling is one of the most elegant and effective productivity systems I've ever encountered. It will not only help you get more organized but will also help you become a better person. I highly recommend this book (and the method it details) for anyone looking to get more out of life."

-Cal Newport, author of Deep Work

"Whether you are an avid journaler or have always wanted to explore the benefits of journaling, *The Bullet Journal Method* simplifies the power of putting pen to paper and will undoubtedly transform your life, in more ways than you can imagine."

-Hal Elrod, author of The Miracle Morning

"Ryder has done an extraordinary job in sharing a comprehensive and hands-on methodology to implement the powerful practice of externalizing our thinking—no matter what it's about! It's a great treatise and manual for freeing and directing our consciousness, with lots of tips about how to play in that big and wonderful game."

—David Allen, author of Getting Things Done

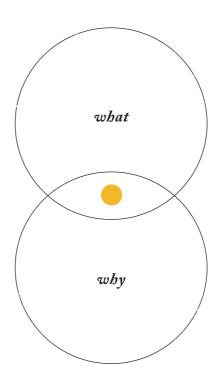
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Let us postpone nothing. Let us balance life's account every day. . . . One who daily puts the finishing touches to his life is never in want of time.

-Seneca, Moral Letters to Lucilius

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# THE PREPARATION



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The mystery box arrived unannounced. Stranger still, there was my mother's unmistakable block script adorning the address label. Maybe a surprise gift, for no particular occasion or reason? Unlikely.

Opening the box revealed a mess of old notebooks. Perplexed, I fished out a nuclear orange one covered in graffiti. Its pages brimmed with rough illustrations of robots, monsters, battle scenes, and wildly misspelled words. Different kinds of . . . a chill went down my spine. These were mine!

I took a deep breath and dove in. This was more than a trip down memory lane. It was like reentering the husk of an all-but-forgotten self. As I leafed through another notebook, a folded sheet fell from its pages. Curious, I unfolded it to find a grotesque rendering of a very angry man. He was yelling so hard that his eyes bulged and his tongue flapped out of his mouth. Two words were written on the page. One small word, shyly tucked into a corner, revealed the identity of the apoplectic man: an old teacher of mine. The other large jagged word, the one revealing the target of his rage, was my name.

My problems started early in elementary school with the terrible grades, the red-faced teachers, the resigned tutors. My performance

was so alarming that I spent a good amount of my summers in special schools and psychologists' offices. Eventually I was diagnosed with attention deficit disorder (ADD). This was back in the 1980s, when mullets were better understood than my condition. The few resources that were available were either too complicated or proscriptive to prove helpful, or didn't fit my needs. If anything, they salted the wound. Nothing worked the way that my mind worked, so I was left largely to my own dull devices.

The main culprit was my inability to rein in my focus. It wasn't that I couldn't focus; I just had a hard time concentrating on the right thing at the right time, on being present. My attention would always dart off to the next bright thing. As I cycled through distractions, my responsibilities steadily piled up until they became overwhelming. I often found myself coming up short or trailing behind. Facing those feelings day in, day out led to deep self-doubt. Few things are more distracting than the cruel stories we tell ourselves.

I admired my successful peers, with their unwavering attention and their notebooks brimming with detailed notes. I became fascinated with order and discipline, qualities that to me seemed as beautiful as they did foreign. To unravel these mysteries, I started devising organizational tricks designed to embrace the way *my* mind worked.

Through trial and *a lot* of error, I gradually pieced together a system that worked, all in my good old-fashioned paper notebook. It was a cross between a planner, diary, notebook, to-do list, and sketchbook. It provided me with a practical yet forgiving tool to organize my impatient mind. Gradually, I became less distracted, less overwhelmed, and a lot more productive. I realized that it was

up to me to solve my challenges. More importantly, I realized that I could!

By 2007, I was working as a web designer for a big fashion label headquartered in the neon heart of New York City, Times Square. I'd gotten the job through a friend who worked there and was struggling to plan her upcoming wedding. Her desk was littered with notebooks, Post-its, and scraps of paper a couple of inches deep. It looked like one of those manic conspiracy map rooms you see in crime shows.

I'd been looking for a way to repay her for getting me the position. So one day, as I saw her scrounging for yet another wayward note, I awkwardly offered to show her how I used my notebook. She turned to me with raised eyebrows, and to my surprise—and horror—she took me up on the offer. Gulp. What had I gotten myself into? Sharing my notebook was like offering someone an unadulterated look into my mind, which, well . . . yeah.

A few days later we went for coffee. My clumsy tutorial took a while. I felt deeply vulnerable exposing how I organized my thoughts—the symbols, the systems, the templates, the cycles, the lists. To me, these were the many crutches invented to support a faulty brain. I avoided making eye contact until I was finished. Mortified, I looked up. Her gaping mouth instantly validated all my insecurities. After an excruciating pause she said, "You have to share this with people."

After the awkwardness of that tutorial, it took a lot more prodding for me to share my system. But over the years, I found myself fielding shy questions from designers, developers, project managers, and accountants about my ever-present notebook. Some asked about organizing their day-to-day. So I showed them how to use my system

for quickly logging their tasks, events, and notes. Others asked about setting goals. So I demonstrated how they could use my system for structuring action plans to tackle future aims. Others just wanted to be less scattered, so I showed them how to neatly funnel all their notes and projects into one notebook.

It had never occurred to me that these solutions I'd devised could be so widely applicable. If someone had a specific need, it was easy to modify one of my techniques to support it. I started to wonder whether sharing my solutions to common organizational challenges might help others avoid, or at least mitigate, the frustration I had endured earlier in my life.

All well and good, but if I was going to open my mouth again, there would be no more awkward freestyling. I formalized the system and streamlined it, stripping away everything but the most effective techniques I had developed over the years. Nothing exactly like it existed, so I had to invent a new language with its own vocabulary. This made the system significantly easier to explain—and, I hoped, to learn. Now it needed a name, something that spoke to its speed, its efficiency, its heritage, and its purpose. I called it the Bullet Journal.

Next, I launched a website featuring interactive tutorials and videos that walked users through the newly minted Bullet Journal system, aka BuJo. I smiled when the site passed 100 unique visitors. To me, that was mission accomplished! Then the unexpected happened. Bulletjournal.com was featured on Lifehack.org. Then on Lifehacker.com, then in *Fast Company*, and from there it went viral. The site went from 100 to 100,000 unique visitors in *days*.

Bullet Journal communities sprouted up across the web. To my

astonishment, people were openly sharing their approaches to dealing with deeply personal challenges. Veterans shared their tactics for coping with PTSD by tracking their days in their Bullet Journals. People suffering from OCD shared ways to distance themselves from their overpowering thoughts. I was touched hearing from those like myself suffering from ADD as they shared how their grades improved and their anxiety diminished. In the often toxic world of online communities, these Bullet Journal groups created incredibly positive and supportive spaces, each focusing on different challenges, all using the same tool.

Sandy stumbled upon Bullet Journaling in May 2017, through a video on Facebook. Lack of sleep and caring for a toddler left her extremely disorganized and forgetful, which is not how anyone would normally describe her. Thoughts ran through her mind like squirrels: Had he slept long enough? Were his immunizations on track? When was that preschool application deadline again? As soon as she put one task to rest, another popped up in its place. She felt stressed and demoralized. Did other moms know something she didn't? So when she heard about an organizational system requiring just a notebook and a pen, she felt she had nothing to lose.

The first step was to create a log of everything she had to do that month. She wrote each family member's schedule in separate columns. They all worked irregular hours. It felt like she could finally press pause on the roller coaster for long enough to see who would be where for the next four weeks. It was horrifying to think about how easily one of them could forget to pick up their baby from preschool in a few years. It felt like it was just a matter of time before they would forget something important.

Sandy resolutely drew another column. She wrote down events and birthdays so they were easily visible. On her monthly financial log, she listed when bills were due and how much she'd paid. She also added daily boxes to track habits and goals—or just a reminder to stop and breathe!

Writing by hand was strangely soothing. Sandy didn't want to set her hopes too high, though, when so many other systems had promised to get the organized side of herself back without delivering long-term change.

Sandy moved on to the next part of the instructions. They were intended to help her keep sight of the bigger picture. What were her aspirations for the coming year? On her Yearly Goals page, she dared to write down a passion project that she'd been weakly attempting for years—with no progress to show for it. Was her OCD sabotaging her resolution to spend more time lettering and drawing? Or was she just too busy? All she knew was that she had potential she wasn't using.

Over the coming weeks, Sandy's habit of sitting down with her Bullet Journal became as effortless as brushing her teeth. Silly as it seemed, crossing off little boxes kept her motivated by reminding her that there was a finite number of tasks to do every day. She didn't forget about a single bill. Nor did she have to send any long, apologetic texts for forgetting someone's birthday. Another surprising thing was that the layout of the Bullet Journal reminded her that mundane tasks were part of the bigger picture. The Monthly Goals and Yearly Goals pages showed her every day that she had a long game, and that she was on her way. Her trick was to add a tiny passion project—say, 15 minutes of lettering by hand—to every Daily Log, and to do it first thing every day. She always had 15 free

minutes if she took them before checking her phone. It was like time had expanded.

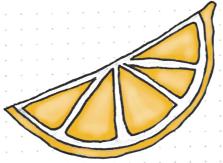
Soon Sandy noticed that journaling garnered more benefits than just keeping her organized and sane. All her life, she'd suffered from a condition called dermatillomania, also known as compulsive skinpicking disorder, that she'd been ashamed of her whole life. For Sandy, it was mostly concentrated on her fingers. She'd canceled meetings and interviews because she felt her fingers looked horrible. Sometimes she couldn't sleep because of the pain, and she'd constantly dropped things and was unable to do the simplest of tasks. For example, she'd always asked her husband or her mom to help her squeeze some lemon for her tea to avoid the biting pain of the acidic sting.

After Bullet Journaling for a few months, she found herself in the kitchen, tears welling up in her eyes. She looked down at her hands, finally squeezing a lemon, and realized that her fingers were no longer covered with wounds. With every line, letter, and notation she made, she'd kept her hands busy and let them slowly but surely heal. I've included the special page she designed in her journal to commemorate the day.

Not only did Bullet Journaling help her plan, track, and keep memories; it let her be creative, heal and no longer hide, and be a part of an encouraging, supportive community. She is not alone in this. I've also been inspired by the inventive, resilient, and spirited Bullet Journalists who have taken my methodology and customized it to fit their circumstances. This is in part why I decided to write this book.

Whether you're an experienced Bullet Journalist or a newcomer, The Bullet Journal Method is for anyone struggling to find their





place in the digital age. It will help you get organized by providing simple tools and techniques that can inject clarity, direction, and focus into your days. As great as getting organized feels, however, it's just the surface of something significantly deeper and more valuable.

I had always thought my ADD made me different from others. One thing this community helped me realize is that my condition simply forced me to address something early on that has since become a common malady of the digital age: the lack of self-awareness.

In the most connected time in history, we're quickly losing touch with ourselves. Overwhelmed by a never-ending flood of information, we're left feeling overstimulated yet restless, overworked yet discontented, tuned in yet burned out. As technology leaked into every nook in my life, with its countless distractions, my methodology provided an analog refuge that proved invaluable in helping me define and focus on what truly mattered. Now countless others have found it key in helping them reclaim agency over their lives.

In 2015, Anthony Gorrity, a shy designer, quit an unsatisfying agency job and started freelancing. He'd been dreaming of going out on his own for years. What he didn't anticipate was the added pressure to perform and the need to structure his own time. He tried a few apps to keep himself organized, but none were as flexible as he needed. He took to keeping notebooks of to-do lists, but they were a mess. Clients would call him without warning, and he'd rifle through six different notebooks trying to find the notes he needed. He knew he'd written this down . . . somewhere. . . . All of these frantic moments undercut his confidence. As someone who wasn't a natural self-promoter, he had a hard enough time pitching himself to get work—and now it seemed as if once the work came in, a

whole new set of stressful challenges awaited. He wondered if he'd made a mistake by going freelance. Then he had a distant memory of seeing a video of some guy demoing some super-complex journal system that he swore by. He started Googling all kinds of weird keywords until he eventually found BulletJournal.com. The system wasn't nearly as complex as he'd remembered. He grabbed a fresh notebook and started consolidating everything he needed to do.

A few things changed. He became a lot more introspective. He realized that he *loved* making to-do lists, and he loved knocking out tasks even more. Best of all, self-confidence had room to take root in the clean, clear space of his notebook: Having things written down gave him the guts he needed when on the phone with a client. Being prepared, and knowing his material, made him feel less like a salesman and more like a craftsman. The Bullet Journal provided a framework that allowed Anthony to explore his potential.

This is a critical aspect of the methodology; it helps us cultivate a better sense of ourselves both in and out of the professional theater. The simple act of pausing to write down the important minutia of one's life goes far beyond simple organization. It has helped people reconnect with themselves and the things they care about.

I spend much of my time nowadays connecting with fellow Bullet Journalists like Sandy and Anthony and fielding questions from the community. Many seek to expand the functionality of their Bullet Journals. Others delve deeper, tackling universal challenges that have become amplified in today's frenetic world. In this book, I seek to address those questions and demonstrate how a simple notebook can prove invaluable in uncovering the answers.

The Bullet Journal method consists of two parts: the system and the practice. First we'll learn about the system, to teach you how to

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## THE BULLET JOURNAL METHOD

transform your notebook into a powerful organizational tool. Then we'll examine the practice. It's a fusion of philosophies from a variety of traditions that define how to live an intentional life—a life both productive and purposeful. The result of my endeavor to translate this timeless knowledge into focused action resulted in the Bullet Journal method, the analog system for the digital age. It will help you track the past and order the present so that you can design your future. I originally developed it as a way to overcome my organizational challenges. Over the years, though, it's matured into a personal operating system that has profoundly changed my life for the better. My hope is that it can do the same for you.

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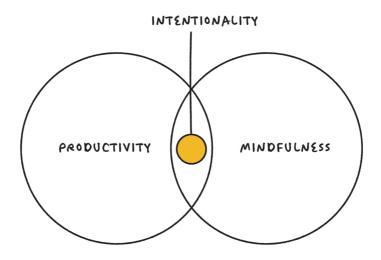
Life had gotten too busy. It seemed as if my existence had become just one long to-do list. I had forgotten about my dreams, my goals, my what-ifs, my "what if I could's."

-AMY HAINES

The Bullet Journal method's mission is to help us become mindful about how we spend our two most valuable resources in life: our time and our energy. If you're going to invest both reading this book, it's only fair to start by highlighting what's in it for you. To sum it up:

The Bullet Journal method will help you accomplish more by working on less. It helps you identify and focus on what is meaningful by stripping away what is meaningless.

How does it do this? By weaving together productivity, mindfulness, and intentionality into a framework that is flexible, forgiving, and, most importantly, practical. Let's take a closer look at each.



# **Productivity**

Do you ever feel overwhelmed by all your responsibilities? Sometimes life feels like a hellish game of whack-a-mole, condemned to stomping out never-ending chores, meetings, emails, and texts. Your multitasking madness has you squeezing in workouts by pacing across your apartment while FaceTiming your sister—who is asking if you could breathe less heavily. Nothing is getting the attention it deserves, and it doesn't feel good. You hate disappointing other people as much as you hate disappointing yourself. To get more done, you've even hacked your sleep, whittling it down to the bare minimum—except now you're a zombie because . . . you've hacked your sleep down to the bare minimum.

Let's step back. Every year between 1950 and 2000, Americans increased their productivity about 1 to 4 percent. Since 2005,

however, this growth has slowed in advanced economies, with a productivity *decrease* recorded in the United States in 2016.<sup>2</sup> Maybe our rapidly evolving technology that promises us near-limitless options to keep us busy is not, in fact, making us more productive?

One possible explanation for our productivity slowdown is that we're paralyzed by information overload. As Daniel Levitin writes in *The Organized Mind*, information overload is worse for our focus than exhaustion or smoking marijuana.<sup>3</sup>

It stands to reason, then, that to be more productive we need a way to stem the tide of digital distractions. Enter the Bullet Journal, an analog solution that provides the offline space needed to process, to think, and to focus. When you open your notebook, you automatically unplug. It momentarily pauses the influx of information so your mind can catch up. Things become less of a blur, and you can finally examine your life with greater clarity.

The Bullet Journal will help you declutter your packed mind so you can finally examine your thoughts from an objective distance.

We often cobble together ways to organize ourselves on the fly. A little of this app; a little of that calendar. Over time, this results in an unwieldy productivity Frankenstein of Post-its, various apps, and email. It kinda works, but it also feels like it's coming apart at the seams. You waste time deliberating where information should go and trying to locate it later: Did you write something down in your notes app or on a Post-it? And where did that Post-it go, anyway?

Many a great idea, "keeper" thought, or important "note to self" has fallen victim to a misplaced scrap of paper or an outdated app. It's a compounding inefficiency that drains your bandwidth, but it's completely avoidable. The Bullet Journal is designed to be your "source of truth." No, this is not some dubious invitation to worship this methodology. It means that you no longer have to wonder where your thoughts live.

Once you've learned how to keep your thoughts in one place, we'll examine how to prioritize them effectively. Everyone calling, emailing, or texting you wants your answer right away. Rather than being proactive about setting priorities, a lot of us simply let the flood of external demands set them for us. Distracted and overextended, our opportunities go under. There goes your chance to increase your GPA, to get that promotion, to run that marathon, to read a book every two weeks.

# BuJo puts you at the helm. You'll learn how to stop reacting and start responding.

You'll learn how to tackle difficult challenges and turn your vague curiosities into meaningful goals, how to break your goals into smaller, more manageable Sprints, and then finally how to effectively take action. What's the next step to improving your GPA this semester? Acing all your classes? No. Get more granular. In which class are you falling behind? What's the next assignment in that class? Writing a paper. Okay, what book do you need to read before writing that paper? Getting that book from the

library—that's the most important thing you have to do now. What about doing the extra-credit assignment for the class you're already acing? Waste of time.

In this book, we will introduce scientifically proven techniques that turn any notebook into a powerful tool for surfacing opportunities and weeding out distractions so that you can focus your time and energy on what actually matters.

# Mindfulness

Uh-oh, the "M" word. Don't worry, no sitars required. When we talk about mindfulness, we're typically talking about a heightened awareness of the present. Productivity is all fine and good, but BuJo isn't designed to help you spin faster on the hamster wheel.

We live in an age where technology promises us near-limitless options to occupy ourselves, yet we're left feeling more distracted and disconnected than ever before. Like when flying, we watch the world speed by at 600 miles an hour with no idea where we truly are. If we're lucky, we may glimpse some ocean glinting below or lightning ripping through dark distant clouds. For the most part, though, we're semiconscious passengers, killing time before the unnerving descent.

If the journey is the destination, then we must learn how to become better travelers. To become better travelers, we must first learn to orient ourselves. Where are you now? Do you want to be here? If not, why do you want to move on?

# Knowing where you are begins with knowing who you are.

Mindfulness is the process of waking up to see what's right in front of us. It helps you become more aware of where you are, who you are, and what you want. This is where BuJo comes into play. The act of writing by hand draws our mind into the present moment on a neurological level unlike any other capturing mechanism.<sup>4</sup> It is in the present moment that we begin to know ourselves. Joan Didion, a famous proponent of writing things down, began doing so at age five. She believed that notebooks were one of the best antidotes for a distracted world: "We forget all too soon the things we thought we could never forget. We forget the loves and the betrayals alike, forget what we whispered and what we screamed, forget who we were. . . . It is a good idea, then, to keep in touch, and I suppose that keeping in touch is what notebooks are all about. And we are all on our own when it comes to keeping those lines open to ourselves: your notebook will never help me, nor mine vou."5

For you digital natives out there, fear not. Banish the image of some hunched, squint-eyed Dickensian figure endlessly scrawling away in a garret by failing candlelight. No, here you'll learn how to capture thoughts quickly and effectively. You'll learn how to journal at the speed of life.

This is where BuJo comes into play. We'll explore various techniques that help us form the habit of asking these kinds of

questions, so we stop getting lost in the daily grind. In other words, the Bullet Journal method keeps us mindful of *why* we're doing *what* we're doing.

# Intentionality

Think back to a book, a speech, or a quotation that deeply touched you or changed the way you thought about life. It was wisdom that inspired you, that held so much promise. All you had to do was act on this newfound knowledge and things would get easier, better, clearer, more empowering.

Now, how much of this knowledge is still in play—not just intellectually, but practically? Did you become a better person, friend, or mate? Did you keep the weight off? Are you happier? Chances are what you learned has withered, if it survived at all. It's not that it wasn't helpful. It just didn't stick. Why is that?

The rush of our busy lives can quietly carve out a gulf separating our actions from our beliefs. We tend to follow the path of least resistance, even when it leads away from the things we care about. It can require a lot of ongoing effort to effect the change we seek. As any athlete will tell you, you need to tear muscle to build it, over and over again. Like building muscle, we need to train our intentions to make them resilient and strong.

Whereas it's easy to "forget" to meditate or summon excuses to skip yoga, there are serious and immediate repercussions when we ignore our day-to-day obligations. To successfully introduce a new sustainable routine, it needs to fit into your packed schedule. What

if you had a way that championed your intentions *and* kept you more organized throughout your day?

The Bullet Journal method acts as a bridge between your beliefs and your actions by integrating into the nitty-gritty of your life.

In addition to organizing her obligations, Amy Haines used her Bullet Journal to keep track of ideas for her business, people she wanted to learn from, apps to check out, even new teas to try. She customized her Collections—which you'll read about later—to cut through the sinking feeling of endless to-do lists and to stay in touch with what she really wanted to do. She was able to reclaim the things that mattered and had gotten away.

Through Bullet Journaling, you'll automatically form a regular habit of introspection where you'll begin to define *what's* important, *why* it's important, and then figure out *how* to best pursue those things. You're gently reminded of these insights every day, which makes it easier to put them into action wherever you happen to be, be it a boardroom, classroom, or even emergency room.

Bullet Journalists have been hired for dream jobs, started businesses, ended toxic relationships, relocated, or, in some cases, simply become more content with who they are by making BuJo part of their routine. This methodology is powered by wisdom from traditions around the world. Like a reverse prism, Bullet Journal absorbs these traditions and focuses them into one bright beam that will help you clearly see where you are and illuminate the way forward. It will empower you to go from passenger to pilot through the art of intentional living.