

## **WARNING ORDER**

**TIME ZONE: 24/7**

## **TASK ORGANIZATION: SOLO MISSION**

1. **SITUATION:** Your horizons have been limited by societal and self-imposed barriers.
2. **MISSION:** Fight through resistance. Seek unknown territory. Redefine what's possible.
3. **EXECUTION:**
  1. Read this book cover to cover. Absorb the philosophy within. Test all theories to the best of your ability. Repeat. Repetition will sharpen new skills and stimulate growth.
  2. This will not be easy. To succeed, you will be required to face hard truths and challenge yourself like never before. This mission is about embracing and learning the lessons from each and every Evolution so you can discover who you really are and can become.
  3. Self-mastery is an unending process. Your job is NEVER FINISHED!
4. **CLASSIFIED:** The real work is unseen. Your performance matters most when nobody is watching.

**BY COMMAND OF: DAVID GOGGINS**

**SIGNED:**

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'David Goggins', with a stylized, cursive script.

**RANK AND SERVICE: CHIEF, U.S. NAVY SEALS, RETIRED**

# EVOLUTION NO. 1

I'VE WORKED IN EMERGENCY MEDICAL SERVICES (EMS), ON AND OFF, FOR fifteen years. When an ambulance arrives on the scene of a severe trauma situation, we are immediately shotgunned into what's known as the "golden hour." In the vast majority of cases, sixty minutes is all the time we have to save a critically injured victim. The clock starts the moment the accident happens and doesn't stop until the patient arrives at a hospital trauma center. By the time we get to the scene of the accident, we are already behind, which means it is vital that our assessment of each patient is rapid and on point.

Some are identified as "Load and Go" because they need specific, time-sensitive interventions that we can't do ourselves. Others are identified as "Stay and Play." Though their condition may be dire, they have issues our skills are built to address to ensure they survive the trip to the hospital. One of the first things we do when we get to a patient is check their ABCs: airway, breathing, and circulation. We need to make sure their airway is unobstructed, their lungs are inflating, and they aren't bleeding profusely. Usually, ABC issues are obvious, but every once in a while, we come across a distracting injury.

Picture a shattered leg twisted way up over the victim's head. When you see a limb in a place it does not belong, it's easy to become fixated. It looks so gruesome that human instinct is to address that problem first and block everything else out. I've seen a lot of EMS personnel get sucked down that rabbit hole, but a badly broken and dislocated leg typically won't kill anyone, unless it distracts us from realizing that their airway is also blocked or that they are gurgling because their lungs are filled with fluid and they are in danger of bleeding out internally. A distracting injury, in the EMS universe, is anything that entices a medical professional to forget their procedures. It can happen to anyone, which is why we are trained to remain alert to those distractions. It truly is a matter of life or death.

The same can be said of the distracting injuries I carried. By the time I turned twenty-four, I was too distracted by child abuse, neglect, and racist taunts to see all of the messed-up things in my life over which I had direct influence. Nothing that happened to me could be considered a fatal condition on its own, yet I spent so much time worrying about what my father did to us, and felt so alone, I was refusing to live. And when you spend your life regretting what was or asking, “Why me?” you eventually die having accomplished nothing at all.

The trip to Buffalo was pure distraction. I wasn’t ready to put in the work to change my life, so I went on an evidence-collecting mission. In fact, by the time I figured it out, it was almost impossible for me to become a SEAL. I was so heavy that if I had been even a few pounds heavier, I would not have been able to lose the necessary weight in the allotted time. I had to take extreme measures—like eating two tiny meals while working out six to eight hours a day for ten weeks—but when I started to shed weight and shift my mindset, I realized I had never been as alone as I’d thought. I’d always told myself that nobody could possibly understand me or what I went through, but as I looked around, I noticed that there were a lot of people out there with distracting injuries stuck neck-deep in their past. These days, I hear from them all the time.

Some suffered child abuse or lost a parent very young. Others grew up feeling ugly or stupid. They were bullied and beaten down or had no friends in school at all. It’s not always the childhood minefield that screws us up. There is no shortage of psychological and emotional snags in adult life. Every day, people suffer bankruptcy, foreclosure, divorce, and catastrophic injury. They get cheated or robbed by their so-called loved ones. They get sexually assaulted. They lose everything they own in a fire or flood. Their children die.

It’s so easy to get lost in the fog of life. Tragedy hunts us all, and any event that causes suffering will linger longer than it should if you let it. Because our sad stories enable us to grade ourselves on a forgiving curve. They give us latitude and justification to stay lazy, weak-minded people, and the longer it takes for us to process that pain, the harder it is to reclaim our lives.

Sometimes, weakness and laziness are rooted in hate and anger, and until we receive the confession, apology, or compensation we believe we are owed, we stay stuck in our self-pity as a form of self-righteous rebellion against our tormentors or even against life itself. Some of us become entitled. We think our pain entitles us to feel sorry for ourselves or that we are entitled to good fortune because we’ve survived so much.

Of course, feeling entitled doesn't make it so. Understand, the clock is always ticking, and at some point, your golden hour will expire unless you take action.

People who get lost in their past, the ones who bore their friends and family with the same tragic story over and over without showing a hint of progress, remind me of a skydiver who becomes too fixated on their tangled parachute. They know they have a backup ready to go but burn so much time trying to fix the primary chute that they forget to track their altimeter, and by the time they cut the first chute away and pull the second ripcord, it's too late. Part of the problem is that they have become terrified of pulling that second cord because if it's also compromised, then they truly will be helpless. That is a mental trap set by fear. We cannot afford to remain afraid of cutting away dead weight to save ourselves.

I was that skydiver for far too long. My father was violent. My mom was broken. I was bullied, laughed at, and misunderstood. Check, check, and checkmate. And yet, I was breathing free, and I was not bleeding. Physically, I was alive and well and perfectly capable of cutting all of that garbage away. I'd wasted way too much of my life telling myself the same sad story. I needed to move forward. It was time to write something new.

If an act of God or nature tore your life apart, the good news is that you really have nobody to blame. Yet, the randomness of it all can feel so personal, as if you've been marked for doom by the fates. If you feel wronged by somebody else, you may be waiting on a confession or an apology in order to move forward, but I'm sorry to say the apology—that tearful confession you've been dreaming of—will never come. The good news is you don't need anybody else to free you from your trauma. You can do it on your own.

My father never apologized to me. Nobody ever said sorry for anything I went through. I had to come to the conclusion that while I didn't deserve any of it, I was my main problem and primary obstacle. I'd given Trunnis Goggins all of my power. I had to take it back. I had to diffuse my demon. I had to shrink him down to the lowly, pathetic figure he was by humanizing him. Just as there was no other way to come out of the gauntlet that was my childhood except screwed up, I had to see that he was a mortally flawed piece of crap because of what he went through. Once I understood that, it was up to me to either do the hard work to break that cycle or stay cursed.

Like medics on the scene of a car accident, we all must act with a sense of urgency and tune into that ticking clock in the back of our minds. Because there is a drop-dead time on everything we do in life. All our dreams and visions come with expiration dates etched in invisible ink. Windows of opportunity can and do close, so it is imperative that we do not waste time on foolishness. None of us have any clue what's coming for us or when our time might run out, which is why I do my best to ignore anything that is counterproductive. I'm not suggesting we act like robots, but we need to understand that forward motion gives our lives momentum. We need to remember that sometimes chaos will descend and a clear highway can be wiped out by a flash flood in the blink of an eye.

When that happens, a lot of people look for a cozy place to hunker down and hide out until the storm passes. "I'm only human," they say. When chaos rains down upon them and they feel drained and powerless, they cannot conceive of a way to keep going. I understand that impulse, but if I had succumbed to the "I'm only human" mentality, I never would have dug myself out of the deep hole I was in at twenty-four years old. Because the second you utter those words, the white towel is fluttering in the air, and your mind stops looking for more fuel. I didn't know for sure if I'd ever find my way out of the darkness. I just knew that I could not throw in the towel, and neither can you. Because there is no towel in our corner. There is only water and a cut man. And if those are your only options, you have no choice but to keep fighting until you overcome every last thing that once held you back.

You have been preoccupied for way too long. It's time to switch your focus to the things that will slingshot you forward. #DistractingInjuries  
#NeverFinished

# EVOLUTION NO. 2

NEVER WASTE A SINGLE THING. IT WAS A LESSON I FIRST LEARNED IN BRAZIL, Indiana, when a classmate brought me a gift after school. I didn't get a lot of presents growing up, so when he handed me that one, I was a thirsty little kid. I wanted to tear that package open and see what I got. The first loud rip got my grandfather's attention. He poked his head into the room and surveyed the scene. "Calm down," he said. Then, he handed me a pair of scissors. "That's good wrapping paper. We can reuse that."

A lot of us grew up with grandparents seasoned by the Great Depression, who knew we were working with finite resources. Even those who made a nice living didn't take comfort or plenty for granted, and I guess that rubbed off on me. To this day, I abhor waste. I eat all my leftovers, and when my tube of toothpaste flattens out, I don't just roll it up to squeeze out the remainder, I cut that tube open and put it in a Ziploc baggie until I've used every last drop.

Everything must be utilized. Especially the energy in volatile, potentially damaging emotions like fear and hate. You have to learn how to handle them—how to mine them—and once you master that craft, any negative emotion or event that bubbles up in your brain or gets lobbed your way, like a grenade, can be used as fuel to make you better. But to get there, you must literally listen to yourself.

In 2009, I was training to ride in a three-thousand-mile cycling race called the Race Across America, better known as RAAM. I was still full-time in the military, so I had to wake up extra early to fit in my fifty- to one hundred-mile rides before work. My weekend training rides stretched out over two hundred miles—sometimes I rode upwards of five hundred miles—often on the narrow shoulders of busy highways. I did all that because the RAAM's distance scared me. The monotony of being able to stay locked in on a bicycle for days at a time without sleep freaked me out. The race burrowed so deep into my psyche that I wasn't

sleeping well. To demystify the experience, I made a point of chronicling each ride on a handheld tape recorder. I described everything I saw and felt in granular detail.

It was mostly just me on a bike with cars, Harleys, and semis zooming past. I smelled all the exhaust, felt the wind slap me upside the head, and tasted the grit of the open road. When I veered onto the blue roads, I wouldn't see a single car for fifty miles, but that white line was ever-present. Whether the shoulder was wide, thin, or nonexistent, the white line was always there.

I listened to those tapes at night and visualized the white line a thousand times. I became entranced by the simplicity of it, which helped minimize everything else about the race. And though I didn't enter RAAM that year because of emergency heart surgery, I knew I'd stumbled onto a system to minimize my fears and build confidence that I'd use for years to come.



I can't possibly fathom the hours spent alone riding the white line

When I started speaking to Fortune 500 companies and professional ballclubs for a living, I had to be willing to reveal my brutal life story to successful people—including millionaires and billionaires who had heard it all. This wasn't some simple recruiting trip to a high school where students were easily impressed, and all my anxiety around public



speaking resurfaced. Once again, I broke out the tape recorder. I spoke my fears and my trauma—which not that many people knew about—into that microphone and discovered a strange, unexpected alchemy. My fear and trauma were transformed into energy and confidence.

Many people write out their darkest moments in a journal or diary and hope to gain some leverage on whatever it is they survived or are struggling to overcome. I've kept a journal for years, but there are levels to this, and a written archive is the entry level. Audio recordings are more interactive and accessible and have a more profound effect on the mind.

If you were bullied, abused, or sexually assaulted and are willing to speak the unfiltered truth into the microphone and listen to it over and over, after a period of time, it will become just another story. A powerful story, for sure, but the poison will be neutralized, and the power will be yours.

This is not a task to take lightly. If you've survived acute trauma, you don't want to think about what you were doing on the day it happened, what you heard and how you felt, or how your life capsized afterward. Do it anyway. The more color and context you can add to the track, the sooner you will walk the streets with your headphones on and your head held high. When people see you coming, they might think you're listening to an Eminem jam. But no, it's your deepest trauma, the scene of your supposed destruction, on repeat. With each subsequent listen, you will claim more and more power and gain enough transformational energy to change your life.

Most people don't even want to think about their darkest moments, much less talk about it. They refuse to speculate in the harsh wilderness of their past because they are afraid of exposure. Believe me, there's gold in them there hills. I know because I was the Black dude in the cowboy hat, hip deep in the icy stream panning for nuggets. And if you find the courage to paint the picture of your worst nightmare in the spoken word, then listen to it until it soaks in and saturates your mind, until you can hear it without any emotional reaction or spillover, it will no longer make you cower or cry. It will make you strong. Strong enough to walk out on stage and tell the whole world what they did to you, and how it didn't break you. It made you powerful.

Recording yourself isn't just a reliable tool for neutralizing trauma. It can change the dynamic of almost any situation or mood. If you use it properly, it can also keep you honest. One day a couple of years ago, not long after ramping up my training from ten miles of running per day to

twenty or more, I felt drained and sore, too tired to run, and kept telling myself that I needed a day off. As I relaxed on the couch, I tuned into my self-talk. Then, I grabbed my recorder and whined into the microphone. I wanted to hear how it sounded out loud. I was real with myself. I cataloged my recent runs and nagging injuries and described how I thought a day off might help me. I made a solid case for a much-needed rest day, but when I played it back, the jury of one was unconvinced. Because my inner crybaby was suddenly the emperor with no clothes. Buck naked in the light of day, he was impossible to ignore and even harder to stomach. I was off the couch and out on the road in a matter of seconds.

Many people wake up with dread or doubt day after day. They dread their workouts, their class load, or their job. Maybe they have a test or presentation that makes them nervous, or they know that the day's workout will hurt. While they linger in bed, they tune into their soft, forgiving self-talk, which doesn't make it any easier to get up and moving. Most people rise up eventually, but they remain in a daze for hours because they aren't fully engaged with their lives. Their self-talk has made them numb to the moment, and they sleepwalk through half the day before they finally perk up.

The way we speak to ourselves in moments of doubt is crucial, whether or not the stakes are high. Because our words become actions, and our actions build habits that can coat our minds and bodies with the plaque of ambivalence, hesitancy, and passivity and separate us from our own lives. If any of this sounds familiar, grab your phone and record your inner dialogue as soon as you wake up. Don't hold back. Spill all your dread, laziness, and stress into the mic. Now listen to it. Nine times out of ten, you won't like what you hear. It will make you cringe. You wouldn't want your girlfriend or boyfriend, your boss, or your kids to hear your unfiltered weakness. But you should.

Because then you can repurpose it. You can use it to remind yourself that changes must be made. Listening might inspire you to commit to your life in a deeper way, to be your best at work, at school, or in the gym. It can challenge you to rewrite the narrative so that when you bed down, you won't feel like you wasted another valuable day.

Do it again the next morning, but this time, once you get through listening to all your whining about what you don't want to do, sit up in bed and lay down a second take. Pretend you're motivating a friend or loved one who is going through challenges. Be respectful of the issues they face, but be positive, forceful, and realistic too. This is a skill that

demands repetition, and if you do it regularly, you'll find that it won't take long for your self-talk to flip from doubt and dread to optimism and empowerment. The conditions of your life might not change a whole lot at first, but your words will make sure that your approach does change, and that will eventually enable you to shift everything. But you must speak the truth and be willing to listen to it. Don't be afraid of your weakness or doubt. Don't be embarrassed and pretend it doesn't exist. It surfaced for a reason, so use it to flip the dynamic of your life.

Lately, I've used this technique with the hate that comes at me online. Most people in my position don't read negative comments or emails. They have someone else screen and then erase them. I see hate as just another fuel source. I see the beauty and power in it, and I never let it go to waste. When the negative comments come in, and they always do, I capture them in a screenshot and speak them into my microphone. In 2021, I posted an image of my swollen left knee, which inspired a flood of negative comments. Some claimed to have seen my breakdown coming and counted it as a personal win. Others simply liked seeing me in pain.

"I'm tired of hearing you run your mouth," one of them wrote.

"I hope I never see your Black butt run again," wrote another.

They were trying to salt my wounds. They wanted me to feel the sting, which I did, and hoped it would bring me down even further. It didn't. I loved those comments. I loved them so much I made a mixtape. I printed them all out, recorded myself saying each one, and then I looped it. Whenever I have a bad day, I listen to it. Sometimes, I walk around the house savoring it in full stereo.

Most people only mine the positive stuff. They want everything and everyone to be nice and hunky-dory. They get filled up on sweetness and recoil from the dark, bitter pill of hate. But there's not nearly as much fuel in atta' boys and accolades as there is in hate. Luckily, the world is filled with jealous, insecure haters. If you don't get negative comments on social media, find your fuel in the thoughtless comment of a friend or the doubt of a teacher or coach. I'm sure it stings when you feel slighted, underestimated, criticized, or excluded. Just know that the heat you feel is free energy waiting to be burned. Don't crawl up in a corner worried about the people who disrespect you. Repackage what you're hearing and feeling until it works for you!

That is a winner's mentality. Winners in life see everything they experience and everything they hear, see, and feel as pure energy. They train their minds to find it. They drop into the gnarly crevices to mine

golden nuggets of trauma, doubt, and hate. They do not live disposable, single-use lives. They discard nothing and refurbish everything. They find strength in the bullying and heartbreak, in their defeats and failures. They harvest it from the people who hate them personally and from the online trolls too.

Some people go to sleep with a meditation app. Others open the windows to the night sounds or stream white noise, whale songs, or the lullaby of the sea lapping some lonely shore. When I bed down at night, I listen to my haters. And it's obvious those weak cowards don't have the slightest idea who they are dealing with.

I'm the person who turns their every negative word into my positive progress. I take what they serve me, roll it up in that wrapping paper I saved way back when, and give it right back to them in the form of another work-out, another long run, and another year of leveling up. Honestly, I should thank them. They make me stronger and more determined to achieve my goals. Which only makes them hate me even more.

It's time to make your own mixtape. #TapeRecordYourself  
#NeverFinished

# EVOLUTION NO. 3

MANY DREAMS DIE WHILE SUFFERING. THINK ABOUT IT. WE CONJURE OUR biggest dreams, our most audacious goals, when we feel safe and warm. Even if you're struggling financially, emotionally, spiritually, or physically, your grand plan to defy the odds probably came to you in a moment of comfort, when you had time to evaluate where you are and how you got there. There is no space for big-picture thinking when you're in the heat of battle. When all is calm, even temporarily, damn near anything can feel possible. So that's when you dream it up and map it all out.

Then you begin and unforeseen challenges knock you back. Whenever you're engaged in an intense struggle, the result of which will have a major impact on your life going forward, you will be challenged to your utmost—and these moments of truth within a larger quest can demand so much from you that you are bound to feel overmatched at times. When that happens, many people panic because they come to believe that they are imposters and their dream was actually a fantasy. In a blink, they go from being driven and focused to becoming convinced that they had no business even trying. So they quit. Right then. Right there. While teetering on the edge, they fail to grasp that there is something they can do to jam that quitter's spiral carrying them right down the drain.

They can make the One-Second Decision to think instead of react.

During my second Hell Week, when I was in Class 231, I was driven. Bill Brown and I were the leaders of Boat Crew Two, and we had our own competition going to see who would be the baddest man in the whole class. But there was another guy in the mix who had captured my attention—let's call him Mora. He was about our size, strong and fit, and whenever things got hard on the beach or the Grinder, he gravitated toward me. He was not in our boat crew yet wanted to feed off of my

energy because Bill Brown and I were performing at such a high level, we made hell look and feel not only manageable but easy.

On day two of Hell Week, Mora found me in the chow hall with a lost look on his face and fear in his eyes. I was busy filling my wet and sandy pockets with packets of peanut butter because I needed fuel to withstand the punishment I knew was coming. Even after consuming as many calories as I could, in two hours, I'd be hungry again and would eat almost anything, even peanut butter gritty with sand and laced with pocket lint. Mora stared at me as if I were a creature from a different time, and I was. I'd become wholly uncivilized after two days of surf torture and boat runs without a wink of sleep. I was now a caveman. Mora, on the other hand, looked like a traumatized modern man, and that was a clue that something was off.

"Hey, Goggins," he whispered as his eyes darted around the room. "I don't wanna be here anymore." The pressure cooker of Hell Week had temporarily unhinged him from his dream and his rational mind, and he looked like he was searching for an emergency exit. He was panic in human form, and I knew that because it was exactly how I felt when the first wave hit me in the very first hour of that same Hell Week.

The Pacific Ocean was as cold as ever when that massive, six-foot wall of water picked me up, flipped me three times, and pounded me into the wet sand. It was as if the ocean itself was saying, "Get the hell out of here!" And I listened because my lungs were still burning from the bout of pneumonia that got me rolled into this class from Class 230 just two months earlier, and because water was my kryptonite.

There were 130 hours of Hell Week to come, and I knew that a good chunk of them would be spent in the cold ocean. That cocktail of suck hijacked my brain to send out signals far more troubling than ambivalence. I wasn't wondering if I had what it took or if I was prepared for the moment. The voice in my head was saying, *I don't really want to be a Navy SEAL.*

For more than a year, my quest to become a SEAL had been all-consuming. I'd never wanted anything as badly or committed so completely to the process, but when you are locked into a sufferfest, there are times when the conditions will become intolerable, and a self-sabotaging impulse rooted in shock and fear will feel like clarity. I was a half-step from voluntarily pulling the plug on a dream that had the power to change the course of my entire life.

I glanced over at Bill Brown, resigned to the fact that he would soon stand alone as the baddest man in Class 231. Then, from the knee-deep,

swirling shallows, I scanned the horizon, where a destroyer was heading out to sea. The instructors had warned us that if we didn't make it through training, we'd be assigned to a ship like that, where we'd be stuck chipping paint for six months at a time. They made it sound like the most miserable deployment on earth, but to me, in that instant, it sounded like heaven.

Most SEAL instructors love quitters. When you tell them that you're too cold and you want out, they are more than happy to take you by the hand and lead you to the warmest shower of your life because, in their minds, it proves that they are better than you. Once you step into that shower, you get so warm within a minute that you forget what being cold even felt like, and then, you realize that your warmth just cost you a piece of your soul, if not the whole thing, which can lead to a lifetime of regret.

Time was of the essence! I could not crawl back onto the beach and take ten minutes to get my mind right. I was in the eye of a psychological storm, and all around me, the water was still frothing and growling. Part of the problem was that the cold water had stolen the breath from my lungs. I was gasping and panic-breathing. In order to think clearly, I needed oxygen. I took a deep breath and then another, and in that time, my possible future played out in my head.

I watched myself stagger back to the beach and lay my helmet down. Within days, I was flushed right out of the military and sent back to Indiana, where I struggled through a series of low-level, low-impact jobs, which were the only ones I was qualified for: minimum-wage security guard, lifeguard at a local pool, and exterminator. That was true clarity. All my aspirations would be vaporized if I left surf torture behind because I was a reservist, and if I snapped and quit, the Navy wouldn't even want me on one of their ships.

I could not afford to lose control. SEAL training—and that cold ocean—were exactly where I belonged, so I needed to calm down and meet the challenge head-on. I took another breath as the next big wave swelled. It smashed me, but I managed to scramble toward the group and lock arms with my teammates. I was done showing weakness. I was finished with fear. I would stay in that water as long as it took!

When we got called back onto the sand ten minutes later, the men in my boat crew were shivering and stiff. They were so cold they didn't even want the edges of their soaked T-shirts to graze their skin. We needed to warm up fast, and the only way to do that during Hell Week is to go hard. I nodded to Bill, grabbed the front of the boat, and shouted

out orders. As a unit, Boat Crew Two started putting out like Hell Week was our natural habitat.

Often, it's the shock that launches the spin-out. For me, it was the snap of the cold water that triggered my fight-or-flight response, which comes with an adrenaline rush that spikes the heart and respiratory rates and puts your insecurities on blast. Your body and mind react that way because they want to protect you by telling you to remove yourself from the suffering. Fight or flight is exactly what Mora was experiencing in the chow hall. His fear and panic owned him.

When I was teetering on the brink, I was able to physically calm myself down with a few deep breaths, and that helped me see through the adrenaline rush. My heart rate was still elevated, and panic continued to creep in, but I'd regained enough of my composure to make a conscious One-Second Decision to stay in the fight. That took mental fortitude because the water hadn't suddenly warmed up. I was still cold and miserable and staring at 130 hours of Hell. But I was able to see that the life I desired was on the other side of surf torture. I did not cave into emotion and quit. When people do that, they aren't even making an actual decision to quit. It's a default reaction due to stress.

I get that it's difficult not to give in to all that emotion, acute pain, and discomfort. All you really want at that point is for it to end. You envision your bed at home and how sweet it feels to lie down with your wife or husband or partner. You know your mom will greet you with a forgiving hug and that your family will understand because they love you no matter what. You know for a fact that they will console and take care of you, and when you're hurting bad or scared to death, all of that feels way too good to pass up.

But you must remember that those images of home aren't actually rooted in love. They are a product of your fear, disguised as love. Mora and I shared the same big dream. We'd both had our worlds rocked. I recovered by dominating Hell Week in a fashion that nobody had seen before. Mora's mind had already unraveled by the time I saw him in the chow hall. He wasn't thinking consciously at all. His emotions were controlling him instead of the other way around. I couldn't help him because by then, he'd already lost the battle. I don't know when he officially quit. In Hell Week, you get so wrapped up in your crew, so engulfed in helping one another get to the other side that, after several hours, you might look up and find half the class has bailed out. All I know is that, at some point, he rang the bell and lived to regret it.



Everything in life comes down to how we handle those crucial seconds. When psychological, physical, or emotional pressure redlines, your adrenal glands go haywire, and you are no longer in control. What separates a true savage from everybody else is the ability to regain control of their mind in that split second, despite the fact that all looks lost!

That's what people miss. Our lives aren't built on hours, days, weeks, months, or years. Hell Week is 130 hours, but it's not the hours that kill you. And it's not the pain, the exhaustion, or the cold. It is the 468,000 seconds that you must win. It only takes one of those seconds—when it all becomes too much and you just can't take it anymore—to bring you down. I had to remain vigilant and manage my mind for every single one of those seconds to make it.

Life, like Hell Week, is built on seconds that you must win, repeatedly. I'm not saying you have to be hyperaware every second of your life, but if you are pursuing something that demands all you've got and means the world to you, that is often what it takes.

When you are trying to lose weight or quit drinking or using drugs, your moment of weakness can be counted in seconds, and you'll need to be ready to win those seconds. You could be the medical student who has dreamed of being a doctor their entire life, only to fail a crucial class early on. Overwhelmed with panic, you may be tempted to march straight to the admissions office and withdraw. Maybe you are an aspiring lawyer with a job at a prestigious firm in your back pocket yet failed the bar exam again, and in the heat of that moment, you abandon your career before it begins. All because you become convinced that you cannot walk back into that office after another humiliation or study for that test again and put yourself right back on the chopping block.

While school and professional exams are held in controlled environments, an F can spike the heart rate and trigger self-doubt as quickly as a six-foot wall of cold water. Sometimes, that grade looms so large, especially in a young mind, that it's easy to feel like all eyes are on you and your failure and that you've fallen so far behind that you'll never catch up.

Moments of doubt are unavoidable when we take on any strenuous task. I've used the One-Second Decision to regain my composure and win hundreds of small battles during ultra races, on the pull-up bar, and in stressful work situations. And the first step is to mentally take a knee.

The best person in any combat scenario is the one who is composed enough to take a knee when the bullets are flying at them. They know

they need to evaluate the situation and the landscape to find a way forward and that it's impossible to make a conscious decision if they or their team is running around like fire ants. Taking a knee in battle is not as easy as it sounds, but it's the only way to give yourself time to breathe through the panic and rein in your spinning mind so you are able to operate. The battle hasn't stopped. Gunfire is still lighting up the night, and you don't have any time to waste. In that one second, you must take a breath and decide to bring the fight.

When you are in the grip of life and in danger of losing control, just think, *It's time to take a knee*. Get a couple of breaths and flash to your future. If you fold, what will happen next? What's your plan B? This is not some deep contemplation. There is no time to order a pizza and hash it out with your people. This must happen in seconds!

It helps to prepare with productive self-talk before you drop into that sufferfest on your schedule. Remind yourself that nobody is great at every single aspect of any job, at least not right away, and no runner skates through a hard race unchallenged. No matter how bleak it looks or feels, you must stay rooted to your baseline.

If you're in med school, your baseline is to graduate and become a doctor. In Coronado, my baseline was becoming a Navy SEAL. Many men buckled under the log during Hell Week, but log PT was easy for me. I had to remember that every time we were ordered back into my own personal torture chamber, the Pacific Ocean.

It helps to remind yourself of what you're good at and where you excel so when you have to engage in something that is hard for you, it doesn't become overwhelming. Tell yourself, *I'm good here. I'm great there. This sucks, but it will be over in twenty minutes*. Maybe it's twenty miles or twenty days or twenty weeks, but it doesn't matter. Every experience on earth is finite. It will end someday, and that makes it doable, but the outcome hinges on those crucial seconds you must win!

There are consequences to this stuff. Quitting on a dream stays with you. It can color how you see yourself and the decisions you make going forward. Several men have taken their own lives after quitting SEAL training. Others marry the first person who comes around because they are so desperate for validation. Of course, the reverse is also true. If you can withstand the suffering, take a knee, and make a conscious One-Second Decision in a critical juncture, you will learn perseverance and gain strength by winning the moment. You will know what it takes and how it feels to overcome all that loud doubt, and that will stay with you

too. It will become a powerful skill you can use again and again to find success, no matter what scenario you're in or where life takes you.

It's not always the wrong move to quit. Even in battle, sometimes we must retreat. You might not be ready for whatever it is you've taken on. Perhaps your preparation wasn't as thorough as you'd thought. Maybe other priorities in life need your attention. It happens, but make sure that it is a conscious decision you're making, not a reaction. Never quit when your pain and insecurity are at their peak. If you must retreat, quit when it's easy, not when it's hard. Control your thought process and get through the most difficult test first. That way, if you do bow out, you'll know it wasn't a reaction based on panic. Instead, you've made a conscious decision based on reason and had time to devise your plan B.

Mora quit on impulse. Usually when you do that, you don't get another chance. Many great opportunities in life only come around once, but sometimes, opportunity does knock twice. Fifteen months after that morning in the chow hall, we crossed paths in Coronado again. It was my graduation day, and he was in our Hooyah class, the incoming trainees wearing the white shirts that signified Day One, Week One. Of all the two hundred and some newbies, he was the only man there who wasn't smiling. He alone knew too much. After the ceremony, he approached, extended his hand, and congratulated me.

"Remember," I said, "many dreams die while suffering, bro." He nodded once, then faded into the crowd. A month later, I heard he made it through Hell Week. Five months after that, he graduated and became a Navy SEAL.

I thought about Mora as I gazed into my pristine, polished mirror twenty-two years later while considering Babbitt's invitation to Leadville. I'd been living large for longer than I cared to admit. In this new life of mine, the water was never cold and the One-Second Decision was in danger of becoming a perishable skill. I didn't think I needed it anymore. I had access to all the finer things. In my house, it was always seventy-two degrees. And that feels good, especially when you believe you've earned it.

Why put myself through a ten-week training camp or a 100-mile run in Colorado's thin air? I knew how horrible that experience is and what it takes, but I also knew that this right here was one of the most important One-Second Decisions in my life. This wasn't a fight-or-flight moment. I wasn't overwhelmed by the fear of death. I wasn't on the brink of failure or humiliation, and my heart rate was beating slow and steady. This was a mature version of the unconscious impulse to quit. The one you don't

see coming until it greets you at the gate when you think you've finally arrived.

See, I don't have any respect for people who live this luxe life 24/7. If I said no to Babbitt, I wouldn't be quitting on him. I would be quitting on myself. I would be making a fear-based choice to no longer be the very person who I became so proud of. It's all well and good to have success and reach a certain level, but I really don't care what you did yesterday. Maybe you finished Ultraman or graduated from Harvard. I do not care. Respect is earned every day by waking up early, challenging yourself with new dreams or digging up old nightmares, and embracing the suck like you have nothing and have never done a damn thing in your life.

There are 86,400 seconds in a day. Losing just one of those seconds can change the outcome of your day and, potentially, your life.  
#OneSecondDecision #NeverFinished

# EVOLUTION NO. 4

ALTHOUGH MY CHILDHOOD STUTTERING WAS ALARMING, I WASN'T COMPLETELY undone by trauma. I was distracted by toxic stress. My pain kept me from living a complete and happy life in grade school, and it continued to haunt me into young adulthood, yet through it all, I retained enough self-awareness to realize how bad things were and remember each and every corner I cut. Strange as it sounds, I was one of the lucky ones. For some victims, their trauma is so devastating that they lose all their self-respect and self-awareness. They are torn down to the studs. Foundational aspects of their character pounded to dust.

Part of what saved me from sliding all the way to rock bottom was what I saw in my mother. As much as she tried to hide it, she was the portrait of devastation. Which is why I've been able to study the work of the prisoner's mind all my life.

She'd been a young woman when she met Trunnis. He dazzled her until she was spellbound. Then, with every slap to the face, every hateful, disrespectful comment, each time he cheated on her, he siphoned more of her life force away until she lost contact with the attractive, intelligent, dignified, strong woman she used to be. It didn't happen overnight. It rarely does. In abusive relationships, it's almost always gradual, which is why it burns so deep. Until one day, you wake up owned by the person who is destroying you.

In nature, destruction always gives way to creation, and my mother didn't sit in her rubble for long once we arrived in Indiana. An urge to build again is in each of us, and she had it too. However, when you are rebuilding the self, it must be done consciously. She'd lost all her confidence and emotional coherence because she never completely liberated herself from my father. As a result, she didn't know what she was building, and the bricks she laid became her prison cell. Subconsciously, she built a tower of mental and emotional isolation, and by the time I was eight years old, she was an empty shell. She hustled

and strived, but very little registered with her emotionally. We lived parallel lives. I couldn't even reach her.

The irony is you build those walls to protect yourself. You think they will make you hard and less vulnerable, but they isolate you in solitary confinement with your darkest thoughts and ugliest memories. You convince yourself that somehow you deserve to be there due to the bad life decisions you made. You believe that you are not worthy of more, or something better, and that the damage can't be undone. You are filled with endless shame. When you look in the mirror, you don't see yourself for who you are. And what keeps you locked up in your prison is that false narrative that you continually feed yourself and the false reflection you can't escape because it is part of you. By the time I was in high school, my mom was an independent, successful woman who had survived domestic violence and landed a six-figure job at a top-tier liberal arts university. Those were the straight facts. Everyone around us saw the same thing, but in the mirror, she saw a worthless and undeserving person.

While working as a college dean during my junior year of high school, she volunteered as a teacher in a prison. It wasn't enough for her to be in her own mental prison; she wanted to experience a real one. Especially if it meant she'd have less time to sit with herself and consider her life in any meaningful way. After just a few weeks of work at the penitentiary, her daily routine—which had been damn near sacred since we arrived in Indiana—was all over the place, and I sensed something was off. How could I not, with the phone ringing every fifteen minutes? Weeks before I was to leave for Air Force boot camp, she finally explained what was going on. She was engaged to a man who'd been in a maximum-security prison for the last ten years.

It took more than a few minutes for that statement to register before I asked, "What was he in prison for?" She didn't answer right away. She had to collect her thoughts because there is no easy way of telling your son that your future husband is in prison for murdering a woman over drugs. He didn't shoot her. This wasn't an attempted robbery gone wrong. This man straight-up choked the life out of a woman over drugs. She went on to say that he was due to be released from prison the week after I left for boot camp and would be moving into our house.

It is truly amazing what the mind can do when you fail to rebuild yourself consciously. My dad was a gangster and a crook. Her previous fiancé had been murdered in his own garage, and for an encore, she would marry a convicted murderer less than a week after his release from

prison. My mom was looking for someone she could save because she did not have the strength to save herself. But the marriage did not go well. They would divorce within two years. He would relapse and eventually die of an overdose many years later.

To put it into plain text: when your self-worth goes away and you don't deal with or accept your demons, they will continue to own you, and you will become a bottom feeder.

I'm aware that most of the advice I give and stories I tell are built to help you push through impossible situations. However, sometimes what you need is a Hard Stop. If you ever find yourself in an abusive scenario like my mother's or any sort of battle where you are losing your sense of self and verging on erasure, your best hope is to arrest the slide before you hit rock bottom.

Hard Stops allow military units and individual soldiers to reorg. That includes reloading your empty magazines, taking inventory of your ammunition, and rearranging your gear so you have access to loaded weapons and anything else you may need in the hours ahead. You also must take a hard look at your battle plan and get a clear sense of what it is you're facing and where it will lead.

I know firsthand how torturous it is to be continually stalked by a predator. You lose all sense of normalcy. Reality becomes distorted, but I also know that moments of clarity do exist. My mom should have reorg'd after Trunnis smacked her in the face the first time, or the twelfth time, or even the fiftieth time. While I know this is hard to do, it is something that we must do for ourselves. It is non-negotiable. If she had, she might have noticed she was on a slippery slope that would lead to her utter destruction. She may have seen that it was not normal or tolerable to watch her kids work all-night skates day after day and then get beaten at home. In a toxic situation, you cannot keep moving blindly forward hoping it will end. It won't, but you might.

When you arrest the slide, you will be damaged but not completely broken. Your wound will likely become a distraction, but with intention and effort, you can heal and take control of your life. When you come to at rock bottom, that's a different situation, and it won't be a clean or easy fix. When inmates are released, they generally aren't rehabilitated in a sustainable way. Most leave prison jacked up and often need more help if they are to piece their lives back together. You'll need help too. You'll need to find people who have survived or at least relate to what you've been through and can help you heal.

Of course, it takes self-esteem and self-awareness to seek help and share your brutal story, and when you are confined by the walls you built, awareness and confidence are non-existent. At that point, your only choice is to get angry.

We are too often told that anger is an unhealthy emotion, but when someone or something has stolen your soul and destroyed your life, anger is a natural response. I am not talking about irrational rage, which can be disastrous and lead you down an even darker hole. I am talking about controlled anger, which is a natural source of energy that can wake you up and help you realize that what you went through wasn't right. I have cracked open anger several times. It has warmed me when I was freezing, it has turned my fear into bravery, and it has given me fight when I had none. And it can do the same for you.

Anger will snap you out of the spell you're in until you are no longer willing to remain confined in your mental prison. You'll be scratching and clawing at the walls, looking for cracks where the light leaks in. Your fingernails will be broken, the tips of your fingers bloody and raw, and you will continue to fight to expand those cracks because your anger will be purifying and the human mind loves progress. Keep at it, and eventually, those walls will tumble until you are free, standing in a debris field one more time, with your eyes wide open. That'll work. Because destruction always breeds creation.

Have the courage and mental endurance to do whatever it takes to start knocking down those walls. You are the warden of your life. Don't forget you hold the keys. #PrisonerMind #NeverFinished



# EVOLUTION NO. 5

THESE ARE THE FACTS, AND THEY ARE UNDISPUTED. YOUR PROBLEMS AND YOUR past aren't on anybody else's agenda. Not really. You may have a few people in your inner circle who care about what you're going through, but for the most part, no one cares that much because they're dealing with their own issues and focused on their own lives.

I learned that the hard way. On our drive from Buffalo to 117 South McGuire Street in Brazil, Indiana when I was eight years old, I assumed I was going to walk into the biggest pity party of all time. I expected balloons, cake, ice cream, and big warm hugs. Instead, it was as if all the pain and terror never happened. Sgt. Jack didn't deal in pity. He was out to harden my shell, and that's exactly what he did.

Pity is a soothing balm that turns toxic. At first, when your family and friends commiserate with you and validate the reasons you have for grumbling about your circumstances, it lands like sympathy. But the more comfort pity brings you, the more external validation you'll crave and the less independent you will become. Which will make it that much more difficult for you to gain any traction in life. That's the vicious cycle of pity. It saps self-esteem and inner strength, which makes it harder to succeed, and with each subsequent failure, you will be more tempted to pity yourself.

Look, I get it. Life isn't fair or easy. A lot of us are doing a job that we don't want to do. We feel we are above the tasks coming our way and that the world, or God, or the fates have sentenced us to live in a box we do not belong in. When I was a night-shift security guard at a local hospital, I felt that work was beneath me, so I showed up every night with a voice in my head screaming, *I don't want to be here!* And that infected everything about my life. I ate my feelings, blew up, and slipped into a deep depression. I wanted a different life, but my bad attitude made it impossible to create one.

Every minute you spend feeling sorry for yourself is another minute not getting better, another morning you miss at the gym, another evening wasted without studying. Another day burned when you didn't make any progress toward your dreams, ambitions, and deepest desires. The ones you've had in your head and heart your entire life.

Every minute you spend feeling sorry for yourself is another minute spent in the dungeon thinking about what you lost or the opportunities that have been snatched away or squandered, which inevitably leads to the Great Depression. When you are depressed, you are likely to believe that nobody understands you or your plight. I used to think that way. But when Sgt. Jack banged that trash can lid inches from my ear in the morning, he was telling me I wasn't the only little boy who got whipped or suffered from toxic stress. Sometimes, the emotions we feel are a product of a horrible past. Sometimes, we just don't want to get up at 0500 and do hours of chores before school because it sucks. Sgt. Jack expected me to perform no matter what I'd been through or what time it was.

In response, my feelings got hurt. I stalled getting out of bed until the last possible moment and slouched my way through my mornings as part of a mindless, mopey rebellion. He didn't care. That grass still needed to be cut, the leaves needed to be raked, and the weeds needed to be pulled. No matter how much I belly-ached, this work needed to get done, and it would get done by me. My feelings were costing me a ton of time because no matter how I felt, there was a task in front of me, and that's all that mattered in the present moment.

The only thing that ever matters is the present moment. Yet too many people let their depression or regret hijack their day. They let their feelings about the past hijack their lives. Perhaps their fiancé left them at the altar, or they got fired without cause. Guess what? One day, they will pan back and realize that nobody cared about any of that but them. I don't care what you've been through. I can feel bad for you. I can have sympathy for you, but my sympathy won't get you anywhere. When I was a young, damaged kid, feeling sorry for myself didn't help me. What helped was cleaning those whitewalls right the first time.

We cannot get time back, so we must be minute hoarders. The earlier I get up, the more I do. The less time I stay in pity-party-feel-sorry-for-myself land, the stronger I become and the more daylight I see between me and everyone else. When you separate yourself from the pack by cultivating the values and priorities that lead to greatness, mountains of

adversity and hardship become speed bumps, and that makes it easier to adapt to the road ahead and build the new life or sense of self you crave.

When I went to live with Sgt. Jack, I was forced to adapt extremely fast. Everyone was hard on me my whole life, but I came out of all that with lessons learned that stuck with me. Those who learn to adapt survive and thrive. Don't feel sorry for yourself. Get strategic. Attack the problem.

When you adapt, you will begin to see everything that comes your way as a stepping stone on your progression toward a higher plane. High-paying, esteemed jobs are generally not entry level. You have to start somewhere, but most people see the thankless tasks that must be completed in order to advance as burdens instead of opportunities. That makes it impossible for them to learn. You've got to find the lesson in every menial task or low-wage job. That requires humility. I wasn't humble enough to appreciate my experience in security, so my attitude was foul. I thought I deserved much better, oblivious to the fact that almost everybody starts at the bottom and, from there, it's attitude and action that determine the future.

Humility is the antidote to self-pity. It keeps you rooted in reality and your emotions in check. I'm not suggesting you should be satisfied with an entry-level job. I'm never satisfied, but you must appreciate what you have while staying hungry enough to learn everything you can. You need to learn to wash the dishes, flip the burgers, sweat over the deep fryer, sweep up the job site, work in the mailroom, and answer the phones. That's how you build proficiency. It's important to learn every aspect of any business before you move up. You can't rise if you're weighed down by bitterness and entitlement. Humility hardens your spine and encourages you to stand tall, secure in yourself no matter what anyone else thinks. And that has tremendous value.

I once heard a story about a Master Sergeant in the Army named William Crawford that exemplifies the power of humility. He retired in 1967 and took a job as a janitor at the Air Force Academy in Colorado Springs. The cadets he cleaned up after paid him little mind, in part because he was reportedly painfully shy but also because these cadets were elite students on an officer track, and Master Sergeant Crawford was just a janitor. Or so they thought. They had no clue that he was also a war hero.

In September 1943, the 36th Infantry Division was getting blitzed by German machine-gun fire and mortars during a pivotal World War II battle for a piece of Italian real estate known as Hill 424. The Americans

were pinned down with no escape route until Crawford spied three machine-gun nests and crawled beneath rivers of bullets to toss a grenade into each of them. His bravery saved lives and allowed his company to advance to safe ground, and after the third direct hit, the Germans abandoned Hill 424, but not before they took Crawford prisoner.

Presumed to be killed in action, tales of his heroism spread among infantrymen and traveled up the chain of command. In 1944, he was awarded the Medal of Honor, the highest decoration in the U.S. military. Because everyone thought he was dead, his father accepted the medal on his behalf. Later that same year, he was found in a liberated POW camp, oblivious to the hype surrounding his name.

In 1976, an Academy cadet and his roommate read about that battle and connected the dots. Their humble janitor had won the Medal of Honor! Can you imagine what went through their heads? The Medal of Honor speaks to everything a military person reveres. Not the medal itself, but the courage and selflessness inside the human being who earned that medal. Those students wanted to be him, and there he was, mopping their floors and cleaning their bathrooms every day. Master Sergeant Crawford was a walking lesson in self-esteem, courage, character, and, especially, humility.

The way I see it, Master Sergeant William Crawford had figured it out. The Medal of Honor didn't change him. He rose to prominence by staying humble and risking his own life to save others and retired into the service of others. It was never about him, and that gave him strength.

People who feel sorry for themselves are obsessed with their own problems and their own fate. Is that really much different than the greedy and egotistical people who want to feel better than everybody else? The higher I climb in my life, the more I realize how much I need to mop that floor. Because that's where all the knowledge is. There is no grit at the top, no tests of resolve in steak dinners, five-star hotels, or spa treatments. Once you make it in this world, you have to freefall back to the bottom in some way to keep learning and growing.

I call this "trained humility." It's a shedding of your skin that allows you to take on a mission that no one else can see and do whatever needs to be done next. Trained humility is service but also strength. Because, when you are humble enough to remember that you'll never know it all, each lesson you learn only makes you hungrier to learn more, and that will put you on a path that guarantees you will grow all the way to the grave.

Continued growth only comes when you are willing to be humble.  
#TrainedHumility #NeverFinished

# EVOLUTION NO. 6

SMALL MINDS AND WEAK PEOPLE KILL BIG DREAMS. YOU MIGHT HAVE CLEAR goals and be working on yourself every day, but if you have the wrong folks around you, there's a good chance they could be sucking the life right out of you and making sure that you go nowhere.

When I select my crew, I'm not looking for elite runners to pace me. I look for individuals with a foxhole mentality. Of the four men who joined Kish and me in Moab, only one had ever done an ultra before, and two others barely ran twenty miles a week, but I didn't choose them for their running ability; they all understood me. They appreciated my mindset, knew how far I was willing to go, and were ready to do whatever it took to get me there. My success in this race was their only priority. When I told them I was heading back out to finish the job, nobody was surprised. They had been with me all day, knew I was feeling better, and, most importantly, know who I am. They expected me to try and finish. When I knocked on their doors at four in the morning, they were nearly packed for the trail already, with a look on their faces that said, "What took you so long?"

In military speak, the foxhole is a fighting position. In life, it's your inner circle. These are the people you surround yourself with. They know your history and are aware of your future goals and past limitations. But because it's a fighting position, a foxhole can just as easily become your grave. Therefore, it is crucial that you be careful about who you invite in. Whether you are at war, competing in a game, or striving in life, you never want someone in your foxhole who lacks faith or will try to steer you away from your full potential by giving you permission to pack it in or wave the white flag when the situation looks bleak.

You want the husband or wife who, when you snooze that alarm on a freezing mid-winter morning before dawn, shakes you awake so you don't miss your training run. When you're dieting and whine about being bored of eating the same bland foods every day, they remind you of all

the progress you have made, of all the hard work you have put in, and happily eat the same bland foods alongside you. When you say you're tired from all the late-night studying, they stay up late with you to help you study.

You want the type of race crew who, when you're suffering on the trail, are inspired by bearing witness to your struggle. They know it is proof of your effort. In turn, their refusal to give up on you can only inspire you to tap the reserves you'd forgotten were there and give more. They know the only time to shut down and walk away is after all options have been exhausted. Even if that means yet another sleepless night or a last-minute change of schedule. When those are the people in your foxhole, how can you not stay in the fight?

Most people don't have a selection process for their foxhole. They invite all the old cronies and close relatives in by default. As if growing up with someone is the top qualification for foxhole membership. Old friends are great and shared history is to be respected, but not every person who has been in your life a long time is looking out for your best interests. Some of them are threatened by your growth because of how it impacts them. Some are looking for a friend to keep them company in their unfulfilling lives.

In order to populate your foxhole with the right people, you must first know who you are as an individual. That means shaking off old belief systems—creaky concepts of the world and your place in it—that no longer serve you and the habits and lifestyle that you've outgrown. Any ideas or interests that were impressed upon you by others, whether they be your family, peers, or culture, must be examined consciously so you can see through all of them and discover your own unique individuality. For most people, this is a slow, organic process that can take years, if it happens at all, but if you bring intentionality to it, individuation can be accelerated. Once you find out who you are, the world will start delivering you care packages filled with opportunities that will fuel your quest.

In addition to power eating and spraying cockroaches, I did a lot of searching after I left the Air Force at twenty-four years old. I was looking for my place in the world and tried on different personas and subcultures. I explored becoming a wrestler. I got into powerlifting and thought about competing in that sport, but those weren't honest choices. I didn't burn with a desire to wrestle or lift heavy on stage. All I knew was that I didn't want to be David Goggins anymore. I wanted to be the hardest

person ever to live. The problem was I didn't know what that looked like.

It was terrifying to admit that to anyone, including myself, because at the time, I was out of shape, working a low-wage job, and living well beyond my means. How do you go from that to being hard as hell? I had no clue and wondered if I was delusional. Who gave me the right to have such an audacious dream? Even I thought I sounded ridiculous. But as absurd as it may have seemed, I didn't let go of that dream. I let it linger in the back of my brain. Then one day, a care package arrived in the form of a Navy SEAL documentary. And there it was. I finally found a place to start that might just lead me there. My dream no longer felt delusional. It felt possible.

My evolution had begun, but as my Navy SEAL future crystallized over the next several months, I learned that when you change, not everyone in your life will be on board. You will get some serious resistance, and it will be a pain. Everywhere I turned, I found family members, friends, and coworkers resistant to my evolution because they loved the Ecolab-spraying, chocolate-shake-slurping fat boy. At three hundred pounds, I made them feel much better about themselves, which is another way of saying, they were holding me back.

Years later, I learned how common that kind of thing is. Most of the men I recruited into the SEALs confided that their wives, girlfriends, or parents were dead set against something they wanted more than anything in the world. That can be extremely stressful. When you are striving to be you—especially when it involves pushing your limits of pain and suffering or sacrificing life and limb—you do not need to deal with trying to make everybody happy at the same time. When you are conflicted like that, your internal dialogue becomes counterproductive, and when those moments of truth arrive and the quitting mind gets loud, that inner conflict might be the very thing that convinces you to give up.

When I first made the decision to try to become a Navy SEAL, the only person in my foxhole was my mom. She knew what it entailed and was immediately on board. I didn't see any fear in her eyes. While she was worried about me, she believed in what I was doing even more, and that allowed me to train and fight with a clear head and maximum focus. Years later, when I ran Badwater, she was in my crew. I walked one hundred of those 135 miles, and when horseflies were all over me and I was suffering in the heat, she got out of the support vehicle, sobbing. Not because I was in pain, but because she was proud of me. Because I was pushing through it all like a warrior.



Not all friends and loved ones react that way when you change and become committed to perpetual growth. Some are genuinely offended, and you don't need or want their voices in your head. Which is a nice way of saying you may be required to leave some people behind along the way. Who you hang around and speak to on the daily matters. That's why it is not a successful formula for people in drug and alcohol recovery to continue to hang out with the people they used to party with if they want to stay sober. When you evolve, your inner circle must evolve with you. Otherwise, you may subconsciously halt your own growth to avoid outpacing and losing contact with the people who mean a lot to you but may not be able to hang with you.

When there is no one around you who believes in or understands your quest, you must turn your foxhole into a one-man fighting position. That's okay. It is always better to fight alone until you can find people strong enough to fight the good fight with you. There is no time to waste trying to pull deadweight up a hill. I've been there many times, and you must hold out until reinforcements arrive, even if it takes years. Loneliness can be difficult and depleting, but I'd much rather you stay lonely than crawl out of your foxhole and trek back through known territory into the arms of the very people who loved the old you and were never comfortable with your transformation.

Does this mean you have to end all relationships or burn all bridges? No, not necessarily. But doubters must be kept at arm's length, and anyone in your inner circle must accept you for who you are and who you want to become. This may require an adjustment period, and that is understandable. But within a reasonable amount of time, the men and women in your foxhole must, in their words and actions, give you permission to be you.

In 2018, right before I received my VFW award, I realized how much I couldn't stand being retired. I spent hours calling old friends and new contacts in the military, looking for a way back in. I considered reenlisting in Pararescue, but remembering how much I loved Ranger School and Delta Selection, I thought the Army might be a better fit, so I dropped word that I was interested in enlisting as a forty-four-year-old grunt. It didn't take long for a recruiter to reach out. He was convinced he could make it happen, but it meant moving to some backwoods Army base for training.

Kish was not thrilled. She'd worked hard in the corporate world for twenty years, and she did not expect to be living on or around an Army base at that point in her life. She certainly didn't expect me to turn down

dozens of lucrative speaking gigs to prepare for a third stint in the military. By then, I was already earning more money for an hour or two of public speaking than I'd earn in a year as a grunt.

I found myself walking on eggshells, wondering if the woman I loved would want to stay with me. At the same time, I knew living someone else's idea of my life is a recipe for misery. In the end, for a number of reasons, I didn't reenlist. I got into wildland firefighting instead. My mission hadn't changed. I was, and still am, trying to become the hardest person to ever live. That's not an ego trip. It's a way of life. It may be far-fetched and even unachievable, but I remain in service of that vision.

Fast forward a few years, and Kish is most definitely foxhole qualified. Now, she is the one who blocks off the fire season entirely and turns down every speaking inquiry that comes in for those months without even asking me because she understands exactly who I am and what I am about. She knows what my priorities are and fully supports them without question. She admires that I am fulfilled by doing things that most people shy away from and that the lure of money and fame do absolutely nothing for me but leave me feeling empty. She wants me to find my very best.

I'm wired the same way. When Kish confided in me that she wanted to run a sub-3:25 marathon, I helped her train and strategize, and she accomplished her goal with a time of 3:21 in Philadelphia. When she mentioned possibly applying to law school, she received a package of LSAT books at the door the very next day.

Don't ever tell me you want to run a marathon because I will sign you up for a race, monitor your daily training, and run with you. If you tell me you want to be a doctor, I'll be the one who enrolls you in med school while you're sleeping, and you'll wake up to a class first thing in the morning. Most people can't handle that level of intensity. But that's the kind of backing I want. The type that comes with an expectation of effort and demands hours, weeks, and even years of hard work. Because that is exactly what it takes to fulfill lofty ambitions and, more important than that, find out what you are truly capable of.

Who's in your foxhole? Tag them and tell them why! #FoxholeMentality  
#NeverFinished

# EVOLUTION NO. 7

AS FAR BACK AS I CAN REMEMBER, I CRAVED A SEAT AT THE TABLE. EVEN WHEN I was a teenager, I knew that one day I wanted to sit at that mythical table among the greats in my field. I suppose you can trace it back to a deep desire for respectability. I desperately wanted to be somebody because I felt like a nobody. That's why I was drawn toward Special Ops at such a young age, and when I realized I was flunking out of school, it's why I was so motivated to change. I knew that I would never arrive at that table unless I took myself and my life more seriously. And yet, as much as I wanted to be among the greats, the decision-makers, the anointed ones, I spent years waiting for a formal invitation.

I don't know how many times I visualized receiving that embossed golden ticket to the dinner I dreamed of, where steak and lobster tail would be served by those who admired and wanted to be near us, but I expected to have to prove something first. I figured if I inserted myself into the proper organization or structure and met the standard consistently, someone would notice me—a mentor or guide—and give me directions to where all the power players gathered. I was not looking to be at the head of their table. I wasn't delusional. I just wanted a seat.

In the meantime, I became one of the waiters who served the elite. Before long, some of my peers, who in my mind weren't as qualified as I was, were seated at the table too. I sucked it up and served them, still hoping that one day I'd be tapped on the shoulder and someone would pull out a chair for me. I wanted so badly to be anointed and validated by my superiors. I wanted to be told, "You have finally arrived, David Goggins. You are now recognized to be one of the best."

Trouble is, that formal invitation rarely arrives, and for me, it never did, but while I waited, I observed my so-called superiors at close range. I watched them work, studied how they presented themselves, and realized that most of them were fairly common people. And I wanted to be uncommon. Because it is the uncommon story, the uncommon leader,

that inspires others to seek more of themselves, work harder, and rise to the occasion.

It's no secret that the vast majority of people prefer to be led because it's easier to follow someone else than to break your own trail. Yet all too often, we are led by bosses, teachers, coaches, and powerful officials who wear the rank and title and deploy optimistic speeches, management lingo, and strategies they learned in some university or seminar or from their colleagues at that table in the executive suite but do not inspire us. Perhaps it's because they talk way too much and do far too little. Maybe it's because their own lives are out of control. Whatever the case, over time, it becomes obvious that these men and women who we once admired from afar don't have what it takes to lead themselves, let alone anyone else. Yet when they reject or ignore us, we allow that to limit us and our ability to influence the organization we belong to and the people around us.

It doesn't have to be that way.

Too many people mistake leadership for what happens at the top, in the spotlight, around that mythical table, when some of the most powerful leaders are hard at work in the shadows. They know that opportunities to make a difference in the lives of their neighbors, family, coworkers, and friends are ever-present. They wield massive influence without having to say much, if anything at all, and the first step in becoming one of these unsung heroes is learning how to become a self-leader.

Back in 1996, when I was a twenty-one-year-old airman in a Tactical Air Control Party unit (TACP), I subscribed to the basic definition of leadership like almost everyone else. A leader was the person in charge. The one with the highest rank, the fat salary, and the doting support staff. A leader had the power to hire and fire and make or break entry-level peons like me. I never thought a person who had no particular authority over me would end up being such a major influence in my life. I had no clue that I would soon get a crash course in self-leadership and how it can turn anyone into a powerful example that is impossible for others to ignore or ever forget.

Typically, TACP is the liaison between the Air Force and the Army, and I was stationed at an Army base in Fort Campbell, Kentucky, where the renowned Air Assault School is located. Air Assault is known to deliver "the ten hardest days in the U.S. Army." Nearly half of every class flunks out because it combines hard physical training with intellectual rigor as candidates complete an onslaught of physical

evolutions and learn how to sling-load choppers with heavy equipment, such as Humvees and fuel blivets. Everything must be rigged in a precise way to ensure the load will break away upon delivery at the right place and time. As an Air Force guy assigned to Fort Campbell for four years, I knew two things. I was guaranteed to be served orders to attend Air Assault School and that if I didn't graduate with that badge on my uniform, it sent a clear message that I lacked motivation and was an underachiever.

Now, did I prepare as if those orders would arrive at any moment? No, I did not. I had everything I needed to become Honor Man at my fingertips, but I didn't tailor my workouts to Air Assault School. I had access to the obstacle course and the two ruck march courses and never got out there for a single training run. I also failed to crack the books or leverage the guys I worked with who had firsthand knowledge of the sling-load test. There were new Air Assault classes running every month. I could have trained and studied hard, then requested Air Assault School when I was ready. Instead, I waited for those orders to land in my lap, and when they did, I showed up unprepared.

The fun started with a physical test on Day Zero, when candidates must run two miles in under eighteen minutes before completing that hellacious obstacle course made up of rib-crushing wall climbs, a rope climb, and a balance test on a network of beams that lead to platforms as high as thirty feet off the ground. There were so many people there that nobody really stood out, and a good chunk of them failed to achieve the basic benchmarks required to be admitted into the school, but I made it.

Before dawn on Day One, I approached the arches that formed the gateway to the Air Assault campus alongside a man I hadn't noticed the day before. Though it was dark, I could tell he was about my height and not much older than me. Now that we officially belonged to the Air Assault class, whenever we crossed under the arches, we were required to perform a set of "five and dimes." That's five pull-ups and ten elevated push-ups. We would cross beneath those arches several times a day, and we always had to pay the same toll.

We grabbed the bar at the same time. I knocked out the standard five pull-ups, but by the time I'd hit the dirt and finished my push-ups, that guy was still on the bar. I stood and watched him perform far more than five pull-ups. Satisfied, he dropped to his feet, fell forward, and hammered a lot more than ten push-ups. Only then did he report to class. We had a hard day of PT ahead. It would include many more push-ups and pull-ups, and the rest of us were content to meet the standard, hoping

we would have enough energy to survive the next ten days, yet this man was ready to smoke himself on the dark early morning of Day One. It was the first time I'd ever seen someone do more than what was required. I'd always thought my job was to meet the standard laid out by the brass, but he was clearly not concerned with what was expected of him or what was to come.

"Who is that guy?" I asked nobody in particular.

"That's Captain Connolly," someone said. Okay, so he was an Army captain, but in the Air Assault class, he had no authority at all. He was one of us, just another student trying to earn his badge. At least, that's what I assumed.

A few minutes later, we lined up for a six-mile march loaded down with thirty-five-pound rucksacks. I was only a year and a half out from running six-minute miles and coming in close to the top in almost every run in Pararescue training. In the run-up to Day One, I'd actually had delusions that once again, I'd be at the front of the pack on all the runs and might even win a few, but I had been measuring myself against the general population. My mind was set on that bell curve where 99.999 percent of the population operates, and when it came to getting after it, I figured I plotted out near the top compared to the rest of the class. Didn't matter that I wasn't 175 pounds anymore and that I'd gained thirty-five pounds from lifting heavy and eating garbage. I still looked strong and fit to most people, myself included. Oh, but I was softening up nicely.

When the instructors yelled, "Go," not everybody went out hard. We had ninety minutes to complete the course, and at least half the class intended to walk a good chunk of it. I planned to run/walk the whole thing, knowing that I would bank time running, which would put me out front. For the first two-plus miles, I was in the lead group of five guys, including Captain Connolly. Most of us were smoking and joking. We were running fairly hard, but we were also ripping on each other, and within twenty-five minutes, I was gassed. The Captain, who had been silent the entire time, had barely started to sweat. While we were wasting valuable energy trash-talking, he was self-contained and dialed in, focused on kicking our collective butts.

Around mile three, the road pitched up into the limestone hills, and the whole group seemed to downshift at once and started to walk as if we shared a common mind. We were breathing heavily, and I knew walking the ups and running the flats and downs would be the best way to finish with a decent time and still have something left in the tank for the next several hours of physical training. Captain Connolly did not downshift.

He ran on ahead of us, silent as a ghost. Some of the guys squawked about catching him when he inevitably blew up, but I was certain we wouldn't see him again until the finish line. Captain Connolly was an entirely different animal. He was off the bell curve—an outlier. He was not one of us.

It does something to you when you are running close to what you perceive as your limit (back then, I still topped out at 40 percent) and there is someone else out there who makes the difficult look effortless. It was obvious that his preparedness was several levels above our own. Captain Connolly did not show up to simply get through the program and graduate so he could collect some wings for his uniform. He came to explore what he was made of and grow. That required a willingness to set a new standard wherever possible and make a statement, not necessarily to us, but to himself. He was respectful of all the instructors and the school, but he was not there to be led.

The ruck march ended at the arches, and on our approach, we could all see Captain Connolly's silhouette as he completed pull-up after pull-up after pull-up. Once again, he made a mockery of the standard as the rest of us were content to file our five and dimes. Compared to our peers, our performance was well above average, but after watching Captain Connolly flex, it didn't feel like much. Because I knew that while I had been fine with just showing up, he'd prepared for the moment, attacked the opportunity, and showed out.

Most people love standards. It gives the brain something to focus on, which helps us reach a place of achievement. Organizational structure and attitudinal boys from our instructors or bosses keep us motivated to perform and to move up on that bell curve. Captain Connolly did not require external motivation. He trained to his own standard and used the existing structure for his own purposes. Air Assault School became his own personal octagon, where he could test himself on a level even the instructors hadn't imagined.

For the next nine days, he put his head down and quietly went about the business of smashing every single standard at Air Assault School. He saw the bar that the instructors pointed to and the rest of us were trying to tap as a hurdle to leap over, and he did it time and again. He understood that his rank only meant something if he sought out a different certification: an invisible badge that says, "I am the example. Follow me, and I will show you that there is more to this life than so-called authority and stripes or candy on a uniform. I'll show you what

true ambition looks like beyond all the external structure in a place of limitless mental growth.”

He didn’t say any of that. He didn’t run his mouth at all. I can’t recall him uttering word one in ten days, but through his performance and extreme dedication, he dropped breadcrumbs for anybody who was awake and aware enough to follow him. He flashed his tool kit. He showed us what potent, silent, exemplary leadership looked like. He checked into every Gold Group run, which was led by the fastest instructor in that school, and volunteered to be the first to carry the flag.

When the sling-load test came around, I thought that might be his kryptonite. I was hoping that he was just a physical stud, a freak of nature. I wanted to find a flaw in him because it would make me feel better about myself. But when the instructors asked for a volunteer to be the first to take a test that half the class would fail, he didn’t raise his hand or say anything out loud. He simply stepped forward to be tested on helicopters, reach pendants, sling sets, proper rigging, and inspection before anyone else. He aced that too.

He won every last physical evolution, was at the top of the class on each of the exams, and raised the level of the entire group. We all wanted to be more like him. We wanted to compete against him. We used him as a measuring stick, as someone we could emulate, because he gave us permission to go beyond the standard. Thanks to him, I volunteered to carry the flag on one of the Gold Runs, and to this day, it is one of the hardest runs I’ve ever completed. Without the use of your arms, it’s impossible to generate the same power and momentum, and that flag feels like a parachute tugging you backward. However, I was nowhere near his physical condition, and when the twelve-mile ruck march came around on Day Ten—our final test in Air Assault School—all I could do was watch him disappear into the distance as he shattered the Air Assault record for the fastest twelve-mile time ever.

I graduated mentally and physically exhausted but felt almost nothing when I was awarded the wings I thought would anoint me as a made man around Fort Campbell. I was still too puzzled and irritated by Captain Connolly’s level of effort, which felt almost confrontational. It wasn’t a lot of fun to be around him, yet I relished every second. He made me uncomfortable because he exposed my lack of dedication to giving my best effort each and every day. Being around people like that forces you to try harder and be better, and while that is a good thing, when you are inherently lazy, what you really want are some days off.



The Captain Connollys of the world don't give you that option. When they are in your foxhole, there are no days off.

His conditioning was clearly off the charts, and I'm not talking about the physical aspect alone. Being a physical specimen is one thing, but it takes so much more energy to stay mentally prepared enough to arrive every day at a place like Air Assault School on a mission to dominate. The fact that he was able to do that told me it couldn't possibly have been a one-time thing. It had to be the result of countless lonely hours in the gym, on the trails, and in the books. Most of his work was hidden, but it is within that unseen work that self-leaders are made. I suspect the reason he was capable of exceeding any and all standards consistently was because he was dedicated at a level most people cannot fathom in order to stay ready for any and all opportunities.

Those who have not learned to self-lead show up to their lives like I did Air Assault School. They don't prepare or have a plan of attack. They wait, get shotgunned into something—a school, a job, a physical test—then wing it. Think about how much information is out there on the internet. Any place you want to build your skills, from boot camp to Harvard Business School, from EMT certification to an engineering degree, is described online in granular detail. You can study the prerequisites and start on the coursework before you are even admitted. You can prepare as if you are already there so when the time comes and you do land that opportunity, you are ready to smash it. That's what a self-leader does, no matter how busy their lives are. Not because they are obsessed with being the best, but because they are striving to become their best.

Self-leaders rarely rest. In the heat of battle, they become dolphins who sleep with one side of their brain on alert and one eye always open so they are ready to outsmart, outswim, or battle their predators and they are awake enough to float back to the surface and take another breath. In order to sustain that amount of energy output, self-leaders return again and again to the organizing ideals of their lives. They live for something bigger than themselves, and because of that, their lives swell and glow with an energy that others can feel. It can also start a chain reaction that challenges and awakens people to the untapped power coiled within themselves. The power that they are wasting with each passing day.

Setting an example through action rather than words will always be the most potent form of leadership, and it's available to all of us. You don't have to be a great public speaker or have an advanced degree. Those things are fine and have their place, but the best way to lead a

group is to simply live the example and show your team or classmates, through dedication, effort, performance, and results, what is truly possible.

That's where I'm at now. Thanks in part to the example Captain Connolly set and because I was aware enough to recognize that he was a rare breed and humble enough to learn from him. However, as you know, the transformation didn't take right away. Sadly, once Air Assault School was over and Captain Connolly was out of my life, the spark faded, and I fell back into my old ways. While I never stopped thinking about that ten-day experience, I didn't have it within me to self-lead just yet. I should have taken the lesson from those ten days and applied it to the next fifty years of my life. I should have imagined Captain Connolly watching me each and every day. Believe me, if you think you're being watched, you live differently. You're more detailed and squared away. That's not how it went for me. It would be another three years of slippage before I exhumed the Connolly files from my personal archives and studied them to become a self-leader.

Two years in the SEAL Teams was all it took to realize that nobody was going to show up to coach or guide me to my seat at the table, but by then, I wanted off the bell curve. I wanted to make my own opportunities and eat alone at my own table. I wanted to become an outlier.

I went on to beat Captain Connolly's twelve-mile ruck-march time, which had been tattooed on my brain for six years, while doing an eighteen-mile ruck march at Delta Selection. I did it on a much harder course with a heavier pack, and for the first twelve miles, I imagined that he was still out there in front of me, dropping breadcrumbs, daring me to exceed the standard he set years ago. He was the first one to show me how to do more with less and that it was not just possible to dig deeper but mandatory if you are striving to be your best self. When I eclipsed his time, I realized I was no longer chasing Captain Connolly. From then on, every school, course, race, or record I took on became an arena for my own self-development.

When you live like that, you are usually far beyond the influence of parents, teachers, coaches, or other traditional mentors and their philosophies. In order to stay humble, you'll need to make sure you are living up to your own code. A lot of great organizations have inspiring mission statements. Elite military units are built around an ethos or creed that defines how their men and women are supposed to conduct themselves. Each time I arrived at a new school or endeavored to join a new Special Operations unit, I studied and memorized the ethos or creed,

and those words never failed to move me and most of my peers, but it's human nature to become complacent. No matter how powerful the organizational ideals, even well-meaning people who love what they do—especially those with seniority—will lack the mental endurance to live the creed on the day to day. And if most people within an organization don't truly follow or adhere to the founding principles, then what are they really worth? So, I took my own oath to self:

*I live with a Day One, Week One mentality. This mentality is rooted in self-discipline, personal accountability, and humility. While most people stop when they're tired, I stop when I am done. In a world where mediocrity is often the standard, my life's mission is to become uncommon amongst the uncommon.*

We all owe it to ourselves to stand for something. Principles give us a foundation—solid ground we can trust and build on as we continue to redefine what's possible in our own lives. Sure, some will be put off by your dedication and level of effort. Others will call you obsessed or think that you've gone crazy. When they do, smile and say, "I'm not crazy. I'm just not you."

Don't rely on some other group's ethos or company's mission statement to be your guide. Don't walk around aimlessly trying to find purpose or fit in. Mine your core principles, and come up with your own oath to self. Make sure it is aspirational and that it challenges you to strive and achieve, and live by it every day.

When everything gets murky and twisted and you feel alone and misunderstood, revisit your oath to self. It will ground you. At times, you will need to revise your oath given the shifting priorities that arise with life changes, but don't water it down. Make sure it is always strong enough to serve as your daily compass as you navigate life and all of its challenges. Living by this oath—your oath—you will never need anyone else to lead you. Because no matter what happens, you will never be lost.

Who will you become and what do you want to stand for? Are you ready to be the standard? If you are willing, share your oath to self.  
#OathToSelf #SelfLeadership #NeverFinished

# EVOLUTION NO. 8

MOST PEOPLE LIVE THEIR WHOLE LIVES WITHOUT EVER CONTEMPLATING WHAT IT means to be great. To them, greatness looks like Steph Curry, Rafael Nadal, Toni Morrison, Georgia O’Keeffe, Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart, or Amelia Earhart. They put all the greats on a pedestal but think of themselves as mere mortals. And that’s exactly why greatness eludes them. They turn it into some untouchable plane, impossible for almost anybody to reach, and it never even crosses their mind to aim for it.

No matter what I’m doing or which arena I’m engaging in, I will always aim for greatness because I know that we are all mere mortals and greatness is possible for anyone and everyone if they are willing to seek it out in their own soul. In Gogglish terms, greatness is a state of letting go of all your faults and imperfections, scavenging every last bit of strength and energy, and putting it to use to excel at whatever you set your mind to. Even if someone out there told you it was impossible. It is a feeling pursued by those rare souls willing to extend themselves beyond reason and pay the cost.

In the late 1950s, Captain Joseph Kittinger was a pilot in the Air Force tapped for experimental aviation and skydiving duty in New Mexico. He wasn’t a household name. In fact, hardly anybody knew the first thing about him until August 16, 1960, when he donned a red, duct-taped pressure suit and boarded an open-sided gondola tethered to an onion-shaped helium balloon. He flew that rig nearly twenty miles high until he reached the thin atmospheric line where everything goes from blue to black. He’d traveled to a place where the horizon did not exist. He was above and beyond all previously known limitations. Suspended at 102,800 feet, he unclipped his harness and stepped into space. His free fall lasted nearly five minutes. His maximum velocity was 614 miles per hour. He plummeted over eighty thousand vertical feet before his primary chute opened. This was no Red Bull sponsored party. It wasn’t a television show. Kittinger wasn’t an entertainer, he was an explorer. A

seeker of a new realm for the world—his flight and his jump helped make manned space flight possible—and also for himself.

I don't jump to earth from outer space, but I know that atmospheric line between blue and black. It is the glimmer of greatness that runs right through the human soul. We all have it. Most of us will never see it because to get there requires a willingness to extend yourself to the limit without any guarantee of success.

Then again, success is just another mile marker on the journey. Landing the jump and walking away while lighting a cigarette as if it were a typical day on the job made Kittinger look cool, but it didn't make him great. His willingness to do it in the first place knowing that the chances of failure were high and everything it cost him made him great. It wasn't a stunt to garner fame or publicity. It was merely an attempt to see what was humanly possible.

Just as words can be redefined, never doubt that we can redefine ourselves. It can feel impossible at times because we live in a world filled with arbitrary boundaries and fixed social lines that are as thick as the walls around a fortress. Worse, we allow those walls to limit us in too many ways. The brainwashing starts early, and it starts at home. The people we grow up with and the environments we grow up in define who we think we are and what we think life is all about. When you're young, you can only know what you see, and if all you are ever exposed to are lazy people, content with mediocrity or who convince you of your own worthlessness, greatness will remain a fantasy.

If you live in the ghetto or in a dying industrial or farming town, where buildings are boarded up, addiction runs rampant, and the schools are a mess, that will factor into the possibilities others envision for you and you envision for yourself. But even privileged people can feel shackled by their circumstances. The vast majority of parents don't know what greatness looks like, so they are ill-equipped and afraid to encourage big dreams. They want their children to have security and don't want them to experience failure. That's how limited horizons get passed down from generation to generation.

Should we really be surprised that almost everybody has a knack for twisting their story to work against themselves? I hear it all the time. Privileged kids say, "I have too much, so I cannot develop the skills that you have." The kid that came from nothing will tell me, "I don't have enough. Therefore, I cannot develop the skills that you have." No matter where someone is in life, they never fail to confess why they can't get where they need to go. The minute they open their mouths, I see how

limited their horizons are, and their sob stories come with the expectation that I will deliver a “become great” package to their front door. But that’s not how it works.

Identity is a trap that will keep you in blinders if you let it. Sometimes, identity is what we are saddled with by society. Other times, it’s a category we claim. It can be empowering to associate yourself with a particular culture, group, job, or lifestyle, but it can also be limiting. If you stick with your own too closely, you will be susceptible to groupthink, and you may never learn who you really are or what you can accomplish. I know people who were so obsessed with landing a specific job that once they settled in to that role, they clipped their own wings. They never moved on or attempted to try anything new, and that blocked them from evolving and developing new skills.

Sometimes, we are misled by others who categorize us based on what they perceive as our identity. When I met with Navy recruiters, several tried to steer me away from SEAL training and into a different opportunity because I didn’t fit the mold. I was overweight, my ASVAB scores were low, and there was my skin color. Remember, I was only the thirty-sixth Black Navy SEAL. The recruiters weren’t trying to hurt me, and I don’t believe they were racist. They honestly thought they were helping me by presenting more realistic options.

Usually, however, we mislead ourselves. Those of us who are struggling with our self-worth, like I was as a child, often build identities around the very things that haunt us the most. Not because we want to, but because subconsciously, we are convinced that is how everyone else sees us. You cannot allow what someone else may or may not think about you or the issues you’re dealing with to stop your progress.

My environment and my history made me overanxious and stressed out. The color of my skin made me a mark. I was prejudged and vulnerable at almost every turn, and it was my job to defy all of that. No matter how troubled or hopeless or sheltered your environment is, it is your job, your obligation, your duty, and your responsibility to yourself to find the blue-to-black line—that glimmer—buried in your soul and seek greatness. Nobody can show you that glimmer. You must do the work to discover it on your own.

There are no prerequisites to becoming great. You could be raised by a pack of wolves. You could be homeless and illiterate at thirty years old and graduate from Harvard at forty. You could be one of the most accomplished people in the country and still be hungrier and work harder than everybody else you know as you attempt to conquer a new field.

And it all starts with a commitment to looking beyond your known world. Beyond your street, town, state, or nationality. Beyond culture and identity. Only then can true self-exploration begin.

After that comes the real work. Fighting those demons every morning and all day long is maddening. Because they only ever want to break you down. They don't encourage you or make you feel good about yourself or your long odds as you fight through all the toxic mold and crust that is self-hate, doubt, and loneliness. They want to limit you. They want you to surrender and retreat back to what you know. They want you to quit before you get to pliability, where the sacrifice, hard work, and isolation that felt so heavy for so long become your haven. Where after struggling to visualize greatness for years, it is effortless. That's when momentum will gather like an updraft and send you airborne and spiraling toward the outer limits of your known world.

It's time to level-up and seek out that blue-to-black line. The line that separates good from great. It is within each one of us.  
#GreatnessIsAttainable #NeverFinished

## CHAPTER NINE

# WRINGING OUT THE SOUL

MY EYES SNAPPED OPEN SIX MINUTES BEFORE MY ALARM STARTED CHIRPING. Sometimes, 0530 comes even earlier than that sounds. In my SEAL days, I woke up before the sun to take souls and wasted no time getting after it. But that April morning, I had to will myself to move an inch at a time. My left side was bruised purple from my hip to my ribs. My intercostal muscles were sore enough that even breathing hurt. My neck was so stiff that I could barely turn my head.

We were two weeks into smokejumper rookie training and deep into ground school, and it was Parachute Landing Falls (PLF) season in Fort St. John. For most of the day, my old, broken body would be bouncing off the frozen ground over and over again.

I palmed my vibrating phone from the nightstand and peeled myself off the mattress. I hadn't felt this exhausted and sore since I was twenty-four years old. Back then, I did whatever it took to lose the weight and make it through SEAL training because I knew that would change everything. I'd be able to leave Indiana behind, gain self-respect and confidence, and infuse my life with meaning. But now, there was literally nothing riding on this. I hadn't even told many people where I was or what I was doing. I had zero external motivation and all of the pain.

Every morning, I asked myself the same question. *Why am I putting myself through this?* I wasn't lacking in self-confidence or in search of meaning, and I didn't need a paycheck. Simply put, this is just who I am.

I could practically hear my bones creak as I stood up slowly, shuffled to the window, and pulled back the curtain. Another foot of snow had fallen overnight, and it was still coming down heavy. We'd expected it to be cold in Northern British Columbia, but this was something beyond. It