IRON HOPE

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IRON HOPE

Lessons Learned from
CONQUERING THE IMPOSSIBLE

JAMES LAWRENCE



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NEW YORK

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THIS BOOK IS FOR YOU.

MAY YOU BE CONFIDENT IN EVERY STORM.

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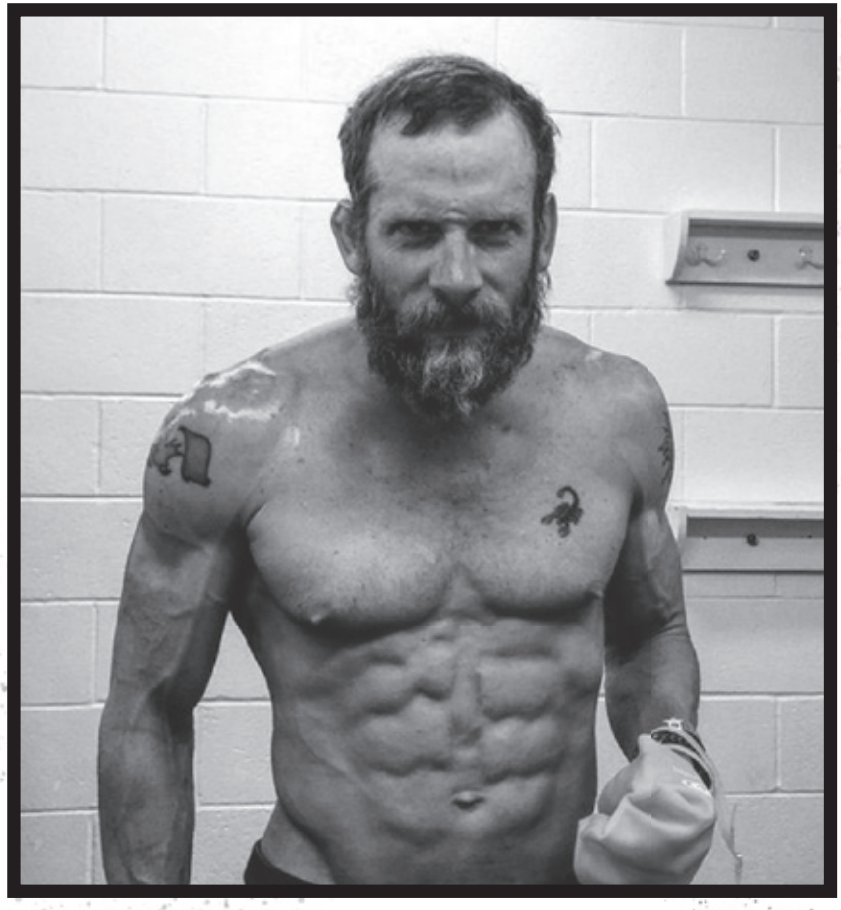
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(Matthew Norton)

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WITHOUT SACRIFICE, THERE CAN BE NO VICTORY.



(Tommy Rivers Puzey)

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IRON COWBOY, BY THE NUMBERS

22 **half distance triathlons in one year.**
World record, 2010.

30 **full distance triathlons in one year.**
World record, 2012.

50 **full distance triathlons in 50 states in 50 days.**
World record, 2015.

100 **full distance triathlons in 100 days.**
World record, 2021.

19,340 feet high. **First person to mountain bike up Mt. Kilimanjaro, Africa's highest peak.**

3,000 miles cycled. **Race Across America. 1st place co-ed team, 2022.**

250 miles. **Ran across Greece.**

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2x completed Kona Ironman World Championships, guiding a young man with Down syndrome through the racecourse, 2.4-mile swim, 112-mile bike, 26.2-mile run.

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214 hours, 3 minutes, 417 miles, completed World's Toughest Race: Eco-Challenge, Fiji

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21 **different medical and genetic tests performed on me.**

0 **special physical attributes.**

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INTRODUCTION

At age forty-five, in a season of life when many people give up running, biking, and swimming entirely, I undertook an endeavor so incredibly difficult, I wondered at times if I would survive.

In 2020, the world shut down because of COVID-19. Overnight, my speaking and athletic training business dried up. For a few weeks I kicked around, at loose ends. Everywhere I looked, I saw people struggling—dismayed, fearful, burdened, angry, depressed, lonely, and desperate. I wanted to help.

I began to envision an endeavor that would require me to push through a lot of difficulty. By persevering, I could inspire people to do the same for whatever difficulty they were going through. I know that many goals can be accomplished through endurance. By pressing forward, we sort out what matters. We discover and live our best life.

So I chose to attempt one hundred full distance triathlons

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(commonly called Ironmans) in one hundred consecutive days, a monster ultradistance feat. I would need to keep going, day after day, mile after mile, daily traveling 140.6 miles, through March, April, May, and several days of June 2021. All told, I would travel more than 14,000 miles under my own power.

I called my endeavor the Conquer 100, and in this book I tell what it was all about. It's a survival story like none other. I warn you, it's raw and emotionally charged. In places, it's bound to bring a lump to your throat. I suspect that at other times you'll want to stand and cheer, because it's also hugely triumphant.

Along the way in the Conquer 100, I learned important lessons that can be applied to anyone's life. These lessons apply in leadership, business, marriage and relationships, education, athletics, and the arts. Think of these lessons as essential tools you can use in the pursuit of your goals.

Many of us dream about living a life where we don't have to work so hard. We long for a hammock in the sun and a drink with a little bamboo umbrella. We certainly don't dream of undertaking labors of mythological proportions. No one forced me to do the Conquer 100. Why would I willingly attempt a challenge so difficult?

I did it for you. To convince you that in your most difficult seasons, there is still hope. You are just as capable as I am of doing hard things, surviving difficult seasons, and taking on and achieving epic goals. You have incredible inner strength, boundless opportunities, and limitless potential just waiting to be unleashed.

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To be clear, I'm not calling you to do exactly what I did. (In fact, I'm recommending you don't.) My challenges involved miles on the swim, bike, and trail. But your specific challenges will be different. Whatever your own sense of "hard" looks like, you can overcome. I want to convince you that in your hardest times, you don't need to give up. Hang on to that.

I'm writing this book in the wake of COVID, but things haven't become much better. Everywhere, people are battling the same dismay, anger, frustration, loneliness, and fear. We need hope more than ever.

It was hard for me to accomplish the Conquer 100, but you may still scoff, insisting I must have superpowers. But here's the surprise. I've subjected my body to every genetic test known to science. The stunning discovery is that there is no stunning discovery. There is no genetic mutation, no bionic heart, and no radioactive-spider bite. There is nothing special about me. I'm just a regular dude.

If I can accomplish the Conquer 100 . . . imagine what you can do. You can rise higher than you've ever imagined. You are not finished. You are not spent. You are not out of the fight. You can keep going. You are far stronger than you think. I will bet any money that the farthest reaches of your potential have yet to be discovered.

Sure, this book is for those with an athletic bent. If you aspire to excel in physical fitness at any level, this book is for you. But even if you have zero interest in a triathlon or marathon or even a 5K, this book is still for you. It's for anyone who wants to overcome any obstacle that's been holding them back.

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The secret to gaining new heights is a bulletproof mentality. In the pages to come, I will show you how I forged an iron will by making and keeping small promises again and again. I amassed experiences and built momentum until giving up became impossible. I'll point you toward a pathway where you can repeat this kind of success in your own life.

The tone of this book might surprise you. You might envision that my lessons are rooted in ego-driven, performance-based hypermasculinity. But that's not me. My guide to self-improvement is rooted in family, community, love, trust, teamwork, and empathy. I see my feats of endurance not as a platform to proclaim personal greatness but as a means to foster hope within you.

Ahead, I'll tell you the story of the hardest one hundred days of my life. *Iron Hope* will share my techniques for forging mental toughness. It will detail strategies I developed to become one of the greatest endurance athletes in human history. And it will share incredible stories of struggle and triumph that I encountered along the way.

Page by page, point by point, I'll show you how to never give up. Think of this book as a primer on mental resiliency. It's your invitation to reach for your dreams and accomplish big things. **Even when the way forward becomes difficult, you can have Iron Hope.**

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GET UP AND START

March 2021

I'm standing in the shower, naked, completely broken, sobbing.

Darkness has fallen, and it's nearing 10 P.M. My day is finally over, but even with hot water cascading down on me, no relief is in sight. On a scale of one to ten, my pain is at twenty, and I have no idea how to make the hurting stop. I've experienced pain before, but not like this. Every step I took for the past thirteen miles, it felt like a red-hot poker was being hammered up through the soles of my feet into my shinbones. I was supposed to run those last thirteen, but when I crossed the finish line, I was barely hobbling.

My morning had started so well, the fifteenth day of my endeavor to complete one hundred full distance triathlons in one hundred consecutive days. But halfway through the run, pain hit without warning. Stress fractures, tiny cracks in the bones caused by too much repetitive force. I'd recognized the sensation in my

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legs, but I'd never felt the pain so intensely. The pain became so overwhelming I'd started blacking out.



My legs are so swollen I'm struggling to walk. My pain is off the charts. *(Matthew Norton)*

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I have two main wingmen for my triathlons. Aaron's a thirty-three-year-old bearded juggernaut and athletic coach who rides all 112 miles on the bike with me every day. Casey is a forty-two-year-old square-jawed schoolteacher, the first person to raise his hand whenever I dream up another adventure. He completes half the swims and most of each day's run.

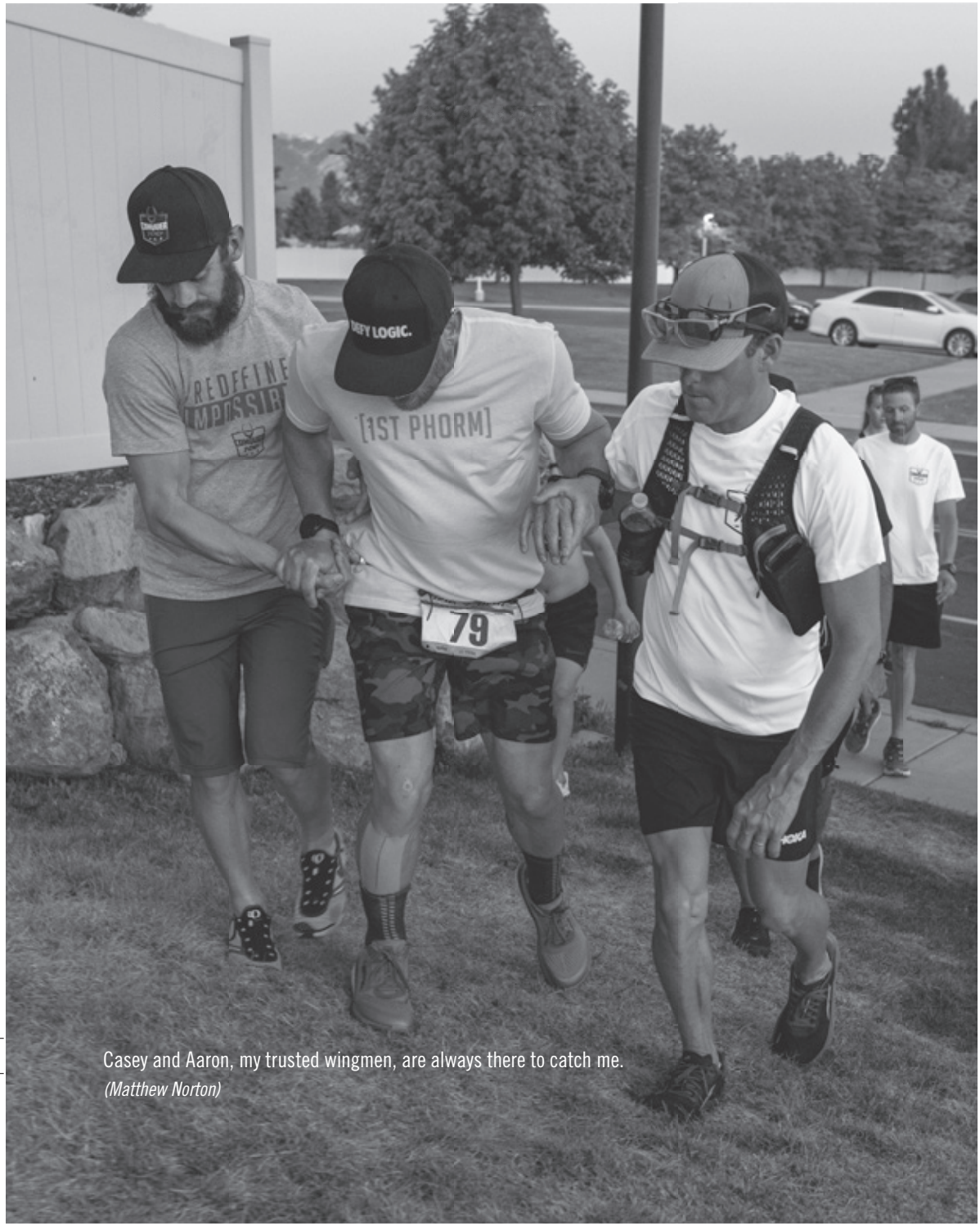
While I was losing consciousness, Casey stayed beside me every step. Whenever I started to fall he'd catch me, pull me out of my stupor, and I'd return to consciousness. He'd utter three words—*Here we go*—my chosen mantra to reset my mind and body. We'd continue to push down the trail until I'd black out, stumble, and fall again. That's how it went for the last half of my marathon. Pain. Blacking out. Falling. Being caught. Casey saying, "Here we go." Another step forward. More pain. Mile after mile after mile.

When at last I'd crossed the finish line, I felt no triumph. I'd spent almost seventeen hours in constant motion, more than four hours longer than my normal pace. I limped through the front door of my house, stripped off layers of clothing worn against the late-winter chill, and stumbled to the shower. That's when tears came, far past the lens of the social media cameras.

I don't cry easily. But tonight in the shower I can't stop myself. I'm broken physically. Exhausted mentally. Afraid of tomorrow. Fearful of permanent damage to my body. And we have eighty-five more days to go.

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Casey and Aaron, my trusted wingmen, are always there to catch me.
(Matthew Norton)

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My wife, Sunny, wondering what she's hearing, opens the shower door. She's beautiful, wise, my manager and motivational warrior, the mother of our five amazing children, and my rock. For the past two weeks she hasn't slept more than four hours a night. She has somber circles underneath her eyes, and with one glance she knows I'm in big trouble. After twenty years of marriage, sometimes words only get in the way.

IRON HOPE: A strong person is a genuine person. Let your inner circle see you at your best and worst, when you're broken and bleeding, when you're triumphant and singing. You need them every step.

I don't want you to miss this. The world is designed to break you. If you're pursuing your goals with everything you have, I guarantee you will get punched in the mouth. You will feel pain. So when you're struggling, you need to let the people closest to you see how you're doing, like I did with Aaron, Casey, and Sunny. You certainly don't need to get naked and bawl in front of everybody. But you need to cultivate a small group of friends who know the truest you.

It's strategic to cast this vision with your inner circle. Let them know how much you value their presence in your life. Communicate your goals, then invite them along on your journey. It's a

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two-way street. You'll be there for them like they're there for you. Let them know that times may come when you're exposed and sobbing. That's okay. You're going to be strong for each other in life's most vulnerable moments. You're going to love each other not merely with talk but with action and truth. You're going to succeed together.

Can you identify a couple of friends like this? Have you articulated your vision to them yet? Schedule that conversation this week.



Sunny and I constantly discussing how to improve my diet, transitions, sleep, and efficiency. *(Matthew Norton)*

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Back to me and Sunny. I shrug, still sobbing. What am I supposed to tell her? That on the last half of today's marathon I was wishing my legs would break in two? That my shins hurt so bad I actually wanted the bones to snap so everybody would know I had absolutely no feasible way to continue?

She stares hard. I can see wheels turning in her mind.

I stare back at her. We're both locking on to a truth:

IRON HOPE: Whenever you struggle, you have a choice—slip into victim mentality or learn and grow and become better from the struggle. You must remind yourself that you are *not* a victim, not in this season, not in your mindset, and not in this moment of intense difficulty.

I want you to grab hold of this truth. A few years ago, some folks asked me to summit Mount Kilimanjaro, Africa's highest peak. I said, "I love Africa, but I don't climb mountains." They said, "No, you don't get it. You're the guy who loves being first to do things nobody else has done, right? We want you to be first to ride a mountain bike to the top."

I muttered, "That's the dumbest thing I've ever heard." Then, because I am who I am, I soon found myself in Africa. Within my first hour riding up Kilimanjaro, I regretted my decision. The mountain is almost 20,000 feet high, much of the terrain

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so steep I could barely pedal. The higher I rode, the harder it became to breathe. Muscles need oxygen to perform, but I had decided to climb without supplemental tanks. For three days I was profoundly miserable, tempted to fall into victim mentality*: I was suckered into this venture. Life is so unfair. My legs hurt more than anybody's, ever.*

Third day, evening, I reached base camp, 12,500 feet above sea level, and met a group of combat veterans. Super excited, they'd made it to the top and were now hiking down. I complained how badly my legs ached. Then a glance showed me a woman who'd summitted with a prosthetic. She'd lost a leg in war. That was my moment, a gut punch that created a powerful paradigm shift. We have no idea if or when something valuable will vanish. Every moment is a gift. Tomorrow is never guaranteed.

I woke up the next morning with new purpose and a new smile. I pedaled to the top of Kilimanjaro, my legs still in agony. As I stood on the summit, I remembered another veteran, a guy who'd lost his sight in battle. I grieved that he could not see this view that I could not put into words, looking out across the African plains from 20,000 feet. Again, it hit me: my pain in reaching the top was worth it. I renewed a lifelong vow to say yes to opportunity, yes to things that make me uncomfortable, yes to things that scare me.

Quick, grab a pencil. I want you to scribble a list on a scrap of paper. Name ten things you're grateful for. Your legs? Eyes? Ability to ride a bike? You might have always taken these things for granted, but any one of them could disappear instantly. When you

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focus on how much you have—versus how much you don't have—your mindset shifts from victim to victor.



Me and Tyrell at the 12,500-foot basecamp of Mount Kilimanjaro in 2017, humbled by hikers with disabilities after complaining about the pain in my legs. *(John Turner)*

The front of Sunny's clothes is getting damp from shower spray, but she doesn't move. We're locked in solidarity, in the fierce resolve of what we do and who we are. When you make your living from full distance triathlons, quitting doesn't exist in your house. Not in your vocabulary, and not in your spouse's.

"James," she says at last. Her voice is clear and firm. "Listen.

You are done for today. You've done your work. Now you need to trust your team. Allow them to put you back together."

I swallow hard, because I still can't get out any words. By "team," she's referring to my athletic trainers, chiropractor, licensed massage therapists, nutritionists, scientists, and Biostrap crew, who monitor and analyze my heart-rate activity. If I can find enough willpower to step out of the shower, all I need to do is wrap a towel around my waist, hobble to my living room, and collapse on my padded massage table. A cadre of people will knead and readjust my muscles, at times into the wee hours of the morning.

Haydn and Felisha work on me most consistently. Haydn is a burly forty-four-year-old certified athletic trainer who works on NFL players for his day job. His insight into the body's inner workings helps keep me alive. Felisha is a clinical massage therapist in her late thirties. She has incredible hand strength and does deep tissue work like nobody's business, sometimes with four fully extended fingers rammed into my belly button up to her palm, working to loosen my psoas muscle. I'll often multitask during sessions. I'll eat while they work on me, feeding myself through the table's face hole while lying on my stomach. Or I'll doze while they attempt to rebuild the ruins of my body. After they finish for the night, I'll shuffle to my bedroom for a few hours of real sleep.

Sunny adds, "You and I both know miracles can happen. That's what we're going to pray for tonight and tomorrow. I just need you to do one thing . . ." Here she pauses, hot water spraying. She's

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waiting so I can compose myself enough to grunt a verbal acquiescence to what's coming next.

But I can't stop the tears. I have a hunch about that one thing, and I know deep in my soul she's right. I won't quit. I will keep going because I've already told myself I will. No matter my pain. No matter the red-hot pokers. No matter the blacking out.

At last I manage to utter one word: "Okay."

"The one thing is this," Sunny says. "I just need you to get up tomorrow and *start*."



Sunny is always there to greet me after each portion of the race.
(Matthew Norton)

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IRON HOPE: When you're deep in a struggle, you won't have all the answers. You will only know you need to keep going. So forget about the finish line for a while. Whether it's an actual finish line you cross, a project to complete, a business to sell, whatever your finish line is—forget about it. The finish line will overwhelm you. Just take care of today. Then get up tomorrow and start.

Keep going. Don't give up. As you press through pain, you sort out priorities. You discover and live your best life. I have a friend who's miserable in his job. Every day is difficult. He longs to be an entrepreneur, and I understand. Social media sells entrepreneurship as the sexiest thing on the planet. A big part of what he wants is relief from his current lousy job.

But I've asked my friend if he's prepared to quit his job, if he's got the bankroll and support system to provide for his family's needs during the transition and start-up time. He's told me flat out, no. But he still wants to quit his job immediately. He dreams of burning his ships on the shore and never looking back.

That might sound good, but I've encouraged him to wait. Endure the pain. He will be ready in time. Yes, absolutely, pursue your dreams wholeheartedly! But don't torch your ships too soon. As an entrepreneur myself, I know most new ventures take longer to get up and running and cost more than projected.

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IRON HOPE: You've got to be willing to do the grunt work now, to do some things you don't want to do, so one day you can do the things you want. You must endure some pain and discomfort on the road toward your dreams. That's a huge part of the iron mindset that will change your life. Many goals can be accomplished if you simply endure.

The good news, my friend, is you can handle your pain and discomfort. You are far stronger than you think. You just need to get through today.

Then get up tomorrow and *start*.

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