

## THE BIG IDEAS

### A Competition for Love

A Hero's secret weapon.

### Black Superheroes

Ali made himself one.

### Fight the Fear

Step into your infinite potential.

### A Gold Medal in 1960

But no meal at "Whites only" diner.

### The Will

Must be stronger than the skill.

# The Soul of a Butterfly

## Reflections on Life's Journey

BY MUHAMMAD ALI · SIMON & SCHUSTER © 2013 · 264 PAGES

"People were always asking me what I was going to do after I retired from boxing. My response then was as it is now: During my boxing career, you did not see the real Muhammad Ali. You just saw a little boxing and a little showmanship. It was after I retired from boxing that my true work began. I had more time then to develop my spiritual being the way that I once developed my muscles and agility.

When I look at the world, I see that many people build big beautiful houses but live in broken homes. We spend more time learning how to make a living than we do learning to make a life. What I hope to share with you are the beliefs that I have come to live by. Many of the philosophies, stories, and ideals that have touched my soul and inspired my heart I learned from my study of Islam. I have shared this knowledge with my family and friends; now I offer it to the world. ...

My soul has grown over the years, and some of my views have changed. As long as I'm alive, I will continue to try to understand more because the work of the heart is never done. All through my life I have been tested. My will has been tested, my courage has been tested, my strength has been tested. Now my patience and endurance are being tested. Every step of the way I believe that God has been with me. And, more than ever, I know that he is with me now. I have learned to live my life one step, one breath, and one moment at a time, but it was a long road. I set out on a journey of love, seeking truth, peace, and understanding. I am still learning."

~ Muhammad Ali from *The Soul of a Butterfly*

*"Truly great people in history never wanted to be great for themselves. All they wanted was the chance to do good for others and be close to God."*

~ Muhammad Ali

I got this book after one of the Black members in our community graciously encouraged me to explore more Black authors and share their stories and perspectives while broadening my own perspective. (Thank you, Miata!)

Muhammad Ali was a magnetically charismatic heavyweight champion turned humanitarian. Wikipedia tells us that he was nicknamed "The Greatest" and that *"he is regarded as one of the most significant sports figures of the 20th century and is often regarded as the greatest heavyweight boxer of all time. In 1999, he was named Sportsman of the Century by Sports Illustrated and the Sports Personality of the Century by the BBC."*

He wrote this book with his daughter Hana Ali in 2004. He was 62 at the time. He died at the age of 74 in 2016. It's a fantastic autobiography in which we learn about the struggles he faced as a Black man living in the segregated South and the courage and commitment with which he strived to live a life of integrity and love.

I highly recommend it as both a great, inspiring biography of one of the most beloved (and polarizing!) figures of the 20th century AND as a means to learn more about the challenges we continue to face in creating a just society. (Get a copy [here](#).)

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

*"Love is a net where hearts  
are caught like fish."*

~ Sufi Wisdom

## A COMPETITION FOR LOVE

"A Hindu poet said: 'The desire to love brought me to earth, and the same desire to see the beloved I am taking with me to heaven.'

Wouldn't it be a beautiful world if just 10 percent of the people who believe in the power of love would compete with one another to see who could do the most good for the most people? So many of us enjoy taking part in competitions, why not hold a competition of love instead of one that leads to jealousy and envy? If we continue to think and live as if we belong only to different cultures and different religions, with separate missions and goals, we will always be in self-defeating competition with each other.

Once we realize we are all members of humanity, we will want to compete in the spirit of love.

In a competition of love we would not be running against one another, but with one another. We would be trying to gain victory for all humanity. If I am a faster runner than you, you may feel bad seeing me pass you in the race, but if you know that we are both racing to make our world better, you will feel good knowing that we are all racing toward a common goal, a mutual reward.

In a competition of love we'll all share in the victory, no matter who comes in first.

A heart enlightened by love is more precious than all of the diamonds and gold in the world."

That's from the very first chapter of the book.

Yes, a memoir by one of the greatest boxers of all time begins with an ode to LOVE.

As I read that passage, I thought of a few of my favorite Stoic philosophers: [Epictetus](#) (who liked to use boxing metaphors) and his teacher, [Musonius Rufus](#) (who tells us we need to compete in love) and the student of their students, [Marcus Aurelius](#) (who strived to embody this wisdom).

You may find it surprising that a book by a boxer would begin with a chapter on love. I certainly found it surprising that my all-time favorite passage on love comes from a Stoic philosopher—following almost exactly the same approach as Ali.

Here's how Musonius Rufus puts it in his *Lectures and Sayings*: "In marriage, there must be, above all, companionship and care of husband and wife for each other, both in sickness and in health and on every occasion. Each party entering into a marriage desires this, after all, just as they desire children. When this mutual care is complete and those who live together provide it to each other completely, each competes to surpass the other in giving such care. Such a marriage is admirable and deserves emulation; such a partnership is beautiful."

As we've discussed, Musonius Rufus taught Epictetus who then taught the guys who taught Marcus Aurelius. As we've also discussed, Epictetus loved to use the metaphor of a boxer to make one of the most important points of his (and our shared) philosophy.

As he tells us: "But what is philosophy? Doesn't it simply mean preparing ourselves for what may come? Don't you understand that really amounts to saying that if I would so prepare myself to endure, then let anything happen that will? Otherwise, it would be like the boxer exiting the ring because he took some punches. Actually, you can leave the ring without consequence, but what advantage would come from abandoning the pursuit of wisdom? So, what should each of us say to every trial we face? This is what I've trained for, for this my discipline!"

*"At night when I go to bed,  
I ask myself, 'If I don't  
wake up tomorrow, would  
I be proud of how I lived  
today?' With that question  
in mind, I have tried to do as  
many good deeds as I can,  
whether it is standing up for  
my faith, signing an autograph,  
or simply shaking a person's  
hand. I'm just trying to make  
people happy and get into  
heaven."*

~ Muhammad Ali

Then there's Aurelius. In his *Meditations*, he tells us: "Let your one delight and refreshment be to pass from one service to the community to another, with God ever in mind."

*" Success is not achieved by winning all the time. Real success comes when we rise after we fall. I am grateful for all my victories, but I am especially grateful for my losses, because they only made me work harder."*

~ Muhammad Ali

Here's to entering the ultimate race (and "boxing" ring!) as we encourage one another to live with more and more love every step of the way!

## BLACK SUPERHEROES

"One Halloween, a little Black girl was trick-or-treating around the neighborhood, dressed up in a superhero costume, but her face was painted white. When I asked her why, she said that her sister told her that there was no such thing as a Black superhero. She was right. When I turned on the television, everyone was always White. Superman was White, Santa Claus was White. They even made Tarzan, the king of the jungle in Africa, White. I noticed that Miss America was always White, and the president living in the White House was White, too. Nothing good reflected our image. At that early age, I could see that something was very wrong. I didn't understand it. I thought that my skin was beautiful, I was proud of the color of my complexion. But everything black was considered bad, and undesirable. Like black cats bring bad luck. Devils' food cake was the dark cake, and angel food cake was the white cake. These may have been subtle messages, but the effects were profound. Every day these messages shaped the images that I and other nonwhite children had of ourselves. I didn't know how, but I knew that I was going to help my people. Somehow, I was going to make a difference in the world. The more injustice I saw, the stronger my feelings grew. It made me feel that I was here for a reason."

That's from one of the early chapters called "Black Is Beautiful."

It's passages like that (and a couple more we'll chat about in a moment) that open my eyes as a White man to just how different (and privileged) my experience of life has been.

We scratched the surface of the challenge of seeing that reality in our Notes on [White Fragility](#).

Over the span of a few days last week, I read this book and Eric Thomas's [You Owe You](#) and another memoir by [Kareem Abdul-Jabbar](#) called *Coach Wooden and Me*. As I read each book, I realized just how powerful these biographies are as a vehicle for White men like me to open our eyes to just how radically different our life experiences have been.

I HIGHLY recommend reading those and other autobiographies by Black men and women as a vehicle to expand your awareness—while getting inspired by seeing Heroic greatness in action.

Now...

Let's talk about the PURPOSE the young Cassius Clay (we'll talk about why he changed his name in a moment) felt when he saw and experienced the injustice in the world.

Later in the book, there's a chapter called "My Fighting Had a Purpose."

In that chapter, Ali tells us: *"When you saw me in the boxing ring fighting, it wasn't just so I could beat my opponent. My fighting had a purpose. I had to be successful in order to get people to listen to the things I had to say.*

*I was fighting to win the world heavyweight title so I could go out in the streets and speak my mind. I wanted to go to the people, where unemployment, drugs, and poverty were part of everyday life. I wanted to be a champion who was accessible to everyone. I hoped to inspire others to take control of their lives and to live with pride and self-determination. I thought perhaps if they saw that I was living my life the way I chose to live it—without fear and with determination—they might dare to take the risks that could set them free."*

Remember: The Hero's secret weapon is love.

For what purpose are YOU fighting life's battles?

Connect to that deeper purpose. Forge the strength for two. Give us all you've got.

TODAY.

*" When we devote all of our actions to a spiritual goal, everything we do becomes a prayer."*

~ Muhammad Ali

*"Every man wants to believe in himself. And every man wants to be fearless. We become heroes when we stand up for what we believe in."*

~ Muhammad Ali

## FIGHT THE FEAR

"For a while I was serious about not going to Italy for the Olympics, and then I thought about what my father said, 'Always confront the things you fear.' I realized that we are only brave when we have something to lose and we still try. We can't be brave without fear.

I realized that this was one of those important moments when I would have to make a choice. There are little choices we make every day that set the standard for the rest of our lives. But this didn't seem like a little choice to me, and I knew it would have a great impact on my life. If I didn't get on that plane, I couldn't win the gold medal. If I had not faced that fear and gone on to win the gold medal at the Olympics, I might not have become the heavyweight champion of the world. If I let fear stand in my way, I would never have accomplished anything important in my life.

Having made the decision, I was soon on my way to Italy for the 1960 Olympic Games."

The great Muhammad Ali almost didn't make it the 1960 Olympics.

You know what he was afraid of?

He was afraid of flying.

Yet...

He mustered the courage to board the plane and fulfill his destiny.

And...

Of course, he chose to act in the presence of fear over and over and over again in his life.

How about YOU? Have you ever \*almost\* let fear stop you from doing something that became one of the most defining moments of your life? (I, of course, certainly have.)

Even more importantly...

Are you CURRENTLY letting fear stop you from doing what you need to do?

KNOW that your *infinite* potential exists on the other side of your comfort zone as you say, "BRING IT ON!" and give us all you've got.

P.S. I recently watched a great documentary on another great Black man who was a contemporary of Ali called [Bill Russell: Legend](#). I Highly recommend it for both the Heroic inspiration and the cultural education.

As we discuss in [Overachievement](#), Russell was so nervous before every basketball game he played that he threw up. Then he went out and dominated. Remember: Courage isn't the ABSENCE of fear. It's the willingness to ACT IN THE PRESENCE OF FEAR.

P.P.S. Check out our Notes on a memoir by another all-time great fighter: George St-Pierre's [The Way of the Fight](#). It's basically a treatise on his relationship to fear. While you're at it, check out our Notes on Ronda Rousey's [My Fight Your Fight](#) for her perspective on the subject.

## A GOLD MEDAL IN 1960

"I had won the gold medal but I still couldn't eat in the restaurant in my hometown, the town where they all knew my name, where I was born in General Hospital only a few blocks away. I couldn't eat in the town where I was raised, where I went to church and led a Christian life. I still couldn't eat in a restaurant in the town where I went to school and helped the nuns clean the school. Now I had won the gold medal.

But it didn't mean anything, because I didn't have the right color skin.

*"The man who views the world at fifty the same as he did when he was twenty has wasted thirty years of his life."*

~ Muhammad Ali

*"I conquered the world and it didn't bring me true happiness. The only true happiness comes from honoring God and treating people right."*

~ Muhammad Ali

Ronnie wanted me to call one of the millionaires from my sponsoring group and tell them what happened, and I almost did, but more than anything, I wanted that medal to mean that I was my own man and would be respected and treated like any other human being. Then I realized that even if it had been my 'Key to the City,' if it could get only me into the 'White only' place, then what good was it? What about other Black people?

Later I realized that it was part of God's plan for me that they wouldn't serve me that day. Before I was kicked out of the restaurant, I was thinking what the medal could do for me. The more I thought about it, the more I began to see that if that medal didn't mean equality for all, it didn't mean anything at all.

What I remember most about 1960 was the first time I took my gold medal off. From that moment on, I have never placed great value on material things. What really matters is how you feel about yourself. If I had kept that medal I would have lost my pride.

Over the years I have told some people I had lost it, but no one ever found it. That's because I lost it on purpose. The world should know the truth—it's somewhere at the bottom of the Ohio River."

It's 1960. You're 18 years old.

Imagine training relentlessly to qualify and then go to the Olympics. You win the Gold medal.

You're incredibly proud of yourself and the fact that you just represented your country well.

You come home to Louisville, Kentucky.

And...

**YOU CAN'T EVEN EAT AT THE RESTAURANT IN YOUR HOMETOWN.**

As a White man, I can't even imagine that experience. That's literally crazy.

Yet...

That's exactly the world Muhammad Ali and millions of other Black men and women lived in as recently as the 1960's. And as insane as that reality was, go back just a few more generations and those very same men and women and children were enslaved. Gah.

So...

What would YOU do in that situation?

The young Cassius Clay threw his gold medal into the river and fiercely committed to doing something about the injustice on behalf of his people.

Then, a few years later, he threw away his name and became Muhammad Ali.

P.S. Ali tells us about why he changed his name. The short story is because he was named after his ancestors' slave master. Did you know the last name of slaves would CHANGE when they were bought and sold? (Again, it's impossible for me to even imagine that.)

He tells us that "Elijah Muhammad later gave me the name Muhammad Ali. Muhammad means 'worthy of all praises,' and Ali means 'most high.'"

btw: Check out the Netflix documentary [Blood Brothers: Malcolm X & Muhammad Ali](#) for another powerful perspective of his complex life and times.

P.P.S. A couple weekends ago, Emerson and I had an incredible just-the-boys trip to the Texas State Chess Championships. We dominated our pre-match protocol—eating, moving, sleeping, breathing, and focusing our minds like professional optimizers.

He wound up winning the state championships for his JV division.

*"True success is reaching our potential without compromising our values."*

~ Muhammad Ali

Of course, I was proud of him. And... As I looked around and saw how many of the kids and their families were clearly struggling with their weight and their confidence and their overall well-being, my heart was broken.

What difference does it make if MY kid could compete at a high level in every area of his life if THESE kids didn't have anywhere near the same resources and advantages that he had?

Then I deepened my resolve to do everything in my power to help as many kids and their families as we can.

*"All my life, if I wanted to do something, I studied those who were good at it; then I memorized what I learned, and believed that I could do it, too. Then I went out and did it."*

~ Muhammad Ali

## THE WILL MUST BE STRONGER THAN THE SKILL

"Champions aren't made in gyms. Champions are made from something deep inside—a desire, a dream, and a vision. They have to have the skill and the will. But the will must be stronger than the skill.

When I was boxing I would set a goal for myself to demonstrate that I could do what other people had done, and to prove to myself that anything was possible when I set a goal and then worked to achieve it. We create our own realities according to our thoughts and beliefs. The critics who told me what I couldn't do didn't know as well as I what I was capable of.

Everyone wins and everyone loses every now and again. If we don't experience a loss we would never know what we are capable of. The important thing to remember is: You don't really lose when you fight for what you believe in. You lose when you fail to fight for what you care about."

That's from a chapter called "Champions to Come."

Right after that he tells us: *"I'm going to share a little secret with you. Running has always been the source of my stamina. Early in my career I learned to run until I was tired, then run even more after that. But all the running I did before the fatigue and pain was just the introduction to my workout. The real conditioning began when the pain set in. That was when it was time to start pushing. That was when I would count every mile as extra strength and stamina.*

*What counts in the ring is what you do after you're exhausted. The same is true of life.*

*Outrun the people who quit when they feel discomfort, outrun the people who stop because of despair, outrun the people who are delayed because of prejudice, outrun the people who surrender to failure, and outrun the opponent who loses sight of the goal. Because if you want to win, the will can never retire, the race can never stop, and faith can never weaken."*

To which I say: Amen.

And... LET'S GO, HERO!

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

## About the Author of This Note

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Brian Johnson is the Founder + CEO of Heroic. He's spent half of the last 25 years as a Founder/CEO and the other half as a Philosopher. Brian loves integrating ancient wisdom and modern science to help YOU become the best, most heroic version of yourself so we can create a world in which 51% of humanity is flourishing by 2051. Learn more at [heroic.us](http://heroic.us).

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