
Secrets of Success in School and Life

A roadmap for young people
to find their way...



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Index

Introduction.....	Page 3
Secret #1: Do the Hard Things.....	Page 4
Secret #2: Develop Your Long-Term Vision.....	Page 7
Secret #3: Focus on Your Habits.....	Page 11
Secret #4: Seek out Mentors.....	Page 15
Secret #5: Embrace Responsibility.....	Page 20
Secret #6: Make Learning Your Superpower.....	Page 26
Secret #7: Failure is Not Fatal.....	Page 32
Secret #8: Practice Gratitude.....	Page 39
Final Thoughts.....	Page 45

Introduction

I wish I'd read this book when I was your age.

I wish someone had shown me the path I'm about to show you.

And even though I'm not certain I would have followed all of the guidance I'm about to share with you...

I wish I had the option at least... the option to choose the right path.

The option you have before you now.

Now, if you're NOT interested in becoming a better, stronger, happier, more successful person...

Then put this book down now.

Don't come back to reading until you're ready to be challenged. To be changed.

But if you're even slightly interested in becoming a better (and ultimately the best!) version of yourself, then read on my young friend...

Because you're about to be given a roadmap to find your way in school and in life... and you'll learn how the power of your choices can determine not only your personal destiny, but perhaps also the shape of the world.

Secret #1: Do the Hard Things.

*“Hard choices, Easy Life.
Easy choices, Hard Life.”*

— Jerzy Gregorek, weightlifting champion

It was around 7 years ago when I first read the quote above. It hit me pretty hard.

It should have. Around that time, I was in poor health, struggling in my relationships, and wasn't even making enough money to pay my bills. I was living a hard life.

A hard life as a result of the “easy choices” I had been making for years...

What exactly are the “easy choices”?

You know them well.

When it's between playing video games and doing your homework, the easy choice is to play video games (homework is boring!)....

When it's between eating your favorite junk food or eating something nutritious, the easy choice is to go for the junk food (Hot Cheetos taste so good!)...

When the choice is between watching TikTok videos or exercising, the easy choice is to watch the TikToks (have you seen the one where the kid does impressions of his teachers? Hilarious!)...

I get it. No one WANTS to do homework or eat healthy or exercise. Those are boring, difficult things.

So why would anyone bother making these hard choices?

Here's why:

Because sometimes you have to do things you don't FEEL like doing to get what you really want in life.

Let me explain.

Accomplishing anything meaningful is difficult.

Want to win in athletics?

You have to put in hard work day after day.

Want to be a successful musician?

You have to put in hard work day after day.

Want to get a college degree and have high-paying career options after school?

You guessed it...

You have to put in hard work day after day.

The reason to do the hard things you know you SHOULD do is to get something you really want in the long-term...

But even if you understand why you should do the hard things, it's still is tough to do for two reasons:

1. The worst consequences of making the "easy choices" (video games, junk food, TikTok) are delayed over time... It may not be until you are a broke, unhealthy, college dropout in your 20s or 30s that you realize where your "easy choices", day after day, have led you.

2. The best consequences of making the "hard choices" (homework, healthy eating, exercise) are also delayed over time... Getting fit and healthy can take

months (or years) of consistent effort before you see the results you want. And you won't get that big paycheck until after you finish your degree.

But even though the biggest benefits of making the hard choices are long-term benefits, there are still some short-term benefits to making hard choices as well.

You'll feel better about yourself when you get the "100%" on the test, or get the report card with all A's and B's... Your teachers and parents will be off your back too.

You'll start to see your energy improve when you eat well and exercise...

Along with your mood and general sense of well-being.

So don't dismiss the short-term benefits of making hard choices. They're important to be aware of too.

And next time you have that hard choice in front of you (studying for the test vs. wasting time on social media), make the choice that benefits you the most over the long-term, not the one that gives you pleasure in the moment, but pain down the road...

Your future self will thank you.

Reflection questions:

1. What are the "easy choices" I've been making that could lead to a hard life for my future self?
2. What are the "hard choices" I can make (starting today!) that will benefit me over the long-run?

Secret #2: Develop Your Long-Term Vision

“All self-help boils down to: choose long-term over short-term.”

— Tech Innovator Naval Ravikant

Trying to make the right choices without a long-term vision is difficult.

It's like driving down the road with a windshield covered in mud: it's hard to steer in the right direction if you can't see ahead of you...

And even if you know what you SHOULD be doing (and most of us know deep down, am I right?), it can still be difficult to find the motivation to do the hard things.

That's why you need to develop your long-term vision: to clarify and inspire the hard choices you're going to make.

What does this mean?

Long-term vision means your view of the future. Your future.

You might only rarely think about it...

And it may not feel as real as the present or the past...

But the future is very real...

YOUR future is very real.

And the choices you make today (right now!) are shaping that future...

For better or for worse.

So let's take a few moments to develop the long-term vision you'll need to make the right choices:

Imagine the kind of person you want to be in 10 years:

Who do you want to be?

Where do you want to be?

What do you want to have achieved?

What do you want to be doing?

Who do you want to be around?

See the picture in your mind... make the image as detailed and specific as possible... What do you look like? What are your surroundings like? What have you accomplished? What are you doing? Who are you with?

Take a moment now and let this image settle into your mind.

Take a mental snapshot and save this image in your memory.

There.

Now, what do you have to do for that vision to become a reality?

Do you have to work hard to succeed academically and graduate from school?

Do you have to take care of your health? Your fitness?

Do you have to avoid drug and alcohol abuse (and avoid those who do)?

Do you have to nurture positive, healthy relationships with family and friends?

Making each of the choices above implies not just making ONE choice, but a whole multitude of the right choices over the course of days, months, and years...

You don't just decide once to work hard in school...

You have to decide every day. Every class. Every night you choose to do your homework or study for a test.

You don't just decide to be healthy once.

You choose to be healthy every day by what you eat, how much you sleep, how much you exercise...

Day after day.

In fact, we're making choices every MOMENT of every day.

And every good choice is like a vote for the ideal person we want to become in the future...

Or a vote against that person if our choices don't align with our long-term vision.

So keep that vision of who you want to be in your mind... and remind yourself often of who you want to become...

Especially when it's time to do the hard things you know you should do...

Ask yourself, as frequently as possible:

"Is what I'm choosing to do right now helping me become the person I want to be in the future?"

If the answer to this question is "Yes", then you can feel confident that you're making the right choice.

You're choosing something that will benefit you in the long-term and increase the chances of making your vision of the future a reality...

But if the answer to that question is “No”, then rethink the “easy choice” you’re tempted to make...

Expand your vision and make choices in favor of your future-self...

Because that future-self will soon be you.

Reflection questions:

1. What do you want to have accomplished in your long-term vision of the future?
2. What choices are you making now that could sabotage that vision?
3. What choices can you make now that increase the chances of that vision being a reality?

Secret #3: Focus on Your Habits

"We are what we repeatedly do."

— Aristotle, Greek Philosopher

So you've got a long-term vision of who you want to be in the future...

You've got some idea of the choices you need to make for that vision to become a reality...

(If either of the above statements are untrue for you, reread "Secret #2: Develop Your Long-Term Vision" and do the reflection questions before reading on.)

Are we good? Ok!

Now, you might be saying to yourself:

"That sounds like a lot of hard work... I'm not sure I'm cut out for it..."

Hey, that's all right...

Anyone trying to achieve anything truly meaningful has that thought cross her mind...

It's a thought that still crosses my mind on a daily basis...

No matter what you achieve, you never get completely rid of doubt... or fear.

You just learn to act in the face of it.

That's courage, by the way.

Not the absence of fear, but doing what needs to be done despite it.

So don't let yourself be discouraged...

You can do this. You're going to do this.

But you can only move forward on this journey one step at a time...

So let me teach you one of the steps you can take now that will make the journey a whole lot easier for you:

Focus on your habits.

What is a habit?

A habit is something we do repeatedly. Often automatically.

Before you walked out the door this morning, you found your shoes and put them on.

You didn't even think about it, you just did it.

It's what you've always done, what you always do, what you always will do.

That's a habit.

Someone says "Good morning" to you, without a conscious thought you say "Good morning" back.

That's a habit.

And when something is a habit it takes little effort or thought. You just do it.

Some habits are good (like brushing your teeth every morning and night).

Some habits are bad (like biting your nails or picking your nose in public).

But you can use the power of habits (the good ones!) to make the hard things you need to do a whole lot easier.

Imagine this: instead of wrestling with yourself every evening, deciding whether or not you want to do your homework (no debate here — of course you don't WANT to do it!), choose to make 7:00-9:00 pm homework time every night.

Make a choice now to set that time aside. Use a calendar you have lying around (or make one if you need to!) and schedule that time out.

Choose a spot in your room or wherever you live and make that the homework place. Doesn't matter where it is (although the quieter the better, if possible).

When 7:00 rolls around, go to your homework place and start your homework. No questions asked.

Do it every night for a week.

You don't even have to finish it. Just focus on building the habit.

My guess is that if you start making this your habit, the work will get done...

Do it the next week too... you'll feel momentum start to build...

Because if you focus on building and MAINTAINING the habit, the work gets easier over time.

When I decided a few years ago that I wanted to get fit, I chose to use my "free period" during the school day (I was a schoolteacher at the time) to go to the school gym.

I wasn't worried about the intensity or duration of my workouts, I just focused on showing up at the gym every Monday, Wednesday, and Friday.

I focused on just making it a habit to be there at the appointed time...

And wouldn't you know, I got in the best shape of my life in a matter of months.

You can use the power of habits to get better at pretty much anything...

Want to learn to play an instrument? Practice playing 20 minutes per day... every day.

Want to get better at reading? Read something interesting for 20 minutes per day... every day.

Want to get better at shooting a basketball? Shoot hoops for 20 minutes per day... every day.

You'll get better at any of these things if you can make a habit of doing them. It's basically guaranteed.

The key to sticking with your habits though, is not focusing too much on the outcome (on the goal).

The first few weeks of building a new habit (especially the habit of practicing a new skill like learning an instrument) are particularly difficult, because you won't see the results you want for a long time...

So don't focus on the results you're getting. (You simply won't get the results you want in the short-term.)

Just focus on building and maintaining the habit...

The outcome will take care of itself.

Reflection questions:

1. What habits can I start building now that are likeliest to help me achieve my long-term vision?
2. What can I do to prevent getting discouraged when I'm trying to build and maintain a new habit?

Secret #4: Seek out Mentors

“Mentor (noun) — a wise or trusted teacher or counselor”

— American Heritage Dictionary

You’re doing the hard things to achieve your long-term vision...

You’re building and maintaining the habits that will help lead to your success at school and life...

You’re on the right path.

But what happens when there is a fork in the road? A big decision you have to make about which direction to go?

Or an unexpected obstacle blocking the way, and you don’t know how to get past it?

You need someone who’s been there before...

Someone who’s arrived at that fork and knows where the paths lead...

Someone who’s seen that same obstacle before and who knows how to get around it...

You need a mentor, a guide. Someone you can trust.

When most young people look for guidance in life, they start with their friends.

It’s a perfectly understandable place to start...

But if you’ve lost your way or don’t know the path forward, chances are those in your peer group are just as lost as you, and just as clueless about the path forward...

You need a teacher, a counselor, an experienced adult who's willing to guide you on your journey.

That's what a mentor is.

How do you find such a mentor, exactly?

The short answer is simple:

You ask.

But don't ask just anyone.

Be on the lookout for the grownups you can trust, especially in your school...

Many of you already know who they are...

They're the kind, patient ones who are always willing to listen to you (really listen).

That's the sign of real wisdom, by the way.

The ignorant ones are always talking (about nonsense), but the wise ones listen and pay attention.

Good mentors may also be found at church, in the workplace (if you have a job) or if you're lucky, in your own family...

If a number of grown-ups seem to fit the bill, choose the one you want to be most like in the future.

This is a good rule of thumb when choosing whose advice to follow:

Find the people who have achieved what you want to achieve, or who you want to be like... Listen to them.

Once you've identified a possible mentor, strike up a conversation and ask for their guidance in your particular situation...

The best mentors will listen carefully and get to know you before making any judgment or giving you much advice...

That's how you know you've got a good one.

And a good mentor can change your life.

I've heard stories from many successful people who tell about that ONE teacher or that ONE boss or that ONE relative who defined the shape of their lives and careers...

So if the benefits of mentorship are so great, why do we fail to ask for guidance when we need it?

Fear.

Fear of looking foolish.

Fear of being rejected.

If you're seriously afraid to ask a possible mentor for guidance, there's a few things about human nature you need to understand...

The best people LOVE mentoring others.

Especially young people who are sincere in their efforts and willing to take their advice.

You may think you're just asking for help to get something from them, but for the best people it's the exact opposite...

You're giving them something: the opportunity to help, the opportunity to do something important. And the opportunity to feel important in the process.

Case in point:

I was at a bowling alley with my family a few years back. The guy in the lane next to us was tossing these beautiful curving strikes (you know the ones I'm talking about, the ones that kiss the gutter but curve back into the front pin just in time?).

I'd always wanted to throw a curve like that, but I could never figure out how... I watched in amazement as I tried to learn his secret.

I thought about asking him how to do it, but I didn't want to bother him... After a couple ugly attempts of my own, I mustered the courage to ask:

"Hey, could you show me how to do that?"

His eyes lit up. He was so excited to show me... for a few minutes that day, he was a respected master of his craft, honored to share his prized knowledge with me.

The best mentors are like that. Eager to help, eager to share what they've learned.

And if you come across someone who's not interested in helping you, that's not the kind of person you want as a mentor anyway, so can't go wrong:

If they say "yes", you're good. And if they say "no" they've conveniently removed themselves from your consideration...

So be on the lookout for a good mentor.

There's a good chance they'll point you in the right direction...

And make your journey a whole lot easier (and faster!) in the process...

As long as you have the courage to ask for help.

One final note:

If you have trouble finding a mentor around you...

You may consider following the published work of individuals who have achieved what you want to achieve in life.

Some of the most influential people in my life are people I've never met...

But who nonetheless have guided me on my journey with their books, Twitter Streams, YouTube channels, and other forms of media.

You don't have to know someone personally to consider them a mentor...

They just have to have the answers you're seeking and be able to guide you on your journey.

In the age of social media, feel free to expand your horizons as you seek out mentors.

Reflection questions:

1. What are the benefits of having a mentor?
2. Why shouldn't you be afraid to ask a potential mentor for guidance and direction?
3. Are there any people you know right now who would be a good mentor for you?
4. If the answer to the question above is "no", what steps can you take to seek out a potential mentor?

Secret #5: Embrace Responsibility

“Responsibility” is a dirty word to most young people, filled with negative associations...

It’s a word that’s been directed at us by irritated grown-ups whenever we haven’t done what they expected us to do (homework, chores, etc.).

“You need to be more responsible!”

We roll our eyes. And resent the (probably well-founded) accusation...

I get it...

I avoided responsibility much of my life (my worst years, by far) in an attempt to assert my independence from those demanding grown-ups:

“You can’t tell me what to do! I’m in charge of my life, not you!”

I’ve been there.

What I didn’t understand at the time, however, is what responsibility really means...

And the massive benefits of accepting and embracing your responsibilities.

Let’s start with what it means:

The word “responsibility” literally means “the ability to respond”...

The ability to respond well to the challenges of life.

From this perspective, we see that responsibility is not about submitting to the authority of others...

It's about self-empowerment.

Taking care of the things we (ourselves) have the ability to take care of...

And also recognizing exactly what we can and should take care of.

That may not sound very exciting to you (yet), but when viewed from the right perspective, there are few ideas that are more energizing and inspiring...

Here's what I mean:

You have a mission in this world.

You may not know precisely what that mission is yet, but I firmly believe in the depths of my soul that you have a mission:

A mission to better yourself, to better the lives of those around you, and to make the world a better place.

Every single one of you reading this now has this mission.

"What can I do!?" you might be thinking to yourself... "I'm a teenager!"

Yes, you're a teenager right now...

But even as a teenager there are endless opportunities to make things better around you... things that need to be improved and problems that need to be solved...

I'm not talking about starting your own tech company here (although that may be part of your mission in the future)...

I'm talking about the things around you RIGHT NOW that could be better if only you choose to take the action necessary to make it better.

Could you be there for a friend going through a tough time in their life?

Could you help your family more with the chores around the house?

Could you reach out to the new kid that no one talks to?

Could you do better in school to prepare yourself for future aspects of your mission?

“Do better in school?!” you protest. “I got a D in Mrs. Ralston’s class because she didn’t like me...”

I get it. I’ve been there.

And even though you’re probably right that she didn’t like you...

That’s not why you failed.

You failed because you didn’t study for her tests and only occasionally did the homework for her class.

Admit it. You could have done better. You SHOULD have done better.

Let’s call your explanation for failure what it is: an excuse.

And your excuses suck.

Don’t worry... we all do it. We all come up with excuses for why we don’t do the things we know we know we should do...

Grown-ups are as guilty of this as anyone, and our excuses are even more creative and clever than yours.

But they’re still just excuses.

And now we’re getting to the heart of the matter... why accepting responsibility is so important, and why it’s central to making your life better...

Because as long as we hang on to our excuses (or worse, blame others) for the problems around us, we'll never take the action we SHOULD take to make things better.

But if we embrace responsibility for our actions, we recognize that we control our ability to respond to the circumstances around us.

“He made fun of me so I hit him” becomes... “I chose to smile and ignore him when he insulted me.”

“She assigned too much homework so I didn't do it” becomes... “I chose to manage my time better” or “I chose to ask for an extension on the assignment”.

“Why should I make friends with that kid? No one else has” becomes... “I chose to be kind to him because that's how I want to be treated too.”

You see the difference now between accepting your excuses and embracing responsibility?

The path of responsibility — that is choosing to respond to difficult circumstances in a positive and constructive way — is a far more interesting, exciting, and joy-filled path than the alternative...

And it's guaranteed to lead to better outcomes for you in school, in your relationships, in your future career, in your future finances... Everything.

There's one more surprising benefit of embracing responsibility:

Not only do your responses to difficult circumstances improve, but generally, so do the difficulties themselves...

Remember Mrs. Ralston's class that you failed “because she didn't like [you]?”

I can almost guarantee that if you took responsibility for your work, you wouldn't have clashed with her as much as you did. She might have even liked you.

Embracing responsibility has a sort of ripple-effect through your life... When you improve one thing it leads to improvement elsewhere in a way that's hard to even imagine...

When you take responsibility for your grades, you never fail that class; you never get grounded for that "D"; you get accepted into your dream college because of your grades; you fall in love with your future spouse at that college, etc.

It may sound far fetched, but that's how this stuff works... and I can speak from experience...

Remember how I mentioned that I was stuck in debt years ago? (See "Secret #1: Do the Hard Things".) I was a poor school teacher with a growing family... I could have easily excused myself: "They don't pay teachers enough" and left it at that...

When I chose to take responsibility for my finances, however, I was inspired to take action. I started a tutoring business that, today, helps tens-of-thousands of students get into college and pursue their career dreams...

And here I am helping you now...

But none of this would have happened without choosing to embrace my responsibilities in the first place.

You have a choice too:

Choose to be a victim of your circumstances (make excuses and blame others)...

Or embrace responsibility and take care of the things you can and should take care of.

You know where both paths lead...

Choose wisely.

Reflection questions:

1. What does it mean to be responsible?
2. How does it benefit me to be responsible?
3. In what ways have I avoided responsibility in the past?
4. What are the things in my life I need to be responsible for?

Secret #6: Make Learning Your Superpower

"Nothing we ever imagined is beyond our powers, only beyond our present self-knowledge."

- Author Theodore Roszak.

Ever wish you had a real superpower?

"Yeah, of course."

What if I told you you already have one, and you just didn't know it?

You might call me crazy...

But, I firmly believe you have a superpower... You just don't realize how powerful it is yet...

I'll explain later (I promise), but first, let me ask another question:

Have you ever heard your classmates say something like this?

"I didn't learn because my teacher didn't teach."

I hear it pretty regularly from students who find themselves ignorant of entire academic subjects, like geometry, grammar, or history...

I get it.

I know what happens in a lot of classrooms...

Or maybe more accurately, what doesn't happen:

Learning.

And while I pity the poor students who languish in boredom while Coach Mack draws up defensive plays in history class...

I can't help but think of the little lie that's hidden behind that excuse:

"I didn't learn because my teacher didn't teach."

Yes, it's true you weren't taught. And, yes, it's your teacher's responsibility to teach...

But is it entirely your teacher's responsibility for you to LEARN?

Is it possible YOU have something to do with your learning?

I read somewhere that George Washington (who was largely self-taught) spent a total of just 2 years in school...

And Abraham Lincoln (also self-taught, and an avid reader) spent less than a year of his life in school...

(Do you know who those two are? Or did you have Coach Mack for history?)

Those guys didn't have someone else to teach them... but somehow they learned. Mostly on their own.

You see, the problem is that many people view learning as a passive process... something that happens TO you. You just sit in your seat and soak it all in...

And if that's the case, then your ignorance is always someone else's fault... because someone else has to teach you something for you to learn it.

But what if learning is an ACTIVE process. Something YOU do. Something YOU can be responsible for?

Now we're getting somewhere...

Imagine this:

Instead of being a sponge (an immobile, brainless sea creature) that waits for food to float its way...

Be a shark. That hunts down and mercilessly attacks its prey.

That's active learning.

That's what Lincoln did. He read every book he could get his hands on as a kid. Later in life, he even taught himself to be a lawyer. (Before he became president, that is.)

"I'm no Lincoln. I just don't like reading that much."

I get it. And I don't entirely blame you. Schools have done a pretty good job of snuffing out curiosity, and the joy of learning that we're all naturally born with...

And reading can take a lot of effort, especially if you don't read often (yet)...

How about this... Start with YouTube. Some of the best learning resources are available there for free, any time you want, right on your phone.

Need to know how to find the circumference of a circle for an upcoming geometry quiz?

Do a YouTube search.

Need to learn how to write a persuasive essay for an English assignment?

Do a YouTube search.

Still don't know who Abraham Lincoln is?

You guessed it...

Do a YouTube search.

I don't care how you learn, as long as you are learning...

The key is to make learning your new habit.

And learning doesn't have to be school related (although that's obviously very helpful)...

You can also just learn about things that you are interested in... things you are curious about...

Want to learn more about coding, drawing, Lamborghinis, underground hip-hop, filmmaking, artificial intelligence, black holes, stand-up comedy, or the meaning of life?

Search it up.

Explore the endless resources available to you with that magic of the internet.

Whatever inspires your fascination or sets your curiosity ablaze... pursue it.

That's active learning too.

Still not sold on learning?

How about this: You may not be excited about learning (yet), but do you like having problems?

"Uh, no..."

Well, if you're willing to solve your problems, there's a good chance that the solution to your problems is in a book, or somewhere on the internet just a Google search away...

Now we come to one of the biggest benefits of active learning:

Problem solving.

That's what motivated me to engage in active learning, though it wasn't until my mid-30s...

At the time, I was dealing with a number of big problems in my life — health problems, relationship problems, financial problems— problems I had no idea how to solve...

I spent years just waiting and hoping for things to get better.

Most things didn't.

I was a sponge.

Waiting...

Eventually, I grew tired of waiting.

"I've tried doing nothing... let's try DOING SOMETHING! But what do I do?"

That's where active learning comes in.

You have to SEEK OUT answers to your questions.

"How do I improve my health?"

"How do I start a business?"

"How do I improve my relationships?"

The answers to those questions are out there... I've sought them out and found them.

And the answers to YOUR questions are out there too... you just have to seek out and find YOUR answers.

Be the shark who smells the tiniest drop of blood in the water, and dart immediately toward your prey: knowledge.

I'm not saying this is effortless... it's not. It requires work. Personal responsibility.

Anything that improves your life is like that.

You've heard the saying: "Knowledge is power."

It's true, by the way.

(What's more valuable? \$1000 cash, or KNOWING how to make \$1000 per day?
I know how I'd answer that question...)

And If knowledge is power, then learning is your SUPERPOWER. It's the superpower that gives you the knowledge you need to get what you want out of life...

Active learning can help you achieve your academic (and career) goals, satisfy your curiosity, and solve almost any problem you can imagine...

So take learning into your own hands.

It's the hidden superpower you didn't know you have.

Reflection questions:

1. What's active learning?
2. Why is active learning a superpower?
3. What are some topics (of interest to me) I can use active learning to learn more about?
4. What problems in my life can I solve using active learning?

Secret #7: Failure is Not Fatal

“Success is the ability to go from failure to failure without losing your enthusiasm.”

- Winston Churchill

If you’ve come this far in the book...

Taking these lessons to heart and applying them in your life...

I’m proud of you.

I’m excited for you!

You’ve started doing the hard things you know you should do.

You’re developing a long-term vision, and aligning your choices with that vision.

You’re building good habits...

Seeking out mentors...

Embracing responsibility...

And taking your learning into your own hands.

You’re building the foundation for success in the present and (even more so!) in the future.

In short, you’re gonna make it.

Your future, that is.

You’re on your way to achieving your long-term vision of success...

But here's the deal:

Though your chances of success are very high (if you learn and apply these lessons)...

There are no guarantees in life.

EXCEPT for this:

At times along the way, you will experience failure.

You won't always achieve what you set out to achieve...

Because you're not perfect. No one is.

Failure is almost inevitable whenever you set out to achieve anything meaningful.

In fact, the more meaningful the achievement, the higher the chances you'll experience failure!

Want to win a championship?

You're gonna lose some games along the way...

Want to graduate from college?

You're going to fail some tests, and maybe even some classes...

Shooting for a particular internship or job after college?

You're going to deal with a lot of rejection before you land the job of your dreams...

Want to build a million-dollar business?

You're going to get your teeth kicked in more times than you can count.

That's just the way life works.

(I don't make the rules. I'm just letting you know how it is.)

And learning to deal with failure is just part of the game.

Some of the most successful people experienced failure long before their great successes...

Remember our friend Abraham Lincoln? Before he became president, he failed at numerous businesses, went bankrupt twice, and lost a total of 26 different elections.

Albert Einstein (the most brilliant scientist to ever live) couldn't pass an entrance exam to get into technical school when he was 16. After college, he also failed as an insurance salesman.

And Michael Jordan (the greatest basketball player of all time, don't @ me) was cut from the Varsity basketball team during his sophomore year of high school...

Here's Jordan on failure:

"I have missed more than 9,000 shots in my career. I have lost almost 300 games. On 26 occasions I have been entrusted to take the game-winning shot, and I missed. I have failed over and over and over again in my life. And that is why I succeed."

Are you starting to see why failure isn't the problem most of us think it is?

We need to stop looking at failure as a problem...

In fact, it would be a bigger problem if you NEVER experience failure: it's a sure sign you're not pushing yourself enough... not reaching for your full potential...

Because the surest way to never fail is to never try: the biggest problem of all.

Now, I still know how failure FEELS...

Failure hurts. Bad.

Especially if we attach our feelings of self-worth to our accomplishments (a common error).

But here's the secret to dealing with failure...

A secret few people know, but one that the most successful people have figured out...

Failure is an opportunity:

An opportunity to learn and grow.

That's it.

If we can choose to look at our failures from this perspective (and you can always CHOOSE your perspective)...

It takes the sting out of failure...

And can transform our failures into our future victories.

So if failure is an opportunity to learn and grow, what does that look like?

Here's a few examples for my own life:

I failed to make the high school soccer team in my Junior year of high school. It was humiliating for me at first (I didn't even make the JV team)...

But after being cut I learned I didn't miss soccer at all... I realized I wasn't that into soccer in the first place (which is probably why I didn't make the team).

And not making the team opened up the opportunity for me to try other extracurriculars that interested me more, including Model United Nations (MUN), where I won a major award at the national conference during my senior year.

But that success wouldn't have happened without my initial failure.

I also failed at my first real job after college, a corporate management role (a suit-and-tie job).

It was a good job, but I didn't last 3 months because I just couldn't make myself care about the work I was doing.

I learned that I needed to find work that was more engaging, more meaningful for me... Which led me to my next next failure: my first teaching job.

My first teaching job was at an inner city charter school. As a first-year teacher, I had no clue what I was doing, and I didn't have much support.

I burned out in a few short months, and I was the last of 3 first-year teachers to quit during that school year.

I learned a lot from that experience: I learned that I loved being a teacher, but I also learned I needed more training and support to be truly successful.

When I had the opportunity to be a student teacher under an experienced "master teacher" a few years later, I jumped on the opportunity...

And that training as a student teacher built the foundation I needed for my successful decade-long career in the classroom.

You see how this works?

It's almost as if success is jumping from one failure to the next...

But leveling up each time IF you're able to:

1. Learn the lessons from your failure.
2. Find the opportunity to grow in the midst of failure.

You see, there's two kinds of learning:

We discussed the first kind of learning in the last chapter (Secret #6: Make Learning Your Superpower) which involves turning our attention outward, seeking the answers and solutions that are out there in the world.

But there's another kind of learning that involves turning INWARD, learning about OURSELVES to see where we have gone wrong in our failures...

Whether it was choosing the wrong place to put our efforts (like Einstein pursuing insurance sales)...

Or figuring out what we need to do the next time to achieve what we want to achieve.

And this second kind of learning (learning about ourselves) is just as important as the first.

It's been said: "You learn more from your failures than from your success."

This is true.

Because if we're always succeeding, why do anything different? We have nothing we need to learn and no need to grow...

But if we experience failure, it's a call to reflection. A call to learn more about ourselves.

We can't let failure (or the fear of failure) stop us from achieving our long-term vision of the future...

Failure is not the end. Failure is not fatal.

It's more like a new start.

Because in every failure lies the seeds of our future success...

If only we can draw out the lessons and find the opportunities for growth.

Reflection Questions:

1. What are some failures I've experienced in my own life?
2. What are the lessons I could draw from those failures? What opportunities for growth?

Secret #8: Practice Gratitude

“The more you express gratitude for what you have, the more likely you will have even more to express gratitude for.”

— Author and Speaker Zig Ziglar

If you’ve gotten this far in the book, you’re on the path of self-improvement...

You’re making your life better...

And making things better for those around you as well.

But there’s a big trap you need to avoid on the way to achieving your long-term vision of the future...

In fact, those on the path of self-improvement (people like you) are more likely to fall into this trap than anyone else...

What’s the trap?

Discouragement.

That’s because if you know what the best version of yourself looks like...

And you fail to live up to that vision...

It’s easy to get discouraged.

It’s easy to focus on how far away you are from your goals...

And ignore how far you’ve already come.

“I can’t be who I want to be and I won’t reach my goals!”

I get it. I’ve been there.

I still fall into the trap from time to time...

Funny thing is, people who aren't trying to achieve anything in life don't have to worry about this.

They're expecting nothing from themselves, and when life gives them nothing in return, they shrug...

"Oh well."

But that's not you.

You're aiming to be the best version of yourself.

You're aiming to make the world better for everyone around you.

So how do you avoid the trap of discouragement?

Gratitude.

Let me explain...

First, what is gratitude?

Gratitude is a sense of thankfulness for the good things in your life...

Now I know, many of you reading this have had a rough time in life so far:

Broken schools, broken homes, broken families...

And many of you have experienced pain and suffering far worse.

I get it.

But that doesn't mean you have nothing good in your life...

Have you eaten, or will you eat today?

Do you have a place to sleep?

Can you walk, or at least move under your own power?

(Not everyone in the world can say “yes” to these questions...)

You see where I’m going with this?

Despite the difficulties that everyone deals with, we all have things to be grateful for:

Sunshine, laughter, a friend’s smile, fresh water, and the air we breathe are all things we can and should be grateful for...

For many of us, our only experience with practicing gratitude happens once per year, on Thanksgiving Day...

You probably celebrate Thanksgiving...

But do you really know the story of the first Thanksgiving?

102 Pilgrims sailing on the Mayflower arrived in present-day Massachusetts 400 years ago. Almost half of them died horribly as a result of starvation and disease within the first year of their arrival...

They had every reason to be discouraged.

They had every reason to give up.

But they didn’t.

What did they do instead?

The 53 remaining survivors celebrated a 3-day long feast in THANKSGIVING for their survival and the blessings they had received in their new home.

That's gratitude.

Most of us would throw a pity party if we survived the Pilgrim's ordeal...

I probably would.

But the Pilgrim's instinct to practice gratitude was the right thing to do...

Because it's energizing to focus on the positives in life...

And it's discouraging and exhausting to focus on the negatives.

Now, I'm not talking about ignoring your problems... if anything this book has been about confronting your problems, hitting them head-on, and overcoming them.

But I am saying that in order to overcome your problems, you need to have positive energy...

And practicing gratitude is a sure path to finding positive energy.

So what does practicing gratitude look like?

Let's try a little exercise:

Make a list of 3 things you are grateful for. List them right here in this book, or on a separate piece of paper.

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____

Did you make the list?

Ok! Congratulations! You know how to practice gratitude!

I usually make a list of things I'm grateful for early in the morning or late at night before bed, or both (though I'm not perfect about it and you don't have to be either)...

I call it my "gratitude journal", and it changed my life when I started practicing it years ago...

I used to get stuck on the negatives in my life... I used to struggle frequently with depression and anxiety (and I still do from time to time, to be perfectly honest).

But when I'm struggling, I have a best friend who asks me:

"Have you been doing your gratitude journal?"

He already knows the answer.

YOU already know the answer.

But when I start practicing gratitude again, the negatives fade away from the front of my mind.

I find renewed peace and positive energy...

Which I need to work toward my long-term vision of the future.

And you need it too...

Especially when times get tough.

Our friend Abraham Lincoln understood this instinctively when he made Thanksgiving a national holiday right in the middle of the Civil War, the bloodiest war in American history.

Think about that.

In the midst of a war that would lead to the deaths of over 600,000 Americans...

President Lincoln chose to turn the nation's attention upward in gratitude.

Because he knew that the best way to overcome our trials is not to focus on our suffering...

But to focus on the Good that is all around us.

So when times get tough, or when life doesn't meet your expectations...

Don't despair.

Practice gratitude instead.

Make that list...

Appreciate the blessings all around you.

And relax, my young friend...

Because you're gonna make it.

Final Thoughts

In the introduction, I described this book as “a roadmap to find your way in school and in life”....

I've done my best here to give you that roadmap.

But I think you see now that I can't tell you exactly what you need to do every step of the way, where you need to turn at every juncture...

That's because your final destination is unique.

It's yours and yours alone.

Which means you're going to have to make your own decisions about which way to go.

YOU have to develop your own long-term vision of the future...

YOU have to choose which habits to build...

YOU have to seek out your mentors...

YOU have to embrace your responsibilities...

YOU have to take charge of your own learning...

YOU have to learn from your failures...

And YOU have to practice gratitude.

I know that sounds like a lot right now...

But I know you can do this.

I wouldn't have written this for you otherwise.

But before I send you on your way, I want to leave you with some final thoughts.

Not my thoughts, but your thoughts. From your future-self.

Here's a letter your future-self wrote to you:

Dear Me,

Thank you so much for reading this book.

I'm so glad you did.

I've learned so much since we read it, many years ago.

I've grown a lot...

Achieved more than you can imagine now...

And helped so many others along the way.

You'll be happy to know we're leaving this world in better shape than we found it.

Thanks for taking the lessons in this book to heart.

Sincerely,

Your Future-Self