

SUMMARY

MAKE YOUR BED

WILLIAM H. MCRAVEN



 QuickRead

Summary of “Make Your Bed” by William H. McRaven

Written by Alyssa Burnette

A Navy SEAL’s simple secrets for success.

Introduction

5

Make Your Bed

6

Rely on Your Buddy

8

Failure is an Opportunity

10

Swim With the Sharks

12

Final Summary

14



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Introduction

How do you start your day? Do you have a routine or a certain thing you like to do to bring order and structure to your day? In my case, that means that every morning, I make my bed. It's an integral part of my morning routine and the first thing I do to start my day. And that's one thing I have in common with retired Navy SEAL Admiral William H. McRaven. McRaven learned the value of structure, routine, and simple things like making your bed in his basic training camp as a young man and it had a powerful impact on his life. And because he still lives by the rules that were taught to him during his career as a SEAL, McRaven knows firsthand how these principles can change your life for the better.

That's why he wants to share them with others: so that people who find their lives to be unfulfilling can learn to find joy in the simple things. And by that, McRaven really does mean the simplest things-- even small tasks like making your bed. So, over the course of this summary, we're going to explore the life lessons that have served McRaven well and learn how you can apply them to your own life.



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Make Your Bed

It's only fitting to begin our first chapter with the book's titular command, so without further adieu, let's dive right in! During his basic training program in Coronado, California, McRaven was taught two things out of the gate: always make your bed and always make it immediately after you get out of bed. This might seem like an overly simplistic command-- indeed, perhaps so simplistic that it's not worth doing-- but McRaven soon learned that this was precisely the point. And here's why: if you've ever been to college, you know that a horde of young people living on their own for the first time can quickly become chaotic.

It also quickly shows your true colors as people begin to discover who was taught to be responsible and organized and who arrived at college without so much as the basic skill of doing your own laundry. The same is true for the Navy. However, these environments are separated by a number of key differences, including the fact that at college, you can get away with wearing your underwear inside out instead of washing it. You can leave your bed unmade for days and leave your dorm littered with potato chip packets and candy wrappers. And because your parents aren't there to correct you, you can get away with it until you grow up and get some common sense. But that doesn't fly in the Navy! As McRaven quickly learned, the ability to obey basic tasks and form good persona; hygiene habits says a lot about your character as a person. It also says a lot about your ability to represent your country and its Navy. And that's why it's vitally important to start your day with simple but necessary tasks like making your bed.

However, many of McRaven's compatriots disagreed. It wasn't clear whether that was because they hadn't been required to make their beds at home or because they thought the task wasn't important enough. But one way or another, many of them forgot or willfully ignored this direction altogether. As a result, their commander required anyone who failed to make their bed to complete "the sugar cookie challenge." That might sound tasty and delicious-- after all, who doesn't love sugar cookies!-- but don't be

fooled! The sugar cookie challenge involved a cadet diving into the frigid Pacific Ocean, then rolling around in the scorching sand until they were covered in shimmering sandy “cookie crumbs.” This unpleasant mix of incompatible sensations was extremely uncomfortable, but it might not be so bad if you got to wash off, right? Wrong. Cadets who were “sugar-cookie’d” had to stay like that for the rest of the day, performing all of their usual drills and tasks with the hot, gritty sand under their clothes-- and being disciplined if they appeared to wilt under the discomfort. As you can imagine, this served as a painful reminder to cadets that they should always make their beds.

Fortunately, however, you don’t have to complete the sugar cookie challenge-- you just get to read about it and use this example to motivate you to make your bed on your own. And if you still find yourself wondering why making your bed is important, let’s put it this way: as you can see from McRaven’s example, accomplishing a simple task is a great way to infuse your day with accomplishment and motivation. If you start your morning by doing something that brings order, structure, and cleanliness, it sets a good tone for the day and communicates to your subconscious that you want those same things for your mind. So, what do you have to lose? Start the day by making your bed!



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Rely on Your Buddy

McRaven's time as a Navy SEAL also taught him another valuable lesson: he learned that you can't make it in life without a buddy who has your back. Because SEALs-- much like the Army or the Marines or any other defense organization-- are united against a common enemy, it's important to avoid petty in-fighting and competition that could tear the unit apart from the inside. McRaven learned that in life, as in the Navy, if you want to fight together, you have to look out for each other. Unfortunately, however, McRaven learned this through painful first-hand experience when an ordinary parachute jump resulted in unexpected and disastrous consequences. This occurred when another SEAL's parachute collided with McRaven's, disrupting the author's flight and causing his parachute to get twisted. Unfortunately, it twisted around his leg before it deployed. This meant that the sheer pressure of gravity acted not only on McRaven's parachute but on his leg as well, and the pull was so strong that it shattered McRaven's pelvis and disconnected his stomach muscles from their very bones. I think it's pretty safe to say that McRaven experienced unimaginable pain in this instance-- pain that left him severely injured and damaged his career as a Navy SEAL.

Under these circumstances, no one would have blamed him if he had succumbed to despair. In fact, if he had allowed it to do so, his story might have ended very differently. Perhaps the necessity of pain medication might have led him to develop an addiction. Perhaps he might have spent the rest of his life wallowing in his misfortune. And indeed, either path would have been easy to take; McRaven was certainly tempted by those prospects. But even though his SEAL "buddy" hadn't looked out for him that day, ensuring that McRaven was safely out of the way before taking his own plunge, the author had another life partner who was there for him: his wife Georgeann. She definitely had his back and she stuck by him through his long and painful road to recovery. To this day, McRaven credits his recovery-- and the trajectory of his future-- to Georgeann and her support, acknowledging that he would have given up without her.

So, this story goes to show that you really can't make it in life without a buddy who has your back. Make sure you find a good one.



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Failure is an Opportunity

Have you ever failed an important test or a job interview and said, “Woo-hoo, I’m so glad I failed!” Probably not, right? That’s because nobody views failure as a good thing; if we had our way, we would all win all the time. But as you’ve probably already noticed, that’s not really how life works.

However, that doesn’t mean you should give up when you inevitably fail! Instead, you should try applying the life lesson McRaven has learned firsthand and live as though failure is an opportunity. Because as contradictory as it sounds, the truth is that failure is indeed a chance to learn, grow, and get better. McRaven learned this the hard way as well when he was part of a diving team that somehow just never won. While practicing their Basic Underwater Demolition drills, McRaven’s team always came in last. And if you thought the sugar cookie punishment was bad, just wait until you hear what losers had to endure!

The price for finishing last was “competing” in The Circus. This exercise was not optional and it was meant to be so grueling as to inspire many hopeful SEALs to give up and drop out of the program. When you think about it, that’s pretty scary for a program that’s already branded as the most intense unit of defense our country has to offer. So, what could be too grueling for the best of the best? The Circus is an intense, non-stop, two-hour drill of physical endurance exercises at the end of the day. As you can imagine, it’s not as if SEALs don’t spend all day every day completing intense workouts, so by this point in the day, most people have nothing left to give. They definitely don’t have the strength to withstand two hours of brutal harassment from their commanders who are literally screaming at them to give up.

But that’s the entire point of the exercise. The SEAL commanders are smart enough to know that if you can’t hack the Circus, you can’t make it as a SEAL. So, they want to ensure that only the strongest and most committed survive. McRaven knew that and he knew it was going to be tough. But he also knew that he had to be tougher than anything he was going to face. So,

he made up his mind that he wouldn't be afraid of the Circus and that he would win, no matter what. And that's exactly what he did. He didn't want to fail and go through the Circus, but he knew that this was an opportunity which would make him better. So, he used it as a chance to grow, and his swimming time started to improve. This experience also helped him set an example that encouraged his fellow cadets, and before you knew it, the whole team's time had improved! By the time their graduation endurance exercise rolled around, McRaven's team was ready for the swimming portion. They were so ready, in fact, that they finished first.

So, from this experience, McRaven learned an important life lesson: you can't be afraid of failure and you can't be afraid of the Circus. Because in life as in the SEAL program, you're going to face a lot of both. So, you can't let it destroy you. Instead, you can choose to view your failure as an opportunity and reap the rewards. And having seen them at work in his own life, McRaven believes that these lessons can be beneficial in life, leadership, and entrepreneurship; you don't have to be a Navy SEAL to put these lessons to good use. Because there are going to be times when your business will fail. There will be times when your employees don't appreciate you or when your competitors try to stab you in the back. There will be times when you have to do the same thing over and over again just to finally get it right. But don't be afraid of those times.



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Swim With the Sharks

What do you want most in life? What would you do to get it? If you were told that everything you wanted was just on the other side of a short body of water, would you jump right in and go for it? What about if that body of water was infested with sharks? That information would cause most of us to pause for a second and re-consider our options. Do we really want something badly enough to risk being eaten alive? Although this might sound like an overly scary hypothetical, McRaven and his unit were faced with the exact same situation as part of their basic training. (That's right-- Navy SEALs are so intense that swimming with sharks is just another day in the park for them). And to make matters even scarier, they had to accomplish this feat in the dark.

On the occasion in question, McRaven and his buddy were told to swim four miles at night through pitch-black water. They would be unable to see anything. And they would most definitely be swimming with sharks. The only question was which kind. Their intel had already confirmed that these waters were heavily populated by hammerhead sharks and leopard sharks, but there was also a strong possibility that during this time of the year, the water would be infested with an influx of great whites. (Not scary at all, of course-- just the literal inspiration for JAWS!) It would have been easy to turn back or say it wasn't worth it. For many, it might have been easier to surrender their dream of being a Navy SEAL than it would have been to accept the risk of plunging into shark-infested waters. But McRaven knew that some goals are more important than fear or his personal comfort zone. So, he pushed past his fears and dove straight in.

And he argues that the same is true for us. You may not be called to literally swim with sharks but there may be times that your situation is so hostile, it feels as though you're surrounded by people who want to rip you apart or eat you alive. But McRaven believes that you can't allow those circumstances to bully you into giving up. As he has seen first-hand,

courage will take us as far as we let it. So, dive in, swim with the sharks, and let your courage carry you!



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Final Summary

Most people reading this are unlikely to become Navy SEALs; rather, there's a better chance that you're going to be an entrepreneur or a leader of some kind. And although the life of a Navy SEAL might seem impossibly far removed from your own, McRaven argues that the life lessons he learned during his time in the Navy can benefit everyone. So, no matter what you plan to do with your life, take a page from McRaven's book and let his secrets for success guide you. Start each day by making your bed. Find a buddy you can rely on and always have their back as you expect them to have yours. Don't be afraid of getting sugar cookie'd, don't be afraid of the Circus, and don't be afraid to swim with sharks.



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