

## THE BIG IDEAS



### Spartan Virtues

Ten of them.

### Your True North

Find it.

### Commitment

Do you know what it is?

### Marshmallows

Red Bull and Wienerschnitzel.

### You'll Know

At the finish line.



## The Spartan Way

Eat Better. Train Better. Think Better. Be Better.

BY JOE DE SENA · ST. MARTIN'S GRIFFIN © 2018 · 208 PAGES

“Human beings thrive on challenge. This has been true for hundreds of thousands of years. It was certainly true for the ancient Spartans. ...”

Look, life is tough. You've just gotta be tougher. You cultivate resilience by facing challenges, not by ignoring them and hoping they'll go away. There are no shortcuts to get anyplace worthwhile. So my question is: 'Are you just gonna lay there with Doritos crumbs on your shirt or are you the kind of person who gets knocked down but gets back up?'

This book, like every Spartan Race, is a rebellion against a life of passivity and softness. It is a rebirth of grit. And it kicks off by forcing you to identify a purpose for your life that'll ignite a fierce, unstoppable passion in you.

This book's purpose is to teach you how to apply the ten timeless principles of the Spartan Lifestyle. If you master these, the next time you're up against a wall, you'll find a way to push through. You'll see. *The Spartan Way* is the ultimate recipe for success. It'll help you embrace adversity and beat any difficult challenge to a pulp.

Tackle it. Own it. We ALL need it.”

~ Joe De Sena from *The Spartan Way*

Joe De Sena created Spartan Race.

As per the back of the book, he is “Determined to yank 100 million people off their couches to start living instead of being passive observers of life” and his ultimate goal is to “help improve everyone's physical and emotional health by teaching them the tenets of Spartan living from ancient Greece: simple eating, smart training, mastering resilience, and an all-out commitment to achieving your goal.”

As you know if you've been following along, I absolutely love what Joe's created with Spartan Race and I'm a huge fan of him, his grit, and his astonishing (!) commitment to being an exemplar of the Spartan virtues he talks about in this and his other two books.

I did my first Spartan after reading [Spartan Up!](#) and stepped it up a notch (or three) after reading [Spartan Fit!](#)

Now, I'm officially all in on using my Spartan training as my athletic “[portal into enlightenment](#).” Every time I think about PAYING to face obstacles I smile, say “[OMMS!](#)” to myself and fall even more in love with the sport. (And, remember: [Swamis love obstacle course races](#) as well!)

In this book, we get to learn the ten Spartan Core Virtues—from Self-Awareness and Commitment to Grit and Integrity. If you're into embodying the classic virtues of ancient Greece as much as I am, I think you'll dig the book as much as I did. (Get a copy [here](#).)

Of course, it's packed with Big Ideas and I'm excited to share some of my favorites so let's jump straight in!

*“The heights of great mean  
reached and kept  
were not attained by sudden  
flight,  
But they, while their  
companions slept,  
were toiling upward in the  
night.”*

~ Henry Wadsworth Longfellow  
*The Ladder of St. Augustine*

## THE 10 SPARTAN CORE VIRTUES

"No matter how far you have  
gone on a wrong road, turn  
back."

~ Turkish Proverb

"Through work and endurance racing I have come to know many people. Some of them were unforgettable. These great ones all shared the same core qualities. I call them the Spartan Core Virtues. Combine these qualities into one person and you have the ideal boss, the valuable employee, the perfect business partner, or comrade in any endeavor. Here's a short description of each of the Spartan Core Virtues.

**Self-Awareness:** Know who you are and who you are not. If you don't, you'll be confused daily.

**Commitment:** Stick to it because the world is filled with people who don't. You're better than that.

**Passion:** If you're not passionate about what you do, you're not going to be great at it. Take things seriously and learn to be passionate.

**Discipline:** Set your rules and stick to them. Be disciplined about it.

**Prioritization:** Deal with the important things—important being what you define as important—first.

**Grit:** Get gritty. Break out of your comfort zone. Do the hard, scary shit. Find your passion and persevere.

**Courage:** This is the ability to stay focused and work relentlessly with both intensity and passion through virtually anything, especially through failure.

**Optimism:** See the world as you want it to be, not as it is. Be ever hopeful.

**Integrity:** If you're not honest with yourself and others, then what are you?

**Wholeness:** Live the life of a complete and whole Spartan."

The ten Spartan Core Virtues—each has its own chapter.

Repetition is the essence of mastery, so let's go through them again. This time, if you didn't already do a quick inventory on how you're doing with each, please do.

**Self-Awareness + Commitment + Passion + Discipline + Prioritization + Grit + Courage + Optimism + Integrity + Wholeness.**

So... What's awesome? What needs work? What can (and will!) you start doing differently?

And, remember: It's ALL (!!!) about VIRTUE.

As I wrap my brain around my life's work and potential next strategic steps in terms of how I can best serve you and the world beyond my teaching, the ONE thing I keep on coming back to is that it's *ALL ABOUT* (!) **OPERATIONALIZING VIRTUE!**

How do we move from theory to practice on this stuff? How do we create the algorithms/habits/new behaviors such that doing the right thing is the automatic thing?

Again, how do we **OPERATIONALIZE VIRTUE?**

As we've discussed so many times, this is what Aristotle taught us when he said that the *summum bonum* (the highest good!) is to live with *eudaimonia*—to flourish by having a "good soul." How do we do that? LIVE VIRTUOUSLY!! (Again, echo, the one-word summation of ALL of our work together? Areté. Express the best version of your moment to moment to moment and voila! Enter: Eudaimonia + a deep sense of flourishing.)

Of course, ALL the classic philosophers and wisdom/religious traditions say the same thing. And, of course, so does the modern science of well-being. The positive psychology movement was founded on what they determined were the six core universal virtues: Wisdom/Knowledge

+ Courage + Love/Humanity + Justice + Temperance + Spirituality/Transcendence. What did they do after they identified those core virtues? As we discuss in [Authentic Happiness](#), they split them up into a collection 24 more detailed virtues and then tried to help us put those “Virtues in Action” by identifying our core virtues (aka signature strengths) and rocking them daily.

If you haven’t done their VIA (Virtues-in-Action!) Signature Strengths test yet, get on that. (That would fall under Joe’s Virtue #1: Self-Awareness. Know thyself. Know who you are at your essential best. And be that. In service to something bigger than yourself!)

P.S. There’s a bonus 11th Virtue. It’s Top Secret. And, it might just be the most important one of all. Learn more about [here](#).

## FIND YOUR TRUE NORTH

*“True North is directly related to your legacy. And everything you do, every action you take, every decision you make, must move you forward toward this legacy.”*

~ Joe De Sena

“Start from where you are now. Look at your own values and beliefs. Question what kind of contribution you’re making in the world and what you can possibly bring to the table every single day of your life. Ask yourself what journey are you on right now? What direction are you going in? How would you live this day if it were going to be your last? What would you think back on and be proud of? What would you regret? How would your eulogy read if you had lived a long, full life and died of old age?”

Welcome to Principle #1: Find Your True North. In short, what are you here to do? How will you make your own personal dent in the universe—starting with your family and community and extending as far out as your ambition commands? To answer those questions requires our first Spartan Virtue: Self-Awareness.

Joe tells us that one way to arrive at more clarity is to write your own eulogy. (Beginning with Ultimate End in Mind [Stephen Covey](#) style.) So... Let’s fast-forward to the end of your long and awesome life. Who says what? What’s YOUR legacy? <- That’s your True North. And, you know when you want to make sure you live in integrity with it? Every. Single. Moment of Every. Single. Day. As Joe says: *“True North is directly related to your legacy. And everything you do, every action you take, every decision you make, must move you forward toward this legacy.”*

P.S. Another way to get clarity? Take a quick trip to Hell. Try this exercise out for size: As we discuss in [Getting Grit](#), some say Hell is arriving at the very end of your life and meeting the version of you that you COULD have become.

I get slightly nauseous (and just sat up a little straighter as I type this) every time I even spend a second thinking about some heroically awesome, radiantly alive version of me looking at the dying me wondering what I did with my life. (Yikes!)

Let’s follow that trip to Hell up with a trip to Heaven. Look closely at that epically awesome version of you. Then LIVE LIKE THAT VERSION OF YOU NOW. Operationalize the virtues that guy/gal figured out. And [chip away at all the stuff that’s in the way](#) because that version of you? That’s the REAL YOU.

P.P.S. Want the clarity you need to live in integrity with your highest ideals? Create the necessary pockets of solitude [Lead Yourself First](#) style!! (Which will almost certainly require Conquering (any potential) Digital Addictions!)

## DO YOU KNOW WHAT COMMITMENT IS?

“Do you know what commitment is? It’s a compelling personal promise you make that determines how you will lead your life day to day, moment to moment. The beauty of committing yourself is that it makes the rest of life’s decisions easy for you. If you look to your True North for direction, it’s easy to say ‘no’ to a cocktail offer, a third slice of pizza, or a meeting that will take you away from a scheduled workout. You can tell the boss ‘no’ to working the weekend

*"Success is going from failure to failure without loss of enthusiasm."*

~ Winston Churchill

without regret because your commitment to family comes first. Do you see now how important identifying your True North is to this second virtue? How completely you commit to your path will determine if you reach your destination or metaphorically disembowel yourself along the way."

Welcome to Principle #2: "Make a Commitment" in which we embody the Spartan Virtue of Perseverance. Know your True North. And Commit to it.

We're not talking about a kinda sorta "Meh..." commitment here. This is a commitment of the ALL IN variety. To bring his point home, Joe tells us about the astonishing "Marathon Monks" of Japan. He was so inspired by them that he moved his family to Japan to walk their path.

Very short story: *"The Marathon Monks are known for their commitment to one of the most grueling physical and spiritual challenges in human history, the sennichi kaihōgyō, which translates to 'circling the mountain.' Chosen monks embark on epic solo walking meditations around Mount Hiei over a period of one thousand days that are broken into one-hundred-day hikes over the course of seven years."*

The monks challenge themselves to do the near impossible (not only crazy distances on a daily basis but also with limited food and water and sleep). They do this in pursuit of enlightenment.

But... *"If he fails to finish, his punishment is death by his own hand. The monk disembowels himself using a knife or hangs himself with a rope. He carries both tools on the journey. The mountain is dotted with many unmarked graves of those who have failed in their quest."*

THAT is commitment. And why Joe took his family to live there. *"These were the graves I wanted to see. I wanted to pay homage to these fallen warrior monks who took their commitment so seriously that they would rather die than live having failed in their quest."*

All of which kinda begs the question: How's YOUR commitment?

P.S. Joe references Sun Tzu's *The Art of War* to echo this wisdom and tells us: *"Sun Tzu called that place where there are no options for retreating or quitting 'desperate ground.' He wrote: 'Throw your soldiers into positions from whence there is no escape and they will prefer death to flight. If they will face death, there is nothing they may not achieve. Officers and men alike will put forth their utmost strength.'"*

P.P.S. In his great book, *Happier*, Tal Ben-Shahar describes the same basic idea (in less fatal terms) as "throwing your knapsack over the wall" and tells us: *"In 1962, when John F. Kennedy declared to the world that the United States was going to land a man on the moon by the end of the decade, some of the metals necessary for the journey had not yet been invented, and the technology required for completing the journey was not available. But he threw his—and NASA's—knapsack over the brick wall. Though making a verbal commitment, no matter how bold and how inspiring, does not ensure that we reach our destination, it does enhance the likelihood of success."* <- Begs the questions: Where's your wall? Where's your knapsack?

## MARSHMALLOWS, RED BULL AND WIENERSCHNITZEL

*"Over the last few decades, other researchers mimicked Mischel's test and got similar results. I tried Mischel's 'marshmallow test' on my son Jack when he was six years old. I told him he could have one scoop of ice cream instantly or two scoops if he waited fifteen minutes. He thought about it a little, then asked, 'How long will I have to wait for fifteen scoops?' Already, my kid had figured out that greater things can come to those who wait."*

Delaying gratification is like catching lightning in a bottle. It's hard to do, especially when you're struggling with money. When I started Spartan, I said we would stand on certain principles and never bend under pressure. We would not align ourselves with partners who we felt would pull us down. My investors went crazy when we turned down a lot of potential partners—like Red

*"Even if you're on the right track, you'll get run over if you just sit there."*

~ Will Rogers

Bull. I just wouldn't do it. I said I'm just not feeding people poison. So we left a lot of money on the table for fifteen years. But I learned from my mistakes. If you burn your hand on the stove, you quickly figure out that you should never put your hand there again.

Patience eventually becomes power. When you are a master of your choices, you are not slave to impulses, bad habits, and the whims of other people. When you couple delayed gratification with perseverance, you have a commanding weapon in your utility belt, which is why it's a core Spartan virtue."

That's from Principle #4 "Delay Gratification" in which we explore the Spartan Virtue of Discipline. Three things here in that wisdom-packed three paragraphs.

First, how epic (!) is that, "How long will I have to wait for fifteen scoops?" response from Joe's six-year-old son Jack? I told Alexandra that story and she did the test on our six-year-old son Emerson. Our version of [The Marshmallow Test](#) went like this: Alexandra: "I'll give you one (100%) dark chocolate bar right now; or, I'll give you two if you wait 15 minutes. Which would you choose?" After thinking about it for a moment, Emerson said: "I'll take one now." To which Alexandra asked, "Why would you choose that?" To which Emerson said: "Well, two chocolate bars is too much for someone my size!" HAH! Love it and love him.

(I might have coached him that if he waited the 15 minutes he could have eaten however much he thought was best then saved the rest for another day. To which he replied that having it around would make it difficult for him to resist a la [Willpower 101](#). :)

Second, I love the Integrity Joe demonstrated by \*not\* accepting cash from Red Bull as a sponsor. He's trying to yank 100 million people off the couch and live their best lives so why would he give them *poison*?

That's EXACTLY what I was thinking when I recently went to a Pancreatic Cancer association walk in support of my brother. My sisters went all in raising money for the organization. They raised so much that we were a top team and "Team Johnson" actually made it to the back of the t-shirts. Which is wonderful. But, you know what wasn't so wonderful? The fact that the Wienerschnitzel logo was on the back of the t-shirt as well.

For those who may not know, Wienerschnitzel is a fast-food restaurant specializing in hot dogs. And, for those who may not know (which, apparently, includes the PanCan organization), consuming highly-processed meats like hot dogs (!!!) is one of the few things that pretty much EVERYONE agrees is a TERRIBLE idea if you want to avoid cancer. Yet... There they were as a major sponsor of a CANCER WALK!! And, not only did they have their logo on the t-shirts, they had a FULL MOBILE RESTAURANT TRUCK giving away free hot dogs to go with the six different sodas on tap while my kids played with their branded beach balls. Yah. That's cool.

Apparently the founder of Wienerschnitzel died of pancreatic cancer. Rather than privately donate to support cancer research (or better yet completely change their business so they sell health not poison), they choose to SPONSOR the event? And the people who run PanCan accepted their cash and put them front and center? Ahem. We've got work to do.

Third: The idea of patience eventually becoming power via combining delayed gratification with perseverance reminds me of SN Goenka and his epic: "*Work diligently. Diligently. Work patiently and persistently. Patiently and persistently. And you are bound to be successful. BOUND to be successful.*"

## **"YOU'LL KNOW AT THE FINISH LINE."**

"When people ask me, 'Why do a Spartan Race?' my answer is, *You'll know at the finish line.*" It's our Spartan tagline. I'm deliberately vague because there's no single definitive answer to why anyone puts himself or herself through a course of manufactured hell.

"People who never get carried away should be."

~ Malcolm Forbes

What you'll know at the finish line will be different from what your buddy or wife, or the stranger next to you will know. It's different for everyone who crosses the line. But that's what makes Spartan worthwhile. And cool. No matter how many races you enter, every step of the course is an opportunity to learn something new about *yourself*. I've heard it from thousands of people all over the world. One thing is certain though, and universal: You are a different person at the finish line. You have been transformed in some way that's unique to you. Do a race. You'll see."

That's from the final chapter on Principle #10: "Be Spartan" in which we learn about the Spartan Virtue of Wholeness as we pull it all together. I actually had tears in my eyes as I typed that out. For a couple reasons. First, MY LIFE has changed as a direct, immeasurable result of getting to the Spartan starting line and then experiencing the finish line. I've talked about it (a lot!) in other contexts but it's truly astonishing. ([Check out these +1's for more.](#))

But that's not the only reason I got tears in my eyes. This is: Last weekend, we all did a Spartan Race together. (Well, all of us but almost-two-year-old Eleanor who can't wait. Seriously. She has EPIC grip strength already and loves hanging on my rings and rig on my office ceiling. lol)

So... I ran the 4.7-mile course with the competitive age group guys then took a quick break and ran it again with my Wifey (so fun!) then took another quick break and did a 1/2-mile kids version with Emerson. All of which was simply awesome.

And now we arrive at what set the mist-machines on in my office this AM. When you do a Spartan Race you get to meet a lot of super-cool people. A lot of them are there all by themselves. Alexandra connected with one guy before the Race. He was super sweet and super nervous. It was his first Race. Then he came up to her after the Race and she almost didn't recognize him. She said he LOOKED LIKE A COMPLETELY DIFFERENT PERSON. He was, quite simply, TRANSFORMED by the Race.

Now, I'm a softy, but that makes me nearly sob. And, it's why I am so 100% ALL IN on my own personal commitment to using Spartan Races as a key component to Optimizing my life AND why I'm going to continue to do everything I can to a) encourage YOU to do a Race and b) Do everything in my power to help Joe hit his goal of yanking 100 million people off their couches so we can change the world together. One finish line at a time.

B

**Brian Johnson,**  
*Philosopher + CEO*

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you'll probably like...

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## About the Author of "The Spartan Way"

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Joe De Sena is a *New York Times* bestselling author, entrepreneur, veteran of adventure racing, and founding CEO of Spartan Race. *The Spartan Way* is his third book.

## About the Author of This Note

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Brian Johnson loves helping people optimize their lives so they can actualize their potential as he studies, embodies and teaches the fundamentals of optimal living—integrating ancient wisdom + modern science + practical tools. Learn more and optimize your life at [optimize.me](http://optimize.me).