

Great Books: How to Become Wise Beyond Your Years

Based on requests, I have compiled this Recommended Reading list. While I have read hundreds of books, some books just keep sticking with me. In fact, I have read many of the books on this list three or more times—or plan to reread them soon.

BTW, if rereading a book is a radical idea for you, remember this: while the book does not change, you are a different learner every time you read the book. You will never experience it the same way twice, and different ideas will jump off the page each time. The classics are often better the second or third time around.

I am aware this is a lengthy list. I am treating you as if you are on the Mastery path, so I'm giving you all I've got with a "start here" suggestion in every category. I suggest you stretch reading these many books over several years.

I have been reading avidly for over 20 years, but it was a skill I learned in my 30's. Before then, I avoided reading. I share this to say no matter what your experience has been with reading, you can build a new one. Just start with books you're excited about that you know you can get through. Don't start with **War and Peace**! And don't forget fiction!!! Great stories make you a better human and a better leader. Plus, they're fun to experience.

Audible.com—while I am not paid to endorse Audible.com, I SHOULD BE because I recommend it to all busy people!

I am a slow reader. I often can consume a book more quickly and easily by listening. While books on CD are fine, the Audible.com app is great for a few reasons. First, you can speed it up to as high as 3X speed without making the reader sound like a chipmunk. I listen to most books at 1.5-2.0 speed. Most authors read their book more slowly than I can listen, so this option is helpful. I also can jump forward and back by 30 seconds and even highlight sections as I listen. The second reason I like Audible is because of a technology they call Whispersync. Many books on Audible are linked to Kindle books with Whispersync, which allows you to jump back and forth between those two Amazon platforms, tracking your location regardless of which platform you want to use at that moment. That is cool.

Here are my recommendations, sorted into some categories that might make them easier to track.

Getting started is usually the hardest part of any practice, so I put an asterisk next to one book in each category. It is my "I recommend you start here" recommendation. Hopefully that makes it easier for you to get started.

Mastery & High Performance. If your goal is to be the best at what you do, these books will give you an edge.

- 1. *Atomic Habits** by James Clear.** This book bumped off the next book for “start here” status. It’s so solid that it will be a best-seller when you’re ready to retire. How do you want to be a better human? This book can show you a path to get there. If you ever wanted to develop a new habit, eliminate a bad habit, deliberately improve your performance, while also understanding why your efforts will succeed or fail, this is your book. There are many books on this topic. This may be the only one you need. This is a great combo of A. the most comprehensive and B. the easiest to apply and understand. Written in Malcolm Gladwell style so it’s an easy read. My favorite quote from this book: “We don’t rise to the level of our goals. We fall to the level of our systems.”
- 2. *Little Book of Talent* by Daniel Coyle.** This book is a fantastic reference. In short one to two-page chapters, he articulates 50 or so qualities of talent hotbeds. They are presented in a way that you can apply them with your work team, sports team, students, and families. It is a great handbook for coaches and leaders of movements. It’s easy to read in short bursts, also. I suggest you focus on applying one habit at a time instead of devouring the book in a few hours. If you prefer the same information delivered in story form, read his book *The Talent Code*.
- 3. *Super Better* by Jane McGonigal.** One of my favorite books of the last decade. McGonigal helps you appreciate how valuable games can be in helping you improve just about anything from performance to outlook. If you’re sick of hearing about “gamification” because it sounds like something that only matters to gamers, she will help you realize that games are everywhere in your life. Even though you have never called them games, they have been shaping your behavior. Based on what she shares in this book, you will find new ways to use games strategically to be, do, and have more of what you want—or to get rid of the things you do not want. Genius book. Genius author. You can also check out her talks on TED.com if you want a preview.
- 4. *Mastery* by George Leonard.** A short, straightforward book about the path of Mastery, a rare path in our modern day. Any time you want to do something exceptional, you will need to follow this path. I find the first 100 pages are the most valuable. This book is one of the top five that has shaped the way I think about life and leadership.
- 5. *Power+ Mindset and Resilience*.** When things get tough, how can you train your mind to withstand the most difficult challenges you will inevitably face? How you

perform under pressure is a key differentiator of the good from the amazing. Performing well under easy conditions is very different. The best performers excel when things get tough, and it is not just a lucky accident. They train themselves for it. These books will light the path for you.

6. **The War of Art* by Steven Pressfield.** This book lays it on the line. Whether it is being a creative (writer, musician, artist) or launching a business, the moment you say you're going to create something great, you've just triggered the worst parts of you to show up and challenge that. Pressfield gives this part of you a name: The Resistance. Delivered in short, two to three-page chapters, he tells you what to expect and how to deal with it in a no BS writing style. It is best to know these things BEFORE you make your biggest stretch. I hope to read this book every year until I die to remind myself of what happens when you decide to do something great. If you do not like to read, this is a great one for you because it has short chapters. Or just listen on Audible.com.
7. **Loving What Is by Byron Katie.** Ok, stop the presses. If I could only take one non-fiction book to a desert island with me, this would be a candidate. When it comes to understanding and managing the mind, the wisdom in this book is really all you need. But it is not easy to apply. Byron Katie's teachings run counter to much of what we were raised to believe about how to handle things in life we do not want. This approach, called "The Work," is a ticket to freedom. Profound because of its simplicity. I definitely recommend you listen to the book because Byron Katie narrates it. It is great just to hear through her voice the state of ease she lives in. Also, there are some examples of her coaching people to apply "The Work" in the book. The Audible.com version is "live" and gives you a much richer experience than reading the coaching conversations transcribed onto a page. The only reason this book isn't listed #1 in this category is that it will take more time to read it. I've read this book or listened on audible at least five times.
8. **Essentialism by Greg McKeown.** Do you feel overwhelmed, like there is too much to do? Do you know you say yes to too many things or are you burdened by all your commitments and possessions? This could be your book. The core mantra of the essentialist is "less but better." If you need more (or less?) of that, this is your book. This is not just an idea. It is a lifestyle that changes the lives of those who adopt it. Let less but better become your mantra.
9. **Turning Pro by Stephen Pressfield.** If you liked *The War of Art*, this book is the next in the series. When I read this book, I probably wrote as many words in the margins as there were words printed on the page. It's a classic that I hope to re-read at least

annually. I would love to have this guy's voice in my ear every day, especially when things get difficult.

- 10. *Psycho-cybernetics* by Maxwell Maltz.** This is probably the one book that kicked off the Western mindfulness enlightenment in the 20th century. He was the first modern day Westerner to help people understand that we create the world we experience through our minds. I love this book and the simple ideas presented in the 1950's. If you read the book, buy the original edition. Others have "updated and improved" the book over the years, but the original is still the best, even though the examples are out of date. The original is a white book with orange and black writing on it. Buy a used copy.
- 11. *Lean Startup* by Eric Ries.** The ideas in this book fly in the face of much of the "modern" business thinking of the 20th and early 21st century. This is as much a book about changing your mindset for more success as it is about how to lead your startup. Smart thinking that applies to a business of any age or size. Even though it works, many people still resist the ideas because they do not conform to their world view or because they are afraid to behave differently than the crowd. Dang that peer pressure!
- 12. *Man's Search for Meaning* by Viktor Frankl.** This is considered one of the best books ever written about the power of the human spirit. Frankl is a survivor of brutal Nazi concentration camps who used his hellacious experiences to show us all how to create more meaning in our own lives. It also helps you put in perspective the day-to-day challenges in your world.

Leadership & Influence. Sometimes you just need to move people to a new place or a higher vision. Great leaders are masters at this. But you will never be done getting better at this. If you want to keep getting better, here are some books to help you.

- 1. *Switch** by Chip and Dan Heath.** I hope the authors have good security systems in their houses, because I love their work so much, I sometimes want to just invite myself over to dinner, so we can all hang out. Surely, they would find me as cool as they are! Of the Heath Brothers' books, this is my favorite. How do you get individuals and groups of people to change direction when most of them do not want to, do not know how, and are afraid? They will introduce you to the rider and elephant metaphor. Their framework is simple. It is three steps. They teach everything through stories. No fluff. Just an elegant framework illustrated with fun and relatable stories.

2. **This Is Marketing.** This is as much a book about leadership thinking as it is about marketing. Seth Godin elegantly incorporates ideas from design thinking and servant leadership in a simple book about marketing and influence. I learned more practical ideas about marketing from him than I did in MBA school. I liked this book so much that I took the online version of it, a 200-day course that blew my mind.
3. **Primed to Perform by Neil Doshi and Lindsay McGregor.** You have probably experienced how traditional ways of “motivating” you either don't work or even create the opposite of their intended affect. The authors lay out a framework to create “Total Motivation” or TOMO to help engage people do their best work. TOMO is so simple, it is profound. If your dreams are huge, you are going to need others to build it with you, and you will need to inspire their very best. Read this book before you get started.
4. **Influence, the Psychology of Persuasion by Robert Cialdini.** Great research-based book that explains through stories how to get people to do things they might not want to do. It was written as a “buyer beware” book but has found the biggest audience with marketers who want to understand how to grow their influence in order to build their businesses. This is considered THE book on influence.
5. **Thinking Fast and Slow by Daniel Kahneman.** Kahneman won a Nobel Prize for the insightful research that this book is based upon. He will help you observe how many of your assumptions about how the human mind works are probably limited. We believe we know why we choose what we choose and act as we act. Yet, there is a part of your brain that moves so quickly, you do not notice it. Understanding it and its slower counterpart can not only help you live more wisely; it can help you lead more generously to bring out the best in people. If you like *Influence* by Cialdini, this delves more deeply and broadly in a similar area.
6. **Game Changers (Civilian Edition) by Lt Col (retired) Scott Mann.** This book is written to help the next generations know how to end violent extremism across the world—or in your local community. It is told with story and shares some must-know insights that any leader of crisis needs to know. It helps you understand, even predict, how people will react in conditions where they are experiencing resource scarcity and depletion of trust—and how to lead them forward. It is based in solid science, and it is what the US Green Berets used to push back violent extremists in Afghanistan. Much of it can be applied by leaders who want to create any type of movement.
7. **The Power of Moments by Chip and Dan Heath.** Not all moments are equal. You know that from experience. But how can you thoughtfully and strategically create

impact experiences as a leader, a parent, a friend, an educator to connect with people, inspire people, and explode their paradigm for what's possible for themselves? Illustrated with exceptional stories.

- 8. *Hooked: How to Build Habit Forming Products* by Nir Eyal.** This book helps you understand at a macro level why all for-profit social media platforms or video games or news websites suck you in and cause you to get trapped within them. These ideas can be used for good or evil, but they very much apply to anyone who wants to create a longer-term relationship with clients. It is an easy read.

Biography. Forget about theory. How about hearing the stories of real people who have achieved remarkable things?

Here are the themes you'll find run across the diverse lives of these amazing people:

- They had a commitment to a cause or a belief that was far bigger than themselves that kept them going far beyond reasonable limits.
- They were geniuses.
 - And they were also highly flawed, sometimes confused, often behaving contrary to or inconsistently with their espoused values.
- They were human.
 - And still, they were focused, and determined, letting nothing stop them from achieving their goals.
- The setbacks they faced were enormous, not just once but over and over and over.
 - And when their face was in the mud, that is when they found it in themselves to keep going when most would have stopped.

Never mind being the perfect leader. The person you are today is ready to step forward. Go make something happen and let your experiences teach you, just like these people did. Let these courageous, flawed humans light your path.

- 1. *Wild** by Cheryl Strayed.** Dang, what an awesome story. This is the quickest and easiest read of all the books in this category. And, it is a really well told story. You will be drawn in. You will see yourself in this character in a thousand ways. She is so human, raw, and honest. Yet, the book is incredibly poignant. It is a true story that reads like a novel. And just for the record, I liked Cheryl Strayed even before Oprah made her cool.

2. ***Elon Musk by Ashlee Vance.*** If you want a more business focused biography, this is my first choice. Elon Musk has overcome so many challenges already. He will probably have a greater impact on our lives than Steve Jobs, by many magnitudes. It is just fascinating to read his story. And there is even a note in the Appendix about what he thinks was the missed opportunity for PayPal.
3. ***Hamilton by Ron Chernow.*** Just an epic story of the life of Alexander Hamilton. It is a story of genius and of overcoming obstacles. Especially because of when he lived, his decisions and actions had epic historical and political impact that still touch our lives, today. Not an easy read because of its length, but a well told story. This also shows the power of a strong partnership. Much of what Hamilton was able to achieve was made possible because of his long-lasting relationship with George Washington who saw the genius and opened doors that would have never been accessible for Hamilton on his own. Who are the powerful people opening doors for you? Who are the geniuses you are opening doors for?
4. ***Washington by Ron Chernow.*** If you only know the basics of George Washington's life, oh, what you do not know! Talk about one powerful and complex human being. He threaded the needle of history. He had so many brushes with death, but he still was the ONE leader in the new US of A who people believed could lead the new nation. Fascinating. Also, he surrounded himself with great people who he could lean on like Alexander Hamilton. He could not have done all of this alone. Who are you leaning on?
5. ***Born to Run by Bruce Springsteen.*** It probably helps if you're a fan of Bruce Springsteen's music to read this book. But it is a story of how a person crafted his own path to become an elite performer. Hint: he had no Plan B. He did not try to do it all. He only tried to do one thing. And he kept getting back up every time someone or something knocked him off his path. Moving and inspiring for any person who intends to make an imprint that lives beyond them.
6. ***Bearing the Cross by David Garrow.*** Talk about a complex and powerful man. There is much about Martin Luther King's life the public never knew. Even though the book reveals his frailties as well as his strengths, my respect and gratitude for this man exploded while reading this book. It took me almost a year to get through it, which is the only reason it's not the first book I recommend. It is not written like a typical biography. It is more of a piecing together of stories based on the author's research.

7. **Steve Jobs by Walter Isaacson.** This book needs little introduction or explanation. Steve Jobs changed the world several times in his lifetime. And he was not an easy guy to know or to understand.
8. **Hillbilly Elegy by JD Vance.** JD Vance gives a view into the world of people who probably buy your products, yet you may not get to interact with much. It is honest and sobering. It is a book about resilience in the trenches of a difficult life within a struggling community. It is real world. And it is another example of how one person (in this instance, Vance's grandma) can forever change the course of a person's life, just like you can do for the people around you.
9. **Born a Crime by Trevor Noah.** This is a book of struggle, resilience, joy and hope. What a life! What a tribute to his mom who is a force of nature! Listen to the audible version so you'll get to hear him speak in all of the accents of the people you'll meet in his story. You won't want it to end. And you'll never forget it. Plenty of leadership lessons in here, even though it's not marketed that way.

Relationship

1. **Getting the Love You Want* by Harville Hendrix.** This is probably the single best-selling book in history about building relationships. Hendrix shares a very provocative theory that we are unconsciously attracted to our partners in life for reasons we would never believe. And in the end, these things that attract us also evoke the greatest potential triggers of our bad behavior. In my own experience in relationships and in observing many others, I think he is correct. But it is not a cynical book. When we finally understand what is really going on, we can make new choices that help build the strongest and best relationship imaginable. Like anything worthwhile, it ain't gonna be easy or fast. But he does an excellent job of laying out a path.
2. **New Rules of Marriage by Terrence Real.** If *Getting the Love You Want* explains WHY a relationship is so hard to be in, this book explains HOW to do something about it. This is the clearest book of instruction on how to address the differences you and your partner experience when one or both of you is not at your best. These lessons also apply 100% to your work relationships and friendships.

Special Note on Mastery Path: This book also taught me a great lesson of what you and I will both encounter on the Mastery Path. The lesson: separate the teacher from the teachings.

I found the author to have a condescending tone in several sections of the book, particularly when he was talking about how he counseled couples in crisis. He's

the hero of his stories. He also took a few swipes at men in the beginning of the book that he never really followed up on, which made me wonder why he needed to do that in the first place.

Whether you agree with my opinions about the author or not, one of the great lessons of mastery is that sometimes you'll encounter teachers you really don't like. Or, you will study with teachers who don't actually walk the talk of what they teach. But DON'T throw the teachings away. "Separating the teacher from the teachings" was one of my critical lessons on the mastery path.

Ideally, you will jam with your teachers and they'll all walk the talk of what they teach. Those are my favorites, too. But do not let them trigger you so you can't accept the gifts they're offering.

- 3. *Mating in Captivity by Esther Perel.*** I like it when people honestly address a topic that's often considered socially taboo. Esther Perel is a brilliant observer of people in relationship. This book describes the mistakes we make in relationships based on good intentions and societal expectations. Left to our own devices, we can deplete the life from a relationship. While she doesn't give a lot of "how to" fixes, her ideas will illuminate your thoughts about your love relationship, especially if you've been together for a while. Perel also has a couple of great TED talks and a great series about marriage on audible. She's a fascinating communicator and teacher.

Bigger Questions of Life. Sometimes we just want to ask if there is more to the world than what we see and hear. What is this mystery we call life? Of course, there are many books written to answer this question. Here are a few of my off-the-beaten-path books I enjoyed.

- 1. *Surrender Experiment* by Michael Singer.*** This guy's odyssey is just one of those stories you must read to believe. I recommend this book to my clients when they are overwhelmed by their responsibilities and stuck in the "I'll never get it all done" loop. It could be listed in the biographies section, but I think it is as much about asking the deeper questions of life. In his early 20's, the author committed to surrender to whatever life brought to him and to try to control absolutely nothing. For a type A personality, that probably seems like a really, really bad idea. But the story he tells about his 40 years of living the "surrender experiment" is beyond what most people can imagine. In my own experience, "surrender" is an act only the wisest and seasoned among us can really do. Yet, it is also where the REAL progress comes. In our vernacular, surrender is the act of saying, "My Reality and my Moves aren't adequate to handle the challenges I'm facing." And from that admission of

not being able to see and do it all, which is nearly impossible for most people to admit, amazing wisdom arises. You might even call some of it “miraculous.” All the different paths of faith talk about surrender in their own way. This book just tells a story of what happened to a guy in our modern era who got really good at it.

- 2. *Meditation for the Love of It* by Sally Kempton.** Sally has been teaching meditation for over 50 years. She was also an award-winning, world-renowned journalist who was one of the voices of the Women’s Liberation Movement before she decided to become a monk and move into an ashram. She is such an amazing communicator. She takes what are often incredibly hard to grasp topics and put them into words that sometimes sound like poetry. She provides very specific practices you can do to train yourself to be a great meditator. I recommend you read a few pages, then go practice what she taught—lather, rinse, repeat. I read this book over about six months the first time. This is still my go to meditation reference guide after 25 years of meditation. Sally is the da bomb and her work is the best.
- 3. *Untethered Soul* by Michael Singer.** By the same author of *The Surrender Experiment*, if you want to dig into mindfulness in a deeper way, this book is helpful. This is a “read a few pages at bedtime” book. But you may have to read every page two or three times!