

THE BIG IDEAS

The Ten Lessons

Of SEAL training applied to life.

Lesson #1

Make your bed!

Life's Not Fair

Drive on!

Sharks + Bullies

Stand your ground.

Hope =

Most powerful force in the universe.

Never Quit

Don't ring the bell.

Make Your Bed

Little Things That Can Change Your Life... And Maybe the World

BY ADMIRAL WILLIAM H. MCRAVEN · GRAND CENTRAL PUBLISHING © 2017 · 144 PAGES

"On May 17, 2014, I was honored to give the commencement speech for the graduating class from the University of Texas at Austin. Even though the university was my alma mater, I was concerned that a military officer, whose career had been defined by war, might not find a welcoming audience among college students. But to my great surprise, the graduating class embraced the speech. The ten lessons I learned from Navy SEAL training, which were the basis for my remarks, seemed to have a universal appeal. They were simple lessons that deal with overcoming the trials of SEAL training, but the ten lessons were equally important in dealing with the challenges of life—no matter who you are. Over the past three years, I have been stopped on the street by great folks telling me their own stories: How they didn't back down from sharks, how they didn't ring the bell, or how making their bed every morning helped them through tough times. They all wanted to know more about how the ten lessons shaped my life and about the people who inspired me during my career. This small book is an attempt to do so. Each chapter gives a little more context to the individual lessons and also adds a short story about some of the people who inspired me with their discipline, their perseverance, their honor, and their courage. I hope you enjoy the book!"

~ Admiral William H. McRaven from *Make Your Bed*

Admiral William H. McRaven is a Retired U.S. Navy SEAL who served for thirty-seven years and commanded at every level.

As a Four-Star Admiral, his final assignment was as Commander of all U.S. Special Operations Forces. (During this time, he oversaw the covert mission that killed Osama bin Laden.)

After retiring from the Navy, he served as the Chancellor of the University of Texas System from 2015 to 2018.

In 2014, he gave the commencement address to the graduates of the University of Texas at Austin. Millions of people wound up watching his speech on ten lessons he learned from his Navy SEAL training. (You can watch it on YouTube [here](#).)

This book takes a deeper look at those ten lessons. It's a super-quick read—packed with simple, yet profound wisdom along with moving stories of moral exemplars. As per the sub-title: "Little Things That Can Change Your Life... And Maybe the World." Joining 5,000+ 5-star reviewers on Amazon, I HIGHLY recommend it. (Get a copy [here](#).)

I have a deep level of respect for and admiration of Navy SEALs. As I was reading this book I thought of some of the other Notes we've created on books written by SEALs, including: Mark Divine's [The Way of the SEAL](#), [Unbeatable Mind](#) plus [Staring Down the Wolf](#)—where he uses McRaven as an exemplar for one of his stories); Jocko Willink and Leif Babin's [Extreme Ownership](#) (plus Jocko's [Discipline Equals Freedom](#)); David Goggins' [Can't Hurt Me](#); and Alden Mills' [Be Unstoppable](#) and [Unstoppable Teams](#).

"If you want to change the world, start off by making your bed."

~ Admiral William H. McRaven

I also thought of Vice-Admiral James Stockdale's [*Courage Under Fire*](#)—which is another super-short yet remarkably wise book. (Plus: Notes on [*Thoughts of a Philosophical Fighter Pilot*](#).)

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

THE TEN LESSONS

"If you want to change the world... find someone to help you paddle."

~ Admiral William H. McRaven

"Remember... start each day with a task completed. Find someone to help you through life. Respect everyone. Know that life is not fair and that you will fail often. But if you take some risks, step up when times are toughest, face down the bullies, lift up the downtrodden, and never, ever give up—if you do these things, then you can change your life for the better... and maybe the world!"

Those are actually the last words of the book. But, they're the perfect summary of the book's wisdom and the perfect place for us to start.

The book features ten lessons. Each gets its own chapter. Here they are:

1. *Start Your Day with a Task Completed*
2. *You Can't Do it Alone*
3. *Only the Size of Your Heart Matters*
4. *Life's Not Fair—Drive On!*
5. *Failure Can Make You Stronger*
6. *You Must Dare Greatly*
7. *Stand Up to the Bullies*
8. *Rise to the Occasion*
9. *Give People Hope*
10. *Never, Ever Quit!*

Let's take a quick look at some of my favorite Ideas and see how we can apply some of that wisdom to our lives TODAY!

MAKE YOUR BED!

"In December 2003, U.S. forces captured Saddam Hussein. He was held in confinement during which time we kept him in a small room. He also slept on an Army cot, but with the luxury of sheets and a blanket. Once a day I would visit Saddam to ensure my soldiers were properly caring for him. I noticed, with some sense of amusement, that Saddam did not make his bed. The covers were always crumpled at the foot of his cot and he rarely seemed inclined to straighten them.

During the ensuing ten years, I had the honor of working with some of the finest men and women this nation has ever produced—from generals to privates, from admirals to seamen recruits, from ambassadors to clerk typists. The Americans who deployed overseas in support of the war effort came willingly, sacrificing much to protect this great nation.

They all understood that life is hard and that sometimes there is little you can do to affect the outcome of your day. In battle soldiers die, families grieve, your days are long and filled with anxious moments. You search for something that can give you solace, that can motivate you to begin your day, that can be a sense of pride in an oftentimes ugly world. But it is not just combat. It is daily life that needs the same sense of structure. Nothing can replace the strength and comfort of one's faith, but sometimes the simple act of making your bed can give you the lift you need to start your day and provide you with the satisfaction to end it right.

"If you want to change the world... measure a person by the size of their heart."

~ Admiral William H. McRaven

"If you want to change the world... get over being a sugar cookie and keep moving forward."

~ Admiral William H. McRaven

If you want to change your life and maybe the world—start off by making your bed!"

Welcome to chapter #1, tip #1 on how to change your life (and maybe the world):

START YOUR DAY BY MAKING YOUR BED!

Yep.

MAKE YOUR BED. (<- All caps.)

Admiral McRaven is a brilliant story teller.

He kicks the book off with a story about the very first days of his SEAL training when, every morning, his instructor would come in and inspect how he made his bed.

Were the corners tucked in just right? The gray blanket "expertly folded into a rectangle at the foot of the bed" with the pillow "centered at the top of the bed and intersected at a ninety-degree angle with the blanket at the bottom"?

That was the standard. Any deviation and he'd get reprimanded.

Why was doing that right so important?

Because, McRaven tells us: *"It demonstrated my discipline. It showed my attention to detail, and at end of the day it would be a reminder that I had done something well, something to be proud of, no matter how small the task."*

So... How about *you*? Are **YOU** making your bed?

Are you controlling the little controllables in your life that give you a sense of agency and intense trust in yourself that you can handle whatever life throws at you?

It's easy to think the little things don't matter. But, of course, the little things are, at the end of the day, what drives EVERYTHING.

Back to McRaven: *"Making your bed will also reinforce the fact that little things in life matter. If you can't do the little things right, you will never do the big things right."*

So... Let's remember: *"If you want to change your life and maybe the world—start off by making your bed!"*

P.S. As I was reading that, I was also thinking of my 1 + 10 + 100 + 1,000 + 10,000 daily ritual. Starting my day with the 1 sun salutation followed by 10 pull-ups, 100 burpees, 1,000 meters of rowing and 10,000 steps throughout the day makes it nearly impossible to have a series of bad days. There's something about the trust we develop in ourselves that comes from the repetition of the mundane that makes us antifragile. Here's to the little things!!

LIFE'S NOT FAIR—DRIVE ON!

"It is easy to blame your lot in life on some outside force, to stop trying because you believe fate is against you. It is easy to think that where you were raised, how your parents treated you, or what school you went to is all that determines your future. Nothing could be further from the truth. The common people and the great men and women are all defined by how they deal with life's unfairness: Helen Keller, Nelson Mandela, Stephen Hawking, Malala Yousafzai, and—Moki Martin.

Sometimes no matter how hard you try, no matter how good you are, you still end up a sugar cookie. Don't complain. Don't blame it on your misfortune. Stand tall, look to the future, and drive on!"

"If you want to change the world... don't be afraid of The Circus."

~ Admiral William H. McRaven

Welcome to chapter 4: "Life's Not Fair—Drive On!" in which we get introduced to the SEAL version of a sugar cookie.

"If you want to change the world... slide down the obstacle head first."

~ Admiral William H. McRaven

It goes something like this: Run into the pounding surf wearing your boots and gear. Then roll in the sand until every inch of your body is covered in sand. (And, make sure you do THAT well enough to pass inspection!) Then go on with your day enjoying that sugar cookie.

McRaven tells us about a time when he was forced to do a sugar cookie:

"Mr. Mac, do you have any idea why you are a sugar cookie this morning?" Martin said in a very calm but questioning manner.'

"No, Instructor Martin," I dutifully responded.

'Because, Mr. Mac, life isn't fair and the sooner you learn that the better off you will be.'

Imagine that.

You do everything *JUST* right.

Bed's made perfectly. Uniform is nice and crisp. You've rocked all your fundies and executed your business (or energy or relationship) strategy perfectly.

And, even after doing your best... You FAIL.

Then what?

Then we remind ourselves of the fact (!) that life's not fair as we *"stand tall, look to the future, and drive on!"*

P.S. McRaven's instructor in that story was a guy named Moki Martin. He was the quintessential super-fit, perfect specimen of a SEAL. Then he got in an accident while training for a triathlon. Paralyzed from the legs down. *"For the past thirty-five years, Moki has been in a wheelchair. In all those years, I never once heard him complain about his misfortune in life. Never once did I hear him ask, 'Why me?' Never once did he display an ounce of pity for himself."*

SHARKS + BULLIES

"But we both wanted to be SEALs so badly that nothing in the water that night was going to stop us. If we had to fight off the sharks, then we were both prepared to do so. Our goal, which we believed to be honorable and noble, gave us courage, and courage is a remarkable quality. Nothing and nobody can stand in your way. Without it, others will define your path forward. Without it, you are at the mercy of life's temptations. Without courage, men will be ruled by tyrants and despots. Without courage, no great society can flourish. Without courage, the bullies of the world rise up. With it, you can accomplish any goal. With it, you can defy and defeat evil."

That's from chapter #7: "Stand Up to Bullies."

The first story McRaven shares in this chapter is all about the shark-infested waters they were required to swim through at night during SEAL training. The key lesson? Don't back down from the sharks.

As I read this chapter, I thought of McRaven's exemplary demonstration of this principle in our current times—repeatedly standing up to the bully currently running our country.

"If you want to change the world... don't back down from the sharks."

~ Admiral William H. McRaven

At the end of this chapter, he also tells us: *"Bullies are all the same; whether they are in the school yard, in the workplace, or ruling a country through terror. They thrive on fear and intimidation. Bullies gain their strength through the timid and faint of heart. They are like sharks that sense fear in the water. They will circle to see if their prey is struggling. They will probe to see if their victim is weak. If you don't find the courage to stand your ground, they will strike. In life, to achieve your goals, to complete the night swim, you will have to be men and women of great courage. That courage is within all of us. Dig deep, and you will find it in abundance."*

"If you want to change the world... be your very best in the darkest moments."

~ Admiral William H. McRaven

HOPE: THE MOST POWERFUL FORCE IN THE UNIVERSE

"Hope is the most powerful force in the universe. With hope you can inspire nations to greatness. With hope you can raise up the downtrodden. With hope you can ease the pain of unbearable loss. Sometimes all it takes is one person to make a difference.

We will all find ourselves neck deep in mud someday. That is the time to sing loudly, to smile broadly, to lift up those around you and give them hope that tomorrow will be a better day."

That's from the ninth lesson: "Give People Hope."

McRaven tells us about yet another one of the trials aspiring SEALs are put through. This one involved freezing cold mud—up to their necks—that they were required to stay in it overnight.

The instructors told them they could get out early if five of them quit. They were starting to break down and lose hope. Then one guy decided to start singing.

McRaven tells us: "Once again, we had learned an important lesson: the power of one person to inspire those around him, to give them hope. If that one person could sing while neck deep in mud, then so could we. If that one person could endure the freezing cold, then so could we. If that one person could hold on, then so could we."

Hope.

It is, and I quote a modern war hero: "the most powerful force in the universe."

As he says: "If I have learned anything in my time traveling around the world, it is the power of hope. The power of one person, a Washington, Lincoln, King, Mandela, and even a young girl from Pakistan, Malala. One person can change the world by giving people hope."

Back to you.

As we navigate these challenging times in our world and in our lives, let's be the ones giving others hope.

TODAY.

P.S. The lesson-chapter right before this one was all about "Rising to the Occasion" and being your best in the darkest moments. Keep this in mind: "At some point we will all confront a dark moment in life. If not the passing of a loved one, then something else that crushes your spirit and leaves you wondering about your future. In that dark moment, reach deep inside yourself and be your very best."

NEVER QUIT

"He let go of the rope tied to the bell's clapper. 'Ring the bell and you won't have to get up early. Ring the bell and you won't have to do the long runs, the cold swims, or the obstacle course. Ring the bell and you can avoid all this pain.'

Then the instructor glanced down at the asphalt and seemed to break from his prepared monologue. 'But let me tell you something,' he said. 'If you quit, you will regret it for the rest of your life. Quitting never makes anything easier.'

Six months later, there were only thirty-three of us standing at graduation. Some had taken the easy way out. They had quit, and my guess is the instructor was right, they would regret it for the rest of their lives.

Of all the lessons I learned in SEAL training, this was the most important. Never quit. It doesn't sound particularly profound, but life constantly puts you in situations where quitting seems so much easier than continuing on. Where the odds are so stacked against you that giving up seems the rational thing to do."

"If you want to change the world... start singing when you're up to your neck in mud."

~ Admiral William H. McRaven

"If you want to change the world... don't ever, ever ring the bell."

~ Admiral William H. McRaven

When prospective SEALs start their training, they're shown the bell they can ring to quit.

Just ring the bell three times and you're done. Sleep in. Stay warm. Stop the pain.

The tenth and final and most important lesson?

Never quit. Never ring the bell.

As I read that passage, I thought of some parallel wisdom Alden Mills's great book [Be Unstoppable](#). I read that book on my own then read it again with Emerson. (Highly recommend it for you and your kids!) After reading it together, he and I loved saying, "NEGU!!!" together.

NEGU is short for: Never. Ever. Give Up.

[He and his sister would run around yelling: NEGU!!!](#) It was fantastic.

McRaven also tells us: *"Life is full of difficult times. But someone out there always has it worse than you do. If you fill your days with pity, sorrowful of the way you have been treated, bemoaning your lot in life, blaming your circumstances on someone or something else, then life will be long and hard. If, on the other hand, you refuse to give up on your dreams, stand tall and strong against the odds—then life will be what you make of it—and you can make it great. Never, ever, ring the bell!"*

Back to Alden. He tells us: *"A Vietnam veteran SEAL compared SEAL training to the forging of a samurai sword: heat the metal, pound it with a hammer, stick it in cold water, and repeat the process approximately 2,000 times. He said no one can sustain that kind of punishment without first knowing **why** they want to be a SEAL. Knowing why enables the trainee to endure the pounding he endures."*

Here's to knowing our why and enduring the pain of forging ourselves into the best version of ourselves in service to our families, communities, countries and world.

And let's remember to start this whole changing the world business by making our beds.

B

Brian Johnson,
Heroic Philosopher CEO

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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.