What It Means to Be a Man
Mullen, Bill

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What It Means to Be a Man: How to Become a Better Person.
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Given the opportunity to write a foreword for this book, written by a leader I respect and was lucky to have served under twice during my 26-year career, I immediately thought about the meaning of the key phrase in the subtitle, “How to Become a Better Person.” This explicitly suggests there is room to grow, and that is true for all of us. In his introduction, Major General Bill Mullen quickly dispels the notion that this book is written solely for men. Rather, it is intended for anyone seeking self-growth. As many other men and women have done during their journey wearing the military service cloth of our nation, I often reflected on what I was doing and how well I was doing it. Servicemembers do not have a corner on the market in this regard and, while this book is doubtless an invaluable tool to add to any leader’s tool kit, the growth possible by the self-reflection it encourages will benefit anyone seeking to be better in life’s endeavors.

Many leaders continue to ask themselves questions like, “How do I live the best life, be the best version of myself, lead a life of worth and take care of those who rely on me?” Being a “total Marine”—or good
person—encompasses a near-endless list of attributes and skills one must master and study. To improve in each requires one to spend countless hours searching for resources; however, in this book, the general provides something akin to a roadmap for being the best person of which one is capable. Conveniently, much of it boils down to choices: the choice to listen, to not give others power over us through their opinions, or just to smile. Mullen covers several of the simple yet hard choices we face every day and in every stage of our personal and professional development. He touches on many of life’s landmines, visible and hidden, that most people—Marine or not—must navigate around to live well and content in their choices.

Candid about his own early career missteps, and occasional want of effort, but also of the maturation process and realization that becoming a professional requires dedication, determination, and effort, General Mullen writes from the heart to impart a life’s worth of knowledge gained from reading and curious inquiry. By writing this book, he continues his record of seeking to give others the opportunity to grow or excel. I met General Mullen when, as the president of Marine Corps University, he decided that including senior enlisted Marines in the student body of the Marine Corps Command and Staff College would benefit the enlisted and officer students alike from the exchange of ideas and perspectives. During my interview with him for that opportunity, it became clear he was looking foremost for potential applicants interested in ways to grow. I believe he is still doing that with What It Means to Be a Man and offering his thoughts on how to do so.

This book’s chapters begin with his definition of self-discipline, that is, “the ability to focus on the right choices in life and having the willpower to pick them instead of the wrong ones, especially when they are difficult or unpopular” (p. 9). He writes on “ideal” behaviors throughout the book in the voice of a trusted mentor rather than a
haughty examiner. While he admits that it is not easy to live up to these standards to the fullest extent, and that he himself is forever endeavoring to do so, he describes the satisfaction to be found in a valuable life well-lived that will follow from the effort.

This book is not a lecture on the art of living well; instead, Mullen offers “before they made it big” stories of larger-than-life or well-known personalities—men and women—who overcame their own obstacles in life or whose tenacious pursuit of greatness paid off. The extreme variety in the many different sources for quotes and historical anecdotes to illustrate his points is augmented by suggestions of books, articles, and programs for further study. Additionally, at the end of every chapter, he poses questions to consider that will lead to self-reflection and, no doubt, improvement in those so inclined. The book has something for everyone, and I found myself taking a few notes of titles to add to my own personal list of books to read soon. Mullen makes his points even more accessible to multiple generations of learners through his use of YouTube videos, movies, and articles in addition to books.

Imagine being able to provide yourself, those close to you, or your Marines, the wisdom and advice that comes from more than 30 years of pursuing self-improvement. Investing the time to read this book’s widely ranging anecdotes and, perhaps, investing some time reading further about the men and women or historical events in the suggested reading or self-reflecting and answering the questions to consider will immediately broaden one’s knowledge and thinking. While reading the examples of attributes Mullen discusses, I recalled times in my own career that I had witnessed, or experienced firsthand, the same triumphs and failures he describes. Growing up in the Marine Corps, and lucky enough to have leaders who valued critical thinking and ideas outside the norm, I benefitted from some truly great mentors and received very good advice. Still, having read a book like this ear-
ly in my career, I believe, would have saved me some time and pain in learning the hard way a few of the lessons General Mullen tackles here.

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