

A large, white, stylized letter 'G' is positioned on the left side of the image. The background is a textured teal color that resembles water. The 'G' is a simple, bold shape with a rounded top and a vertical stem.

*AIWATT*

and the Empty Boat

Marshall Goldsmith

# I've taken the position that there is no harder task for adults than changing our behavior.

We are geniuses at coming up with reasons to avoid change. We make excuses. We rationalize. We harbor beliefs that trigger all manner of denial and resistance. As a result, we continually fail at becoming the person we want to be.

One of our greatest instances of denial involves our relationship with our environment. We willfully ignore how profoundly the environment influences our behavior. In fact, the environment is a relentless triggering mechanism that, in an instant, can change us from saint to sinner, optimist to pessimist, model citizen to jerk—and make us lose sight of who we're trying to be.

When we experience “road rage” on a crowded freeway, it's not because we're sociopathic monsters. It's because the temporary condition of being behind the wheel in a car, surrounded by rude impatient drivers, triggers a change in our otherwise placid demeanor. We've unwittingly placed ourselves in an environment of impatience, competitiveness, and hostility—and it alters us.

When we take highly vocal umbrage at disappointing food in a restaurant by abusing a friendly waiter and making nasty comments to the maître d'—neither of whom cooked the food—it's not because we regularly display the noblesse oblige of Louis XIV. Our behavior is an aberration, triggered by a restaurant environment where we believe that paying handsomely for a meal entitles us to royal treatment. In an environment of entitlement, we behave accordingly. Outside the restaurant we resume our lives as model citizens—patient, polite, not entitled.

The good news is that the environment is not conducting a cloak-and-dagger operation. It's out in the open, providing constant feedback to us. We're often too distracted to hear what the environment is telling us. But in those moments when we're dialed in and paying attention, the seemingly covert triggers that shape our behavior become apparent.

The not-so-good news is that it's hard to stay alert as we move from one environment to another. Our circumstances change from minute to minute, hour to hour—and we can't always summon the ability or motivation to manage each situation as we would like. We mess up. We take one step forward, two steps back.

Moreover, we have a bifurcated response to the environment in which we display two discrete personas I call “planner” and “doer.” The planner who wakes up in the morning with clear plans for the day is not the same person later in the day who has to execute those plans. None of us wake up planning to be angry on the road to work or rude to the waiter at dinner, and these negative emotions and reactions take us away from our better intentions, our best selves, and our best-laid plans, which makes us less productive in both extremely practical every-day ways, but also, fundamentally as human beings.

Basic tools such as anticipating, avoiding, and adjusting to risky environments are a good place to start correcting this conflict between planner and doer in us. But they are Band-Aid solutions to immediate challenges; they don’t alter our behavior permanently. One way to do that is to ask important, actionable questions continuously—in our lives in general, or about our immediate goals more specifically and what we’re doing to accomplish them.

*“ We are geniuses at coming up with reasons to avoid change. We make excuses. We rationalize. We harbor beliefs that trigger all manner of denial and resistance. As a result, we continually fail at becoming the person we want to be.*

One of the most powerful tools to do this every day, in every moment, to actually be the person you want to be instead of an environment-induced aberration, is with a simple acronym...

# AIWATT

Every endeavor comes with beginning principles that dramatically improve our chances of succeeding at that endeavor. The first principle of carpentry is “Measure twice, cut once.” In sailing it’s “Know where the wind is coming from.” In women’s fashion it’s “Buy a little black dress.”

I have a first principle for becoming the person you want to be. Follow it and it will dramatically shrink your daily volume of stress, conflict, unpleasant debate, and wasted time. It is phrased in the form of a question you should be asking yourself in any situation where you must choose to either engage or “let it go.”

**Am I willing, at this time, to make the investment required to make a positive difference on this topic?**

It's a question that pops into my head so often each day that I've turned the first five words into an acronym, AIWATT (it rhymes with "say what"). Like the physician's principle, "First, do no harm," it doesn't require you to do anything, merely avoid doing something foolish.

The question is a mash-up of two bits of guidance I've valued over the years, one part Buddhist insight, the other part common sense from the late Peter Drucker.

## It's Always an Empty Boat

The Buddhist wisdom is contained in the Parable of the Empty Boat:

**A young farmer was covered with sweat as he paddled his boat up the river. He was going upstream to deliver his produce to the village. It was a hot day, and he wanted to make his delivery and get home before dark. As he looked ahead, he spied another vessel, heading rapidly downstream toward his boat. He rowed furiously to get out of the way, but it didn't seem to help.**

**He shouted, "Change direction! You are going to hit me!" To no avail. The vessel hit his boat with a violent thud. He cried out, "You idiot! How could you manage to hit my boat in the middle of this wide river?" As he glared into the boat, seeking**

**out the individual responsible for the accident, he realized no one was there. He had been screaming at an empty boat that had broken free of its moorings and was floating downstream with the current.**

We behave one way when we believe that there is another person at the helm. We can blame that stupid, uncaring person for our misfortune. This blaming permits us to get angry, act out, assign blame, and play the victim.

We behave more calmly when we learn that it's an empty boat. With no available scapegoat, we can't get upset. We make peace with the fact that our misfortune was the result of fate or bad luck. We may even laugh at the absurdity of a random unmanned boat finding a way to collide with us in a vast body of water.

The moral: There's never anyone in the other boat. We are always screaming at an empty vessel. An empty boat isn't targeting us. And neither are all the people creating the sour notes in the soundtrack of our day.

The colleague who always interrupts you in meetings? He thinks he's smarter than everyone, not just you. Empty boat.

The aggressive driver who tailgated you for miles on the way to work today? He does that every day on any road. That's how he rolls. Empty car.

The bank officer who turned down your small business loan application because of a typo on the form? He sees a form, not you. Empty suit.

The checkout woman at the supermarket who neglected to pack the small tin of gourmet anchovies you need for tonight's dinner party, so you have to drive back to the market to pick up what you paid for? She's been scanning and packing items all day. A three-ounce tin is easy to miss. She didn't do it intentionally, certainly not to you. Another empty vessel.

I like to make this point in leadership classes with a simple exercise. I'll ask a random audience member to think of one person who makes him or her feel bad, angry, or crazy. "Can you envision that person?" I ask.

A nod, a disgusted face, and then, "Yes."

"How much sleep is that person losing over you tonight?" I ask.

"None."

"Who is being punished here? Who is doing the punishing?" I ask.



The answer inevitably is “Me and me.”

I end the exercise with a simple reminder that getting mad at people for being who they are makes as much sense as getting mad at a chair for being a chair. The chair cannot help but be a chair, and neither can most of the people we encounter. If there’s a person who drives you crazy, you don’t have to like, agree with, or respect him, just accept him for being who he is.

Don Corleone, the Godfather, must have been a closet Buddhist when he said, “It’s not personal. It’s business.” He knew that people disappoint us or disagree with us when it’s in their best interest to do so, not because they want to cause us pain. It’s the same with all the people who annoy or enrage us. They’re doing it because that’s who they are, not because of who we are.

*“We behave one way when we believe that there is another person at the helm. We can blame that stupid, uncaring person for our misfortune. This blaming permits us to get angry, act out, assign blame, and play the victim. We behave more calmly when we learn that it’s an empty boat.”*

# Creating False Positives

The common sense comes from Peter Drucker, who said, “Our mission in life should be to make a positive difference, not to prove how smart or right we are.” The advice sounds anodyne and obvious. Given the choice, who wouldn’t opt to make a “positive difference”?

But Drucker is highlighting two notions that we have trouble holding in our heads simultaneously. When we have the opportunity to demonstrate our brainpower, we’re rarely thinking about a positive result for the other people in the room. We’re actually issuing what I like to call “false positives”—making statements to upgrade ourselves, often at the expense of others—and they appear in many forms:

There’s pedantry. A subordinate makes a grammatical error in a presentation—using who instead of whom—and you correct him. Smart, perhaps (if the objective is punctilious grammar), but hardly a contribution that improves the room’s vibe or how the subordinate feels.

There’s “I told you so.” You tell your wife the two of you need to leave the house at least sixty minutes in advance to make an eight o’clock Broadway show. She delays, you arrive late, and miss the first scene. You turn petulant, needle her for ruining your night, remind her that you said

sixty minutes. You're right, of course—and proceed to ruin her night in proportion to how much she ruined yours.

There's the moral superiority you assert when you tell a friend or loved one that she shouldn't smoke, that he doesn't need another beer, or that you would have taken a faster route home. How often do these alleged attempts to help elicit a genuine thank-you from the object of your attention?

There's complaining about your managers, your colleagues, your rivals, your customers. (The average American worker spends fifteen hours a month complaining about his or her superiors.) When you complain, you're disagreeing with what someone else decided, planned, or did. By definition, you're being disagreeable—and adding the implication that you would have done better. It's rarely a positive contribution, especially so if you do it behind people's backs rather than to their faces.

This is profoundly counterproductive behavior that achieves the opposite of its intended effect. We don't instruct when we correct someone in public for a small error, or heal a sore wound with "I told you so," or cure people's bad habits by suggesting they should be more like us, or improve our superiors by complaining about them to others.

These are just four random examples of what we do all day. From wake-up to bedtime, when we're in contact with another human being, we face the option of being helpful, hurtful, or neutral. If we're not paying attention we often choose hurtful, largely to prove we're smarter, better, more right than the "other guy."

I've come to regard the "empty boat" parable and Peter Drucker's positivity advice as complementary insights. The Buddhism is inward-facing; it's about maintaining our sanity in the presence of others. The Drucker is outward-facing; it's about confining our contributions to the positive.

*“From wake-up to bedtime, when we're in contact with another human being, we face the option of being helpful, hurtful, or neutral. If we're not paying attention we often choose hurtful, largely to prove we're smarter, better, more right than the "other guy."”*

When we lash out or belittle others—that is, fail to make a positive contribution to a situation—we’re not aware that we’re being counterproductive. Nor is it our intention to be cruel, as if we have chosen to speak our minds and “Damn the consequences!” Consequences don’t enter the picture. We’re only thinking about elevating ourselves. We’re trying to prove how smart we are to an empty boat!

AIWATT is the delaying mechanism we should be deploying in the interval between trigger and behavior—after a trigger creates an impulse and before behavior we may regret. AIWATT creates a split-second delay in our prideful, cynical, judgmental, argumentative, and selfish responses to our triggering environment. The delay gives us time to consider a more positive response. The nineteen-word text deserves close parsing:

Am I willing implies that we are exercising volition—taking responsibility—rather than surfing along the waves of inertia that otherwise rule our day. We are asking,

“Do I really want to do this?”

At this time reminds us that we’re operating in the present. Circumstances will differ later on, demanding a different response. The only issue is what we’re facing now.

To make the investment required reminds us that responding to others is work, an expenditure of time, energy, and opportunity. And, like any investment, our resources are finite. We are asking, “Is this really the best use of my time?”

To make a positive difference places the emphasis on the kinder, gentler side of our nature. It’s a reminder that we can either help create a better us or a better world. If we’re not accomplishing one or the other, why are we getting involved?

On this topic focuses us on the matter at hand. We can’t solve every problem. The time we spend on topics where we can’t make a positive difference is stolen from topics where we can.

The circumstances for deploying AIWATT are not limited to those moments when we must choose to be nice or not (although I can’t overestimate the importance of being nice).

The question matters in the seemingly small moments that can shape our reputation and make or break our relationships.

They also shape our day-to-day productivity, and that brings us back to our “planner” and “doer” dichotomy. The triggers that distract, disengage, or enrage us in our daily environments, whether it’s an impatient driver behind you on the road to work, an unpleasant coworker once you arrive, or an unexpected request in an email, can derail our day. So we have to ask...

Am I willing, at this time, to make the investment required to make a positive difference on this topic?

Is it more important, and more positively impactful, than what you're currently doing? Yes, sometimes making a positive difference can be meeting impatience with patience, responding to hostility with humanity and humility, to “let it go”—even others’ errors—from the world instead of perpetuating it. But, sometimes, it can be as simple as finishing the task at hand.

And sometimes—hopefully many times in your life—it’s making just a small emotional investment, taking the time to reach out and make a positive difference in someone’s day.

*“Am I willing implies that we are exercising volition—taking responsibility—rather than surfing along the waves of inertia that otherwise rule our day.”*

What relationship did you miss by not introducing yourself to a neighbor? Why not thank a customer for placing the order? What would it cost us to offer a soothing word to an upset child?

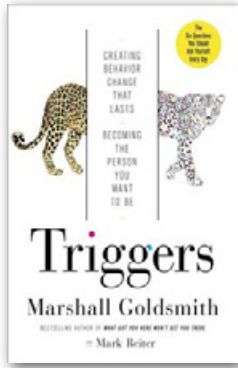
When we perpetuate or prolong negative behavior—both the kind that hurts other people and the kind that hurts us in some way—we are leading a changeless existence in the most hazardous manner. We are willfully choosing to be miserable and making others miserable, too. The time we are miserable is time we can never get back. Even more painful, it was all our doing. It was our choice.

So, think about one change, one triggering gesture, that you won't regret later on. Maybe it's calling your mother just to tell her you love her. Or thanking a customer for his loyalty. Or saying nothing instead of something cynical in a meeting.

**Then do it.** 📌



# Info



**BUY THE BOOK** | Get more details or buy a copy of [Triggers](#).

**ABOUT THE AUTHOR** | Marshall Goldsmith has been recognized as one of the 15 most influential business thinkers in the world by *The Times* (London) and *Forbes*. He is the million-selling author of many books, including *What Got You Here Won't Get You There* and *Mojo*.

→ **SEND THIS** | [Pass along a copy](#) of this manifesto to others.

→ **SUBSCRIBE** | [Sign up for e-news](#) to learn when our latest manifestos are available.

This document was created on June 10, 2015 and is based on the best information available at that time.

The copyright of this work belongs to the author, who is solely responsible for the content. This work is licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivs License. To view a copy of this license, visit [Creative Commons](#) or send a letter to Creative Commons, 559 Nathan Abbott Way, Stanford, California 94305, USA.

Cover image from [Unsplash](#). You are given the unlimited right to print this manifesto and to distribute it electronically (via email, your website, or any other means). You can print out pages and put them in your favorite coffee shop's windows or your doctor's waiting room. You can transcribe the author's words onto the sidewalk, or you can hand out copies to everyone you meet. You may not alter this manifesto in any way, though, and you may not charge for it.

# About ChangeThis

[ChangeThis](#) is a vehicle, not a publisher. We make it easy for big ideas to spread. While the authors we work with are responsible for their own work, they don't necessarily agree with everything available in ChangeThis format. But you knew that already.

## *800ceoread*

ChangeThis is supported by the love and tender care of 800-CEO-READ. Visit us at [800-CEO-READ](#) or at our daily [blog](#).