



By [Joe Byerly](#) with [Cassie Crosby](#)

For almost a decade, I've published a [year-end reading list](#) as an effort to promote a practice I find so valuable. Three years ago, I morphed this list into [an annual reading reflection](#). It's become my favorite (and toughest) post to write every year.

While reflecting on 2021, I identified five lessons that emerged over the course of the year. These lessons go beyond performing at a higher level at work- they helped me become a better person. I hope that in sharing these with you, you might decide to take a few moments to reflect on your own lessons or purchase one of these great books for your own developmental journey. Here are the big takeaways from my year:

We become by doing

We all love the idea of *being* something. We love the idea of *being* leaders, *being* musicians, *being* in relationships -or at least we seem to until sh*t gets hard. Popular author Seth Godin calls the part where it gets hard, the Dip. In his book, [*The Dip: A Little Book That Teaches You When to Quit \(And When to Stick\)*](#), he writes, “The Dip is the long stretch between beginner’s luck and real accomplishment. The Dip is the set of artificial screens set up to keep people like you out.” Only by doing can we actually become the thing we really want to be, and the Dip helps us decide.

When we hit the Dip, it can make us question if any of what we’re doing in pursuit of our goals is worth it. It’s in facing the Dip and making the decision to push forward or quit that we realize what we like, what we value, and what’s worth our time. Nasim Taleb alluded to this in [*AntiFragile*](#), writing, “You will never get to know yourself -your real preferences -unless you face options and choices.”

Many of the books I read this year reinforced this lesson. For instance, in reading [*Edison*](#) by Edmund Morriss, I learned that Thomas Edison spent most of his life toiling away in his labs, sometimes working up to twenty-three hours a day. According to Morriss, Edison hated it when people chalked his success up to his simple gift of genius. He reminded them that genius is only an external label, it’s the actual work that matters.

Kim Scott, author of [*Radical Candor*](#) and [*Just Work*](#) and Scott O’Neil, who wrote [*Be Where Your Feet Are*](#), both found their love of leading others by actually leading, not just writing about it. In his book [*Do the Work*](#), Steven Pressfield underscores this lesson, saying “We can always revise and revisit once we’ve acted. But we can accomplish nothing until we act.”

If we decide to push through the “Dip”, we learn our preferences and if we actually enjoy doing something or if we’re just in love the idea of it. With this awareness, I now have a different outlook on my identity. It’s not who I say I am that matters, it’s what I do.

Focused attention is one of our greatest commodities

I reread Cal Newport's [*Deep Work: Rules for Success in a Distracted World*](#) in which he argues that it's getting harder to perform professional activities that push our cognitive capacities to our limits because of the increasing number of distractions in the workplace. While I agree with Cal, I believe that focused attention is also an important skill for being content in life.

Our entire outlook on life depends on where we focus our attention. In [*Rapt: Attention and the Focused Life*](#) by Winnifred Gallagher, I learned "Your life -who you are, what you think, feel and do, what you love -is the sum of what you focus on." Her ideas were echoed by the psychologist Dr. Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi in his book [*Flow: The Psychology of Optimal Experience*](#), where he wrote "the information we allow into consciousness becomes extremely important; it is, in fact, what determines the content and the quality of our life."

Even though focused attention is one of our greatest commodities, it seems like it just keeps getting easier to squander it. No matter the time of day, we can summon new content with the swipe of a screen. I've wasted more time than I want to admit aimlessly scrolling social media feeds. What I found is that focusing on the curated lives of others can leave us feeling like we're just not good enough.

It's not only focused attention on the present that matters. How we focus on our past stories, also shapes who we are and where we're headed. James Kerr underscores this point in [*Legacy*](#), writing:

True or not, stories are the way we understand life and our place in it. We are meaning making machines, interpreting and reinterpreting a sequence of events...stories help us understand who we are, what we want, what we stand for, what we stand against, and why we do things.

Therefore, we can continue to give focused attention to the negative aspects of events or reinterpret them to extract strength. Looking at my own series of stories, I try to view my missteps as learning experiences that develop me rather than define me.

As I move into 2022, I'm going to continue to work on paying attention to where I pay attention. What I've learned is that our focus enables us to live the good life, do the deep work, and take control of our own stories. More importantly, we can capitalize on the moments we are given rather than always feeling like our moments are stolen. As Scott O'Neil advises in [Be Where Your Feet Are](#), we should all make a more deliberate effort to "live the moments [we] have when and where we have them."

We can find 24/7 mentorship

I used to believe that mentors needed to be someone I could call, email, or text at a moment's notice to gain clarity around an idea or decision. Over time, I realized that many of the people I looked up to also had lives, were on their own journeys, and were sometimes just too busy for me. This awareness helped me grow in my own way but it's also to be expected of our mentors. The [Roman philosopher Seneca pointed out](#), with a hint of snark, that we would be hypocritical to get upset with mentors who can't make time for us, when we barely make time for ourselves. Instead, he recommended we find them in the bookshelves of libraries because they are available "to all mortals by night or by day."

This year, I found an endless supply of mentors who sat with me at 4am while drinking coffee, spoke to me on my drive into work, or imparted some bit of knowledge minutes before I fell asleep- all from within the pages of a book. For instance, [Ryder Carroll](#) taught me the importance of making journaling a habit; serial entrepreneur [Mark Jacobsen](#) showed me how to extract strength from failure; [Canadian Astronaut Chris Hadfield](#) warned me that if I defined success in life only in my peak moments, I would be unhappy; And, [Kim Scott](#) taught me how to create a culture that embraces feedback.

I've learned that mentors in any form are necessary for our own journeys. In [The Writer's Journey](#), Christopher Vogler describes the role of a mentors, writing "Mentors in stories act mainly on the mind of the hero, changing her consciousness or redirecting her will. Even if physical gifts are given, Mentors strengthen the hero's mind to face an ordeal with confidence." While mentorship from books lacks the benefit of the two-way conversation I'm used to, I value the knowledge I've gained from years of reading. In fact, books make me appreciate the role my actual mentors have played in my life and the many ways they've shaped me.

Our greatest battles are with our own ego

One of the themes that continuously emerges from books this year is the battle we have with our own egos. Throughout Plutarch's [Roman Lives](#), he recounts stories of egos getting the best of prominent Roman leaders. In writing about Julius Caesar, he argued that Caesar lost the ability to enjoy his accomplishments because, "his past successes induced and encouraged him to hope for more in the future....as though he had exhausted what he already had." Plutarch also noted that as Caesar got more power, he became less benevolent and more of a tyrant.

Roman Emperor Marcus Aurelius also read Plutarch's book. The pages of [Meditations](#), his personal journal, are filled with entries where he wrestles with the tension between who he wants to be and his ego. He even turned the name of Julius Caesar into a noun, warning himself:

Beware of becoming Caesarfield, dyed in purple. It does happen. Keep yourself simple, good, guileless, dignified, unpretentious, devoted to justice, pious, kind, affectionate to others, and resolute in carrying out your proper tasks. Strive to be and remain the kind of person philosophy would have you be.

Almost two millennia later, Robert A. Caro described the transformative effects of power in

[*The Power Broker: Robert Moses and the Fall of New York*](#), writing, “power performed its harsh alchemy” on the character of Bob Moses, “eating away at some traits, allowing others to enlarge...” If we’re deliberate, we will allow only those traits to grow that serve the greater good, rather than our own desires.

The fight with ego is a battle I’m very familiar with. At its core, my ego is more concerned with external validation than inner growth. I struggle daily to prevent it from driving my decisions. Reading about ego’s effect on the lives of people across numerous books this past year helped me identify the warning signs in my own life. While I sometimes fail to get it right, I fight back with humility, by admitting that I got it wrong. I found strength in Adam Grant’s [*Think Again*](#), in which he wrote, “It takes confident humility to admit we’re a work in progress. It shows that we care more about improving ourselves than proving ourselves.”

There’s some magic in reading, writing, and reflection

I wrote about this concept last month, but it’s become such a recurring theme for me that I wanted to mention it again. Above all, I’ve come to the conclusion that reading, writing, and reflection can turn our experiences into wisdom. Through reading, we expand and enrich our mental models, helping us prepare for future experiences and unlock key insights from our past. Through writing, we capture and observe our thoughts to better understand ourselves and our world view, and we refine our stories. Finally, through reflection we learn what drives us and what challenges us, where we came from and where we want to go.

In dissecting our experiences, we gain clarity on where we need to grow and where we can just let go. Leaders who read, write, and reflect build a capacity to develop themselves, even as they step into more challenging and demanding leadership roles. They possess the humility to prepare and the confidence to lead.

Thank you to everyone who joined me over the last twelve months as I shared with you the insights of my own experiences with reading, writing, and reflection. And a special thanks to

those of you who picked up a copy of [My Green Notebook: "Know Thyself" Before Changing Jobs!](#) Our book has been recognized in the US, Italy, and Germany as one of the top releases in leadership and business.

I wish you all the best in 2022!

-Joe

Joe Byerly is an active duty Army officer and Non-Resident Fellow at the Modern War Institute. He's also the founder of From the Green Notebook. Listen to him on [The Podcast](#), sign-up for [his reading list email](#), or connect with him on [LinkedIn](#).

Cassie Crosby is a retired Army officer and leadership coach with extensive experience leading high-performing, multifunctional teams in dynamic and complex environments. She is the founder of [Iterata Solutions](#), a leadership coaching and consulting company.

My 2021 Reading List and Monthly Lessons

November: Read.Write.Reflect

[The Thin Book of Trust: An Essential Primer for Building Trust at Work](#) by Charles Feltman

[The Biggest Bluff: How I Learned to Pay Attention, Master Myself, and Win](#) by Maria Konnikova

[Plutarch Roman Lives: A New Translation](#) by Robin Waterfield (Oxford World's Classics)

October: Reading For Action

[Nobody Wants to Read Your Sh*t](#) by Steven Pressfield

[Do the Work](#) by Steven Pressfield

[Be Where Your Feet Are: Seven Principles to Keep You Present, Grounded, and Thriving](#) by Scott O'Neil

September: Books as a Mirror

[*Courage is Calling: Fortune Favors the Bold*](#) by Ryan Holiday

[*The Boys in the Boat: Nine Americans and Their Epic Quest for Gold at the 1936 Berlin Olympics*](#) by Daniel James Brown

[*How to Be a Leader*](#) by Plutarch and [*How to Be a Bad Emperor*](#) by Suetonius. (The [*Ancient Wisdom for Modern Readers*](#) series by Princeton University Press)

[*The Blind Strategist: John Boyd and the American Art of War*](#) by Stephen Robinson

August: We Own Our Education

[*Antifragile: Things That Gain from Disorder*](#) by Nassim Nicholas Taleb

[*Rapt: Attention and the Focused Life*](#) by Winfred Gallagher

[*The Practice: Shipping Creative Work*](#) by Seth Godin

[*Madhouse at the End of the Earth: The Belgica's Journey into the Dark Antarctic Night*](#) by Julian Sancton

July: The Relationship Between Information and Attention

[*Legacy: What the All Blacks Can Teach Us About the Business of Life*](#) by James Kerr

[*Just Work: How to Root Out Bias, Prejudice, and Bullying to Build a Kick-Ass Culture of Inclusivity*](#) By Kim Scott

[*Winning Matters: Be the Best You Can Be*](#) by Sean Fitzpatrick

[*Rest: Why You Get More Done When You Work Less*](#) by Alex Soojung-Kim Pang

[*Deep Work: Rules For Focused Success in a Distracted World*](#) by Cal Newport

June: Seven Lessons to Get the Most out of Reading

[*Flow: The Psychology of Optimal Experience*](#) by Mihaly Csikzenmihalyi

[*Strategic Humanism: Lessons Leadership from the Ancient Greeks*](#) by Claudia Hauer

[*Radical Candor: Be a Kick-Ass Boss Without Losing Your Humanity*](#) by Kim Scott

[*Meditations: The Annotated Edition*](#) translated, introduced, and edited by Robin Waterfield

[*The Sacred Band: Three Hundred Theban Lovers Fighting to Save Greek Freedom*](#) by James

Romm

May: Illuminating Life Through Reading

[*Think Again: The Power of Knowing What You Don't Know*](#) by Adam Grant

[*Ghost on the Throne: The Death of Alexander the Great and the Bloody Fight for His Empire*](#) by James Romm

[*The Hail Mary Project*](#) by Andy Weir

[*Freedom, Tribe, and War*](#) by Sebastian Junger

[*Stoic Wisdom: Ancient Lessons in Modern Resilience*](#) and [*Stoic Warriors: The Ancient Philosophy Behind the Military Mind*](#) by Dr. Nancy Sherman

[*Red Team: How to Succeed by Thinking Like the Enemy*](#) by Micah Zenko

April: The Power of Doing

[*Edison*](#) by Edmund Morris

[*Eating Glass: The Inner Journey Through Failure and Renewal*](#) by Mark Jacobsen

[*Cyropaedia*](#) (Books 1-4) by Xenophon from Loeb Classical Library

March: Why We Need Examples

[*The Code Breaker: Jennifer Doudna, Gene Editing and the Future of the Human Race*](#) by Walter Isaacson

[*Big Magic: Creative Living Beyond Fear*](#) by Elizabeth Gilbert

[*The Bullet Journal Method*](#) by Ryder Carroll

[*Borrowing Brilliance: The Six Steps to Business Innovation by Building on the Ideas of Others*](#) by David Kord Murray

February: Read Promiscuously

[*A Man at Arms: A Novel*](#) by Steven Pressfield

[*A Hobbit, a Wardrobe, and a Great War: How J.R.R. Tolkien and C.S. Lewis Rediscovered Faith, Friendship, and Heroism in the Cataclysm of 1914-1918*](#) by Joseph Laconte

[*Zero to One: Notes on Startups, or How to Build the Future*](#) By Peter Thiel

[*The Future Is Yours: A Novel*](#)

[*Plato's Symposium*](#) A Translation by Seth Benardete with Commentaries by Allan Bloom and Seth Benardete

[*The Motive: Why So Many Leaders Abdicate Their Most Important Responsibilities*](#) by Pat Lencioini

[January: How to Read a Long Book](#)

[*Dying Every Day: Seneca at the Court of Nero*](#) by James Romm

[*Robert E. Lee and Me: A Southerner's Reckoning with the Myth of the Lost Cause*](#) by Ty Seidule

[*The Power Broker: Moses and the Fall of New York*](#) by Robert Caro

Share this:

- [Email](#)
- [Tweet](#)
- 
- [Print](#)
- [WhatsApp](#)