

## THE BIG IDEAS

### No Exit Strategy

Get rid of Plan B.

### Trust Your Instincts.

Always.

### Your Demons

How to overcome them.

### Failure

= The price to pay to level up.

### Thought Experiment

An exciting one.

# Burn the Boats

## Toss Plan B Overboard and Unleash Your Full Potential

BY MATT HIGGINS · WILLIAM MORROW © 2023 · 288 PAGES

“Through my own experience and through the hundreds of businesses and entrepreneurs I’ve worked with—many of whose stories appear in this book—I’ve realized that there is indeed a powerful formula for achieving never-ending progressive growth and sustained success: Toss your Plan B overboard and *burn the boats*.”

What do I mean by “burn the boats”?

To accomplish something great, you have to give yourself no escape routes no chance to ever turn back. You throw away your backup plans and you push forward, no longer bogged down by the infinite ways in which we hedge our own successes. Over time, our primitive instincts have been supplanted by conventional wisdom that pushes us to make contingency plans. The words ‘You never know’ echo in our brains on an endless loop. We are so out of practice tapping into our own internal navigation systems that when we’re about to make a bold move, our first impulse is to undercut it with a backup plan. In other words, we no longer trust our instincts. Yet the act of building a safety net is precisely what forces you to need one. If you’re someone who’s worried you won’t succeed, you’ve already failed.

I’m living proof that the universe has no ceiling on ambition. If I’ve learned one thing over the past three decades—from dropping out of high school to get my GED in a bid to escape from poverty to landing on Shark Tank to help new entrepreneurs launch their careers—it’s that you don’t win when you give yourself the option to lose. Greatness doesn’t emerge from hedging, hesitating, or submitting to the naysayers that skulk in every corner of our lives.

I wouldn’t have accomplished anything if I hadn’t lived the Burn the Boats philosophy. Now, with this book, I’m ready to arm *you* with all the tools and tips to do exactly the same thing.”

*“I’ve seen hesitation kill more deals than speed ever will. And when you hesitate, or when you hedge, or when you divide your attention between your goal and the safety net you think you need to build, it all just begs the question: What are you waiting for?”*

~ Matt Higgins

~ Matt Higgins from *Burn the Boats*

Matt Higgins is a FASCINATING human being.

He was raised in poverty by a single mom, dropped out of high school at sixteen, then wound up getting his law degree from Fordham University School of Law and became the youngest press secretary to the mayor’s office in New York City history. Then he helped lead the effort to rebuild the World Trade Center site before becoming an executive for the New York Jets.

THEN he became a guest shark on Shark Tank, an executive fellow teaching at Harvard Business School, and has invested in some of America’s most beloved brands through RSE Ventures—the investment firm he co-founded.

*"Intrinsic motivations borne of personal experience are the most valuable assets we possess. No visions are ever rendered to us in the dead of the night that we are incapable of pursuing at the break of dawn. But we have to give ourselves permission to see them and then act on them."*

~ Matt Higgins

In this book, he tells us how he did it while sharing a TON of inspiring stories about others who went ALL IN on their dreams. It's fantastic. I highly recommend it. Get a copy [here](#).

The sub-title of the book is "Toss Plan B Overboard and Unleash Your Full Potential." That, of course, reminds me of the sub-title of OUR book: [Areté: Activate Your Heroic Potential](#).

The book is PACKED with Big Ideas and I'm excited to share some of my favorites so let's jump straight in!

## NO EXIT STRATEGY

"This isn't just my story. It's every story, and it's all of history. Burning the boats as a strategy for success goes all the way back to the Old Testament. ...

More recently, in 2022, Voldymyr Zelensky, the comedian turned president of Ukraine, was under siege from Russian invaders when the United States offered him a plan to evacuate. The entire free world had concluded that Ukraine had no chance of overcoming the full weight of the Russian army, and that if Zelensky didn't abandon Kyiv soon, he would meet his demise. But the Ukrainian president proved himself a student of both history and psychology when he took to the airwaves to reject the offer from U.S. president Joe Biden. 'I don't need a ride; I need weapons,' he said.

Zelensky signaled to the Russian opponents—and to the world—that he had given himself no way out. He had burned the boats and was prepared to fight his way to the death. His defiance proved contagious, and with those simple words, he inspired his country—and ultimately all of NATO—to resist invasion."

That's from the Introduction in which Matt introduces himself and his remarkable story.

Before giving us Zelensky as an example of burning the boats and eliminating an exit strategy, Matt tells us about the ancient warriors in the Old Testament who, when besieging a city, would always give their enemies a way out.

He quotes Rabbi Naphtali Hoff who says: "They understood that so long as the enemy saw that they had an escape route available, they would not fight with utmost earnestness and energy."

Then there's "Sun Tzu, the great Chinese general, military strategist writer, and philosopher," who echoes the same point. In *The Art of War*, Sun Tzu says that "The leader of an army carries his men deep into hostile territory before he shows his hand. He burns his boats and breaks his cooking pots." As Matt says: "He gives his men no option to return, and the only way they will eat again is to eat the food of their enemy."

Boats burned. No exit strategy.

[Napoleon Hill](#) echoes this wisdom in his all-time classic, [Think and Grow Rich](#).

In the context of emphasizing the importance of having what he called a "burning desire" to achieve your goals, he tells us: "A long while ago, a great warrior faced a situation which made it necessary for him to make a decision which insured his success on the battlefield. He was about to send his armies against a powerful foe, whose men outnumbered his own. He loaded his soldiers into boats, sailed to the enemy's country, unloaded soldiers and equipment, then gave the order to burn the ships that had carried them. Addressing the men before the first battle, he said, 'You see the boats going up in smoke. That means that we cannot leave these shores unless we win! We now have no choice—we win—or we perish!'

They won. Every person who wins in any undertaking must be willing to burn his ships and cut all sources of retreat. Only by so doing can one be sure of maintaining that state of mind known as a burning desire to win, essential to success."

*"The best leaders make decisions that masquerade as data-driven choices when they are actually what I call gut sandwiches: data sandwiched between insights and intuition that we can't justify with numbers alone. Game-changing ideas have too many ingredients to be reduced to a formula."*

~ Matt Higgins

*"If you are someone who is worried that you won't succeed, trust me, you've already failed."*

~ Matt Higgins

Spotlight on YOU. What do YOU want to create in your life?

WOOP it. Know the price you will need to pay. Double it. Then decide whether or not you're willing to pay it. Then GO PAY IT.

P.S. My equivalent move to burn the boats while eliminating any and all exits with my Mission to help create a world in which 51% of humanity is flourishing by the year 2051 as the Philosopher/CEO of Heroic Public Benefit Corporation? My tattoos. As I like to joke to prospective investors, they don't rub off. (Hah.) I'm ALL IN. Boats are burned. YOU?

P.P.S. [Lanny Bassham](#) just came to mind as I type that out. In [With Winning in Mind](#), he tells us: "Determine a goal worth trading your life for."

P.P.P.S. I'm typing this days after returning from a trip to Norfolk, Virginia to lead a Heroic workshop for Captain Dave Pollard and his leadership team on the USS GEORGE H.W. BUSH. Note: That's the aircraft carrier we sent out in response to Zelensky's request for support. (Goosebumps.)

Here's to ALL of us playing our roles as humbly yet Heroically well as we can to help create that world we aspire to see.

## TRUST YOUR INSTINCTS

"The entire book is about not becoming hesitant when your instincts don't match what the world is telling you to do. The key to unlocking potential is to embrace your highest competitive advantage; you are the only one who has the full story of your life. YOU are the one subject about which there will never be a greater expert in the world. And so of course you will see your path forward before anyone else will.

In other words, if you don't trust yourself, you will miss the chance to be extraordinary.

As Ralph Waldo Emerson wrote in his 1841 essay, 'Self-Reliance' (a work that I return to again and again for inspiration), 'A man should learn to detect and watch that gleam of light which flashes across his mind from within, more than the lustre of the firmament of bards and sages. Yet he dismisses without notice his thought, because it is his.'

Listening to yourself is how you begin to find your future."

That's from Chapter #1: "Trust Your Instincts."

Matt and I are both VERY big fans of [Ralph Waldo Emerson](#).

As you know if you've been following along, Alexandra and I named our son Emerson after my beloved American hero, Ralph Waldo.

Ralph Waldo Emerson's Heroic portrait is starting at me from the office wall as I type this. He is the first of my Heroic guides to speak to me during my meditation.

You know what he tells me EVERY SINGLE MORNING? It's a line from [Self-Reliance](#)—the essay I've read at least a dozen times: "Trust thyself. Every heart vibrates to the iron string."

The full passage from which I pulled that line is the first Big Idea on our Notes on [Self-Reliance](#).

Here it is: "Trust thyself: every heart vibrates to that iron string. Accept the place the divine providence has found for you, the society of your contemporaries, the connection of events. Great men have always done so, and confided themselves childlike to the genius of their age, betraying their perception that the absolutely trustworthy was seated at their heart, working through their hands, predominating in all their being. And we are now men, and must accept in the highest mind the same transcendent destiny; and not minors or invalids in a protected corner, not cowards fleeing before a revolution, but guides, redeemers, and benefactors, obeying the Almighty effort, and advancing on Chaos and the Dark."

*"No te quaesiveras extra. It's the first line of Emerson's 'Self-Reliance,' and in Latin it means, 'Do not seek outside thyself.'"*

~ Matt Higgins

*"I believe you dilute your doubt by cultivating your conviction. The degree to which you diversify should have an inverse relationship with how convinced you are of your success. It is counter-productive to spread your energy across a landscape of opportunities such that you can't actually invest your full self into any of them."*

~ Matt Higgins

Emerson is so remarkably quotable. Here are a few other gems you may enjoy...

*"What I must do is all that concerns me, not what the people think. This rule, equally arduous in actual and in intellectual life, may serve for the whole distinction between greatness and meanness. It is the harder, because you will always find those who think they know what your duty is better than you know it. It is easy in the world to live after the world's opinion; it is easy in solitude to live after our own; but the great man is he who in the midst of the crowd keeps with perfect sweetness the independence of solitude."*

*"Men imagine that they communicate their virtue or vice only by overt actions, and do not see that virtue or vice emit a breath every moment."*

P.S. The Heroic portrait of our 11-year-old son, Emerson, is also staring at me from my wall as I type this. It's a picture of him (from a picture of us!) from a special moment—right before he walked in to play his final game in the Texas State Chess Championships.

I have Heroic portraits of him and our daughter Eleanor (named after another one of our favorite American heroes!) up on my wall as a reminder of the sacred privilege (and challenge!) of striving to be worthy of their emulation.

P.P.S. Who are YOUR heroes? What wisdom would they like to give YOU today?! And, for whom are you committed to forging the strength for two and being a worthy exemplar?

P.P.P.S. If you haven't read *Self-Reliance* yet, I HIGHLY recommend you check it out. [Here's a link](#) to a PDF of it. And, check out our Notes on [The Selected Writings of Ralph Waldo Emerson](#) and [Self-Reliance](#).

## OVERCOME YOUR DEMONS

*"The written word is even more powerful. In one study, students from marginalized groups who write about the values that are most important to them—like confidence, creativity, empathy, and independence—received higher grades than a control group. In another study, dieters who wrote about what they valued the most in life—relationships, religion, and health—lost more weight than those who didn't. Strengthening your identity—reaffirming what you stand for and what you believe in—makes it easier to hold your ground when confronted by challenges from outside—and even from within.*

*We all have to train the voice in our head to be our biggest ally, because the most impactful conversations you'll ever have in life will be with yourself. Too often, we let our self-talk tear us down before the world even gets a shot in. Who gives you a harder time, your boss, or you yourself, anticipating what your boss is going to say to you over some perceived shortcoming? We short-circuit our efforts and become even worse than the haters we fear. You can't do that and expect to succeed. Instead, you need to treat yourself with the same kindness you'd extend to a friend. When we come to understand that the only approval that matters in life is our own, we realize we have the power to inoculate ourselves from all external scorn and ridicule."*

That's from Chapter #2: "Overcome Your Demons and Enemies."

Two things I want to highlight here. In the first paragraph, Matt talks about the power of identities AND values. As he reminds us, science says: When you connect to the values that matter most to you, you will outperform those who don't.

Guess what? We architected the Big 3 protocol in the [Heroic app](#) with THAT in mind. We need to know who we are at our best—our Identities. And... We need to know what VIRTUES (aka "values") that version of us embodies. AND... Most importantly, we need to know what that Heroic best version of us *does* to be in integrity with that Identity and with those Virtues and...

BOOM!

*"Opportunity is not an inexhaustible resource, and when you see an opening you have to take advantage."*

~ Matt Higgins

*"You need to structure your big bets in life to give yourself time to be right. It's hard enough to be right, it's impossible to predict when you'll be right. ... I tell people it takes at least three years for a startup to stabilize, five to reap the harvest—and almost never less, no matter the product."*

~ Matt Higgins

When we live in integrity with that best version of ourselves we win the ultimate game as we activate our Soul Force and show up more energized, productive, and connected than ever.

Here's what's really interesting. As we've discussed countless times, when we live in integrity with our best selves, we connect to our inner *daimons*—that guiding spirit within each of us.

Remember: The word *demon* is just the diminutive of *daimon*. So... If you want to "Overcome Your Demons," you need to make sure you're staying connected to your DAIMON.

When? All day. Every day.

Especially TODAY.

P.S. As I read the line about having great conversations with yourself, I thought of [this +1 Don't Listen to Yourself, TALK to Yourself](#) inspired by [Darrin Donnelly's The Mental Game](#).

## FAILURE = THE PRICE TO PAY FOR LEVELING UP

"In other words, he doesn't let his losses define him. He may fail, but that doesn't make him a failure. This is the single most important attribute I see in people who have had unexplainable breakout success. The highest achievers let their wins become part of their identity, to bolster their belief in themselves. ... The difference between victory or defeat is leaving the losses behind. Extract lessons, absolutely, but once you pick over the carcass of failure, bury it in the desert and never return to pay your respects. It's gone for good. Every time these achievers fail, they simply expand their definition of success to accommodate the failure as a stepping-stone along the way.

Dave Chang says that failure 'is the price to pay for leveling up. We want to hit home runs, and we want to be so good at what we do that we destroy everything around us—but to do that, we have to accept that failure is possible, and even encourage it, because it means we're taking big swings.' ...

It's not that we ignore failure or avoid responsibility. That's delusion, and I'm not arguing that anyone should be delusional. You have to be intellectually curious about your failures, figure out what went wrong, and reflect on how to do better next time. You can't let failure co-opt your identity."

That's another Big Idea from the chapter on Overcoming Your Demons and Enemies.

Failure. It's inevitable.

Remember Rule #1 of a noble, Heroic life: IT'S SUPPOSED TO BE CHALLENGING.

Figure out what you needed to learn, integrate that wisdom into your new approach and DOMINATE.

We quoted Coach [John Wooden](#) on this subject in our last Note. In [Wooden on Leadership](#), he tells us: "Things turn out best for those who make the best of how things turn out."

Then there's [Yogananda](#). In [The Law of Success](#), he tells us: "Even failure should act as a stimulant to your will power, and to your material and spiritual growth. Weed out the causes of failure, and with double vigor launch what you wish to accomplish. The season of failure is the best time for sowing seeds of success."

Then there's [Trevor Moawad](#). In [It Takes What It Takes](#), he tells us: "Derek Jeter—Russell [Wilson]'s favorite athlete—said what Russell was now living: to be able to hit the game-winning home run, you have to be willing to strike out in the same batter's box. That translates to football pretty easily. To have a chance to throw the touchdown pass that wins the Super Bowl, you have to be willing to throw the interception that loses the Super Bowl. Those two things live in the same moment."

*"I process failure in four stages: 1. I have failed. 2. But I am not a failure. 3. I will unearth what failure was trying to teach me. 4. And next time, I will win."*

~ Matt Higgins

## AN EXCITING THOUGHT EXPERIMENT

*"It's hard to achieve greatness if you're spending mental energy trying to rein yourself in. When I talk about going all in, it's not just about eliminating backup plans and hedges—it's also literally about putting all of yourself into the endeavor, and not holding back."*

~ Matt Higgins

"Every time I achieve something new, I immediately look for something to build on that success—often in ways that weren't necessarily obvious beforehand. Once I started investing in companies, suddenly I had the kind of experience that could land me on Shark Tank. Once I had the Shark Tank seal of approval, I could teach at HBS. Once I taught at HBS, I could write a book. What can you do today that you couldn't do yesterday that moves you closer to what you want to do tomorrow? If you've still got a pulse, then there's always something else you should want to do tomorrow. And every new thing you achieve in life puts you in a better position to secure whatever the next milestone is.

An exciting and freeing thought experiment: If you ignored the limits, and assumed you could do anything, what is it you would do with your life?"

That's from Chapter #7: "Consolidate Your Gains"—which is the first chapter in Part III of the book. Part I = Get in the Water. Part II = No Turning Back. Part III = Build More Boats.

As I read that, I thought of [Arnold Schwarzenegger](#) when I read this for a couple reasons. First, Arnold wrote a blurb for this book and has some VERY strong thoughts on Plan B. [Watch THIS INCREDIBLE VIDEO for more](#). Spoiler alert: He HATES Plan B.

In *Be Useful*, he echoes this wisdom when he tells us: "There's a story about Sir Edmund Hillary, the first person to summit Mount Everest. When he came back down to base camp, he was met by reporters who asked him what the view was like at the top of the world. He said it was incredible, because while he was up there he saw another mountain in the Himalayan range that he hadn't climbed yet, and he was already thinking about the route he would take to summit that peak next. When you reach the mountaintop, it gives you a brand new perspective on the rest of the world, on the rest of your life. You see new challenges that were out of sight before, and you see old challenges in new ways. With this huge victory now under your belt, they all become conquerable."

Back to Matt for "An exciting and freeing thought experiment: If you ignored the limits, and assumed you could do anything, what is it you would do with your life?"

Well, what will it be, Hero?

Here's to going ALL IN as we activate our Heroic potential and give the world all we've got.

B

**Brian Johnson,**  
*Heroic Philosopher CEO*

### About the Author of This Note

BRIAN JOHNSON



Brian Johnson is the Founder + CEO of Heroic Public Benefit Corporation and the author of *Areté: Activate Your Heroic Potential*. He's 50% Philosopher and 50% CEO and 101% committed to helping create a world in which 51% of humanity is flourishing by the year 2051. As a Founder/CEO he's made crowdfunding history and built and sold two social platforms. As a Philosopher/teacher, he's helped millions of people from around the world, trained 10,000+ [Heroic Coaches](#) from 100+ countries and created a protocol that science says changes lives. He lives in the country outside Austin, Texas, with his wife, Alexandra, and their two kids, Emerson and Eleanor. Learn more at [heroic.us](#).

If you liked this Note, you'll probably like...

[Be Useful, Wooden on Leadership, Unlocked, How Champions Think, It Takes What It Takes, The Law of Success](#)