

10 Life Lessons from Basic SEAL Training by Naval Admiral William H. McRaven

Below are ten life lessons from an inspiring and powerful 20-minute commencement speech by Naval Admiral William H. McRaven, ninth commander of U.S. Special Operations at the Commencement at The University of Texas at Austin on May 17, 2014.

1. **If you want to change the world, start off by making your bed.**
“If you can’t do the little things right, you will never do the big things right.”
2. **If you want to change the world, find someone to help you paddle.**
“You can’t change the world alone—you will need some help— and to truly get from your starting point to your destination takes friends, colleagues, the good will of strangers and a strong coxswain to guide them.”
3. **If you want to change the world, measure a person by the size of their heart, not the size of their flippers.**
“SEAL training was a great equalizer. Nothing mattered but your will to succeed. Not your color, not your ethnic background, not your education and not your social status.”
4. **If you want to change the world get over being a sugar cookie and keep moving forward.**
“For failing the uniform inspection, the student [in Basic SEAL training] had to run, fully clothed into the surf zone and then, wet from head to toe, roll around on the beach until every part of your body was covered with sand. The effect was known as a ‘sugar cookie.’ You stayed in that uniform the rest of the day — cold, wet and sandy. Sometimes no matter how well you prepare or how well you perform you still end up as a sugar cookie. There were many a student who just couldn’t accept the fact that all their effort was in vain. . . Those students didn’t understand the purpose of the drill. You were never going to succeed. You were never going to have a perfect uniform.”
5. **If you want to change the world, don’t be afraid of the circuses.**
“Every day during training you were challenged with multiple physical events — long runs, long swims, obstacle courses, hours of calisthenics — something designed to test your mettle. Every event had standards — times you had to meet. If you failed to meet those standards your name was posted on a list, and at the end of the day those on the list were invited to a ‘circus.’ A circus was two hours of additional calisthenics designed to wear you down, to break your spirit, to force you to quit. Life is filled with circuses. You will fail. You will likely fail often. It will be painful. It will be discouraging. At times it will test you to your very core.”
6. **If you want to change the world sometimes you have to slide down the obstacle head first.**
“One day, a student decided to go down the slide for life head first. Instead of swinging his body underneath the rope and inching his way down, he bravely mounted the TOP of the rope and thrust himself forward. It was a dangerous move — seemingly foolish, and fraught with risk. Failure could mean injury and being dropped from the training. Without hesitation the student slid down the rope perilously fast. Instead of several minutes, it only took him half that time and by the end of the course he had broken the record.”
7. **If you want to change the world, don’t back down from the sharks.**
“There are a lot of sharks in the world. If you hope to complete the swim you will have to deal with them.”

8. **If you want to change the world, you must be your very best in the darkest moment.**

“At the darkest moment of the mission is the time when you must be calm, composed—when all your tactical skills, your physical power and all your inner strength must be brought to bear.”

9. **If you want to change the world, start singing when you’re up to your neck in mud.**

“If I have learned anything in my time traveling the world, it is the power of hope. The power of one person—Washington, Lincoln, King, Mandela and even a young girl from Pakistan, Malala—one person can change the world by giving people hope.”

10. **If you want to change the world don’t ever, ever ring the bell.**

“In SEAL training there is a bell. A brass bell that hangs in the center of the compound for all the students to see. All you have to do to quit—is ring the bell. Ring the bell and you no longer have to wake up at 5 o’clock. Ring the bell and you no longer have to do the freezing cold swims. Ring the bell and you no longer have to do the runs, the obstacle course, the PT—and you no longer have to endure the hardships of training. Just ring the bell. If you want to change the world don’t ever, ever ring the bell.”

“Start each day with a task completed. Find someone to help you through life. Respect everyone. Know that life is not fair and that you will fail often. But if you take some risks, step up when the times are toughest, face down the bullies, lift up the downtrodden and never, ever give up — if you do these things, then the next generation and the generations that follow will live in a world far better than the one we have today.”

“It matters not your gender, your ethnic or religious background, your orientation, or your social status. Our struggles in this world are similar and the lessons to overcome those struggles and to move forward—changing ourselves and the world around us—will apply equally to all.”

"Changing the world can happen anywhere and anyone can do it."

The first thing William McRaven does when he wakes up each day is make his bed.

Referring to McRaven's practice as a strictly executed "habit" doesn't do it justice. It's more like a ritual or a daily rite or perhaps even a "lifestyle." The bed-making routine began during basic SEAL training in the late 1970s and continued as he rose from a junior officer in the Navy to the commander of the U.S. Special Operations Command – the position he held until he retired in 2014 after 37 years of service.

McRaven is, of course, no ordinary bed-maker; he's a master folder of threads, no matter the count, and one who devotes more than an entire page in his new book – "Make Your Bed: Little Things That Can Change Your Life . . . And Maybe the World" – to explaining the requisite angles, creases and alignment that produce a properly made bed.

The 61-year-old McRaven – a four-star admiral who oversaw the raid that killed Osama bin Laden – argues that it's no coincidence that his dedication to bed-making dovetailed with his prolific rise through the Navy.

"There's a power behind making your bed every morning," McRaven, now the chancellor at the University of Texas System, told USA Today. "Learn to do the little things well, learn to make your bed right. And that transcends into a lot of other things you do."