

ADVANCE REVIEW COPY | ON SALE MARCH 2026

UNLOCKING THE LAST 20%

**Rising to Greatness
Through Discipline,
Balance, and Resiliency**

TUCKER HAMILTON

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To my first date and the love of my life, Courtney . . . you surpass them all!
To Olivia, Andrew, Beatrice, and August . . .
passionately toil, reflectively love.



The author is in the F-35 aircraft that is turning away from the camera,
2019. (Lockheed Martin aerial photographer Chad Bellay)

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Experimental Test Pilots are among the most highly trained aviators in the world—the first to fly new aircraft, systems, and weapons. Their mission is as daring as it is essential: to take machines that have never been proven into the sky and push them to their limits, ensuring they are safe, effective, and meet the government’s contractual specifications.

Referred to simply as “Test Pilots” throughout this book, they graduate from a crucible known as Test Pilot School (TPS)—a year-long program so demanding that it is often called the PhD of flying. For the Air Force, TPS is located at Edwards Air Force Base in California; for the Navy, at Patuxent River Naval Air Station in Maryland. There, pilots, combat system officers, and flight test engineers are pushed to master more than 30 different aircraft, refine specialized flight-test techniques, and learn to deliver data that will shape the future of aviation. It is only through the collective skill of this team of professionals that success is possible—where every mission is measured in milliseconds and demands nothing less than absolute precision, discipline, and composure in the face of chaos.

At TPS, we fly everything. From gliders to commercial jets, helicopters to vintage warbirds, water landing aircraft to blimps, and of course,

cutting-edge fighter aircraft. Students are deliberately thrust into the unknown, building a repertoire of experience that may one day save them when no one else has gone before. For example, after only a day and a half of ground instruction in the A-10, I found myself flying solo—firing its 30mm cannon and dropping bombs, feats that operational A-10 pilots do not attempt until months into their training pipeline. In just one year, TPS students complete over 35 technical papers, master demanding courses in aerodynamics, propulsion, data science, and more, while conducting a full-scale test program as their capstone. Those who graduate not only earn a Master's degree in Flight Test Engineering but also the coveted "Blue Patch"—a symbol worn permanently on their flight suits, marking them as members of one of aviation's most elite communities.

Only a handful of people on Earth are entrusted with this role. Test Pilots are the ones who strap into an aircraft for the very first time, take it to the edge of performance, and bring back the knowledge that keeps future aviators alive. They are the bridge between invention and combat power—the reason operators can climb into their aircraft with unshakable confidence that what carries them into battle is safe, reliable, and ready for war.

For readers who want to delve deeper, this book is complemented by videos and media that bring the stories to life. You can find them on my YouTube channel: **@cincohamilton**.

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INTRODUCTION

“There is no passion to be found in playing small—in settling for a life that is less than the one you are capable of living.”

—Nelson Mandela

If you knew that the survival of two lives and a \$30 million aircraft would depend upon how you responded in a split-second decision, how would you prepare for that moment? Casually or with laser focus? Would you take your training seriously, or just “call it in”?

The reality is that life-defining decisions are just around the corner, no matter what phase of life you are in, and your preparation for them is happening right now. Are you going to have what it takes when the time comes?

One unforgettable instance of my answer to that perennial question occurred on July 14, 2014.

It was a bluebird morning, and I was taking up an Air Force helicopter test pilot on an incentive flight in an F-15D. As test pilots, staying sharp with different aircraft is key to our readiness, and this day was no different. The F-15D is a two-seat version of the F-15C, typically used for training, with

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limited controls in the back seat.* The pilot in the front seat—my guest for the day—was a helicopter pilot, about to experience something entirely new.

After two hours of mission prep and teaching the basics of flying forward at breakneck speeds, compared to his typical hovering in a helicopter, we were ready to go. The plan was simple: He would handle most of the flight, from takeoff to landing, while I sat in the back as the instructor, overseeing every move. It was a perfect day for flying, and everything went smoothly on the ground. We took off without a hitch, executed a few aerobatic maneuvers, and even went supersonic. The front-seat pilot adapted quickly, showing the skill and flexibility of a test pilot.

We joined up with another F-15 to conduct some formation flying. As we flew in tight formation back to our base, I noticed something out of place. I calmly radioed to the other aircraft, “Everything seems fine, except you’re missing your left rudder.” Basically, a large chunk of one of his tails was missing. After a brief pause, the other pilot acknowledged the issue, and we shifted into an emergency support role, ensuring our wingman could land safely. We followed him closely as he conducted an approach and landing. Because he was landing, we also put our gear down to chase him, which is standard practice.† Once he was on the ground, we

* Only a select few instructor pilots were authorized to fly from the back seat, and it was extremely rare for the front-seat pilot to be a non-qualified passenger. One of the few exceptions was when a test pilot was receiving a familiarization flight. Typically, back-seat instructors were there to train qualified pilots on tasks like air refueling or to oversee landings for new F-15 pilots. Even those students had extensive simulator time and a solid understanding of emergency procedures. Landing from the back seat was considered one of the most demanding and high-risk scenarios—reserved for the rare instance when the front-seat pilot was incapacitated.

† Chasing another aircraft is one of the first skills we learn in pilot training. In the fighter world, our formation isn’t just tactical—it’s a lifeline. When emergencies hit, the support of the other aircraft can make all the difference. Fighter pilots even have a one-handed system to count, since the other hand stays glued to the stick. A closed fist is zero. Fingers held upright signal 1–5; turn the hand sideways and fingers extended mean 6–9. To pass along a string of numbers, we raise the hand, flash the count, drop it out of view, then bring it back up with the next number. The chapter headings are a nod to this counting—that’s why chapter 11 is marked with two vertical “diamonds”: a one beside a one . . . voilà, eleven.

prepared for our own pattern to land, which first required us to raise our gear.

As we began to retract our landing gear, we placed the landing gear handle up in the cockpit. Lights came on, first indicating that the gear was moving between being fully down and locked, and then we waited for new lights to indicate that the gear was up safely and retracted into the belly of the aircraft. As I moved the gear handle up, I noticed the gear light failed to go out, indicating the gear hadn't fully retracted. This wasn't an immediate concern because we could simply extend the gear again and land—as long as when we put the gear handle down, the gear lights showed the landing gear was safely locked in the down position. We placed the gear handle down, and as anticipated, we had green lights showing everything was fine. I let the front-seat pilot take control for the landing. All seemed to be going well until we touched down, and the left wing dipped hard. My hands, hovering just above the controls, quickly reacted, and I threw the throttles into full afterburner, lifting the aircraft back into the air. Something was wrong, and I declared an emergency.

We climbed to 4,000 feet, hoping to get another aircraft to check out our landing gear, but the nearest one was 60 miles away. Meanwhile, my wingman, now safely on the ground, relayed what he saw and helped me run through emergency procedures. The tower reported that it looked like we'd blown a tire on landing, but I needed confirmation. Our recovery actions would be dictated by what actually happened. As we waited for the chase aircraft to arrive, we ran through the checklist to prepare for a cable-assisted landing. In fighter aircraft, we use a hook to catch a cable strung across the runway* during certain landing gear emergencies. Since

* Runway numbers are based on their magnetic compass heading, rounded to the nearest 10 degrees. For example, a runway pointing due east (90°) is labeled Runway 09, while the opposite direction (270°) is Runway 27. Runways vary in length depending on the airport's size and mission. Some runways are also equipped with arresting cables designed to catch tailhooks on military jets during emergency landings. Interestingly, runway numbers can change over time due to the gradual shift of Earth's magnetic north, requiring airports to occasionally repaint and relabel their headings.

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I was in the back seat and most of our switches were in the front seat, it was my job to talk the front-seat pilot through the necessary steps of configuring the aircraft for this serious situation. One major configuration change involved depressurizing our fuel tanks. He didn't know the names of pretty much any switch or handle except the throttle and the flight control stick. This meant I had to guide him, from memory, to locate a poorly labeled switch hidden among dozens of other switches. I instructed him step-by-step: "Place your left hand to the first set of switches directly in front of the throttle. Count three switches to the left, then move one switch forward, and pull that switch aft." The situation was high-stakes and mentally demanding for both of us. Every move mattered, and the consequences of getting it wrong could be disastrous.

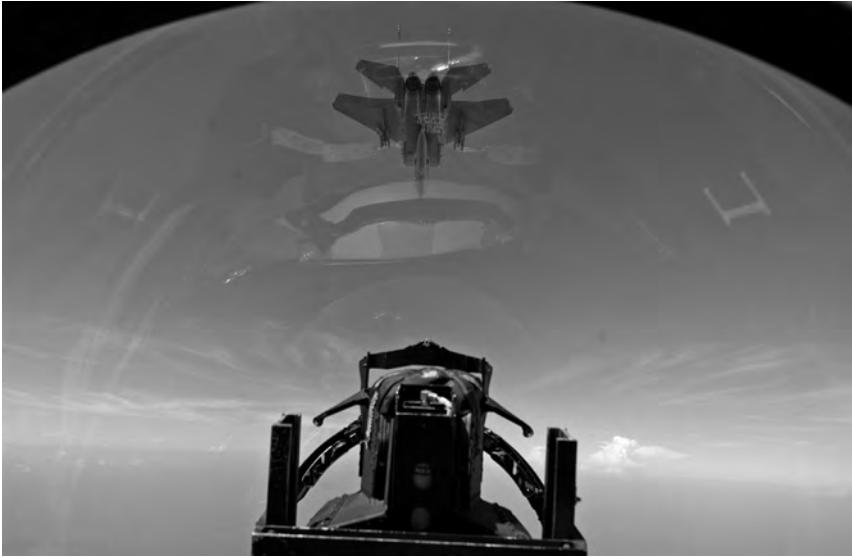
With just five minutes' worth of fuel remaining, the chase aircraft finally arrived and delivered the news—there was no blown tire. This was not welcome news because it meant we had no idea what was wrong, but we had to land immediately. The pressure was immense. The front-seat flyer didn't have the experience to land the F-15 in an emergency, and as the instructor pilot in the back seat, I was responsible. The problem? I couldn't see out the front of the aircraft. I had to land this jet nearly blind, relying only on my side view to gauge our position relative to a tight 400-foot landing zone.

This wasn't just any landing zone[†]—it was the critical space where we needed to catch the arresting cable to stop safely. Too early, and our hook would grab the underrun cable, ripping the aircraft apart. Too late, and we'd miss the cable entirely, sending us hurtling off the runway at high speed. Both outcomes were devastating. Traveling at 190 mph, the front-seat pilot became my eyes, guiding me step-by-step, telling me where the

* In aviation, *aft* refers to the rear of the aircraft. Pilots commonly use *forward* to indicate the direction toward the nose, and *aft* to indicate the direction toward the tail.

† A 400-foot landing zone, when traveling at 190 mph (279 feet per second), passes by in 1.44 seconds.

nose of the aircraft was pointing as I did everything in my power to keep us on target.



Captured from the back seat of an F-15D, this photo highlights the limited forward visibility for the rear-seat pilot.

This was it. We had no second chance. With the fuel running out, if I missed the mark, we'd likely have to eject and hope we got out before the aircraft cartwheeled off the side of the runway. The adrenaline was surging. Everything hinged on that cable, and I had to get it right.

As we touched down, the left wing dropped hard, scraping the runway as I fought to keep the jet level. The wing miraculously hopped over the cable, and the external fuel tank that hung beneath the wing also skipped by. We started veering dangerously off to the left, my hands moving towards the ejection handles, ready to pull, until suddenly we felt the violent jolt of the cable catching. We were yanked to a stop, still veering left, but staying on the runway. We were safe.

We quickly shut down the engines, executed an emergency ground

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egress,* and sprinted clear of the aircraft. The cause? A catastrophic mechanical failure in the left main landing gear. The system had shown us all green—indicating it was safe—when, in reality, it was anything but. We had been flying on the edge of disaster, relying on a malfunctioning system to indicate our gear integrity, and it nearly cost us everything.

Reflecting on that day, I realized how critical to our survival preparation, communication, and teamwork were. From the training that prepared me to react in split seconds, to the support from my wingman and tower, to the calm communication between me and the front-seat pilot. But, beyond that, this mission cemented something deeper: When it really counts, most of us are only prepared to give 80%, but true success, especially in high-pressure situations, demands the last 20%.

Imagine if each night when you plug in your smartphone the battery only charges to 80%. It works fine—apps run, calls go through, and it lasts most of the day. But you know that it has more potential. What happens on those days when your phone dips down to 2% battery remaining, but you desperately need more time? This is what it's like when you're not fully pushing yourself. You function well, you get through life, but you're never truly operating at full strength, never fully ready to take advantage of emerging opportunities.

Why 80%? What's the magic with that number? It's a B-minus—just above average. It's enough to be competent, to achieve, to succeed. People living at 80% of their potential will probably realize a sense of fulfillment. They'll experience some modicum of success, but will never be fully optimized. And if that's you—if you're content without pushing for

* Emergency ground egress begins by shutting off the engines and de-arming the ejection seat so that it doesn't accidentally ignite. From there, unbuckling the lap belt, disconnecting your shoulder harnesses, unplugging the G-suit hose, and detaching two hip connectors that secure a pilot to a survival kit that is only used in an ejection scenario. Once you've completed these tasks you open the canopy and use an emergency telescoping ladder that is stowed along the outside of the canopy.

more—then sit back and enjoy the stories ahead. They come from a fighter test pilot's world, offering a unique and entertaining perspective. After all, there are far worse ways to spend your time.

But if a B-minus doesn't cut it for you—if you crave excellence, thrive on challenge, and absolutely refuse to settle for “good enough”—then this is your moment. You have more to give, and it's time to unlock your full potential. The path won't be easy. It will come with failures, setbacks, and dreams that may never fully materialize. But it will also bring something far more significant—a deep, unshakable satisfaction, the kind that comes from knowing you left nothing on the table. It's a balance, a clarity, a fulfillment that resonates through all facets of life. It's the pursuit of greatness.

A word of caution is in order. This book is not about giving you a measuring tool that allows you to differentiate between 85% and 92%. It's not a formula or a scorecard; rather, it's an overarching call to invest in recognizing you have more to give, and then providing you with tools to optimize your potential. The difference between 80% and 100% is not a number; it's a mindset. It's the shift from reacting to life to shaping it. It's the art of being intentional—crafting a life, career, and relationships with purpose, passion, and relentless pursuit of your full potential.

But how do you know you've reached 100%? How do you know you're only living at 80% and that you have more to give? In the story above, as I sat in the back seat of the F-15D, was I performing at 80% and then all of a sudden knew I had to kick it in when the unexpected happened? Absolutely not! Had I been performing at 80% when I first had an inkling that something was wrong, I would have had 1% battery life when I needed another 20% and we would have crashed.

You might be thinking, isn't it impossible to be at 100% all the time? What about rest? What about simply enjoying life—watching a movie, taking a breath?

Here's the truth: Being at 100% isn't about constant exertion or burnout. It's about intentionality. It's about living a life that isn't reactive

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but proactive, cultivating a mindset that ensures you're fully present and ready—whether it's a high-stakes board meeting, quality time with family, or simply unwinding. When you commit to that level of engagement, even moments of rest become richer, more fulfilling. Because whether you're deeply immersed in a video game or pushing two times the speed of sound in a test flight, you're not just going through the motions. You're fully there—awake, engaged, and experiencing life at its highest level.

And yet, the pursuit never stops. Being at 100% today doesn't mean that mark won't shift tomorrow. Life changes, and with it, our understanding of what giving our all truly means. Maybe you become a parent, and suddenly, what you thought was your maximum capacity expands in ways you never imagined. Maybe a challenge arises that forces you to dig deeper, push further. The point isn't to reach some fixed definition of your best—it's to always seek growth, to reflect, adjust, and evolve. Because while life may change, the pursuit of becoming a better version of ourselves never does.

To be clear, it's not about being reckless or overly ambitious; it's about trusting that you've done the work and knowing that when the time comes, you can push through. It's the willingness to lean forward, to step into the moment with intention and confidence.

On the day of my gear collapse, it wasn't just skill that saved us—it was being near 100% before the circumstances demanded it.

The real question, then, is how do we know when we've truly unlocked that last 20%? How do we recognize when we're still holding back, or worse, deceiving ourselves into thinking we've given everything when, in reality, there's more to give? This is where the power of self-awareness and intuition comes into play. Self-awareness is about understanding your internal world and motivations, the conscious knowledge of one's own character. Intuition is more about sensing the external world, knowing something without the need for conscious reasoning. The former is

reflective and deliberate, enabling growth. The latter is automatic, drawing on experience and providing an instinct to be able to perform in challenging situations.

Intuition helps you act quickly and correctly, while self-awareness helps you understand why you acted and how to improve next time.

Intuition isn't just a feeling or guesswork—it's more like an internal altimeter,* finely tuned over time through experience, reflection, and growth, all grounded in self-awareness. It's the subtle knowledge that tells us we're not yet at our peak performance.

But this intuition doesn't just appear overnight. Each time you push past your limits, you're sharpening your sense of what you're truly capable of. This is where the concept of developing self-awareness comes in—learning to tune into those quiet signals that tell you when you're operating below your peak. It's the feeling in your gut that tells you you've got more left in the tank, the nagging thought that you didn't push quite hard enough in that last meeting or training session, or the awareness that fear of failure is still holding you back.

If you're not having these thoughts or raising these questions, you're ready for the first step in unlocking the last 20%—acknowledge that you're not always performing at 100%, even when you think you are. That self-awareness needs to then turn into believing that you are made for more—start feeling the call to greatness. A call that will never get answered unless you begin asking yourself: *Do I have more to give? Do I have what it takes to rise to greatness?*

This self-awareness is a skill, and like any skill, it can be honed.

* An altimeter measures a pilot's altitude using atmospheric pressure, which decreases with height. Because air pressure can vary based on weather and location, pilots must regularly adjust—or “set”—their altimeter to a known reference (usually local sea-level pressure) to ensure accurate altitude readings. Even a small miscalibration can result in altitude errors of hundreds of feet, which can be dangerous, especially when flying in formation, near terrain, or in congested airspace.

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Actively seek out moments when you can stretch beyond your comfort zone. Ask yourself tough questions: Did I take the easy path today? Did I settle for “good enough,” or did I push to be excellent? These small, self-reflections, done consistently, sharpen your intuition and help you realize when you’re holding back.

Once you begin to develop this intuition, the next step is taking action—recognizing that moment when you’re only at 80% and intuitively pushing through, even when it’s uncomfortable or uncertain. This could be in the final push during a physical challenge, the last critical decision in a high-stakes situation, or the extra effort in a personal relationship.

Just the other day I was out for a run, holding a fast pace. Then I had this thought: *Do I have more to give?* In that self-awareness moment, I pushed it up a notch—not only going faster but also honing my intuition.

It isn’t about the pace, per se, and it isn’t about maximum exertion every workout. Oftentimes, slow is smooth and smooth is fast. Rather, it’s about each moment, recognizing that you may have more to offer—and choosing to lean into it. And sometimes, as an example, leaning in may simply mean taking a breath and truly listening to the person across from you.

For my gear collapse scenario, it meant refusing to be complacent as we came into land for the first time. It required me to stay mentally sharp and prepared for the unexpected, even in a situation that—in the overwhelming majority of cases—would have been routine. It wasn’t just about reacting when things went wrong, but also about having the mindset and training to recognize when something could go wrong, and the readiness to act decisively. I didn’t pause to think, *I’ve been holding back at 80%; now it’s time to step up and save the day!* Instead, I responded instinctively.

This process and cycle of self-awareness fine tuning your intuition, will ultimately help you recognize when you’ve left something on the table. It will then make it second nature to push forward—this is where greatness is born. And it’s a cycle that repeats, each time taking you closer to unlocking your true capacity.

At this point, you might be thinking this book is about finding some elusive “next level” that will catapult you into professional nirvana. Let me dispel that notion right now. Living at 100% isn’t necessarily about crushing it at work, amassing wealth, or waking up at 3 AM to run 10 miles. Instead, it’s about being fully present and engaged in each moment, seizing opportunities that bring genuine fulfillment and meaning to your life.

While some moments demand peak performance, the idea that other moments only require 80%, 50%, or even 20% effort is misleading. Every moment—big or small—deserves the intention and effort to operate at 100%. Why? Because consistently striving for 100% prepares us for living life to the fullest. Through this striving we cultivate a holistic balance that reduces anxiety, sharpens focus, and ensures we’re mentally, physically, and emotionally prepared to respond when it matters most. It’s a way of living that empowers every facet of our lives.

Our success in catching that runway cable wasn’t just about skill and luck. It was *the result* of being focused and prepared, which were *the results* of being well rested and not distracted, which were *the results* of being present in my relationships and living a disciplined life, which were *the results* of having a purpose and appreciation for what was important to me. Our moments are all interconnected—the good and the bad—and the way we show up in one area inevitably ripples into the others. Much like a ripe, delicious piece of fruit is the result of numerous factors working together over time (e.g., proper soil conditions, nutrients, sunlight, water, etc.), realizing that last 20% is the synergistic culmination of the mindset, habits, and values we bring to every day.

As an example, at 26 years old, I was just beginning my career as a fighter pilot. I had an incredible wife, a strong marriage, and a spiritual journey that gave my daily grind a sense of meaning and purpose. I was ambitious, driven to pursue an advanced degree to strengthen my chances of becoming a military test pilot. My workweeks were relentless—12-hour

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days,* 5 days a week, with an additional 5 to 15 hours over the weekend. From the outside, many would have assumed I was operating at full capacity, giving 100%. I was not. I was running at 80%, and without a fresh perspective, I was on track to remain there indefinitely—or worse, burn out—convinced that I had given it my all and that the things I desired most were simply out of reach.

A stark imbalance began to surface in the winter of 2006. I was consumed with proving I was the best, driven by a need to validate myself in the face of feeling professionally overlooked. Some of my actions felt hollow. I operated transactionally in friendships and was fueled by endless anxiety over what my future military job would hold. When this imbalance set in—born from a growing obsession with work and my restless need for validation from supervisors and peers—my instinct wasn't to pause and reflect; it was to double down. I convinced myself that working more, pushing harder, and becoming more efficient was the solution. I volunteered in the local community, enrolled in additional classes, and sought a high-visibility job in my fighter squadron that might make me stand out. On and on I churned, stuck at 80%, believing that “greatness” was just over the horizon, waiting to be unlocked by the next quarterly evaluation or a few more grueling hours of work. But instead, I was chasing a mirage.

It all came crashing down in late 2007 when I received my next assignment: three years as an Air Liaison Officer—a non-flying job that was dead last on my desired job list. For my test pilot dream, it was a crushing setback that felt like the death of everything I had worked for.

As the axiom goes, when you stop trying to attain it, you find it. When

* Pilots in the US Air Force are required to have 12 hours of “crew rest” before reporting for a flying duty day, with the opportunity for 8 hours of uninterrupted sleep during that period. The goal is to ensure aircrew are rested, alert, and mission-ready. For example, if I'm scheduled to fly at 2 p.m. on a Tuesday and plan to arrive at the squadron at 8 a.m. for mission prep—or even to handle other office work—I must stop all official duties by 8 p.m. Monday night. This rule only applies when you're scheduled to fly, but when it does, it's taken seriously.

I stopped trying to attain 100% in my professional pursuits, I realized that the simple behavior of trying to attain 100% professionally was keeping me from living at 100% of who I could be. My fulfillment was tied to an aspect of my life that didn't embody all of who I was. Fulfillment needed to come from the way I lived, the way I prioritized all facets of my life and lived out those priorities. Basically, living isn't defined by professional success. It's about cultivating a well-rounded, disciplined, and intentional life, being present and fulfilled in the journey. This means giving 100% in every area of your life, including your work, relationships, community, and beyond.

It took me years to fully realize that I wasn't operating at my full potential. I first noticed it when I kept hitting walls, frustrated that things weren't aligning with what I thought I deserved. Eventually, I realized that achieving 100% required redefining what success truly meant. It wasn't about doing more of the same work I had been consumed with in 2006 and 2007. Instead, it required a different kind of effort. It meant being intentional every single day, focusing on actions that aligned with a broader vision, and ensuring that each short-term step was purposefully leading toward long-term goals. Reaching 100% isn't a sprint; it's a journey. It requires sacrifice, patience, grace, grit, humility, and the willingness to lean on others. It's not a quick fix but a continuous process of recalibration through life's ups, downs, and unexpected detours.

This is what this book is about—unlocking the greatness within you. It's about becoming a person of virtue, a leader filled with purpose, and a citizen attuned to the greater good—ready to sacrifice, serve, and strive for excellence. Greatness doesn't come from shortcuts or settling for “good enough.” It's forged in the fires of preparation, self-reflection, and the relentless pursuit of your final 20%.

This journey is about transforming your deepest desires into a force for good, sharpening your focus, and rising above the distractions and negativity that hold so many back. It's a call to action for men and women alike to turn aspiration into action, adversity into resilience, and resilience

into hope. Don't settle for mediocrity. Refuse to be complicit in a world that polarizes and distracts. This is your moment to embrace the courage to push past your limits, to endure, and to inspire. Your best self awaits, and now is the time to step forward and claim it.

Through the chapters of this book, you'll learn how to:

- **Visualize your triumphs**—your last 20% begins in the mind. See yourself as someone who is capable, unstoppable, and worthy of achieving your biggest dreams;
- **Refine and align your purpose**—the last 20% isn't stumbled upon; it's about walking with intention. Define your purpose so that every step you take shapes your path with deliberate, meaningful action;
- **Grasp the science behind unlocking more of yourself**—your body and mind are capable of far more than you realize. Learn how to harness their full potential and push beyond limits;
- **Prepare for the opportunities that are bound to arise**—success favors the prepared. Take charge of your future by training, planning, and positioning yourself for the moment when it matters most;
- **Embrace and strive for balance in every pursuit**—your last 20% isn't about burnout or single-minded obsession. It's about becoming the fullest version of yourself. Learn to push forward without losing what makes you whole;
- **Cultivate discipline and focus**—most people stop at 80%, with distraction being the enemy of achievement. Strengthen your ability to stay committed, put in the work, and control your own momentum;
- **Build resilience in the face of adversity**—failure is not the opposite of success; it's a part of it. The last 20% belongs to those who rise from setbacks, grow through challenges, and extend grace to themselves and others;

- **Lean on the strength of your community**—true success is never a solo journey. Unlock your last 20% by actively engaging in relationships that inspire and elevate you;
- **Adopt and integrate technology for growth**—the world is evolving and so must you. Leverage technology to amplify your efforts, enhance your abilities, and accelerate toward your goals; and ultimately,
- **Become the person you were meant to be**—your last 20% is waiting! Step boldly into the life you were designed for, with confidence, clarity, and an unshakable belief in your potential.

At the end of the day, it's not just about what you've accomplished—it's about becoming the person who knows, without a doubt, that you've given everything you've got.

STORY TIMELINE

This book is not a memoir, though many of the stories shared in the following chapters are deeply personal and drawn from my life experiences. Understanding the context of where I was in my life journey during these moments adds valuable perspective. This table offers a clear framework for my stories, showing how they fit into the timeline of my life and providing context for each phase of my journey. My full military biography can be found in the appendix.

1988	My parents' struggle (chapter 8)
1998	Disappointing my father (chapter 2)
1998–2002	Attended college
2002–2004	Attended pilot training
2004	Centrifuge (chapter 10)
2005–2008	First fighter squadron
2006	Earning my callsign (chapter 6)
2006	Struck by lightning (chapter 10)
2008	Midair collision (chapter 7)
2008–2010	Air liaison officer (chapter 2)
2009–2010	MC-12

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- 2010 MC-12 textbook employment (chapter 6)
- 2010 MC-12 airfield attack (chapter 10)
- 2010 MC-12 bird hunter (chapter 8)
- 2010–2011 Air liaison officer
- 2011–2012 Test Pilot School student
- 2012–2014 First assignment as an experimental fighter test pilot
 - 2013 Advanced missile mission (chapter 4)
 - 2014 F-15 gear collapse (introduction)
- 2014–2016 Program manager at the F-35 Joint Program Office
- 2016–2019 F-35 test pilot and commander
 - 2016 Missile test failure (chapter 4)
 - 2019 F-35 Automatic Ground Collision Avoidance (chapter 9)
- 2019–2022 Massachusetts Institute of Technology AI Lab
- 2022–2024 Chief of AI Test & Operations & Operations Group commander
 - 2023 Artificial intelligence–flown uncrewed system (chapter 3)

Chapter 1



ENVISIONING WHOLENESS

The Power of Visualizing 100%

“What we achieve inwardly will change outer reality.”

—Plutarch

For so many years, we imagine what success will look like—from winning a video game, to making varsity, to being accepted by a specific college, to landing that first job, to owning a house. Your imagination can take you to your greatest heights. While you imagine success, you imagine the feeling that washes over you in the moment of attainment. The exhilaration that it conjures is palpable. As you visualize this success, the journey that has gotten you there is more than the hard work, the late nights, the sacrifices. It began with a vision, a dream.

Visualizing your success is not just a mental exercise; it’s a blueprint for achievement—a powerful tool that takes your dreams and allows you to “see” your way to winning. Believing in this vivid image of success is the first step in accomplishing your 100%. When you visualize, you train

your brain to act in ways that align your vision with actions, decisions, and habits, bringing your imagination to life.

Studies in sports psychology and neuroscience have repeatedly shown the effectiveness of visualization. This approach relieves anxiety, builds confidence, focuses the mind on achieving objectives, rehearses reaching success in spite of obstacles, and propels us toward winning. Top performers, such as the swimming legend Michael Phelps* or the media mogul Oprah Winfrey,† use visualization techniques to activate, rehearse, prepare, and execute at the highest levels. This practice is more than simply preparing for the challenges and opportunities that you'll face. It puts you in the mindset of already winning and helps you push beyond your self-imposed limitations. When you visualize your full potential, you're embodying the mindset and actions of someone who has already achieved the goal.

In its essence, visualization is the deliberate act of seeing yourself operating at 100% and not just in fragments of capability but as a fully realized, fully empowered individual who is deeply committed to your journey and ready for whatever comes. It marks the critical transition from merely hoping for success to expecting it as an inevitable outcome. This shift in mindset compels you to act with intention, making decisions that resonate with your vision and taking steps that methodically bring you closer to your goals. However, there is a significant pitfall that accompanies this powerful tool: the danger of arrogance.

The confidence you cultivate through visualization can quickly morph into arrogance, which not only distorts your perception but also sabotages the very success you seek. The antidote to this arrogance is humility—a

* "The Olympian's Eye: Visualization Techniques," Owaves, July 20, 2016. Accessed February 2, 2025, <https://owaves.com/olympians-eye-visualization-techniques/>.

† Rebecca Achelles, "Oprah Winfrey Credits Her Success to This One Thing We All Have," Medium, January 18, 2018. Accessed February 2, 2025, <https://medium.com/indian-thoughts/oprah-winfrey-credits-her-success-to-this-one-thing-we-all-have-4435a14b063d>.

grounded awareness of your origins, a recognition of the support systems around you, and an acknowledgment that your journey is as much about the people who uplift you as it is about your personal achievements. Celebrate your gifts and the milestones you reach, but always remain anchored in the reality of where you've come from and the collective effort that has propelled you forward.

Alongside the pitfall of arrogance lies another equally detrimental obstacle: a rigid adherence to a specific goal. While having clear, specific, and measurable goals is essential, it's equally important to remain adaptable as life unfolds, revealing new opportunities, challenges, and insights.

Military members, especially aircrew, must become familiar with a map and compass. We never know when we may find ourselves on the ground behind enemy lines, having to get back to friendly territory. We learn the ins and outs of land navigation through survival and evasion training. One of the first rules is to study the map before entering an area, learning about the terrain and other landmarks. If we find ourselves stranded on the map, we orient ourselves and pinpoint our best course to get to safety. Mind you, there are numerous options to reach one location, and equally numerous locations that could lead to safety. The compass becomes our tool to direct us toward our main objective. However, it's a literal step-by-step process. If we're traveling one-mile due north, we use the compass to identify a tree or other short-distance marker to move forward on our path. We count our steps, avoid obstacles, and keep our focus on our next marker. Once we reach that tree, we double-check our map and look forward to our next marker.

Think of your goals as these markers guiding you toward a desired destination. However, if you fixate too rigidly on your initial course, you may miss alternate paths that could lead to even greater fulfillment and success. These alternative routes may appear unexpectedly, yet they often offer richer rewards and more profound growth. You might also overlook obstacles that are only noticeable when you maintain awareness of your entire surroundings.

On the flip side, it's important to acknowledge that these alternate paths can also lead you astray if not carefully considered. Discerning which direction is right for you requires a deep understanding of your purpose and a clear vision of what true fulfillment looks like. This process doesn't diminish the value of your original goals; rather, it elevates them, allowing for a more holistic and adaptive approach to your journey. By staying open to new possibilities and being willing to adjust your course as needed, you ensure that your pursuit of success remains aligned with your evolving aspirations and values.

Life is dynamic, and the more that it becomes illuminated through experience, the more your aspirations evolve. Embrace this evolution and allow your goals to shift as you gain knowledge and encounter new experiences. Embrace growth. Flexibility ensures that your pursuit of success is not just relentless, but also intelligent and responsive to the changing world.

During my time as a military commander of ~1,000 person organization, visualization became one of my most important tools. Each week, I would block off time to study my calendar and think deeply about how to navigate the coming days and weeks—not just in terms of meetings and tasks, but how to lead with purpose. I would mentally walk through conversations I needed to have, people I needed to encourage, and decisions that would need to be made. I imagined how to deliver clarity to my team and how to reinforce our mission. I pictured what success would look like—our unit operating in alignment, our people feeling seen and valued, and our objectives being met with precision.

These visualization sessions helped me stay grounded and intentional. They gave me clarity on short-term goals that I could then translate into direction for my staff. Over time, this habit built a rhythm in my leadership that centered on values and alignment. While we were often moving fast and navigating complexity, these weekly moments gave me a mental rehearsal for leading with impact.

Finally, while visualization is a powerful tool, it is not a panacea.

Obstacles will arise, and relying solely on visualization will leave you unprepared for the complexities and unpredictable aspects of life. Visualization is insufficient on its own; it is most effective when paired with complementary strategies like the persistence required to keep moving even when the path is unclear, the resiliency required to get back up, and the courage to take bold steps. Integrating visualization with practical action, continuous learning, and adaptability creates a more robust approach to achieving your goals.

A STORY TO REFLECT ON

The year was 1928, spring was right around the corner, and a young girl living in a rural area outside of Chicago was late for her after-school train. She pushed her legs hard to reach her transportation home before it departed; fortunately, those legs were fast. She thought nothing of it as she settled into her seat. What she didn't know was that a train passenger took notice of her speed. That stranger would change her life.

The next day at school, 16-year-old Elizabeth Robinson, called "Betty" by most who knew her, was stopped between classes by her high school's track coach, Charles Price. He began the interaction, "I saw you run to make the train home yesterday, and you are fast." He asked if she ever considered running on the high school track team. The thought had never crossed her mind, mainly because women competing in high school sports was an emerging idea. Her high school did not even have a women's track team, but Mr. Price wanted to change that.

He asked Betty to meet him at the end of school near the locker rooms. When she arrived, he asked her to do a quick time trial in the hallways. He marked off 50 meters and took his stopwatch to the opposite end of the hallway. With her normal school shoes on, she clocked in at a remarkable time. Then and there, her future was set in motion as he mentioned that while the school did not have a women's track team, there was a meet in

Chicago in just two weeks. She went and purchased track shoes and began training for the ensuing two weeks with the men's team.

Her first meet was in Chicago on March 30, 1928. She was up against the star of the sport, Helen Filkey, as they competed in the 60-yard dash. While Filkey held a world record in the 60-yard distance, Betty came in a close second. At her next meet on June 2, 1928, Betty got to the starting blocks for the 100-meter dash and was off with the bang. She had a natural ability and with the wind at her back she surprised the sport by clocking in at 12 seconds flat, beating Filkey and the world record by four-tenths of a second.* Betty's win secured her spot in the US Olympic trials just one month away. She buckled down and trained hard over the following weeks. For the first time in her life, she had a true goal. She visualized winning, breaking the ribbon with a smile. She knew it was possible. This exercise of seeing her success calmed her nerves and focused her.

On July 4, 1928, Betty walked onto City Field in Newark, New Jersey. The first few heats of the 100m dash went smoothly, and she made it to the finals. As she settled into the blocks for the final event, the fastest women from across the nation knelt down on her left and right. At 16 years old—the youngest competitor in the field—Betty proved to have nerves of steel as she ran across the finish line in second place and secured a spot on the US Olympic team.

Betty, her parents, and her coach were thrilled for this remarkable opportunity. The celebration needed to be quick because days after the Olympic trials, the team was loaded onto a ship to set sail across the Atlantic Ocean for the 1928 Amsterdam Olympics. It was the first Olympics in which women were allowed to compete in nearly every event, including track and field.

Young Betty Robinson found herself on a boat traveling across the Atlantic Ocean just a few months after running late for her train. She met many teammates from all over America and enjoyed the open ocean

* This time was not ratified as a world record because the wind was out of limit.

for the first time in her life. Of course, she also tried to stay focused on her training as much as possible. The small vessel they were confined on for two whole weeks made that quite difficult. Surprisingly, many team members gained quite a bit of weight because they were not used to having access to three square meals—free meals. While the sprinters had it difficult, many of the competitors had it worse, like the long-distance runners and those who required special apparatus. There were no treadmills back in those days. She tried to stay focused as the team made their way to Amsterdam.

She'd always had a competitive spirit, but now she had a real chance to win. She longed for the feeling of coming across the line with her chest grabbing the ribbon. This required deliberate moments of visualization. Not just the idea of winning, but what it would take. What were the required moments, the required successive successes that would culminate in gold.

In August of 1928 their ship made it into port, and everyone was eager to disembark and prepare for their competition. Many Americans, in many of the sports, did not fare well with their long break in training caused by their journey across the Atlantic. However, Betty was resilient and stayed focused on her upcoming event. The first event in track and field would be the discus, while the second would be the 100-meter dash.

Betty made it through the first two rounds and secured her place in the finals, the only woman from America to make it through. As they took their places, the fastest women in the world flanked Betty. The pistol fired and then quickly fired again—false start. Again, the runners set their marks. *Bang!* Followed quickly by another round from the gun. A second false start and two women were eliminated, one from Canada and another from Germany. With nerves rattled, the remaining women lined up; the heavy favorite and fastest woman in the world was from Canada, Fanny Rosenfeld, and knelt to Betty's right. It was time for Betty to find something inside her.

The pistol rocked through the air, and the women were off. The

seconds counted up as the runners approached the finish line. Betty Robinson, with a wide smile on her face, arms up to help push her chest out, hit the finishing tape 0.01 seconds in front of the Canadian, won gold, and matched the world record of 12.2 seconds! She was and still to this day is the youngest woman to win a gold medal in the 100-meter dash. Since this was the first event for track, she also became the first woman to win a gold medal in the history of Olympic track.



What she knew at the moment was she had won gold. What she did not know was that she had just become a trailblazer for women in all sports. Overnight, this 16-year-old had become famous. A few days later, she added to her gold—a silver medal in the 4x100 meter relay. The news from the Olympics was not all good. Most Americans were not doing well, still reeling from the trip over.

On top of that, a lot of individuals were against the idea of women competing. One of the stories that ran in America the day after a women's long-distance running event berated women as being too fragile to compete. A *New York Times* reporter, Wythe Williams wrote: "The final of the women's 800-meter run plainly demonstrated that even this distance

makes too great a call on feminine strength.” The *Daily Mail* (London) wrote: “Women Athletes Collapse.” Their sexist articles were tied to a picture of women lying on the ground next to a finish line, exhausted from leaving everything they had on the track.

Regardless of this rampant culture of sexism, Betty headed home victorious. She spent a few days receiving accolades from folks all over America. She partook in parades, represented what women were capable of, and made her way back home to the suburbs of Chicago. The festivities continued there as well and over time the excitement eventually died down. She went back to her schoolwork and stayed focused on her newfound passion for running. She competed throughout the year and trained hard for the upcoming 1932 Olympics, which were being held in Los Angeles, California.

As the years ticked by and her running prowess continued, she was prepared to defend her title. After a particularly hot day in the summer of 1931, Betty wanted to take a break and cool down. Her cousin knew just the thing and convinced her to go up with him in an airplane. As their small plane took off and climbed to over 500 feet, Betty was awed by the unique vantage point, the feeling of freedom, and the cool, crisp air. As the altitude crept up, the sound of the engine hummed. Suddenly, the engine sputtered with the propeller screeching to a halt. The nose violently pitched up, the aircraft stalled, and just as violently pitched over into a nosedive. The ground raced toward them as Betty gasped her last breath. The plane hit the ground nose-first and disintegrated around Betty and her cousin.

Witnesses rushed in to try and find survivors. Her cousin was taken to a hospital, yet sadly, tragically, Betty was taken to the undertaker. Her storied career would be no more, and her gold medal would sit as a beacon for women’s rights.

There is just a little more to that day’s tragic events. Betty’s body was brought to the undertaker, and after a quick examination, he discovered

that she wasn't dead! She was rushed to the hospital in the back of a truck and lay in a coma for three months. While it was miraculous she had survived her aircraft accident, when she finally woke from her coma, the doctor had devastating news. She would never run again. While she was unconscious, they had to do knee surgery and placed pins in her knee. She had lost over an inch of bone in one of her legs. They were doubtful she would walk again.

As the news sank in, Betty was not about to take it sitting down, and her understanding of unlocking her last 20% was about to unfold.

There is something in us that makes some people refuse to allow others to dictate what they can or cannot do. Naysayers have been a huge motivator for many remarkable feats, and this was no exception. Even though Betty lacked the modern language and scientific understanding behind "visualization," she still expressed the concept. She spent time deliberately focusing her thoughts on fighting through the pain, imagining herself taking steps once more, and defeating the notion that she was limited. Betty slowly learned to move her legs again, and over time, relearned how to stand. Moving her legs caused excruciating pain, but she knew that the road to recovery required courage. Over weeks and months, she learned to stand and walk slowly.

Throughout this phase of her recovery, there were many setbacks, and the pain was, at times, debilitating. She had an amazing support structure that gave her the right level of encouragement and inspiration to keep moving. For instance, her cousin prioritized spending time walking by her side and encouraging her to take that next step. Her slow walks turned into being able to walk with a slight limp. Months turned into years as Betty's road to recovery slogged on. Slowly, she regained mobility. Her walking transformed into jogs, which evolved into running and full-out sprints. Over time, motivated to prove that she would not let this injury stop her, she began entertaining the idea of competing.

A problem arose when she needed to get into the starting block. The pins in her knee didn't allow a natural bending of the knee and her ability to get into and out of the starting block took precious time off her 100-meter dash. She proved quite fast still, if there was just a way for her to avoid having to get out of the block. In 1936, Betty attended the Olympic Trials and remarkably made the women's 4x100 relay team as the third leg of the race. No starter block is needed when accepting and passing a baton.

Betty embarked on her second trip across the Atlantic Ocean to represent her country in the Olympics. Among her Olympic teammates was the famed Jesse Owens. He, too, refused to let people tell him what he could or could not do, and against the scrutiny of many Americans and Germans alike, he would prove that people of color were not inferior to Hitler's Aryan race. Alongside them were the young men from Washington who represented the United States in rowing, now popularized through the book and movie *The Boys in the Boat*.

Betty and her relay team had a difficult battle ahead as the Germans were favored to win. When the finals came, Betty took her place as the third leg of the relay. The Germans came out strong and built their lead through the first two legs. They were twenty feet ahead with the Americans in second and the Canadians close behind them. The Americans still had Betty, and after her, the world record holder, Helen Stephens, rounding out the relay team as the American anchor. Betty took the baton and chased after her German counterpart as they approached the final curve. As the Germans, who had a considerable lead, began their handoff between three and four, the unthinkable happened. The baton struck the ground, and just like that, the favored Germans were out. Betty was just then reaching her baton out and passed it cleanly to her anchor. Helen sailed to the finish line, and the Americans were victorious. Betty had come from being "dead" just five years earlier to winning her second Olympic gold medal.



Elizabeth Robinson was a hero, though at the time she didn't know it. She ran because she felt called to run. She pursued the difficult because it was precisely that. She walked and ran and paved a path for women to make their mark on society. She didn't set out to do that, and I guarantee you she thought little of the immensity of her actions while she ran for the train at 16 years old. I like to think that Betty and I have something in common. I actually don't need to think we have something in common—I know it. She was my grandma, and I loved her.

I had the pleasure of getting to know her and spending many nights at her table while she taught me how to play solitaire and stuffed me with Jell-O and Rice Krispy treats. She also would tell me and my brother and sister stories about her days traveling the world representing America. She would even pull out her medals every once in a while and let us wear them around the house. She kept them in a small shoebox in the hall closet. It was a humble place for a humble lady who lived for life. Even into her old age, she wouldn't let others tell her what she could or could not do.

She died in 1998, at my house in Colorado, loved by her children and grandchildren. She has taught me so much, but probably more since I've

become an adult and recognized my own challenges that required resiliency. My family and I found ourselves in Amsterdam in the summer of 2016 and stopped by the stadium. They were preparing the stadium for an upcoming European Athletics Championships, but I was able to find someone that worked in the office and tell them who I was. They immediately invited all of us into the stadium where they gave us a private tour and walked us around to see where my grandma's name was chiseled into the stadium wall. We also had the pleasure of running around the field and let the kids get into a starter's crouch, imagining the stadium filled with fans. It's remarkable to think of the actual event and to realize what a moment it was for women, breaking through man-made barriers of injustice and oppression, my grandma leading the way . . . at 16! I hope my kids, and especially my girls, understand their responsibility to the cause of pursuing equality and justice.

How did she do all of this? How did she see through the noise to win her first medal and return to win another? We envision accomplishments that drive and direct our journeys. Those accomplishments are first formed by the desires we have on our heart. Remembering back to our compass and map analogy, these desires help shape the objectives on our map that we move toward—identifying and moving from marker to marker. This “desire” is so crucial for helping energize and direct our journey, but there are a few significant warnings: Desire without knowledge is not good; the desire for greatness as an end in itself, seeking our own glory, is empty; and desire alone will not deliver fulfillment.

This can be seen throughout society as people desire and, at times, achieve “success” but are left with little joy. Why? Because the desires being pursued and attained in many of these instances are frequently hollow, rooted in superficial goals. They aren't driven by a purpose founded on values and knowledge. It's like the compass holder wasn't holding a compass oriented to magnetic north, but rather a needle always oriented back toward the holder. Desire directs, but wisdom fulfills. With knowledge, we learn that some desires are baseless, shallow pursuits. However, most

desires can lead us on our journey toward fulfillment. As we set out with desire in our hearts and wisdom as our companion, we still must wrestle with understanding how to optimize our performance.

A LESSON

The last 20% of our effort is the most crucial. We must see beyond artificial limitations that others or our society impose. By harnessing the power of visualization, we can propel ourselves into the realm of the seemingly impossible. And just like Betty paved a pathway for others to follow, we, too, are called to visualize 100% and then blaze new paths.

Visualization is essential. You must “see” what the next immediate goal is while also trying to visualize how it all comes together. Betty’s first win was a whirlwind experience. While in the starting block, she had to visualize her victory, which helped prepare her mind for the next few moments. But that was just a tactical or immediate goal. She had a greater goal in mind afterward. She probably didn’t even know or visualize that grander goal right away, but as our choices and actions unfold, greater opportunities become visible and possible. She shifted her gaze from winning a race to becoming a dominant Olympic runner. This gaze was driving her to be disciplined and focused.

It seemingly all came crashing down with her accident.

She pushed herself to visualize her success, imagining every detail of what it would be like to not only defend her title but to overcome the unimaginable odds stacked against her. The visualization wasn’t just about winning another medal; it was about defying the limitations that had been placed on her by her doctors, her society, and even herself. Betty saw herself running again, not as she once was, but as a stronger, more resilient version of the athlete she had been.

The journey was arduous. Each step she took was a battle, a painful reminder of what she had lost and what she was determined to regain. But

with each visualization, she saw herself not as a victim of circumstances, but as a warrior ready to reclaim her life. Her recovery was not linear; there were days of progress and days of setbacks, yet she never wavered in her commitment to her vision. She knew that the mind had to lead where the body would follow.

Betty's visualization practices became more vivid and detailed over time. She would close her eyes and imagine the feel of the starting blocks beneath her feet, the sound of the starter pistol, the rush of air as she exploded off the line. She saw herself at the finish line, crossing it with the same determined smile she had worn in Amsterdam. This mental rehearsal was not just wishful thinking; it was a critical component of her physical rehabilitation. By visualizing her success, she was retraining her mind to believe that her goals were attainable, even when her body was telling her otherwise.

When Betty finally returned to competitive running, she did so not just with the strength of her legs, but with the unshakable belief that she was destined to succeed. Her ability to see beyond the immediate pain and struggle, to visualize the triumph that lay ahead, became her greatest asset. In 1936, as she stood on the track in Berlin, she was not just an athlete returning to competition after a life-threatening accident. She was a symbol of resilience, a testament to the power of the human spirit to overcome adversity.

As she prepared for her relay leg, Betty knew that the race was about more than just her personal victory. It was about showing the world that the limitations placed on us by others, by our circumstances, and even by our own minds, can be shattered when we dare to see beyond them. In the moment when the Germans fumbled their baton, Betty took no notice. She was focused on her own lane and her own handoff, not distracted by someone else's journey. Everything up to that moment had directly influenced how the race was going to unfold in the last 100 meters. Through visualization, purpose, preparation, discipline, resiliency, and her community of supporters and teammates, she had attained success.

The Americans crossed the finish line first, securing the gold. For Betty, this win was sweeter than her first, not because it marked her return to the podium, but because it validated every moment of pain, doubt, and struggle she had endured since that fateful day in 1931.

Betty's story, and the visualization that powered her through her darkest days, serves as a powerful reminder that our greatest achievements are often born from our most significant challenges. When we learn to see beyond our current circumstances, to visualize not just the next step but the ultimate destination, we tap into a wellspring of potential that can carry us through any obstacle.

The lesson here is clear: Visualization is not just about seeing the end goal; it is about living it in your mind until it becomes your reality. By picturing yourself at your best, you train your mind and body to work together toward that vision. Whether it's on the track, in the boardroom, or in the everyday challenges of life, the ability to visualize success is what separates those who achieve their dreams from those who fall short.

PRINCIPLES IN ACTION: ARE YOU READY TO VISUALIZE YOUR LAST 20%?

Let's put visualization into more practical terms. Think back to a time when you desperately wanted and achieved something. It could be getting into a particular school, scoring a date with a crush, winning a contract, or getting selected for a job. Soak that feeling of attainment up. Now, envision something that you're currently wanting. Hold onto that vision and marry it with a sense of achievement.

Think about the skills that most helped you attain that goal. What were they? Think about the disciplined work you put into reaching your goal. Think about the barriers you overcame. This visualization exercise is essential because it's building a foundation.

Using this framework, I would like to provide a practical example that

requires a little imagination, but bear with me. Zara is a young professional in a tech company with a background in computer engineering. In her current position she runs a small team that has an objective that will take approximately one year to attain. As she comes to work each day, she likes the idea of helping develop strategy for the company and directing the progress of multiple teams. She desires to lead two tiers higher than her current role. She has more to give.

Zara sets aside time at the beginning of each Monday to visualize her success. She sees herself running the teams. They are meeting their goals and winning business for the company. She takes herself out of her current role and begins to think like a more senior manager. During this reflection, she identifies her subordinate teams' actions that led to success. She "sees" her teams upskilling and learning about Natural Language Processing tools that propel their efficiency. She sees members of each of her subordinate teams conducting short "stand-up" meetings on Tuesday mornings that quickly get folks on the same page and a subsequent short email to herself, as the boss, that summarizes their actions. She imagines upskilling some of her teammates by challenging and then mentoring them to give presentations at a computer engineering conference, which then brings new business to the company. Ultimately, she identifies what has made her successful as a senior manager.

When she snaps back to reality, she can use those ideas of success to make deliberate and practical changes that turn her into a more effective subordinate. It won't unfold exactly as she imagines but will unfold toward opportunity. Some may argue Zara isn't unleashing her final 20% because her goal isn't audacious enough. As with many people, Zara may have unspoken, deep-rooted desires for more considerable success—a respected computer engineering expert, a professor, a nonprofit leader, the CEO of a successful company, and/or a mom who has raised thriving kids. She may or may not have the vision of her "100%" but through visualizing the small stuff, she can begin toward a path of realization, which could simply be to have more effective weekly meetings.

A life without deliberate visualization is a life lived with the lights dimmed. Yes, it's possible to succeed without it—many people do. But without intentionally imagining your future, you miss a powerful opportunity to connect your daily actions to a deeper purpose. Visualization brings clarity to your goals, calms the anxiety of the unknown, and fuels your motivation when discipline wanes. It turns vague hopes into vivid targets. Without it, you may still move forward, but likely without the focus, inspiration, or conviction that comes from truly seeing the life you're capable of living. Visualization doesn't guarantee success—but without it, you risk falling short of unlocking what is inside of you, without even realizing it.

To make visualization a tangible part of your life, create intentional moments to pause and reflect before any important task, challenge, or strategic review. Cut through the noise by focusing on your desired outcome—what success truly looks like—and let that vision guide your preparation. Write down specific goals or milestones that can be tracked, measured, and refined along the way. Revisit this process often to account for changes in either the goal or the path toward it. Visualization isn't a one-time exercise—it's a habit. Make space to “see” your success, and you'll begin to move toward it with greater clarity, purpose, and resilience.

A CALL TO GREATNESS

As you embark on your journey, remember Betty's story.* Remember that the last 20% of effort, the part that requires you to dig deeper and push harder than ever before, is where the real magic happens. Visualize your success in vivid detail. Let that vision guide your actions, fuel your

* Thanks to Joe Gergen and his book *The First Lady of Olympic Track: The Life and Times of Betty Robinson* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2014). His work helped me fill in the gaps that I had in my grandmother's story.

determination, and sustain you through the inevitable challenges that lie ahead.

Ultimately, it's not just about crossing the finish line; it's about the journey you take to get there and the strength you discover within yourself along the way. Just as Betty Robinson did, you can visualize your way to greatness, breaking through barriers and achieving what once seemed impossible.

A word of caution that, if unaddressed, deteriorates credibility for the practice of visualization. What if Zara's boss gets upset with her idea of Tuesday meetings? What if the Germans didn't drop their baton and the Americans didn't win gold?* What if the thing you've been visualizing doesn't come to fruition? Does your story end? Is it all for naught? There's one last piece to visualizing your goal, to visualizing your greatness: You must understand who you are and what defines your greatness.

* More than once in conversation with me, my grandmother insisted that even if the Germans hadn't dropped the baton, Helen Stephens would have caught them and still won gold.

About the Author



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Tucker “Cinco” Hamilton is an inspirational leader whose journey from high school dropout to a top national security expert exemplifies the principles of this book—discipline, leadership, resilience, and transformation. A former fighter test pilot and Air Force officer ranked in the top 1% of his peers, Cinco has flown over 30 aircraft and led aviation’s largest flight

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