



“When you grow up, you tend to get told that the world is the way it is and your life is just to live your life inside the world, try not to bash into the walls too much, try to have a nice family life, have fun, save a little money.

That’s a very limited life. Life can be much broader, once you discover one simple fact, and that is that everything around you that you call life was made up by people that were no smarter than you. And you can change it, you can influence it, you can build your own things that other people can use. Once you learn that, you’ll never be the same again.

And the minute that you understand that you can poke life and actually something will, you know if you push in, something will pop out the other side, that you can change it, you can mold it. That’s maybe the most important thing. It’s to shake off this erroneous notion that life is there and you’re just gonna live in it, versus embrace it, change it, improve it, make your mark upon it.

*I think that’s very important and however you learn that, once you learn it, you’ll want to change life and make it better, cause it’s kind of messed up, in a lot of ways. **Once you learn that, you’ll never be the same again.**”*

[-1994 Interview with Steve Jobs](#)

Today, we are constantly bombarded with images of the negative impacts of war on our veteran community. We watch stories on the news, read articles in magazines, and see characters in movies, all depicting a population struggling to make sense of their experiences. These snapshots combine to create the [narrative](#) of the fractured veteran who no longer connects with society. But there is a competing narrative that is growing louder. The wars in Iraq and Afghanistan provided experiences that proved to a generation of leaders that you can *change life, improve life, and make a mark upon it*. These crucible experiences have produced a tribe of men and women who believe in their ability to succeed no matter the circumstances. This tribe has been gifted with a strong sense of [self-efficacy](#).

People with a strong sense of self-efficacy:

- View challenging problems as tasks to be mastered instead of threats to be avoided
- Develop deeper interest and commitment to the activities in which they participate
- Have a greater sense of resiliency and recover quickly from setbacks and disappointments

This high level of self-efficacy seemed to flow throughout the leaders from the military, academia, government, and industry who were in attendance at the [Defense Entrepreneurs Forum 2.0](#) in Chicago. Everyone I met had a passion for wanting to improve and push the status quo of the military, society, and the world at large-and more importantly, a belief they could do it. Below are a few stories of those I encountered who are already making amazing progress in their quest to “*poke life*”.

[Mark Jacobsen](#), the winner of the DEF 2.0 innovation contest, is an active duty Air Force C-17 pilot. He saw a need to deliver humanitarian aid to populations when the air space is

contested. To answer this need, he created [The Syria Airlift Project](#)

[Kimberly Jung](#) , who spoke at the event, is a former Army officer who served in Afghanistan. She, along with her co-founders saw an opportunity to incentivize Afghani farmers growing saffron over opium. Her company [Rumi Spice](#) currently brings saffron from Afghani farmers straight to U.S. consumers.

[Jonathan Silk](#) is an active duty Army Officer who was [severely wounded](#) in Iraq in 2004. His passion lies in creating innovative ways to develop company-level leaders in the Army. His latest project is LPDs On-the-Go, downloadable video vignettes that make leaders think through tough situations. Also, this past spring he co-founded a weekly twitter chat with students from King's College in London. Every Monday they post a professional article with a question online, and participants engage in conversation throughout the week via Twitter using [#CCLKOW](#).

These are just a few of the stories and people that make up the growing DEF community. Their stories along with the others I heard throughout the weekend all possess the same elements: Someone saw an opportunity, and then they went after it.

As we move beyond DEF 2.0 and I reflect on my own purpose and sense of self-efficacy, I hope others are doing the same. My experiences in Iraq taught me that I can make a difference and make life better even when the challenges seem too great. To me, this is a gift. As Steve Jobs stated, "Once you learn that, you will never be the same again." *Let's continue poking life.*

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