What It Means to Be a Man

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Published by Marine Corps University Press

Mullen, Bill.
What It Means to Be a Man: How to Become a Better Person.
Project MUSE. muse.jhu.edu/book/111378.

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https://muse.jhu.edu/book/111378
I believe that the root of all success as a human being is self-discipline. This, to me, is the ability to focus on the right choices in life and then have the willpower to pick them instead of the wrong ones, especially when they are difficult or unpopular. It is the ability to do what is required of you regardless of convenience. It is the ability to turn away from poor choices, even when they seem more convenient or desirable than doing the right thing. It is taking the longer and more arduous path to excellence in all things rather than taking the shortcut that may offer the chance of getting where you want to go faster but at a moral or ethical cost to you. In the end, self-discipline represents our ability to control or master ourselves to gain the outcomes we desire instead of losing control and rolling the dice and hoping for the best.

Self-discipline, or the lack thereof, is demonstrated in the choices we make every day, but it starts with mastery of what is going on in our heads—what we are thinking. If we cannot master our thoughts, we will never be able to master our actions. As the actor Will Smith
said in one of his motivational talks, “You cannot win the war against the world if you cannot win the war against your own mind.”

The unfortunate fact about self-discipline is that I have seen more people ruined by a lack of self-restraint than anything else. Those lacking in self-discipline may have a great deal of talent, or the good fortune of having been born into an affluent family, but their inability to control themselves and make good choices leads to their destruction. Temptations in life abound. Hard work can be intimidating. Doing what is required can be very inconvenient. While patience is said to be a virtue, it seems to be in extremely short supply these days and this trend is accelerating. Having the patience to put in the time and effort to reach your goals is very difficult, especially when you see others moving much faster by taking shortcuts or stepping on others to get where they want to go. The 2019 college admissions scandal presents a perfect example of the lack of patience and will to put in the effort required. Instead of doing things correctly, some aspiring students and their affluent parents paid college admissions consultants to develop fake college applications for them, which included fraudulent SAT scores and altered pictures of them participating in athletic activities. I personally wonder how these people can look at themselves in the mirror and honestly assess their moral compass. These acts make for a lifetime full of regrets instead of the fulfilling and self-affirming knowledge that, by making good choices, we led a good life.

As an avid student of history, I am always seeking out lessons from the past. One that stuck with me was something reportedly said by Confederate general Robert E. Lee after the Civil War. A woman approached him as he was coming out of church one Sunday afternoon in the late 1860s. She held a baby in her arms and asked Lee what she

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1 Will Smith, “Win the War against Your Own Mind,” YouTube video, 3 November 2020.
needed to do to ensure he grew up to be a good man. His response was, “Teach him to deny himself.”

3 When Lee was a young man, he was widely admired by his peers at the U.S. Military Academy at West Point for his character and self-discipline. He was dedicated to fulfilling what he deemed to be his duty no matter the personal cost in time, effort, or convenience. Some at the time would say the only negative thing he did at West Point was drawl out the word “sir,” a testament to his Virginia roots. In fact, Lee was one of six classmates to get through four years at the U.S. Military Academy without being awarded a single demerit. 4 Considering all the things, some of which are quite minor, that can result in demerits at that institution, this is a remarkable testament to who Lee was as a young man.

Robert E. Lee was the son of the American Revolutionary War hero Henry “Light-Horse Harry” Lee III, who was one of George Washington’s most trusted subordinates. He is most remembered for his eulogy at Washington’s 1799 funeral, “First in war, first in peace, first in the hearts of his countrymen.” 5 Unfortunately, the elder Lee set a poor example for his children. His ability to tell the truth was questionable, at best, and his life ended in extreme debt, poverty, and misery after abandoning his family and leaving them with an appreciation for the shame the Lee name carried. Maybe his son endeavored to be good to counter the tremendously poor example his father set for all who knew him.

Later in life, after more than 30 years serving as an Army engineer and with particular distinction during the U.S.-Mexican War for which

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3 As will be discussed later, the fact the Lee served the Confederate side against the United States does not necessarily diminish his standing as a military strategist or competent leader. Douglas Southall Freeman, *R. E. Lee: A Biography*, 4 vols. (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1934), 505.


Figure 1. Confederate general Robert E. Lee
Source: Prints & Photographs Online Catalog, Library of Congress.
he was advanced from captain to lieutenant colonel for bravery, Robert E. Lee made, in my opinion, a deplorable choice. Due to the loyalty he felt for his home state of Virginia, he resigned his commission when they chose to leave the Union in 1861, despite being offered command of the entire Union Army. The then chief of staff of the U.S. Army, Major General Winfield Scott, also a Virginian and the commander of the U.S. Army during the War with Mexico, considered Lee the best man for the job and was frustrated when Lee refused the appointment.6 Apparently, Lee felt that his duty to defend his home state outweighed his duty to defend the Union as a whole. The words of his aunt, Anna Fitzhugh, who remained loyal to the United States, sums the situation up best, “I am so sorry that such a good man would take up such a bad cause.”7 His service in the Confederate Army was an act of treason against the country he had served for so many years and an attempt to defend the indefensible—the institution of slavery.8

Despite the fact that I could not disagree more with the decision Lee made to fight for a cause I despise, I still look to him as an example of personal discipline. Throughout a terrible war, he focused on the fight at hand, which garnered numerous early victories and the respect of his men in the Confederate Army as well as many of those who fought against him. He capitulated when the Union forces of Lieutenant General Ulysses S. Grant cornered his Army of Northern Vir-

7 The original quote is in *Morning Oregonian* (Portland, OR), 15 November 1872, 4. This quote is also found in William C. Davis, *Crucible of Command: Ulysses S. Grant and Robert E. Lee—The War They Fought, the Peace They Forged* (Boston, MA: Da Capo Press, 2014), 121–22.
8 Although Lee had misgivings about the institution, he both directly participated in and benefited from chattel slavery before and during the Civil War. For more on his views and relationship with slavery, see Elizabeth Pryor Brown, *Reading the Man: A Portrait of Robert E. Lee Through His Private Letters* (New York: Viking Press, 2007), 123–40, 143–54, 260–75.
ginia. When he surrendered to Grant at Appomattox Court House, Virginia, on 9 April 1865, firsthand accounts of the scene illustrate the sense of awe felt by everyone present, both North and South, when Lee signed the surrender document and then left. It was the last thing in the world that Lee wanted to do and the bitterness he felt must have been intense; but, due to his self-discipline, he never let it show. Lee knew he must set the example for his troops and that is exactly what he did.

Perhaps Lee’s greatest act as a leader was to encourage his men to return home and rebuild their communities after the war and make the best of the remainder of their lives instead of becoming guerrillas and drawing out the conflict. He considered what was best for his soldiers and Virginia and, despite what must have been a great deal of anger and frustration at losing a bitterly fought war, he encouraged his men to do the right thing. To those who know his family history, Lee’s personal situation made this choice even more noteworthy because he had no home to return to after his wife’s ancestral home—Arlington House sat across the Potomac River from Washington, DC, and still stands today—had been confiscated by the federal government early in the war for failure to pay taxes and was later turned into a cemetery to bury Union dead. Today, it is known as Arlington National Cemetery, where our honored dead are buried, and

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10 Jay Winik, April 1865 (New York: Harper Collins, 2002); and Pryor, Reading the Man.
the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier stands among many other stirring memorials to our nation’s past.¹¹

Despite these challenges, Lee “walked his talk” by returning instead to the rented house where his family resided in Richmond, Virginia, and quietly waited to see if he would be arrested and tried for treason. Other Confederate leaders fled and went into hiding, including Confederate president Jefferson F. Davis who was captured in Georgia reportedly while wearing a woman’s shawl in an attempt to hide his distinctive uniform.¹² Lee was never arrested, even after the turmoil created by the assassination of President Abraham Lincoln on 14 April 1865, because General Grant intervened on his behalf with President Andrew Johnson to prevent Lee’s arrest and trial for treason. This act by General Grant convinced me that I should reconsider my opinion of General Lee, to a degree, for the poor decision he made in 1861. If the very man who had just spent the previous four years fighting to save the Union and to defeat the South, and the previous year in particular fighting desperately against Lee and his army, could put his reputation on the line in defense of the man, then I should be more forgiving as well.

What means even more to me in this matter, however, was what the man I admire most from this period, Abraham Lincoln, wanted for southern leaders. Lincoln was another leader who had gone through a terrible four years trying to keep the Union together. The war years aged him visibly, which images from the period illustrate clearly. He

¹¹ The home and surrounding property was held by Lee’s wife Mary Custis Lee and confiscated in 1863. An 1882 Supreme Court decision would later find fault with that event and returned the properties to the family. A twist of irony saw a good portion of the property sold back to the government by George Washington Custis Lee. See “Whose Land?: Claims at Arlington Estate,” National Park Service, 22 June 2021.

¹² File 000.4 Historical (9 Oct 45), Adjutant General Decimal File, 1940–1945 (NAID 895294), Records of the Office of the Adjutant General, 1917–, Record Group 407, National Archives.
lost dear friends and loved ones and, at times, despaired that the North would emerge victorious over the South. Lincoln knew that if the country were to have a chance of truly uniting again after the fighting was over, the victors in the war could not inflict harsh terms on the defeated. As he said to Grant and Major General William T. Sherman in late March 1865, when he met them on the riverboat River Queen in the days just before Richmond fell to Grant’s army, he was not interested in vengeance.

Instead of being arrested, tried for treason, and imprisoned or executed, Lee was offered and assumed the leadership of a destitute and failing Washington College in Lexington, Virginia, and sought to restore the campus and institution as well as to mold young men (it was an all-male college at the time) into the people they needed to be in order to be successful in life. He was so well respected and successful in these endeavors that, after his death in 1870, the name of the college was changed to Washington and Lee University, which it still bears today.¹³

Following through on what is expected of you, or what is deemed to be your duty, can be tremendously satisfying. I would also paraphrase an old adage that many miss out on opportunities because they come knocking on the door wearing work coveralls.¹⁴ Many people are not interested in doing the work required to take advantage of an opportunity, or if they do make the attempt, they only make a half effort. This is rarely sufficient, and we should all remember that a task may take time, and it may be difficult and inconvenient, but when you have the self-discipline to take the time to do something correctly

¹³ In the wake of efforts across the country to remove the connection to the Confederacy from streets, buildings, organizations, etc., Washington and Lee University administrators and board members voted in the summer of 2021 to retain the name of the college. “University History,” WLU.edu, accessed 28 July 2022.

¹⁴ The date of the earliest citation that closely matches this expression was in May 1921. It was printed in a newspaper in Indiana, but the adage was not credited to any specific person.
and complete the task regardless of how difficult it may be, the sense of accomplishment is profound. I am reminded of something said to me many times as a teenager by both my mother and father: If you do not have time to do it right the first time, when will you have time to do it again?

I have considered the advice above many times as I was faced with tasks that I did not want to do or that I thought were not worth my time. Early in my career as a young officer, I did not give my best effort to every task. As I matured toward the professional that I sought to be, I realized that professionals give every task, regardless of importance, their best effort. I came to this conclusion by watching and admiring the efforts of much better officers and Marines than myself.
It seemed that no one had to tell them these things, they just knew it and went about their tasks with a great attitude that I could not help but admire. The more I emulated them, the more successful I became as an officer and a member of the profession of arms. My only regret was that I did not start my career with this same attitude. It was always a choice available to me, but it took me a while to really understand it and make that choice. For example, when I went back to my alma mater Marquette University in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, to pursue a master’s degree. I really enjoyed the work and performed well but looked back on my undergraduate years with regret. I thoroughly explored the full undergraduate experience and managed to keep my grades good enough to graduate and receive my commission, but I could have done so much better if I had really applied myself. Hindsight does indeed have perfect vision.

The key is that making the morally or ethically right decision, even in the face of pressure to do otherwise, ensures that you can look at yourself in the mirror in the morning and know that the person looking back did the right thing. As life’s journey comes to an end, it guarantees pleasant memories and the satisfaction that comes with the knowledge of a life well-lived. But, of course, the actual doing is up to each of us individually. We must choose the right and reject the wrong regardless of the consequences. We can either make good choices of our own accord, or we risk having them made for us. Author Steven Pressfield considers the early work of Greek philosopher Socrates (470–399 BCE), “The paradox seems to be that the truly free individual is free only to the extent of his own self-mastery. While those who will not govern themselves are condemned to find masters to govern over them.”15 Given that Socrates is still a relevant example, it should be evident that nothing presented in this chapter is new.

I will close this chapter with a quote from another Greek philosopher—Epicurus. He was squarely focused on what brought happiness in life and was well known for adhering to the principles laid out below, all of which require self-discipline:

It is not possible to live pleasantly without living prudently, honorably, and justly; Nor to live prudently, honorably, and justly without living pleasantly. Pleasure is good and pain is bad, but the pursuit of pleasure must be kept within reasonable bounds.

When, therefore, we say that pleasure is the chief good we are not speaking of the pleasures of a debauched man, or those that lie in sensual enjoyment . . . but we mean the freedom of the body from pain, and the soul from disturbance. For it is not continued drinking and revels, or the enjoyment of female society, or feasts of fish or other expensive foods, that make life pleasant, but such sober contemplation as examines reasons for choices and avoidance and puts to flight the vain opinions from which arises most of the confusion that troubles the soul.16

Questions to Consider

1. How strong is your self-discipline? Are you your own master?
2. Do you make the best choices possible regardless of difficulty or inconvenience?
3. What kind of example do you set for those around you or those coming behind you?

Suggested Further Study


This is one of the most well-balanced biographies of Lee; it does not offer hero worship, but does not seek to ruin his reputation either.


I was not impressed with the title, but was very impressed with the book itself. Steven Pressfield is one of my favorite authors (and a Marine), so I picked it up and am glad I did. His description of the concept of resistance is, in my mind and experience, absolutely on the mark.