



Put more life
in your life

MINI- CHALLENGES

A short guide to make your
life more fun & awesome

Kate Chadbourne

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Introduction

This is *not* a new idea. We know this already: to live a life you like better, do more of the things you truly want to do.

So, if you want to live a life of books, read more.

If you want long walks, lace up your sneakers and go out the door.

If you want to sing, well – sing.

But those statements make it sound easier than it sometimes feels. We have a lot of inner and outer barriers that rise up as soon as we start thinking about doing the things we long to do. Here, let's say them together:

- I don't have time!
- I can't afford that!
- It's too late to start that.
- I don't have the equipment/training/resources to do that.
- That's just silly, and I have work to do, and I'm not even supposed to want that, even though I do...
- Oh, and did I say: I don't have time!

This short guide aims to soothe those fears and worries while providing some juicy ideas for mini-challenges and how you can scale them to fit in your life as it is right now without changing a thing. Nothing to lose, everything to gain: my favorite! Yours, too?



What is a mini-challenge?

It's simply a small assignment that you set for yourself. The only ingredients are:

- a defined time-frame (3 days, a week, two weeks)
- a defined action you really want to take

Please note that it's a *mini*-challenge. It's meant to be light and easy-breezy – not a forced death march through the Sahara. It's also meant to be FUN.



How do you decide what to do?

Think about what you want more of in your life. You might want: more FUN, freedom, free time, friendship, laughter, vitality, music, peace, good food, family time, skill, time outside, art-making time, or a million other things. When in doubt, please remember this axiom: *you already know*.

Think what you could do to create more of that. If you want to feel more peaceful, you could drink a cup of tea on the back porch before work each day this week; or you could spend five minutes each night looking at the stars; or you could read one peaceful poem each day before supper. There are a million choices. Recently, when I wanted to improve as a harper, I chose a book of scales and exercises and committed to working through it for a week. It's important that whatever you choose elicits a true "YES" from your inner self (see Objections below for more on this point).

Stay positive and solution-oriented. If you want more international travel but currently have zero dollars to spend on a ticket, do not throw up your hands! You can travel in many delightful ways while you wait for your savings account to swell. You could, as I have, check out a big stack of library books about your dream-destination and give yourself a mini-challenge to dip in once a day for 20 minutes. You could choose to take one day trip each week or month to a different town, museum, library, or sea-port. You could decide to daydream your trip and have



everything exactly as you desire; this is serious FUN. You can do this all in a few moments, or you could take it a leap forwards and put down on paper the ideal version of your trip, including lodgings, food, company, excursions, and souvenirs. Another axiom: *there is always a way to move forwards with your desire if you are willing to stay in the game and be creative.*



Why set yourself a mini-challenge?

Because this is your life. For all we know, this is the one life you get.

(For the record, I don't actually believe that; but this is the one chance you get to be YOU, the one reading this right now).

Because *tempus fugit*, as they say. And it's so easy to be buffeted about by the world's insistent directives rather than to set our own priorities. It's an art to figure out what matters most to you and it's an act of courage to put that front and center, week after month after season after year.

Last year, I realized with some dismay that I was spending far too much of my one wild and precious life (*thank you, Mary Oliver*) scrolling down the screen on Facebook. In the time I'd spent, I could have written a novel or learned to tango or trained for a speed-walking contest – something in the off-screen world that would have been more satisfying and energizing than scrolling and liking.

Perhaps you've had a similar realization? Maybe your own time-trap is a video game, or obsessively reading the terrible news, or staring at bad TV while shoveling Cheetos into your maw.

I can guarantee you: we all have something, and it's something that *almost* nourishes us, but not quite. It's *almost* fun, but not quite. It's *almost* what we want, but not quite.

What we really want is the bull's eye – the thing that strikes the vital center and confirms: **YOU ARE ALIVE and ROCKING THIS LIFE.**

That's why setting a mini-challenge is so cool and effective: because you pare away some of the time spent on the “almost, but not quite” and give it instead to the “YES: this is me being ALIVE.”



Benefits

- You feel a little taller. Suddenly, you are a person who for three days running has done something cool and deliberate (cooked a flan, written to a friend, played the ukulele, walked in the woods) – and that is a super-cool thing to be.
- You feel a little more can-do about everything, a little more in charge of yourself and your time.
- You might even think, “Hey! I have more time than I thought!”
- Your life gets a little richer. It has a new dimension, a new texture.
- New possibilities open up. New ideas come. New life flows in.
- You look at the year and think, “Wow! So much has happened!”



Objections that might come up

But I don't have time

You can challenge this one head-on. If you have an hour for your “almost” activity (Facebook, TV, video game, or whatever), you definitely have time for a mini-challenge that might take as little as five minutes a day, leaving you the best part of an hour to find out what your cousin ate for supper on her honeymoon and still watch two cat videos.

The best answer to this objection is to create the very mini-est of mini-challenges – something you can do in a tiny, tiny amount of time. I ask my music students to simply touch the piano or harp every day for a week. That's a bona fide mini-challenge that anyone can do.

When the inner voice pipes up about time, be a good parent to yourself and make your challenge so small that even your most terrified self can't object. “I will walk outside and look at the full moon on Monday, Tuesday, and Wednesday this week.” That's it: walk out, glance up, walk back in.

But if it's so mini, it won't make a real difference

Well, let's take the last example to unwind this objection. How do you think you'd feel if you practiced this tiny level of consistency? You might feel a fraction more in control of your



life. You might feel a little bit more connected to the mighty rhythms of heavenly bodies. You might feel a little gust of excitement, like a kid running out in her pajamas. All of that seems worth it to me. How about you?

“Yes, Kate,” I hear you saying, “that’s true of the ‘look at the Moon’ challenge, but how about practicing a skill? Surely such a miniscule commitment won’t shift the needle on that kind of thing.”

As a lifelong musician and as a music teacher, let me assure you: it does. The person who plays the C scale each day for a week – an activity that takes approximately one minute to perform – becomes an expert in the C scale AND gains agility, ease, fluency, and confidence. That one small action moves you forwards. If you did 30 or 40 of those mini-challenges each year, imagine how much you’d learn!

But I can’t seem to make myself do even that tiny thing

I totally get this one. I’ve been here many times and the problem comes down to this. Either I’ve set too large a goal for the present moment OR I don’t really want to do what I’ve outlined.

Perhaps I’ve tried to make myself write 50 pages each day for a week when I’ve got too much on my plate and it would be better to ask for one paragraph instead. The inner wisdom kicks up a fuss, saying, “Too much! Too big! You’re overloading me and I’m going to dig my heels in until you back off!” The solution to this is to pare back the expectation until it feels doable and FUN.

Or I propose a project that sounds, if I’m honest, rather dreary, but something a really “good person” would do: a week of meditation, for instance. In this case, the inner wisdom may prevent me from every sitting down. I’ll just find other things to do until I’m honest enough with myself to hear the inner wisdom saying, “I don’t really want to do this. Give me something I really want to do and I’ll do it!” The solution here is to choose something to do which you genuinely want to do (like my museum challenge; see below).

It takes practice to deal effectively with the part of us that puts the brakes on. I’ve found the most useful way is to ask:

- *Have I set the bar too high?*
- *Do I really want to do this?*



But I don't have the money

The best mini-challenges involve actions you can take today or tomorrow with available resources. It's fun to use what you have, to press it into useful service. If you absolutely need something you don't have to do the thing you want to do, do the preliminary part while you earn or borrow the money. OR, find a cheaper way to do the thing. OR, pick something else that sounds just as FUN but requires no do-re-mi.

But what if I pick the wrong thing?

This isn't a lifetime vow; just pick again! Make adjustments. Scale back the time or scope. Change the focus. Scrap the project and start something else you like better. You've learned something about your true desires, and that's valuable.



Some examples from my life

This year I've taken on mini-challenges of different scopes and purposes. I've been having a lot of fun with this notion, which is why I wanted to share it with you.

One longer ongoing challenge has been to visit a different museum each month. I chose to do this instead of making a New Year's Resolution and I have to say that it wins, hands down. This challenge has led to fun planning, road-trips, new interests, and cool visits to other towns. I've learned more, had more fun, and felt more alive because of it. Meeting this challenge has made me feel expansive and hopeful and proud.

And did I mention I'm now setting paintings to music? After working closely with classic poems in English and Irish for [Songs of the Poets](#), I think it's time for "Songs of the Painters." As you can imagine, these museum visits are stoking the compositional fire.

In April, I undertook a medium-scope challenge to write a poem every day as part of National Poetry Writing Month. Let me tell you how this usually goes. I expect myself to follow this rather weighty procedure:



1. write the poem by hand
2. type it into my laptop
3. edit it as I type and try like the dickens to improve it
4. give it a title and save it in the appropriate folder
5. print it out
6. put it in a protective sleeve

The whole thing takes approximately eleventy-hundred hours each day. It's daunting, and there's an underlying energy to it that waggles a finger and says, "This better be good, Chadbourne." As a result, I usually end the month "owing" 18 poems and I spend the next couple months trying to catch up. In short, I've turned a beautiful creative opportunity into a big ol' drag.

This year I changed the procedure. Here it is:

1. Write a draft of a poem by hand in a notebook.

Guess what? I wrote not 30, but 31 poems in April! It was light, doable, encouraging, and FUN.

Inspired by "Shark Week," I created "Scale Week" and practiced piano scales every day for a week. It's gratifying to see that what is a little rusty on Monday is fluent and graceful on Thursday. It's exciting to feel the fingers, like tiny trained horses, pick up their hooves and prance!

Other mini-challenges have led me to **harp more, walk more, read A LOT more, see my friends more often, dance more, and cook more.** I'm hooked! My life has gotten cooler and richer, and I feel more confident that I'll keep my promises to myself.



Ideas for Mini-Challenges

Remember, the ingredients of a mini-challenge are a defined time-frame and a defined activity.

For example:

- *Write one drafty poem each day for three days running.*
- *Hop on the pogo-stick up and down the driveway once each evening this week.*
- *Listen to one Beatles song in the headphones before bed each night for ten days.*
- *Go swimming once each week until the end of summer.*

The following pages contain some categories and suggestions for mini-challenges to get you started thinking. My hope is that you'll riff off of what I've offered here. Change it, adapt it, make it your own, and most of all, make it fun, delicious, and something you'll be excited to experience and do.

I think it's helpful to also think what a specific mini-challenge can bring you, so I've offered a little "Imagine this" after each example.



Health & Well-Being

- Cook one new recipe each week for a month.** *Imagine having a new repertoire of healthy food at the end of the month.*
- Purchase and eat one new-to-you vegetable each week for a month. *Imagine feeling adventurous and healthy.*
- Take a quick walk after work (or before supper or breakfast) each day this week.** *Imagine feeling that you've prioritized your well-being.*
- Do 10 minutes of yoga each day for 5 days. *Imagine feeling that hard postures are getting easier.*
- Go to bed at 10 pm for 3 nights running.** *Imagine feeling calm and well-rested.*
- Visualize something wonderful for 3 minutes each day this week. *Imagine feeling positive and abuzz with possibility.*
- Take 10 deep breaths on your lunch hour Monday through Friday.** *Imagine feeling peaceful and clear.*
- Dance to one awesome song each day this week. *Imagine feeling more light-hearted and happy.*
- Walk in the woods three Saturdays this month.** *Imagine feeling connected to the rhythms of nature.*
- Do 5 push-ups each day for three days in a row. Or hold plank position for 30 seconds each day for three days. *Imagine feeling stronger and stronger.*



Creativity & Art-Making

- Write/Paint/Dance/Sculpt/Sing/Play Music/Knit/Whittle (fill in your art-form here) for 15 minutes each day for one week.** *Imagine feeling that you're making progress. You'll amaze yourself with this one thing, I promise.*
- Practice one small, discrete skill – a scale, a technique, an exercise – once each day for a week. *Imagine feeling that you're growing in mastery.*
- Write a haiku each day for one week.** *Imagine the satisfaction of creating a tiny book of tiny jewel-like poems.*
- Take 10-20 minutes a day for five days running to organize your art-space or work-space. *Imagine having everything you need right to hand.*
- Take your camera on a photography adventure on the first day of each month for a season or a year.** *Imagine documenting the changing seasons and the beauty of the place where you live.*
- Write a one-line journal each day this month. *Imagine capturing one jewel-like moment each day to remember later.*
- Practice your art – whatever it is – in three different places this week.** *Imagine making your art portable and resilient – ready for any adventure!*
- Invite a friend for 20 minutes of creative conversation in person or on Skype once/week for four weeks running. *Imagine receiving and providing high-level support and accountability.*
- Choose a project that's been dragging on for a long time and spend 15 minutes each day this week bringing it to closure. The key to this one is to scale down expectations so that you can allow yourself to complete this work.** *Imagine feeling proud of having*



completed something that matters to you. Bonus points: take time to celebrate before you start the next project.

- Choose an art-supply or notebook that you've held onto for donkey's years and spend 15 minutes each day this week using it up. *Imagine being an artist who uses stuff up – and who can, in good conscience, get more!*



Friendship & Connection

- Write a quick card – in five minutes or less – to a friend or acquaintance for 3, 5, or 7 days this week.** *Imagine how lovely it will be for them to get snail mail. Also, imagine using up your stationery stash.*
- Make a “re-connection” mini-challenge: write a quick, friendly email for 3, 5, or 7 days this week to a friend with whom you’ve fallen out of touch. *Imagine feeling the connections wake up again.*
- Commit to hosting a gathering in each season of the year for your most cherished friends: pot-luck, barbecue, soup-and-bread, make-your-own-sundae, take-out pizza...** *Imagine the fun of celebrating the year with people you love.*
- Find four events in your local community and pledge to attend them (this might take longer than a month). Go as an interested, kindly person. For bonus points, speak to a stranger at each event. *Imagine feeling more connected to your community.*
- Hop on the phone with a friend for 30 minutes four times this month.** *Imagine feeling close and caught up with people you care about.*
- Over the course of three days, write three notes of gratitude to people in your life. Choose one person from the distant past (more than 10 years ago), one from the recent past (less than 10 years), and one from the present. Tell them how their generosity has affected your life. *Imagine how good it feels to bask in the goodness of the wonderful, generous people who have blessed you.*
- Every morning for seven days, write down one quality of a person you love.** At the end of the week, give the list to that person. *Imagine immersing yourself in love for a few minutes each day.*



- ❑ Pledge to send a letter or small gift each month this year to an elder in your life. *Imagine being the kind of person who consistently honors the old.*
- ❑ **Plan a monthly visit to a place that needs warmth, willingness, and connection: an assisted-living home, a youth center, a school, a hospital.** Give your gifts. *Imagine yourself as a person with treasure to share.*
- ❑ Bust out the photo-albums and spend a few evenings this week looking at your wedding pictures, baby pictures, travel pictures. Relive your adventures. Tell someone your stories. Make it a “Memory Week.” *Imagine feeling like the main character of a really cool book.*



Learning & Curiosity

- ❑ **Read every morning or evening for 20 minutes this week, this month, or this year.**

Imagine getting through all those books and knowing that have strengthened your vocabulary and facility with language.

- ❑ Choose a subject you're curious about and spend 10 minutes each day this week researching it on-line: the Revolutionary War, the mating habits of owls, farming practices of medieval Europe, the invention of the photocopier... The sky's the limit!

Imagine discovering new questions and angles and growing your frame of reference upon which all learning rests (I could write all day about the immense value of one's frame of reference, but suffice it to say – the more you learn, the more you CAN learn).

- ❑ **Spend twenty minutes three times this week listening to a language course.** *Imagine how cool it is to be bi-lingual – or even tri!*

- ❑ Choose a poet and read one of his or her poems every day for a week. *Imagine filling the well with beautiful words.*

- ❑ **Choose a painter or artist and look at his or her art every day for a week.** *Imagine filling the well with inspiring images.*

- ❑ Enroll in a class and spend one night a week for the duration of the course (or whatever the time frame may be) learning something delicious and life-enhancing. *Imagine the excitement of new ideas, connections, friends, possibilities.*

- ❑ **Call three people this month and ask them questions about their work or hobby.** *Imagine really listening to someone you know well and hearing something new and fascinating.*



- ❑ Get out the kit you got for Christmas one year (to make a kite, a ship-in-a-bottle, marbled paper, a telescope) and play with it three nights this week. *Imagine making something new!*
- ❑ **Watch three Ted talks this week by people you've never heard of.** *Imagine having some new things to think about.*
- ❑ Check out the bibliography or discography of an artist you admire and read or listen to at least one new item each week for a month. Think of it as “Hendrix month,” or “Tove Jansson month,” (I’m doing this one now), or “Stephen Hawking month.” *Imagine going deeper than you've gone yet.*



Travel & Adventure

- **Commit to visiting one X (your “thing”) each month this year.** Whether your “thing” is museums, whiskey-bars, libraries, farms, weaving workshops, candy shops, bookstores, small towns, or anything else, you will love this one. It takes a bit of planning, but it worth every second. After six months and six museums, I’m hooked!
Imagine feeling excited for your monthly adventure.
- Go on a weekly “artist’s date,” a term coined by Julia Cameron in her classic call to creative arms, *The Artist’s Way*. Go somewhere that delights, engages, or educates the artist in you: an old five-and-dime store, a children’s bookstore, a smithy, a museum shop, a luthier’s workshop...Commit to going once a week for a month and then decide if you’d like to continue beyond the month. *Imagine prioritizing your curiosity and artistry.*
- **Pick four days this year – one a season – to be a tourist in your own neighborhood or region.** Plan days that light you up, with excursions, sight-seeing, shopping, meals, picnics, hikes, festivals, concerts, boat rides, and other fun. *Imagine actually living where you live.*
- Locate conservation spaces – parks, mountains, hiking trails – and plan to visit a different place one each month during the fair-weather months. *Imagine discovering favorite new places to walk, climb, bird-watch, and observe nature.*
- **Find three fun things to do near the place where you work or even AT the place where you work.** Commit to doing one thing each week. *Imagine feeling more warm and friendly spaces around where you work.*
- Invite a friend to be your “adventure buddy” who will alternate with you in planning one fun, adventurous day each month. This way, you get to be the “captain” who calls the



shots sometimes, and other times you get to be the person who is surprised and delighted.

Imagine making a year of awesome memories together.

- **Choose a country or culture and research its food ways and traditions.** Plan, cook, and devour a traditional meal in a monthly cultural heritage celebration. Imagine expanding your culinary repertoire with new flavors and recipes.



Nature & Spirituality

- ❑ **Draw an oracle card each day and note it in your journal.** *Imagine what you might discover by connecting with the world of symbols and mysteries every day.*
- ❑ Sit outdoors in the same place at the same time of day, no matter the weather, for seven days running. Observe the birds, animals, plants, trees, clouds, and weather. *Imagine getting to know the “neighbors” in this cherished place.*
- ❑ **Pray every day for 30 days.** Whatever “prayer” means to you, do that. *Imagine feeling connected with the divine.*
- ❑ Bring your morning tea or coffee outside and listen to morning sounds each day this week. *Imagine feeling calm before the day gets rolling.*
- ❑ **Read one page of a sacred text each day for a week.** *Imagine making your way, slowly and thoughtfully, through a text you’ve always wanted to read and understand.*
- ❑ Choose an animal or plant you’d like to learn more about and spend three evenings this week investigating its habits and habitat – in books, videos, recordings, and lectures. You might also investigate its totemic significance. *Imagine feeling more connected with the creatures and growing things of this world.*
- ❑ **Light a candle every evening at dusk or dawn.** This is one of the simplest ways I know to evoke reverence and wonder. *Imagine feeling peaceful and timeless.*
- ❑ Plan a celebration on the day or the eve of the Summer Solstice, Autumnal Equinox, Winter Solstice, and Spring Equinox. Solo or with friends, engage in something that connects you with this moment in time and helps you celebrate that you are here, you are alive, you are participating. *Imagine participating in the marriage of the present moment and the eternal.*



- **Write a conversation with your wisest self (or God, Source, Spirit, Universe if that feels better) once each week for a year.** I've done this for years now and it has changed my life. *Imagine feeling that you are helped, heard, and loved.*
- **Throw a kiss to the Sun or the Moon every morning or night for a week or a month.**
Imagine honoring and cultivating intimacy with these mighty, beautiful, eternal ones!



A few suggestions before we part

- ❑ **Pair a daily mini-challenge with a monthly or yearly one.** For instance, right now my daily challenge is simply to sing a song each day, and my yearly challenge is to visit a museum each month. These pair well because there's not too much going on at any one time. Steer clear of overwhelm. Find the sweet spot of excitement and ease instead.
- ❑ **Think in terms of weeks, months, seasons, and years.** It's fun to ask yourself, "What would I like to experience this season? What is this year about for me? What's the theme? What could I take on this week to feel more zesty/connected/healthy/committed/*whatever you want to feel?*"
- ❑ **Make course corrections as you go along.** Again, if you find yourself stuck or resistant, ask: "Am I expecting too much?" and "Do I really want to do this?" Then scale back or switch tracks. None of this is required. You're the boss. Tinker until you find something you're eager to do.
- ❑ **Alternate the "self-improvement" challenges with the pure-FUN ones.** Research tells us that will-power is an expendable resource. That means that too much self-improvement can rip through your fund of will-power and leave you cranky and uninspired. Plus, you get a billion bonus points for resisting the pernicious cultural narrative that something is dreadfully wrong with you, and you're obliged to improve yourself. How lovely to get off the hamster-wheel of that thinking and instead improve what YOU want to improve. Keep things moving by setting shorter self-improvement challenges and frequent FUN ones.
- ❑ **Record your mini-challenges on your calendar or in your journal.** This could mean ticking a box each time you do what you've set out to do, but if that seems like too much work, at least record the name of the challenge on your monthly calendar or in your journal: "Push-up challenge," or "Poem-a-day challenge" or "Phone-a-friend challenge." At the end of the month, season, or year, you will *love* looking back at these and you will feel that your life really IS richer and cooler than ever. And by extension, that means that YOU are richer and cooler, too! See how easy this is?



About Kate



I've always been aware that this life is a tremendous opportunity. I've also been aware from a very young age that it has an end-point.

When I was a small girl of perhaps six or seven, I dreamed one night that as I was looking at my hands, they aged rapidly, right before my very eyes. My soft little girl hands changed and hardened and finally grew into the knobbly, lined hands of a very old woman. My whole life sped by in one shocked moment. That dream stayed with me.

We are all given the same raw materials: a body that exists on earth within time. While every life is valuable and meaningful, I've noticed that some people use those raw materials to create a masterpiece of love, generosity, significance, and beauty. They endure difficulties and loss like everyone does, they wrangle with self-doubt and bouts of the blues, but somehow from those raw materials they create a life that shines. The luster on these lives, I think, is *life itself* – passionate, engaged, conscious participation.

I came upon the idea of “mini-challenges” in my life as a practicing poet and musician, and quickly saw that it could make my whole life more fun and lively. It certainly has! I feel like these little challenges and adventures have helped me *put more life in my life*, and I hope they do that for you, too. Let's jump in and create more life from the raw materials of our days. Let's do what our hearts are asking us to do.

May these mini-challenges help you create a life that
shines!



How to Connect with me

I'm a singer, storyteller, poet, composer, scholar, and teacher. There's lots of ways we can interact or even create something awesome together.

Here's how to stay in touch:

If you were inspired by this short guide to undertake a mini-challenge or two, I'd love to hear from you! Drop me a line at kate@katechadbourne.com.

To learn more about my concerts, CDs and books, university courses on Irish language and folklore, or to find out how you can study piano, harp, or singing with me, please visit www.katechadbourne.com. My calendar and blog are there, too. There's also another free book in the shop you might like. Check it out!

To explore what's going on in The Bardic Academy, my school for great-hearted people at the crossroads of artistry and magic, please visit www.bardicacademy.com.

If you want to dive deeper with the idea of putting more life into your life, you might like to read my book, *Practice: a love affair with art & life*. It is guaranteed to get you fired up and practicing! Just click [HERE](#) to view it on Amazon.com.

With all my warmest wishes for your fun, awesome, LIVELY LIFE,

Kate

