# My Grandfather's Challenge

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Hugh Cooper, Sr.
1882 - 1967

No matter how long we work, no matter how little we sleep, no matter how hard we try, very few of us are achieving the life we have imagined or hoped for. There is another way.

I am thankful every day for the challenge my grandfather gave me early in my life, which forms the basis for the challenge and the promise I extend to you.

**Give the world the best you have and the best will come back to you.**

My father worked long hours and was often away from home when I was growing up. He was a loving parent, but his work, including humanitarian service to world health organizations and with the hospital ship USS HOPE, engaged his energies for extended periods. On numerous occasions, both of my grandfathers committed themselves to spending extra time with me. They shared insights and lessons from their lives that have had an enduring influence on my own.

Hugh Cooper, Sr., had been a surveyor, a minister, a teacher, and a school superintendent. Amid the clutter of memorabilia atop his desk sat a small pewter frame given to him when he was a boy in the late 1880s. Inside the frame, written in script by a fountain pen on a now-yellowed piece of paper, were these words: "Give the world the best you have and the best will come back to you."

I stared at that inscription as I stood in the den of his house waiting for him to return from the hospital following his fourth heart attack. I was fourteen years old.

After each of his three previous attacks — in a time before coronary bypass surgery — his physicians had solemnly advised him that there was nothing they could do; he was living on borrowed time. With each return from the brink of death he would call and ask me to come to his house to talk about life and what mattered the most. This time he had been so unsure of his prospects that he called from the hospital and asked me to meet him directly upon his return home. He loved me, and he had something important to tell me.

I heard the front door open and soon my grandmother, stooped from worry, helped her husband make his way, supported by two canes, to his favorite sofa. Sitting heavily, he asked me to take the small pewter frame from his desk and sit beside him.

"They said I wouldn't make it," he said as I came toward him. "I heard the doctors talking when they were trying to make my heart keep beating. They said no one could survive this." He winked at me, his eyes bloodshot but glowing with intensity.

"They were wrong, weren't they, Robert?"

**With each return from the brink of death he would call and ask me to come to his house to talk about life and what mattered the most.**

Though it was a cold March day, warm sunlight poured into the room through a bank of windows as we sat together.



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"I've been thinking," he said, gently pointing toward the frame and gazing at the expression it contained. "My whole life I thought I knew what these words meant. It was simple. Either you gave your best or you didn't. First you went to school and worked hard to get good grades . . ." He drew in a breath, gathering himself.

He had been the first in his family of eight children to finish high school. He went on to graduate from college at the turn of the century and earned a master's degree. "Then," he continued, "once you got a job, you arrived on time every day and worked hard. That was giving your best. From there, the best would come back to you, as a paycheck and a sense of pride."

He looked at me intently, as he almost always did. "My whole life I have been wrong," he said.

"What do you mean?"

**"I've been thinking," he said, gently pointing toward the frame and gazing at the expression it contained. "My whole life I thought I knew what these words meant. It was simple. Either you gave your best or you didn't."**

"In the hospital, I was thinking about the most exceptional people I've known. They were the ones who kept going when others quit; the ones who found ways to do what everyone else thought couldn't be done. They didn't just hold down a job or work hard. They were reaching deeper inside and finding something more. They made a greater difference. I don't believe they would have understood these words" — he held the frame so we both could see the inscription — "the way I did."

"I remember my parents and other adults in my hometown saying, 'Study hard and work hard but don't let your dreams get too big. If you do that, you'll only be disappointed.' 'Learn to fit in and go along,' they said, 'that's what successful people do.' I got very good at fitting in and going along." His voice trailed off.

"Robert, you're going to hear the same kinds of things from people around you. They're well-intentioned but they're wrong. What if I hadn't accepted it? What if every day I had questioned yesterday's definition of my best? What if I'd listened to my own heart instead of their words? Then I might have kept looking deeper and giving the world more of the best that was hidden inside me."

"And if I'd done that," he said, "more of the best would have come back to me, and to this family, and to you, Robert. But it won't," he said, "because I didn't do it."

"So this is my challenge to you, to live these words." He handed me the frame. There was no glass in it; I ran my fingertips over the words and felt the brittle paper. "But grandfather," I said, not wanting to disappoint him but unsure of how to accomplish what he was asking of me, "maybe when I'm older. . . "

"Age has nothing to do with it. Every day you can learn something more about who you are and all the potential that's hidden inside you. Every day you can choose to become more than you have been. I'm asking you to start right now."

"But how?"

"By looking inside yourself. By testing new possibilities. By searching for what matters most to you, Robert. Few of us every do that for ourselves. Instead, we hold our breath. We look away. We get by or go along. We defend what we have been. We say, 'It's good enough.' I pray you don't wake up one day and say, 'I've been living my life wrong and now it's too late to make it right.'"

Young as I was, I could still see the pain his regret was causing him, and even then I recognized that the gift he was giving me was as much in his honesty as in the specific words he was so determined for me to hear.

**"Every day you can learn something more about who you are and all the potential that's hidden inside you. Every day you can choose to become more than you have been."**

"Robert, all of us are mostly unused potential. It's up to you to become the most curious



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person you know and to keep asking yourself, What is my best? Keep finding more of it every day to give to the world. If you do that, I promise that more of the best than you can ever imagine — and in many ways beyond money — will come back to you."

And it has. Despite my struggles and mistakes along the way, I have learned that there are opportunities for each of us that exist beneath and beyond conventional thinking and self-imposed limits. What my grandfather realized too late that he had not done, he challenged me to do. In this book, I pass that challenge to you.

**The Other 90%—and More**

Human intelligence and spirit are two of the most amazing creations we know, yet most of us use only a tiny percentage of our brilliance or power. It's as if we are each given our own jet airplane at birth. It can fly; it was made to fly; but we don't see it; we don't know what we have. So all we do is polish the wings or fire up the engines each morning for the sound effect, and then close the storage hangar for the rest of the day. How you get that plane flying is what The Other 90% is about.

**"Time after time, I have seen them do the impossible against all odds. Their actions, large and small, have changed me, stretched my thinking, and awakened more of my heart and spirit along the way. I am not the same person I would have been. "**

In accepting my grandfather's challenge, little did I realize how it would shape not only my personal life but also my professional path through the many years since his death.

His challenge has moved me to independently study life and leadership from a very different perspective, as an ordinary man searching for hidden human possibilities. This has encouraged me to travel far and also to observe the world more closely wherever I am, asking uncommon questions of everyday people doing extraordinary things: inventors, parents, children, teachers, business leaders, thinkers, and doers in all walks of life. Time after time, I have seen them do the impossible against all odds. Their actions, large and small, have changed me, stretched my thinking, and awakened more of my heart and spirit along the way. I am not the same person I would have been.

My grandfather believed in the old saying that we use only about 10 percent of our potential in the course of a lifetime. What about the rest of it, he wondered. That's why he started me on a search for what we called "the other 90 percent." He would have been amused to know that a few years ago the old wisdom got revised: studies indicate that we use not one-tenth but one ten-thousandth of our capabilities!

Whenever my grandfather would observe me getting caught up on the surface of things, struggling along by habit or expending lots of time or effort trying to produce some small gain, he would ask, "What about the other 90%, Robert"? It was one of his ways of encouraging me to alter my view, look deeper, and be willing to consider hidden possibilities. I believe that the most exciting breakthroughs of this century will not come from advances in technology but from a deeper realization of what it means to be most human and alive. Many of the choices that can dramatically change our lives are small and within easy reach, yet few people recognize them or know how to apply them.

William James, a pioneer in philosophy and psychology, said, "All of life is but a mass of small choices—practical, emotional and intellectual—systematically organized for our greatness or grief." When asked if these choices could be altered, he replied, "Yes, one at a time. But we must never forget that it's not only our big dreams that shape reality. …The small choices bear us irresistibly toward our destiny."

The next frontier is not only in front of you, it's inside you. You have a vast hidden potential and a destiny beckoning to be lived. So do we all. No one else can live it in your place.

**There is no passion to be found playing small in settling for a life that is less than the one you are capable of living.**

**- Nelson Mandela**



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