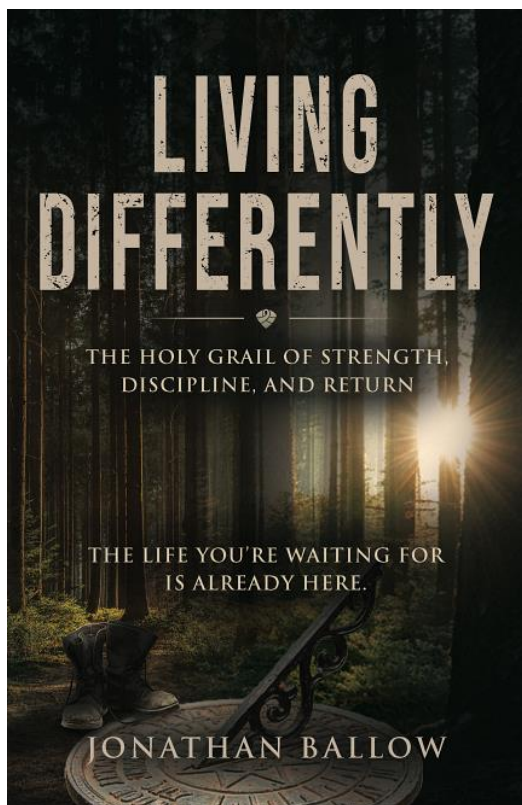




A powerful guide to rebuilding through adversity, discipline, and purpose—and returning stronger to the life you were meant to live.

**Living Differently:
The Holy Grail of Strength, Discipline, and Return**
By Jonathan Ballow

**Order the book from the publisher Booklocker.com
<https://booklocker.com/books/15062.html?s=pdf>
or from your favorite neighborhood
or online bookstore.**

LIVING DIFFERENTLY



THE HOLY GRAIL OF STRENGTH,
DISCIPLINE, AND RETURN

THE LIFE YOU'RE WAITING FOR
IS ALREADY HERE.

A pair of black combat boots and a metal shovel resting on a circular metal hatch cover in a forest.

JONATHAN BALLOW

Copyright © 2026 Jonathan Ballow

Print ISBN: 978-1-961269-11-8

Ebook ISBN: 979-8-88532-741-1

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, recording or otherwise, without the prior written permission of the author.

Published by Abuzz Press, Trenton, Georgia.

Abuzz Press

2026

First Edition

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Preface	vii
Maybe You're Here Too.....	1
What I Learned the Hard Way.....	3
Part I — The Shift.....	9
Chapter 1 — Awakening.....	11
Chapter 2 — Drifting (Survival Mode)	15
Chapter 3 — The Beach Photo	23
Chapter 4 — Stabilizing.....	35
Chapter 5 — The Long Middle.....	43
Chapter 6 — Rebuilding The Machine	49
Chapter 7 — Working With the Machine.....	57
Chapter 8 — The Seasons Reveal.....	67
Chapter 9 — Reset (The Cave).....	73
Chapter 10 — Cruise (Learning to Live Again).....	79
Chapter 11 — Build (The Forge)	85
Chapter 12 — The Return to Reset (Not Starting Over — Starting Higher).....	91
Chapter 13 — The Symbol	97
Chapter 14 — Living The Seasons	103
Chapter 15 — Seasonal Standards	109
Final Chapter — The Handoff.....	115
Author's Note — Before You Go	119
Appendix — What It Looked Like for Me (Training Samples).....	121
Appendix — Closing.....	125

CHAPTER 1 — AWAKENING

I knew I needed to make changes.

I could feel it.

There's a certain uneasiness that shows up when you start slipping—a feeling you can't quite shake. You look in the mirror and something just doesn't sit right.

You don't necessarily look terrible.

But you know you're not where you're supposed to be.

For me, it probably started around the craft beer boom. Breweries were popping up everywhere, and I was checking a lot of them out.

A couple heavy IPAs turned into several.

Pizza.

Pretzels.

Whatever was on the menu.

At the time, it just felt like normal life.

I'd lift weights for a while, then fall off. Start again. Fall off again.

Zero cardio.

Add in the normal stress that comes with the job, and the reality is I slowly drifted away from the version of myself I respected.

From the outside, everything looked normal.

But inside, I knew something was off.

I was slipping.

And the hardest part about slipping is that it rarely happens all at once.

It happens quietly.

One small compromise at a time.

One skipped workout.

One extra drink.

One late night.

Until one day you look in the mirror and realize the person staring back isn't the man you believe you should be.

Around that same time, I attended a peer support conference for first responders.

One speaker told a story that stuck with me.

He said his favorite place in the house was his garage.

That was his "happy place."

After work, he'd go out there, crack open a few beers, and sit by himself.

His wife would even stop the kids from going out there.

"Leave dad alone."

"He just needs some space."

"Give him some time in his happy place."

For a long time, he thought that was normal.

Then one day he realized something.

He wasn't decompressing.

He was isolating.

He said he suddenly thought about what that must look like to his kids.

They believed the garage was the place their dad was happiest.

Not the living room.

Not the dinner table.

Not being with them.

The place he felt happiest... was away from them.

He paused and said something that hit the room hard:

“What kind of message is that sending to your family?”

Then he said the word that stuck with me.

Isolation.

I remember sitting there thinking:

Oh shit.

That’s what I’ve been doing.

A beer.

Some music playing.

Moving things around. Looking busy.

But the life I was building with my partner—my wife—was happening inside the house.

And I was hiding out in the garage.

The uncomfortable truth is, even after recognizing it... I didn’t change right away.

Life kept moving.

Work stayed busy.

Habits stayed the same.

It would still be years before I finally did something about it.

But that moment stuck with me.

It was one of the first times I saw the drift clearly.

At the time, I didn't have a system.

I didn't have a philosophy.

I didn't understand the seasons yet.

All I knew was this:

Something about the direction I was heading didn't feel right.

I saw it... and then I kept living it.

CHAPTER 2 — DRIFTING (SURVIVAL MODE)

If someone had asked me back then how I was doing, I would've said what most men say:

“Same shit. Raising kids and paying bills.”

And I would've believed it.

That was the surface truth.

Underneath it?

I was tired. Inflamed. Short-tempered. Functioning. Drifting.

But drifting in a way that doesn't look dramatic from the outside.

Life was intact. Career intact. Family intact. Responsibilities handled.

That's what makes survival mode dangerous.

It doesn't look like collapse.

It looks like competence.

My days were predictable.

Wake up. Sometimes groggy — alcohol, sugar, inflammation. Shower. Coffee. Work. Ten to thirteen hours. Late lunch. Hyper-alert. Decision after decision.

Come home. Eat. Try to help. Try to engage.

But by then I was empty.

I wasn't mean. I wasn't absent.

I was just exhausted in a way that made presence feel expensive.

Providing was my badge of honor.

I was proud of that.

Bills paid.

Kids safe.

Family protected.

Public served.

I could push through anything.

Fatigue.

Stress.

Sleep deprivation.

That's what good cops do.

That's what good soldiers do.

That's what good men do.

Until it starts costing something.

The warning signs were there.

Irritability.

Inflammation.

Poor sleep.

More drinking than I admitted.

More sugar than I needed.

Checking out mentally even when I was sitting in the same room as the people
I loved.

But the biggest warning sign wasn't in me.

It was in her.

My wife tried every which way from Sunday to tell me something was off.

She tried gently.
She tried joking.
She tried frustrated.
She tried argumentative.
She tried concerned.
She tried practical.
She tried emotional.

Every angle.

And I interpreted it every wrong way possible.

Criticism.

Nagging.

Not understanding my stress.

Bad timing.

“I’m fine.”

“I’ve got this.”

“It’s just a phase.”

The truth?

I didn’t want to look under the hood.

Because if something was wrong, then I would have to admit I wasn’t as dialed
as I thought I was.

And survival mode does not like self-audits.

The shift didn’t come when she raised her voice.

It came when she stopped.

She went quiet.

That silence was louder than any argument.

One day she said something that broke something open in me.

She looked at me — not angry, not dramatic — just deeply hurt.

And she said:

“If you don’t see this... you’re going to end up dying someday all alone. And that breaks my heart.”

There was no attack in it.

Just fear.

And love.

That was the moment I realized something I hadn’t been willing to see.

She wasn’t fighting me.

She was fighting for me.

And I had been too deep in survival mode to know the difference.

Here’s the part most men won’t admit:

The skills that made me good at my job were slowly eroding me at home.

Hyper-alert.

Emotionally compartmentalized.

Able to shut feelings off.

Able to push through exhaustion.

Able to stay “on” for long stretches without rest.

Those traits keep partners alive.

They protect the public.

They win promotions.

They also slowly disconnect you.

From your body.
From your emotions.
From your wife.
From your kids.
From yourself.

Survival mode helped me stay safe.
Helped me protect my partners and the public.
But it cost me my health.
It cost me my clarity.
And it pulled me further away from the man I actually wanted to be.
The scariest part?
I didn't see it happening.
Because nothing had failed.

Deep down, before everything shifted, I knew something was off.
I felt tired but wired.
Disconnected.
Short-fused.
Like I was running on fumes but still telling everyone I was good to go.
It's the kind of thing you'd admit over coffee to another cop if the room was quiet enough.
"Yeah man... I don't know. Something's off."
But you keep moving.
Because that's what we do.

Survival mode becomes identity.

And identity is hard to question.

Here's the truth I had to swallow:

I didn't need a new life.

I needed to stop living this one like I was still under threat.

The war wasn't at my dinner table.

But my nervous system didn't know that.

My body had been red-lined for years.

And I thought that was strength.

It wasn't.

It was misalignment.

And that's where this entire story actually begins.

Not with a sunrise.

Not with a system.

Not with a symbol.

With a man who looked capable...

and was slowly drifting away from himself.

That's survival mode.

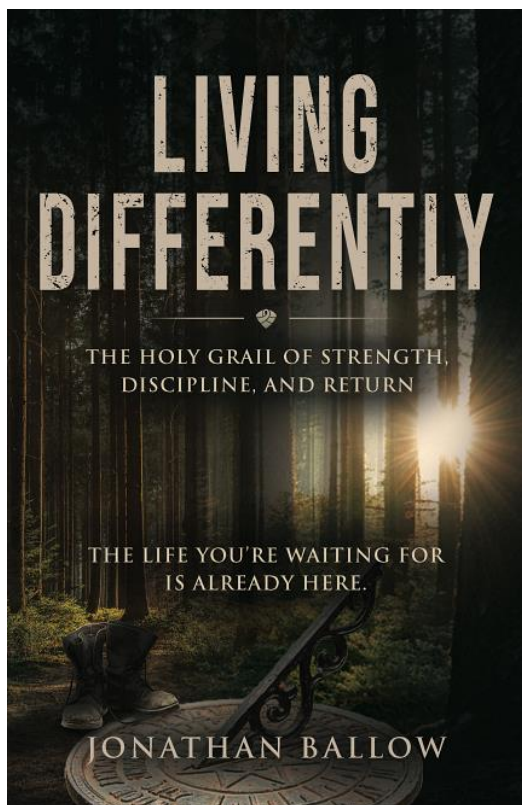
And if you recognized yourself in any of that...

You're not broken.

You're just overdue for alignment.

I wasn't burned out from life.

I was disconnected from it.



A powerful guide to rebuilding through adversity, discipline, and purpose—and returning stronger to the life you were meant to live.

**Living Differently:
The Holy Grail of Strength, Discipline, and Return**
By Jonathan Ballow

**Order the book from the publisher Booklocker.com
<https://booklocker.com/books/15062.html?s=pdf>
or from your favorite neighborhood
or online bookstore.**