

# *True North*



*Reflections on over 40 Great Quotes That Just Might  
Inspire You To Be Your Best*

**Michael Diamond**

[www.michaeldiamond.com](http://www.michaeldiamond.com)

# Foreword

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What is it about quotations that fascinate us? Why do the sayings of those who came before us – in many cases decades or centuries before us – have perhaps more value today than when they were originally spoken?

It must have something to do with the wealth of wisdom that can be packed into so few words. In an electronic age where digital content and social media constantly provide us with updates, tweets, and “likes”, we have become fast skimmers rather than deep readers.

While this certainly has negative consequences, it leaves the value and beauty of the great quote unscathed.

There is a phrase that “good writing is succinct writing”. So too are many quotes made all the more impactful by their economy of words. When Aristotle said, “We are what we repeatedly do. Excellence, therefore, is not an act, but a habit”, we instinctively know that perceptivity like this can only be learned from a lifetime of successes and failures, and yet it speaks to us right here, right now.

The quotes in this ebook are selected from a collection I started keeping several years ago. Some are not quotes at all, but aphorisms or time-honored sayings that cannot be attributed to a single person. In some cases I saved them because of their wisdom, and in other cases I saved them simply because they made me laugh. Any collection of quotes that include both Abraham Lincoln and SpongeBob SquarePants promises to cover a bit of ground.

The title of this eBook – True North – is a salute to the memory of Dr. Stephen R. Covey, the author of The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People. In his presentations, Dr. Covey often would use a compass to illustrate that while many elements of modern living are artificial and pliable, the most important principles are true and unyielding – like the concept of true north. If you have not read this important book, I urge you to do so.

That’s enough of an introduction I think. After all, as Shakespeare had Polonius say in Hamlet: “Brevity is the soul of wit”.

I couldn’t have said it better myself. Enjoy.

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# Character



**“Character is like a tree and reputation is like its shadow. The shadow is what we think of it; the tree is the real thing.”**

- Abraham Lincoln



There are a many quotes that follow this basic lesson, that we tend to focus too much upon the result of something, rather than its source. As a matter of fact, the use of the tree as a metaphor for this line of thinking is common, for example, “There are a thousand hacking at the branches of evil to one who is striking at the root” (Thoreau).

But back to Abe: As a homespun prairie lawyer, and certainly later as president, he would have had ample opportunity to see the connection between character and reputation. Many of us have crossed paths with people who had a better reputation than underlying character, but these people tend to be like the foolish man in Matthew’s Gospel who builds his house on sand. It usually catches up with them.

This quote reminds me to tend to my roots. Strong roots, strong branches.

## **“Be just, and fear not”**

- Shakespeare (Henry VIII)



During the Eliot Spitzer scandal, media outlets reported that the names of high-profile Washington DC clients had been found in the address book of a prostitute. The names themselves hadn't been reported, but it seemed that someone had the names in their possession. I confess that in a conversation with a friend about the scandal we were laughing a bit at the high-profile men who knew their names were in that book and were probably at that very moment sweating bullets. She said about her lifestyle, “yeah, this clean living stuff has its advantages”.

In a world of stress and worry, one way to reduce worry is to be “just”, as Shakespeare said.

On a related note, I've noticed a fairly common theme when I read a story about someone who has been arrested after a long period of embezzling. In the news accounts, the accused often admits to a sense of relief that they were finally caught.

Duplicity can be emotionally and mentally taxing.

# **“The gem cannot be polished without friction, nor the man without trials”**

**-Chinese Proverb**

I also like this related observation: “That which doesn’t kill you makes you stronger”.



I think all of us understand the way that our past trials have made us better people today. Perhaps we are more understanding of those who are going through similar difficulties. Perhaps we are more empathetic. Perhaps we have a greater confidence in our ability to overcome adversity.

How many of us secretly draw power from the challenges we have withstood? We didn’t always “overcome” them – some challenges can only be weathered. But having withstood them, having picked ourselves back up after they knocked us down, helps us understand that we’re made of tougher stuff afterwards.

Friction in our lives polishes us. It helps us to shine.



**“Self-discipline is a form of freedom. Freedom from laziness and lethargy, freedom from expectations and demands of others, freedom from weakness and fear — and doubt”**

- H.A. Dorfman

If there is a misunderstood concept in our culture, it has to be freedom. If asked to define what the word “freedom” means to them, I suspect that many people would respond, “doing whatever I want to do”.

In fact there are centuries of wisdom literature and religious traditions that emphasize the connection between discipline and freedom. You cannot have one without the other.



These same concepts are at play in how we spend our time. A great phrase that I’ve seen directed toward young people is: “Do what you need to do when you need to do it, so that someday you can do what you want to do, when you want to do it”.

Amen.

**“The common denominator of success - the secret of success of every man who has ever been successful - lies in the fact that he formed the habit of doing things that failures don't like to do.”**

- Albert E.M. Gray (cited in Stephen Covey's Seven Habits)

There are two key concepts to reflect upon in this quote. The first, and most obvious, revolves around self-discipline. Do we have the ability to do the unpleasant task that nobody will compliment us for? After all, we humans are like water: we seek the path of least resistance.

Secondly, Mr. Gray doesn't let us off the hook by saying successful people *frequently* have the self-discipline to do things failures don't like to do. He says that successful people have “*formed the habit*”. So habit becomes the second, and more challenging, mountain for us to climb if we are to model this behavior.

Often when I have a choice between doing something I ought to do (but don't want to) and doing something I'd rather do, I'll tell myself “Eat your peas first”. I don't know where I picked up that phrase, and as someone who likes peas I feel a sense of guilt for besmirching that fine vegetable, but it works for me. When I have a more pleasant task waiting for me on the other side of the unpleasant one, I'm much more apt to get the unpleasant one done. For me, this quote is as much about ordering my tasks as it is about accomplishing unpleasant ones.

There are many more things to contemplate here – after all, Mr. Gray doesn't limit this just to daily tasks, like filling out an expense report or cleaning the kitchen floor. It can also be about the cultivation of a healthy, balanced lifestyle. Learning. Reflecting. Exercising. Some of these come more natural to some than others, but successful people learn how to pursue them because they are worthy activities.

# Responsibility, Work Ethic, & Empowerment





**"Here's a test to find whether your mission on earth is finished: If you're alive, it isn't."**

**-Richard Bach**

I grabbed this quote from the author of [Jonathan Livingston Seagull](#) because while I think it's empowering for any age, it becomes more so as we grow older. Many quotes that exhort us to be our best are particularly focused on young people. What about those in the autumn and winter of their lives?

I always want to remember this quote. I really like the word "mission". A mark of a well-balanced life is to think about what your "mission" in life actually is. A sense of mission brings with it a sense of purpose, which in turn helps us make decisions about how we spend our time, which in turn leads to a life lived intentionally rather than accidentally.

Even people who are confined, sick, or disabled can actively pursue a sense of mission through their spirit and determination. As a matter of fact, often these are the people who make the greatest impact on us.

# “Opportunity is missed by most people because it is dressed in overalls and looks like work”

-Thomas Edison

I’ve always loved this wry observation from a man who was famous for failing before he was famous for inventing (another one from him: “I have not failed. I have found 10,000 ways that won’t work.”).




This quote is a reaction to the common use of the phrase “opportunity knocking”. The underlying message, however, behind opportunity knocking on our door is that opportunity will a) approach us, b) we will recognize it, c) we will do something about it when we recognize it, and d) we will apply focused effort for a lengthy period of time to take advantage of it.

I don’t think you’ll be shocked when I suggest the above doesn’t describe most of us. We would rather our opportunity be bright and shiny (preferably accompanied by orchestral music) when it magically appears before us.

Edison knew that it often was decidedly less grandiose.

If you’re looking for opportunity, look for something that looks like work.



“Everyone has his own specific vocation or mission in life; everyone must carry out a concrete assignment that demands fulfillment. Therein he cannot be replaced, nor can his life be repeated. Thus, *everyone's task is unique as is his specific opportunity to implement it.*”

~ Viktor Frankl



## **“Luck is when preparation and opportunity meet”** -Seneca

I didn’t know this observation was attributed to the Roman philosopher Seneca until I did a bit of research for this short book, but regardless of its provenance, this is one the most powerful ways to think about the role of “luck” in our own lives, as well as the lives of those around us.

If I were a high school teacher, I would have this quote displayed prominently in the room, and end every exam with this same question for extra credit: “What is the definition of luck?” The students would quickly figure out that writing down this simple definition would be the easiest way to score a few extra points. It would be one way to hammer home a concept that all young people should take to heart. It might save them from a life spent griping about how other people always “get lucky”.

By knowing that luck is “when preparation and opportunity meet”, we acknowledge our agency in creating our own lucky outcomes, and yet we also acknowledge that there is an element of randomness in the world.

Here’s another saying along the same lines that I once heard from a friend: “Luck is the residue of hard work”.

Want to be luckier? Get prepared, get to work, and make your own luck.

## “Give ‘em a pitchfork and put ‘em to work.”

This bit of sage advice evidently came from previous generations who worked on farms. I heard it many years ago, when I was visiting my fiancée’s house, and when I arrived only her mother was there. I was telling her about my frustrating afternoon at work where we had to leave our desks and go to a company-wide “team building” event. It was hosted by a man and woman who were official trainers for one of those famous self-help gurus who was selling tons of books and videos back in the day.

The afternoon was filled with what I thought were ridiculous exercises (e.g. practice having a conversation with someone without using the negative word “but”). The wasted afternoon culminated in us writing a personal goal on a balloon and simultaneously releasing our balloons to the sky.

As I told my soon-to-be mother-in-law about the “training” I had spent an afternoon on, she said of the people who led this session: “You know what my Dad would have said? Give ‘em a pitchfork and put ‘em to work”.

I don’t know why I loved that so much, but it always stuck with me. Although we are thankfully spared from the harsh existence of farm living from years ago, we all understand that there was a practicality from those generations we should bear in mind when we’re speaking the command “find coffee shop” into our Bluetooth headset.

There are a lot of people who have “glue” jobs these days. Their days are consumed with being in meetings and helping one part of an organization stay in contact with another part of the same organization (thus the “glue”). Some of this is necessary and important.

If you’re in a leadership position and see too many people wrapped up in glue activities, start handing out pitchforks. When you reflect upon your recent schedule and see large chunks of time spent on unworthy activities, grab a pitchfork and get to work.



# “Keep the radiator cap in the middle of the road.”

This is another nugget of folksy wisdom that came from earlier generations of my wife’s family. When I first heard it, I was struck by its power. I assume it started off as the only bit of formal driving advice young people received before climbing behind the wheel of the family auto, hopefully on a rural road somewhere.

But for me it cautions against over-steering. When you’re in a busy time of your life, keep the radiator cap in the middle of the road. When political campaigns are causing people around you to lose their heads, keep the radiator cap in the middle of the road.

This also reminds me of one of the most powerful metaphors of parenting I’ve run across, at least for me. Let me run it past you in the event you find it helpful as well.



I heard once of a drivers education course that would set up orange cones in the high school parking lot, and the students would over-steer and inevitably run over a few cones. Once their instructors told them to focus their gaze more into the distance, and trust their peripheral vision to negotiate the cones closest to them, they learned not to over-steer, and the car and it’s passengers went around, instead of over, the cones.

Some parents, when confronted with the crisis of the moment with their children (an orange cone) have a tendency to over-react to the moment (over-steer). As a parent, it seemed to make more sense to me to make sure we were generally heading in the right direction, and trust my sense of peripheral vision to navigate whatever cones appeared on a given day.

# “Hanging on to resentment is letting someone you despise live rent-free in your head”

- Ann Landers



Some of us are born with a better ability to not harbor resentments than others. For those that struggle with resentments, this saying can be powerful medicine. I don't have a particular problem with resentments, although I attribute that more to a poor memory than any nobleness of character. That said, I'm human, and for those of us who are not saints on earth, that means we'll nurture a few resentments along the way.

Here's a related saying that offers a similar insight: “Hatred is like acid. It does more damage to the container in which it is stored, than to the object on which it is poured” (variations of this quote are commonly attributed to Mark Twain).

Life is short. If someone or some past event is living “rent-free” in our head, we simply have to remember that we are the landlord and can evict the troublesome tenant.

# “Good travelers create their own serendipity”

-Rick Steves

A friend of mine referred me to travel writer Rick Steves’ podcast, which has since been a frequent companion of mine when I go out for walks. Rick often talks about traveling through the “back door” – an image that suggests the road less traveled and real interactions with locals that are more genuine than we’re often exposed to in traditional tourist venues.

The quote above from Rick reminds me of my own responsibility to make great travel memories. For me, it might mean taking the unplanned turn at an interesting street, or joining a friend on a trip when I’m invited.

As a matter of fact, that’s a good way to think about serendipity. It rarely happens without you at some point saying “yes”.

Here’s a bonus quote on travel, courtesy of St. Augustine: “The world is a book, and those who do not travel only read a page”.





**“Our deepest fear is not that we are inadequate. Our deepest fear is that we are powerful beyond measure. It is our light, not our darkness, that most frightens us. We ask ourselves, Who am I to be brilliant, gorgeous, talented, fabulous? Actually, who are you not to be? You are a child of God. Your playing small doesn’t serve the world.**

**There is nothing enlightened about shrinking so that other people won’t feel insecure around you. We are all meant to shine, as children do. We were born to make manifest the glory of God that is within us. It’s not just in some of us; it’s in everyone. And as we let our own light shine, we unconsciously give other people permission to do the same. As we’re liberated from our own fear, our presence automatically liberates others.”**

**- Marianne Williamson**

At 140 words, this is certainly the longest quote in this collection. It doesn’t exactly roll off the tongue, but should hit us between the eyes. It is a call for us to step up and be great. It tells us to not tolerate excuses from ourselves. Enough said.

**“That which we obtain too easily, we esteem too lightly. It is dearness only which gives everything its value”**

**- Thomas Paine**

This quote from Thomas Paine describes why there is such a gauntlet of luxury retailers co-located with casinos in Las Vegas. Gamblers, who “beat” the house and have extra cash in their pocket think little of parting ways with it for something unnecessary. They invested nothing of themselves for the money. They didn’t sacrifice and sweat for it.

When I was young, all the boys in my hockey organization had an official jacket. On the back of the jacket was the name of our town and the hockey organization, and while various jackets had different patches earned by playing in tournaments, every single jacket started off with one patch sewn on the right shoulder: the crossed flags of the United States and Canada. I never wanted anything so much in my whole life, and so my parents said I could get one if I saved for it.



These many years later, the price of the jacket is still burned onto my brain: \$22. My allowance for doing odd jobs around the house was \$2 per week. This meant it would take me over eleven weeks to be able to afford that jacket, plus the extra dollar for the flag patch. They were the longest weeks of my young life. I must have counted my measly dollar bills a hundred times each week. I knew that a candy bar purchase would delay my jacket purchase by another week, so I dropped the candy store from the places I would visit.

I don’t remember ever feeling as good about a jacket as I did the day I finally put on my new jacket, with it’s crossed flag patch on the shoulder.

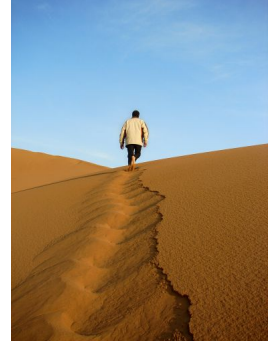
A related quote, attributed to Larry Summers: “Nobody ever washed a rental car”.

# Leadership & Business



# “Act boldly and unseen forces will come to your aid” - Dorothea Brande

Truth! How hard it is for us to take that first step. If I were to be marooned on a deserted island, and could only bring a few quotes to reflect upon in my solitude, this would be one of them. Maybe it would inspire me to trust unseen forces, fashion my own vessel like Tom Hanks in Cast Away and head out to sea.



One of the great decisions I made in my career happened when I was in my early thirties. I was the sole breadwinner for a young family, and had an opportunity to work out of my home for a young software company in California. Everything about the opportunity was different than what I had been used to up to that point. It had a much more competitive culture. Working out of my home meant there would be nobody besides me to make sure I was really working. Many people who had tried to make it in this world had washed out. I wondered if I should stay with the “safe” job I had, or make the move? (By the way, the “safe” job wouldn’t have lasted very long in retrospect as that company got acquired soon after, which reminds me that what we consider to be our safe options are seldom as safe as we think.)

I made the move, and to paraphrase Robert Frost, that has made all the difference.

A related quote to this story: “Nobody ever stole second base without taking their foot off of first”.

Acting boldly is scary. If we’re honest with ourselves, we tend to over-inflate risks in our minds, causing us to hide behind a flimsy excuse that we’re avoiding the bold move due to some profound reasoning, when in reality we’re simply afraid.

I don’t know what these “unseen forces” are that come to our aid when we act boldly, but I’m convinced they’re out there, and I’m also convinced they have a lot of extra capacity to aid you. So go for it.

**“If you want to build a ship, don’t drum up the men to go to the forest to gather wood, saw it, and nail the planks together. Instead, teach them the desire for the sea.”**

**-WW II pilot and writer Antoine de Saint-Exupery**



Antoine de Saint-Exupery (you may remember his novella The Little Prince, or Le Petit Prince for those of you who read it in French class) was a great aviator in the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, but this keen insight is every bit as powerful today as it was then. Particularly for those leading innovation efforts in their companies, Saint-Exupery reminds us that harnessing the passion and creativity of those around us may be messier and less organized than a top-down autocratic management method, but it is more likely the model that leads to great outcomes.



**“I've searched all the parks in all the cities and found no statues of committees.”**

**- G.K. Chesterton**



Chesterton was one of the more quotable people of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, and this one is a reminder that while committees and consortiums might do necessary things, they rarely do great things.

The trick is that we're also exhorted to collaborate with others, so when is the impulse to collaborate the right one, and the impulse to move quickly, alone, the right course of action?

If there were a hard and fast rule for this, life wouldn't be a puzzle and would be less interesting. However, when you see an organization pre-disposed toward committees in their decision-making apparatus, it may be good to remember Chesterton's words.

**“Transformational leaders don't start by denying the world around them. Instead, they describe a future they'd like to create instead.”**

*Seth Godin*

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# Miscellaneous Grand Finale!



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**If you have the law on your side, argue the law; if you have the facts, argue the facts; if you have neither, pound the table.**

- Lawyers' Adage

**“It's supposed to be hard. If it wasn't hard, everyone would do it.  
The hard... is what makes it great.”**

- Jimmy Dugan (Baseball manager played by Tom Hanks in A League of Their Own)

**“Potential is a matter of opinion. Cash flow is a matter of fact.”**

- Business Wisdom

**“We're selling fish, not wine”**

- Anonymous VP of Sales

**“You're about as ugly as homemade soup”**

- SpongeBob SquarePants

**“Remember that amateurs built the ark, and professionals built the Titanic”**

- Unknown

**“Fighting with a pig only makes you muddy and the pig happy.”**

- Unknown

**“If builders built houses the way programmers built programs, the first woodpecker to come along would destroy civilization”**

- Gerald M. Weinberg

**“Happiness is a cat. Chase it and it will run from you. Sit quietly and do your work and it will come and curl itself at your feet.”**

- Unknown

# Afterword

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I hope you've enjoyed just a few of the great quotes that have resonated with me over the years. I suspect you've heard some of them before, and have been introduced to new ones as well. In no particular order, let me leave you with a few thoughts.

- Did you notice how many of the quotes had to do with fear? Although the word “fear” only appears in a few of the quotes, the underlying theme in many of the quotes is that fear is our greatest enemy. I didn't include the great quote about fear from President Franklin Roosevelt (“The only thing we have to fear,...”), but the powerful message of that quote, and many others, is that our fears are our greatest obstacles. One of the ways to make fears shrivel in size is to write them down. Fears often don't look so daunting when they're extracted from the dark recesses of our imagination and forced to stand before us on a piece of paper, blinking in the harsh sunlight. Write them down, and then go about overcoming them.
- It has never been easier to capture and store written nuggets that appeal to us. The reason I have these quotes is because one day several years ago I thought to myself “I'm going to start a file of quotes I like”. So I created a Word doc and gave it the imaginative filename “Phrases.doc”. Each time in the ensuing years when I saw something I liked, I simply opened Phrases.doc and did a quick copy/paste. It admittedly wasn't very elegant, but remember that the best tool for the job is the one you use, and my “Phrases.doc” approach worked for me. I encourage you to start your own collection. If you start today, it won't be long until you have created a worthwhile collection of inspiration that speaks to you.

- We are all a bundle of strengths and weaknesses. We fall and get up. We fail and succeed. We succumb to our smallest fears, and rise to our greatest callings. I hope these quotes inspire you to be balanced, effective, bold, thoughtful, and strong.

Good luck!

*Mike*

PS: Do you have quotes that you love? I'd like to hear from you. Stop by my blog at [www.michaeldiamond.com](http://www.michaeldiamond.com) and let me know what your favorite quotes are and why.

I'd love to learn from you.

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