

THE BIG IDEAS

Fierce Ambition

Of the heroic variety. (How's yours?)

"I Must Die or Be Better."

- Lincoln

Lincoln's Growth Mindset

How do you think about failure?

Acquiring Virtue

Roosevelt, Aristotle and W. James.

Stress

Find ways to relieve it.

Leadership

In Turbulent Times

BY DORIS KEARNS GOODWIN · SIMON & SCHUSTER © 2018 · 496 PAGES

"Four case studies will reveal these vastly different men in action during defining events of their times and presidencies. These four extended examples show how their leadership fit the historical moment as a key fits a lock. No key is exactly the same; each has a different line of ridges and notches along its blade. While there is neither a master key to leadership nor a common lock of historical circumstance, we can detect a certain family resemblance of leadership traits as we trace the alignment of leadership capacity within its historical context. ...

It is my hope that these stories of leadership in times of fracture and fear will prove instructive and reassuring. These men set a standard and a bar for all of us. Just as they learned from one another, so we can learn from them. And from them gain a better perspective on the discord of our times. For leadership does not exist in a void. Leadership is a two-way street. 'I have only been an instrument,' Lincoln insisted, with both accuracy and modesty, 'the antislavery people of the country and the army have done it all.' The progressive movement helped pave the way for Theodore Roosevelt's 'Square Deal,' much as the civil rights movement provided the fuel to ignite the righteous and pragmatic activism that enabled the Great Society. And no one communicated with people and heard voices more clearly than Franklin Roosevelt. He absorbed their stories, listened carefully, and for a generation held a nonstop conversation with the people.

'With public sentiment, nothing can fail,' Abraham Lincoln said, 'without it nothing can succeed.' Such a leader is inseparably linked to the people. Such leadership is a mirror in which the people see their collective reflection."

~ Doris Kearns Goodwin from *Leadership*

"While the nature of the era a leader chances to occupy profoundly influences the nature of the leadership opportunity, the leader must be ready when that opportunity presents itself."

~ Doris Kearns Goodwin

I received this book as a gift from Cal Newport. It's phenomenal.

Doris Kearns Goodwin has been studying presidential history and leadership for five decades since she first became a professor at Harvard. She won the Pulitzer Prize for *No Ordinary Time: Franklin & Eleanor Roosevelt: The Home Front in World War II*. Her bestseller *Team of Rivals* was the basis for Steven Spielberg's Academy Award-winning film *Lincoln*.

In this book, she walks us through four case studies in leadership: Abraham Lincoln, Theodore Roosevelt, Franklin D. Roosevelt, and Lyndon B. Johnson.

The book has three parts:

- Part I - Ambition and the Recognition of Leadership (in which we meet our young leaders, and witness their FIERCE ambition as they discover their leadership abilities);
- Part II - Adversity and Growth (in which we meet our young leaders in crisis and navigating crucible moments to forge their character and strength);

- Part III - The Leader and the Times: How They Led (in which we see their leadership in turbulent times and learn the lessons we can apply to our lives today).

"I have often thought, American philosopher William James wrote of the mysterious formation of identity, 'that the best way to define a man's character would be to seek out the particular mental or moral attitude in which, when it came upon him, he felt himself most deeply and intensely alive and active. At such moments, there is a voice inside which speaks and says, 'This is the real me!'"

~ Doris Kearns Goodwin

If you enjoy studying leadership like I do, I think you'll love this book as much as I did. Get a copy of the book [here](#) and [cruise on over here](#) to check out Leadership 101 and our collection of Notes on other great leadership books.

Of course, it's packed with (biographically inspired) Big Ideas and I'm excited to share some of my favorites so let's jump straight in!

FIERCE AMBITION

"No single path carried them to the pinnacle of political leadership. Theodore Roosevelt and Franklin Roosevelt were born to extraordinary privilege and wealth. Abraham Lincoln endured relentless poverty. Lyndon Johnson experienced sporadic hard times. They differed widely in temperament, appearance, and physical ability. They were endowed with a divergent range of qualities often ascribed to leadership—intelligence, energy, empathy, verbal and written gifts, and skills in dealing with people. They were united, however, by a fierce ambition, an inordinate drive to succeed. With perseverance and hard work, they all essentially made themselves leaders by enhancing and developing the qualities they were given."

That passage is from the Foreword. It might have jumped out and high-fived me.

In fact, when I read that, a chorus of angels began to sing. :)

Abraham Lincoln. Theodore Roosevelt. Franklin D. Roosevelt. Lyndon B. Johnson.

Those four towering individuals differed in many ways.

But what they all shared was a FIERCE AMBITION.

As in (I repeat): a FIERCE AMBITION.

Goodwin describes Lincoln's ambition as "ferocious." And tells us that his "ambition was as central to his make-up as his backbone."

She also tells us that it wasn't just about him. She says that his ambition "was, almost from the start, two-fold. It was not simply for himself; it was for the people he hoped to lead. He wanted to distinguish himself in their eyes. The sense of community was central to the master dream of his life—the desire to accomplish deeds that would gain the lasting respect of his fellow men."

Once again: Fierce ambition. Plus love.

That sounds like HEROICALLY FIERCE AMBITION.

As we discussed in our [+1 on Ambition and Your Routines](#), I've had some ambivalence about my ambition. Passages like that help me let go of that ambivalence and channel all my energy into heroic valence.

How about you?

What are you FIERCELY committed to making happen in the world?

Let's stoke that fire. And get to work.

"I MUST DIE OR BE BETTER" - LINCOLN

"What fired in Lincoln this furious and fertile time of self-improvement? The answer lay in his readiness to gaze in the mirror and soberly scrutinize himself. Taking stock, he found himself wanting. From the beginning, young Lincoln aspired to nothing less than to inscribe his name into the book of communal memory. To fulfill what he believed to be his destiny, a different kind of sustained effort and discipline was required, a willingness to confront weakness and

"A man watches his pear-tree day after day, impatient for the ripening of the fruit. Let him attempt to force the process, and he may spoil both fruit and tree. But let him patiently wait, and the ripe pear at length falls into his lap!"

~ Abraham Lincoln

" Any man who has been successful, [Theodore] Roosevelt repeatedly said, has leapt at opportunities chance provides."

~ Doris Kearns Goodwin

*" Worried that Teedie [T. Roosevelt], like [his mother] Mittie, was becoming an invalid, Thee took his son aside: ' Theodore, you have the mind but not the body, and without the help of the body the mind cannot go as far as it should. You must *make* your body. It is hard drudgery to make one's body, but I know you will do it.' Teedie responded enthusiastically, promising his father: ' I'll make my body.'"*

~ Doris Kearns Goodwin

imperfection, reflect upon failure, and examine the kind of leader he wanted to be.

The diligence and studiousness he exhibited during this period of introspection would have been remarkable in a young student; in a man of forty, it was astounding."

That's from page 106.

I actually STARTED reading the book on this page because, in his thoughtful gift note, Cal told me that the wisdom on that particular page made him think of me and of our recent chats.

That passage is from Part II of the book in which we learn about all the EXTRAORDINARY (!) challenges our heroes faced in their quests to fulfill their destinies.

Lincoln's was dramatic. He was so depressed after letting down his constituents in Illinois after his tenure as a state legislator that his friends feared for his life and removed every sharp object from his house. :o

Fierce ambition. Equally huge failure.

Then what?

Then our hero doesn't feel like a hero. He feels terrible.

Then what?

Then he (or she) gets to work.

As we've discussed countless times, this isn't supposed to be easy. (And, thinking that it should be easy is probably the biggest challenge we face.)

Echo: We're not sidestepping lizards en route to our destiny. We're battling dragons.

As such, building our heroic strength for two demands a FIERCE commitment to self-improvement (Optimizing!!) to match that fierce ambition to make a difference.

As Lincoln said, "I must die or be better."

How about YOU?

How's your fierce ambition?

And...

How's your strength-building going?

Here's to having the audacity to dream big and the heroic humility and self-mastery to do the work we need to do so we can most fully give ourselves to the world.

Starting Today. Continuing forever.

P.S. [Self-efficacy 101 style](#), this is one of the reasons reading biographies of great humans is such a wise thing to do—we gain strength in other people's examples!!

LINCOLN'S GROWTH MINDSET

"While uncertain about his prospects in this first election, Lincoln made it clear that failure did not intimidate him. Should he lose, he had said when declaring his intention to run, he had been 'too familiar with disappointments to be very much chagrined.' And yet, he forewarned, only after being defeated 'some 5 or 6 times' would he deem it 'a disgrace' and be certain 'never to try it again.' So, along with the uncertainty of whether his ambition would be realized was the promise of resilience."

Lincoln and both Roosevelts are case studies in the growth mindset. Except, of course, at times when they weren't! (Hah!) When they were on? Failure was just an opportunity to get better.

" As ever, immediately beneath the skin of [FDR's] vision lay the sinew and bone of pragmatic action."

~ Doris Kearns Goodwin

"When Roosevelt first described the plan to the cabinet, Perkins considered it a 'pipedream.' How would a quarter of a million young men be recruited? How would they be transported to the forests, clothed, fed, and housed? Who would design and supervise the work projects? How could the program possibly be up and running in three months' time? The answers to all such questions lay in Roosevelt's leadership style: Establish a clear purpose; challenge the team to work out details; traverse conventional departmental boundaries; set large short-term and long-term targets; create tangible success to generate accelerated growth and momentum."

~ Doris Kearns Goodwin

"Yet, however dissimilar their upbringings, books became for both Lincoln and [Theodore] Roosevelt 'the greatest of companions.' Every day for the rest of their lives, both men set aside time for reading, snatching moments while waiting for meals, between visitors, or lying in bed before sleep."

~ Doris Kearns Goodwin

As I read that, I was reminded of Ralph Waldo Emerson's wisdom. Emerson was a contemporary of Lincoln. In fact, he delivered a moving eulogy included in his collected works.

In [Self-Reliance](#), he captures the spirit of a Lincoln-like hero when he tells us: "If our young men miscarry in their first enterprises, they lose all heart. If the young merchant fails, men say he is ruined. If the finest genius studies at one of our colleges, and is not installed in an office within one year afterwards in the cities or suburbs of Boston or New York, it seems to his friends and to himself that he is right in being disheartened, and in complaining the rest of his life. A sturdy lad from New Hampshire or Vermont, who in turn tries all the professions, who teams it, farms it, peddles, keeps a school, preaches, edits a newspaper, goes to Congress, buys a township, and so forth, in successive years, and always, like a cat, falls on his feet, is worth a hundred of these city dolls. He walks abreast with his days, and feels no shame in not 'studying a profession,' for he does not postpone his life, but lives already. He has not one chance, but a hundred chances. Let a Stoic open the resources of man, and tell men they are not leaning willows, but can and must detach themselves; that with the exercise of self-trust, new powers shall appear; that a man is the word made flesh, born to shed healing to the nations, that he should be ashamed of our compassion, and that the moment he acts from himself, tossing the laws, the books, idolatries, and customs out of the window, we pity him no more, but thank and revere him,—and that teacher shall restore the life of man to splendor, and make his name dear to all history."

I'm also reminded of Seth Godin's wisdom from [The Icarus Deception](#) where he tells us that the mark of the deepest sense confidence is the willingness to go all in AND be willing to say, "This might not work."

And, finally, the last line there about "the promise of resilience" reminds me of [Grit](#). Remember what Angela Duckworth describes as the four key aspects of Grit we can Optimize? 1. Passion + 2. Practice + 3. Purpose + 4. Hope.

Fierce ambition + grit? That's a winning formula.

How many times are YOU willing to fail?

ACQUIRING VIRTUE

"[Theodore] Roosevelt maintained that empathy, like courage, could be acquired over time. 'A man who conscientiously endeavors to throw in his lot with those about him, to make his interest theirs, to put himself in a position where he and they have a common object, will at first feel a little self-conscious, will realize too plainly his aims. But with exercise this will pass off. He will speedily find that the fellow-feeling which at first he had to stimulate was really existent, though latent, and is capable of a very healthy growth.' Indeed, he argued that a 'very large part of the rancor of political and social strife' springs from the fact that different classes or sections 'are so cut off from each other that neither appreciates the other's passions, prejudices, and, indeed, point of view.'

By his third term in the Assembly, Roosevelt had begun to soften his abrasive self-righteousness. Working with Democrats, whom he had previously labeled as 'rotten,' he brought the two parties together to pass civil service reform and a host of bills to benefit the city of New York. He had taken his weaknesses, his physical liabilities, his fears, and the brash and self-centered aspects of his leadership style, and had carefully worked to overcome them."

Want to Optimize your empathy? Your courage? And any other virtue? Fantastic! Practice it.

Aristotle comes to mind. In his [Ethics](#), he tells us: "Moral virtues, like crafts, are acquired by practice and habituation."

William James told us: "If you want a quality, act as if you already have it."

"To better illustrate the situation, he [FDR] reverted to a sports analogy. He likened himself to the quarterback of a football team who 'has a general plan of game in mind.' He knew what his first play was going to be but could not tell you the play after that 'until the next play is run off. If the play makes ten yards, the succeeding play will be different from what it would have been if they had been thrown for a loss."

~ Doris Kearns Goodwin

"As [Theodore] Roosevelt figured out details of his radical plan, he pressed ahead on two less extreme fronts. 'It is never well to take drastic action,' he liked to say, 'if the result can be achieved with equal efficiency in less drastic fashion."

~ Doris Kearns Goodwin

Richard Wiseman wrote a whole book on this idea—establishing the scientific validity of what he calls [The As If Principle](#) (which also happens to be the name of his book).

As Wiseman says: *"The notion of behavior causing emotion suggests that people should be able to create any feeling they desire simply by acting as if they are experiencing that emotion. Or as James famously put it, 'If you want a quality, act as if you already have it.' I refer to this simple but powerful proposition as the As If principle.*

This aspect of James's theory energized him more than any other. In one public talk, he described the potential power of the idea as 'bottled lightning' and enthusiastically noted, 'The sovereign voluntary path to cheerfulness . . . is to sit up cheerfully, to look round cheerfully, and to act and speak as if cheerfulness were already there. . . . To wrestle with a bad feeling only pins our attention on it, and keeps it still fastened in the mind.'"

So...

What qualities do YOU want more of in your life?

Get clear. Go practice them. Act like the kind of person who *already* has those qualities!

FIND WAYS TO RELIEVE STRESS

"I find it pleasant when I have been hard at work at some big state question," Roosevelt told a friend, "to entirely change the current of my thoughts." Though possessed of no surpassing athletic gifts, robust activity was his way of keeping mental balance. His letters abound with accounts of raucous tennis matches, strenuous hikes in the wooded cliffs of Rock Creek Park, the numerous efforts to scour up sparring partners to box with him. He regaled his children with comic tales of being 'thrown about' by two Japanese wrestlers: 'I am not the age or build one would think to be whirled lightly over an opponent's head and batted down on a mattress without damage but they are so skillful that I've not been hurt at all.' Sometimes, he relished jousting with his helmeted and armored friends in a game called Singlestick.

Deprived of such zany exertions by his infected leg, Roosevelt turned with a vengeance to his most reliable recreation—books. From his earliest days, young Roosevelt had found in literature not only diversion but an escape into the lives of others, allowing him to embark vicariously on thrilling adventures, to breathe free, and accomplish great deeds. It is hardly an exaggeration to say that books were the chief building blocks of his identity.

So now, confined to his wheelchair, he appealed to the librarian of Congress, Herbert Putnam, for 'some books that would appeal to my queer taste'—histories of Poland or the early Mediterranean races. Two days later, fully gratified, he wrote to Putnam. 'I owe you much! You sent me exactly the books I wished. I am now reveling in Maspero and occasionally make a deviation into Sergis' theories about the Mediterranean races. . . . It has been such a delight to drop everything useful—everything that referred to my duty—everything, for instance, relating to the coal strike . . . and to spend an afternoon in reading about the relations between Assyria and Egypt; which could not possibly do me any good and in which I reveled accordingly."

The third part of the book features case studies in extraordinary leadership. Each section includes a number of specific practices. That passage is from a section called "Crisis Management" in which we learn how Teddy Roosevelt approached a coal strike.

The lesson?

"Find ways to relieve stress."

Teddy's preferred ways to relieve stress? Strenuous physical activity. Alas, during the strike he was confined to a wheelchair after a tragic trolley accident that killed his favorite secret service agent and nearly killed him.

" While their personal stories came to very different ends, they were all looking beyond their own lives, hopeful that their achievements had shaped and enlarged the future. The fame they craved, the recognition they sought, bears little resemblance to today's cult of celebrity. For these leaders, the final measure of their achievements would be realized by their admittance to an enduring place in communal memory."

~ Doris Kearns Goodwin

So... He did some reading.

The reading part reminds me of this gem from Joseph Campbell's [Pathways to Bliss](#) that we've come back to a number of times: "For myself, well, Alan Watts once asked me what spiritual practice I followed. I told him, 'I underline books.' It's all in how you approach it."

The general theme of finding ways to relieve stress reminds me of Cal Newport's wisdom from [Digital Minimalism](#) in which he tells us just how important it is to swap out "passive leisure" for "active leisure."

Cal tells us: "The state I'm helping you escape is one in which passive interaction with your screens is your primary leisure. I want you to replace this with a state where your leisure time is now filled with better pursuits, many of which will exist primarily in the physical world. In this new state, digital technology is still present, but now subordinated to a support role: helping you to set up or maintain your leisure activities, but not acting as the primary source of leisure themselves. Spending an hour browsing funny YouTube clips might sap your vitality, while—and I'm speaking from recent experience here—using YouTube to teach yourself how to replace a motor in a bathroom ventilation fan can provide the foundation for a satisfying afternoon of tinkering."

How about YOU? How do you relieve your stress?

Know that the more intense the challenge, the more important we master our protocol and create nice, healthy ON and OFF oscillating rhythms!

Let's unplug from the screens. And nourish our souls.

TODAY!

B

Brian Johnson,
Heroic Philosopher CEO

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[On Becoming a Leader](#)

[The Leadership Challenge](#)

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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.