

A WORKBOOK

Tortoise Practice

An Ordinary Day That Leads to an Extraordinary Life



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BEFORE WE START

Today's Promise

I guide people through the valley, the messy middle between where you are and where you want to be. Small steps, simple systems, and the steady pace of the tortoise.

Work with me, and you'll walk away with a plan: a routine that leads to success. You'll have the tools to adjust and get back on course when you drift, because you will drift. We all do.

You know the fable. The Hare is expected to win every race against the Tortoise, but not in this story. The Hare is so confident and so far out front that it takes a nap. The Tortoise moves by to win the race. Slow and steady wins.

I've taken it a step further. I believe the tortoise runs the same race the same way every time. The tortoise didn't get lucky or have a great day. It was a typical, ordinary day. And it led to an extraordinary life.

How to use this workbook

If you want to learn to swim, you got to get in the water.

Don't just read this. Swim in it.

Every chapter ends with a section called **Swim**. That's where you get in the water. Grab a pen and write directly on these pages. The writing is the work. Reading about the tortoise changes nothing. Practicing like the tortoise changes who you are.

- Go in order the first time. The chapters build.
- Write badly. First drafts are supposed to be rough. You have something to edit, and that's the point.
- Some is better than none. Now is better than later.

At the back you'll find the Tortoise Planner: yearly, quarterly, monthly, weekly, and daily pages. Copy them as often as you like. They are the race, run on paper.

Off to a Great Start

My career was off to a great start. I was producing. I was wanted. I was busy.

Then I noticed I had worked the last three weekends in a row. I was about to miss a three day trip with friends, the kind of trip you remember for decades. And I caught myself thinking, so this is what burnout starts to feel like.

Human being, or human doing?

Somebody once told me, "You don't have the right to be a lump on a log." I believe that. We are built for work, for contribution. Abraham Maslow said, "What you can be, you must be." I couldn't agree more. You don't get to opt out.

But here's what I had to learn the hard way: you can't self-actualize on an empty tank. I remember the day I had to make a decision. I showed up early. I was trying to get the day started right, and the timing of the parking lot light didn't match the season. The lights turned off, and it was too dark to do my job, and the wind was blowing snow. When the foundation cracks, nothing above it stands. Foundational needs come first. Sleep. Food. Movement. People.

One thing nobody wants to hear: get help before you need it. See a therapist. Hire a coach. Call a friend. Do what it takes. The Air Force taught me in survival school to stay safe so you can fight again tomorrow. What are you fighting for? Make sure there's enough of you left to build back stronger and help someone else tomorrow.

SWIM

What does burnout feel like for you? One honest sentence.

Foundation check. Rate each, 1 (solid) to 4 (cracking):

Sleep ____ Food ____ Movement ____ People ____

Who could help you, before you need it?

The Hot Hand Is a Myth

Get excited. Your player has a hot hand. Feed him the ball.

Nope. There's no such thing as a real hot hand in basketball. Researchers have looked. It's only temporary success that we remember selectively. What matters is the routine.

We love the natural born hero. Superman didn't learn to be Superman. He didn't practice to be Superman. He was born Superman. I'll say something strong here: Superman has done more harm to us than any villain ever could, because he taught us that the great ones are born, not built. So we wait to discover what we were born to be instead of practicing to become it.

My son once bought a raffle ticket for a chance at a halftime half court shot worth fifty dollars. He spent the entire first half dreaming about how he'd spend the money. He had the will to win. You could not want it more than he did. He missed by half the court. He had never played basketball before.

■ *"It's not the will to win, but the will to prepare to win that makes the difference." Bear Bryant*

People used to tell me I got lucky in sales. One day a client slid the largest hardware order I had ever seen across the table and asked if I could quote it. How lucky. Of course, I had studied that technology nonstop for seven years and visited that client every two weeks for two years, eight hours of driving each visit. Could I have made that half court shot without the preparation?

The grizzly that catches the most salmon isn't the most talented bear. It's the one that figured out where to stand. Position and patience. You have to at least get in the way.

And when the progress stops showing? George Leonard calls it the plateau, and he says to love it. Growth comes in surprise bursts surrounded by long stretches of plateau. The practice is the reward. Rewards and punishments live in the past or the future. Practice is now.

SWIM

Where in your life are you waiting on luck, talent, or a hot hand?

What's your half court shot, the win you want without the practice behind it?

What would the will to prepare look like this week? Be specific.

Name a plateau you're standing on right now. Can you reframe the plateau and decide to love it?

Who Do You Aspire to Be?

Don't worry about what you want to do. Not yet. The better question is who.

I have a daughter who is a little better than most at math. When she was young, we bragged about how smart she was. Gifted. Advanced. It was a dangerous mistake. When she hit a problem she couldn't solve right away, she'd shut down and cry, because if math was hard, then who was she? We changed how we talk. Now we brag about how hard she works and how she asks for help early. Fixed labels break. Growth identities bend.

Col. Chris Hadfield started getting ready to be an astronaut at nine years old. Canada didn't even have a space program. He lived the life an astronaut would live and put himself in the best position for success. If he never made it, he still lived a great life. That's who he is: a man who prepares.

Researchers asked cleaners at a teaching hospital whether their work was a job, a career, or a calling. About a third said calling. They knew a clean room saves lives. Same mop, different man. You alone decide what your day means. (Amy Wrzesniewski's research on jobs, careers, and callings, if you want to dig deeper.)

Now let me tell you why I believe identity can be rebuilt, at any age, from almost anything.

My Dad died when I was six years old. I remember sitting in the front of a pickup truck in a hospital parking lot when the nurse walked up to the driver's window and simply said, "I'm sorry." Life changed. A stepfather came, a hard man from a hard childhood, and I became the target of a lot of frustration. In fifth grade he put me on a tractor chained to a tree he was cutting down, and I couldn't confidently work a clutch yet. The tree hit the house instead of me. My belief in my ability to influence the world was not high.

What saved me was a few good teachers who looked for the spark and fanned the flames. A teacher who noticed how much information I could absorb. A teacher who loved me like a second mom. A German instructor in the Air Force who threw chalk at me and got me through. Decades later I finished my MBA as a Graduate Student of the Year, and a dean invited me to teach. I teach at Creighton today. I have my dream job.

You can only perform at the level of your belief. And belief is built, not born.

Self-efficacy grows when you stretch just outside your ability, not so far that you break. Write your intentions down and review them. Peter Drucker kept a journal of what he intended to do and learned soon enough what he was good at. Keep a journal for your future self to read. Your future self is waiting, understands your intentions, and doesn't buy excuses.

SWIM

Drucker's five questions. Take these slowly. Revisit every six months.

1. What do you want to be remembered for?

2. Who do you want to be remembered by?

3. What do THEY find important (not you)?

4. How will you measure their value?

5. What's your plan?

Finish the sentence with a growth identity:

I am someone who _____ every day.

Write three lines to your future self. They're waiting.

The Eastward Gaze

"My own plans are made. While I can, I sail east in the Dawn Treader. When she fails me, I paddle east in my coracle. When she sinks, I shall swim east with my four paws. And when I can swim no longer, if I have not reached Aslan's country, or shot over the edge of the world into some vast cataract, I shall sink with my nose to the sunrise."

Reepicheep, in C.S. Lewis's The Voyage of the Dawn Treader

Reepicheep knew his east. Ship, coracle, paws, nose to the sunrise: the vehicle kept changing, but the direction never did. That's the gaze I want for you.

How does a ship leave a port and arrive at an intended destination? It isn't the great start, the fast pace, the skilled crew, or the fuel. The captain knows where the ship is headed at all times, measures against the course, and corrects. Confidence will not guide the ship. Course correction will.

Every year, sea turtles swim thousands of miles across open ocean to reach their nesting grounds. They don't rush. They don't multitask. They navigate by the earth's own magnetic field, rest when needed, adjust when needed, and never lose the destination. Clear direction, consistent movement.

Nobody climbed Everest by showing up at the bottom, looking up, and saying, "Let's try." You don't show up on game day and ask, "Gee, fellows, what do you think we need to do today?"

So pick a port. Here's the secret that takes the pressure off:

The practice of declaring a destination matters more than selecting the perfect one.

If you can't choose among too many options, then focus on getting ready. Any option is better if you are healthy and don't overspend. But name something. Call your shot. Play on purpose.

SWIM

Your Eastward Gaze: what is the single most important thing you want this year to be about?

Why does it matter? Who is it for?

How will you know you're on course in 90 days? Name something you could see or count.

Six Watches

	6am	9am	Noon	3pm	6pm	9pm
Analytical puzzle, brain power required	•	•	•			
Open minded mystery, brainstorming				•	•	•

An example day in six watches. Yours may run differently. You'll map your own at the end of this chapter.

Sailors learned long ago that nobody can stand at the helm all day. So a ship's day is divided into watches, and the crew gives each watch its proper duty. If a ship can cross an ocean that way, you can cross a Tuesday.

I divide the day into six watches: 6am, 9am, noon, 3pm, 6pm, and 9pm. Three hours each. Six small races instead of one long blur.

Here's the part that changes everything: there are two kinds of work, and they don't belong on the same watch.

Analytical watches

Puzzle work. Brain power required. Writing, planning, numbers, the most important project moved forward. For most people these are the morning watches, when you're sharp. Pay yourself first here: early sunshine, exercise, planned eating, a gratitude note, prayer or meditation, then the big rock. If the day is going to take the best of you anyway, make sure some of the best went to what matters most.

Guard your sharpest watch from the traps: don't open email first. Open your "start here" document. Set your calendar, not your inbox, as the morning view. If you can delete an email, trash it. If you can answer in under two minutes, do it. If it takes thought, schedule it. A to-do list without a "when" is just a wish list. Want less email? Send less email.

The deepest trap of all: operate vs lead. You can sit down, put your head down, and not look up till lunch, pulled along by the current of the urgent. That's operating. Leading your day means working on tomorrow: what can you prep this watch that makes tomorrow better?

Open minded watches

Mystery work. Brainstorming. The watches when you're a little tired and your guard relaxes, and you're more open to new ideas. Brainstorm. Write loose drafts. Follow up with friends and family. Take the open meetings. One warning: your guard is down for impulse shopping too. Careful out there.

And the late watches belong to rest and process. Wind down, review, set a sleep goal and respect it. I'm Catholic and I rest one day a week, a Day Of No Scheduled Activity. I accept the wisdom of the old tradition, and I notice it implies working the other six with a full heart. Rest is part of the race plan. The tortoise had a plan for race day, and the plan included rest.

There's not enough of you to go around. That's not pessimism; it's planning. Stand each watch on purpose, and answer carefully: who gets the best of you?

The secret scorecard: how do we treat others? Whoever gets your sharpest watch, make sure the people you love aren't living on your leftovers.

SWIM

Map your six watches. Mark each box A (analytical: puzzle, brain power) or O (open minded: mystery, brainstorming), and shade the watches that belong to rest.

	6am	9am	Noon	3pm	6pm	9pm
Mode (A / O / rest)						
What belongs here						

What's in your sharpest watch for YOU? Pick two:

- ☐ Early sunshine
- ☐ Exercise
- ☐ Planned eating
- ☐ Gratitude journal
- ☐ Prayer / meditation
- ☐ Time with loved ones

Tomorrow's index card:

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____

Who has been getting your best watch? Who should be?

Build an Ordinary Tuesday

Here is the tortoise's actual secret, and it fits on one page: a typical Tuesday.

Not a perfect day. Not a vacation day. A typical Tuesday that keeps you on course toward your destination. A Tuesday that becomes your average, the routine you return to when you get tired. Return to the mean, and make the mean worth returning to.

Annie Dillard said it best in *The Writing Life*: "How we spend our days is, of course, how we spend our lives." I shorten it to this: how you live a day is how you live your life.

Close the day well to open the day well. The day starts at the close of business the night before: review the calendar, scan the list, and write tomorrow's index card. Today started yesterday. It's too late to wake up and decide what's next.

I love the practice of flying, and I borrowed a ritual from the flight line called "Remove before flight." Those are the red tags on the parts that must be removed before the plane is safe to fly. I keep a short morning appointment with myself under that name, Remove Before Flight: thank you notes, meeting notes from yesterday, did I do what I intended to do yesterday and if not why, and do I know what I intend to do today. Your list will be different. I warn you to keep it short.

And subtract before you add. Masanobu Fukuoka, the farmer who wrote *The One-Straw Revolution*, grew remarkable harvests by removing everything from farming that didn't need to be there, adding back only what broke. We live in a world of not enough time, and finding more time is not a sustainable answer. You need a not-to-do list. The best time to plant a shade tree was twenty years ago. The next best time is today.

Don't let the shame of delay stall your start.

SWIM

Draft your test Tortoise-Day. Write it out so you have something to edit.

Block	Plan
Analytical watches + first rocks	
Open minded watches + primaries	
Rest watches + process	
Sleep goal	

Your "Remove before flight" list. Four items maximum.

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____
4. _____

The Non-Agenda: three things you will stop doing to make room.

- ☐ _____
- ☐ _____
- ☐ _____

The Early Warning System

None of this is new advice. Age old, simple advice is the answer. So why don't we follow it?

Because we don't hear the alarm.

Years ago I worked in technology at a hospital. A virus hit us, and the outcome was far worse than it needed to be. In hindsight, we didn't sound the alarm soon enough. We didn't realize we were in the middle of a problem until it was too late to avoid the damage.

In the Air Force, I sat through a safety debrief I have never forgotten. A blinking light indicating engine trouble held the attention of all four crew members, and the plane hit a mountain.

No one was looking out the window.

Your superpower is reflection. It's the early warning system that tells you you're drifting while the correction is still cheap.

I borrow an old practice called the Examen and keep it simple. At noon, check in: Am I on track? Am I having fun, meaning is the work giving me energy? Two questions, thirty seconds.

Stop. Challenge. Choose.

Jane McGonigal gives the tool that name, and I love it. The first step in every ethics class is realizing you're in an ethical situation. The first step in every drift is realizing you're drifting. Most of us train the response. Train the alarm instead: practice the noticing on small choices until catching yourself drifting becomes automatic.

This is course correction, the number one tool for life. A crew can't simply believe they're on the right path. They measure against the intended course and adjust, as often as needed. Reflect and correct.

SWIM

Pick your alarm. When will it ring, and what will it ask?

Run the noon Examen for one week. Check the boxes honestly.

	Mon	Tue	Wed	Thu	Fri	Sat	Sun
On track?							
Having fun?							

Where in your life is a blinking light getting all the attention while nobody looks out the window?

Call Your Shots

During the building of the transcontinental railroad, General Dodge had every soldier out of the stockades and in the saddle, repairing the downed telegraph line. Soon word reached Washington that the telegraph was working again all the way from the Missouri River to California. General Grant wired to ask where Dodge was. The reply: "Nobody knows where he is, but everybody knows where he has been." The working line was the report. I can't think of a better compliment.

Tell me what you've done, not what you're going to do.

Here's the feedback game. Write down your intentions for the week. Five small, specific, measurable shots. At the end of the week, review. Did you accomplish them? If not, why not? Was it won't do, or can't do? Those are very different answers, and both are useful.

This is not a critique. It's a conversation.

An honest dialogue with the mirror, or with a coach if you're fortunate.

And stack the deck in your favor. Change requires a feeding plan. There's an old fable about a man who always knew which dog would win the fight: he fed one dog and starved the other. Feed the behaviors you want, early in the day, before your willpower thins out. Fill the day with the actions you want, and you'll run out of time for the others.

One more game: pass the baton. Pretend tomorrow is a relay race and today's runner hands off to tomorrow's. What can today's runner do to set up a clean handoff? Prep the lunch. Lay out the shoes. Write the card.

Case study: my 100 Day Challenge

In 2020 I published a podcast episode and an article and did 150 seconds of exercise every day for 100 straight days. What I learned surprised me. I didn't lack skill, time, or money. The whole experiment was an emotional rollercoaster, and emotions were the only real obstacle. Lessons that stuck: firsts beget seconds (if I read, I'm more likely to read). Right size fits all: one minute of running a day beats the marathon you never run. The finishing matters most exactly when the fun is gone. And something every day is far better than a medium chunk once in a while.

SWIM

Call five shots for this week. Small. Specific. Measurable.

- ☐ _____ Done / Missed: won't or can't?
- ☐ _____ Done / Missed: won't or can't?
- ☐ _____ Done / Missed: won't or can't?
- ☐ _____ Done / Missed: won't or can't?
- ☐ _____ Done / Missed: won't or can't?

Your feeding plan: which behavior gets fed first tomorrow morning?

Pass the baton: one thing you'll do today for tomorrow's runner.

When You Drift

You will drift. The plan will break. Here are the recovery tools I reach for, in the order I usually need them.

Drive the truck

I was twelve, driving the family truck through a gate, turning too sharp, inching closer and closer to the post and hoping. I didn't see the railroad spike. It caved in the whole panel. My Dad was not a calm man, but in all his yelling he gave me one piece of wisdom that has served me for decades: "Drive the truck. Don't let the truck drive you." How many times have you let a situation inch out of control when you could have changed course? Grab the wheel.

Take the wheel of your own response

What happens is often unfair. What happens is frequently not your fault. How you respond is 100 percent your responsibility. Epictetus said it isn't events that disturb people, but their judgments about them. Gratitude is the only weapon I know against a scarcity mindset. It's why I do my own laundry: no excuses changes my option set. You get to decide if today is a good day. You pick.

Read the resistance

I am afraid more often than I admit. Fear of rejection, mostly. I once sat in a client's parking lot unable to get out of the car; the air felt thick. That resistance was my signal. Whenever I feel the resistance, I know it's the direction to go. Sunshine is the best disinfectant: name the fear, bring it into the light, and it shrinks. Action has momentum. Ring the doorbell and it's easier to say hello.

Remember: Gremlins don't exist

The best technicians I ever worked with kept going because they knew the answer was out there. The ones who quit believed in Gremlins, in problems with no cause. We didn't always find the answer, but our faith kept us looking long after others stopped. Belief rules your world.

Be a pig, not a cow

On the farm, cows touched the electric fence once and never tested it again. The pigs tested it every few hours, nose first, careful but curious. When the fence was off, the pigs walked through. Which fences in your life did you stop testing years ago?

Chunk it

When everything competes for attention at once, I chunk. Write down what's distracting me so my mind can relax. Pick one important thing, good enough beats perfect. Set a timer for 30 minutes and tell the rest of my brain to chill; everything gets a turn. And when I can, I double dip: weighted backpack on while the vacuum runs. Had a great time.

SWIM

What's inching out of control right now, while you slowly turn and hope?

What's the correction you've been hoping you wouldn't have to make?

Name one fear out loud here. Sunshine is the best disinfectant.

One fence you stopped testing. Is the current even on?

Three things you're grateful for, before you turn this page.

The Long Race

I love thinking about a new year and new possibilities. Zoom in or out and notice your priorities change.

In a one year plan, I focus on goals, things I want to have. In a five year plan, anything seems possible: career, geography, skills. In a twenty five year plan, the details fade into the background, and I wonder about identity and health. What kind of life do I want? What type of person do I want to be?

Start with the long horizon and work backwards. The actuarial tables tell me roughly how many years I have. What's important: health, relationships, independence. What's distracting: approval from strangers, degrees, titles, promotions.

Survival school taught me to stay safe so I could fight again tomorrow. So I'll ask you what I ask myself: what are you fighting for? You get the best of you so you can be strong enough to help others.

It's a path, not a race against anyone else. Focus on continual improvement over the long haul. Don't rush. Pace matters.

Remember, the tortoise wins.

SWIM

Your 25 year sentence. Who are you by then? One sentence is enough.

Your 5 year line.

This year's line (check it against your Eastward Gaze from Chapter 4).

Tomorrow's index card. The whole system, ending where it always ends: with an ordinary day.

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____

Cross out what's been distracting you:

approval from strangers | titles | promotions | degrees | _____

The Tortoise Manifesto

- **We choose direction over speed.** Better to move slowly toward the right destination than to sprint toward the wrong one.
- **We protect our energy like a finite resource.** Not because we're lazy, but because we understand the power of focused attention.
- **We say no to good opportunities** so we can say yes to great ones. Our non-agenda is as important as our agenda.
- **We measure progress in consistency, not intensity.** Small daily actions compound into remarkable results.
- **We build habits that serve our future selves.** What we do repeatedly becomes who we are.
- **We reflect before we react.** Regular reviews keep us on course.
- **We trust the process, especially when we can't see immediate results.** Some journeys take time.
- **We choose sustainable over spectacular.** The goal isn't to impress others but to reach our true destination.
- **We remember that every expert was once a beginner** who kept showing up, day after day, until mastery emerged.
- **We win not through speed, but through persistence and direction.** This is the tortoise way.

The same race, the same way, tomorrow.

Signed _____ Date _____

A NOTE FROM GREG

Why I Coach

I'm concerned that we go about coaching and motivating all wrong. We focus on the mistakes and look only at final results. If my story makes any sense at all, look for the spark in people and fan the flames.

I lost my Dad at six, grew up under a hard hand, barely graduated, and joined the Air Force at seventeen. Teachers who saw something worth working on changed my path. Twenty five years later I finished my MBA as Graduate Student of the Year, and today I teach at Creighton University. It is a labor of love.

I know how to guide others to become stronger for two reasons: I continually learn, and I've been through it myself.

One more thing. Everything you wrote in these pages can become the foundation of something bigger. I teach a way to put AI to work as a personal coach: one tool holds your goals, reflections, and weekly intentions as a knowledge base, and another acts as a persistent coaching persona grounded in your own material. It checks in with you, spots your patterns, and pushes back when you overcommit. The pages you just filled out are the perfect starting material.

If you'd like help building your ordinary day, or your own AI coach to guard it, reach out. I'd love to hear which page you wrote on first.

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Yearly Outlook

Copy these planner pages as often as you need. They are the race, run on paper.

MY EASTWARD GAZE: YEARLY DIRECTION

The destination: what is the single most important thing I want to be remembered for this year? (The ship's one destination.)

THE MUST-BE

What is one thing I can be that I must be this year?

PAY YOURSELF FIRST (SHARPEST WATCH COMMITMENT)

The most important personal project I will schedule time for every single day.

THE NON-AGENDA (WHAT I WILL NOT DO)

Three things I am going to stop doing to free up time and energy.

☐ _____

☐ _____

☐ _____

Quarterly Check-In

Review the past 90 days. Rate each factor 1 (excellent) to 4 (needs attention).

Tortoise factor	Rating	Reflection
Direction Moving steadily toward the Eastward Gaze?		
Consistency Are the habits and routines working?		
Balance Sharpest watch protected, relationships healthy?		
Energy Energized, sustainable pace, no burnout?		

Total 4-8: steady progress, on course. 9-12: time for minor corrections. 13-16: reset; significant change needed.

THE SCORECARD

How did I treat others this quarter? How did I live my values in my key relationships?

RE-TUNING THE COMPASS

One minor adjustment for next quarter.

Monthly Preview

Month _____ Year _____

MONTHLY BIG ROCKS

Three milestones this month that keep me on the yearly path.

- ☐ _____
- ☐ _____
- ☐ _____

WHAT MIGHT KNOCK ME OFF COURSE?

Name it now, while the correction is cheap.

NOTES

Weekly Planning

Week of _____

WEEKLY INTENTIONS: CALL YOUR SHOTS

Five specific, measurable actions this week. Review Friday: done or missed; if missed, won't do or can't do?

- ☐ _____ Done / Won't / Can't
- ☐ _____ Done / Won't / Can't
- ☐ _____ Done / Won't / Can't
- ☐ _____ Done / Won't / Can't
- ☐ _____ Done / Won't / Can't

SHARPEST WATCH PROTECTION

Block a daily watch for the Pay Yourself First project.

WEEKLY LEARNING & ADJUSTMENT

One small adjustment to better align intentions with actions next week.

Daily Page

Day _____ Date _____

MORNING: REMOVE BEFORE FLIGHT

The single, deliberate first step this morning. Did yesterday's intentions happen? What do I intend today?

SHARPEST WATCH BLOCK

The one major task scheduled for my best hours.

NOON EXAMEN

On track: ☐ Yes ☐ No Having fun (energy from the work): ☐ Yes ☐ No

OPEN MINDED WATCH TASKS

- ☐ _____
- ☐ _____
- ☐ _____

EVENING REFLECTION

What small act of love or sacrifice did I practice today? What can I prep tonight to make tomorrow better?

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