

## **The Obstacle is the Way:**

The Timeless Art of Turning Trials Into Triumph

Ryan Holiday, 2014

Summary and Notes

### **Introduction**

**“Our actions may be impeded....but there can be no impeding our intentions or dispositions (what we are trying to do and state of mind we choose). Because we can accommodate and adapt. The mind adapts and converts to its own purposes the obstacle to our acting. The impediment to action advances action.**

**What stands in the way becomes the way.”**

Marcus Aurelius Antoninus, *Meditations*

Every obstacle is an opportunity to practice some virtue: patience, courage, humility, resourcefulness, reason, justice and creativity. This philosophical approach is the driving force of self-made people and the succor to those in positions with great responsibility or great trouble. Struggle is one constant in every life.

We are the rightful heirs to this tradition. It's our birthright. Whatever we face, we have a choice: will we be blocked by obstacles, or will we advance through and over them?

What most people lack is simple: a method and a framework for understanding, appreciating, and acting upon the obstacles that we each encounter. We need a proper context to process the universe.

**“The universe is not hostile, nor yet is it friendly. It is simply indifferent.”**

John H. Holmes.

>There is nothing to blame. It's life. Stop. Take a breath, think, consider, decide and MOVE.

All great victories, be they in politics, business, art, or seduction, involved solving vexing problems with a potent cocktail of creativity, planning, focus and daring. When you have a goal, obstacles are actually teaching you how to get where you want to go - carving you a path.

**“The things which hurt, instruct.”** Benjamin Franklin

We are soft, entitled and scared of conflict. The great times of the last few decades are great softeners of will. Abundance can be its own obstacle. Our *Generation Now*, all of us, needs an approach for overcoming obstacles and thriving amid chaos more than ever. One that will help turn our problems on their heads, using them as canvases on which to paint our master works of individuality and of culture.

## The Way Through Them

“Objective judgment, now at this very moment.

Unselfish action, now at this very moment.

Willing acceptance - now at this very moment - of all external events.

That's all you need. **Marcus Aurelius**

Overcoming obstacles is a discipline of three critical steps.

It begins with how we look at our specific problems, our attitude and approach; then the energy and creativity with which we actively break them down and turn them into opportunities; finally the cultivation and maintenance of an inner will that allows us to handle defeat and difficulty.

It's three interdependent, interconnected, and fluidly contingent disciplines:

### **Perception, Action and Will**

Obstacles are not only to be *expected*, but to be *embraced*. Because these obstacles are actually opportunities to test ourselves, to try new things, and ultimately, to triumph.

## Part I - Perception

### **Intro**

Perception is how we see and understand what occurs around us - and what we decide those events will mean. It takes practice to bat away the pests of bad perceptions, to separate reliable signals from deceptive ones, to filter out prejudice, expectation and fear. But it's worth it, for what is left is *truth*. You will see things as they truly are - neither good or bad.

### **The Discipline of Perception**

What matters most is not the obstacles but how we SEE them, how we REACT to them whether we keep our composure. Outward appearances are deceptive. What's within them, beneath them, is what matters. Unhelpful perceptions can invade our minds - that sacred place of reason, action and will - and disrupt our compass.

We have a CHOICE about how we respond to any situation. We can be blindly led by nonconscious primal feelings or we can understand them and learn to filter them, to harness them, then to control them. Discipline in perception lets you clearly see the inherent advantage of any situation - that others do not - and the proper course of action, without the pestilence of panic or rage.

*Most people are slaves to impulses and instincts they have never questioned.* Everything that happens is a chance to move forward, even if it is on a bearing or path that we did not anticipate.

When faced with a seemingly insurmountable obstacle, we must try:

- To be objective
- To control emotions and keep an even keel
- To choose to see the opportunity for growth in a situation
- To steady your nerves
- To ignore what disturbs or limits others
- To place things in perspective
- To revert to the present moment
- To focus on what can be controlled

### **Recognize Your Power**

“Choose not to be harmed - and you won’t feel harmed.

Don’t feel harmed - and you haven’t been. **Marcus Aurelius**

We decide what we will make of each and every situation. We decide whether we will break or whether we will resist. We decide whether we will assent or reject. No one can force us to give up or to believe in something that is untrue. Our perceptions are the thing that we’re in complete control of. Your mind remains your own.

“Nothing good or bad, but thinking makes it so,” **Shakespeare**

There is the event itself that happens and then the story we tell ourselves about what it means. We decide what story to tell ourselves. Or whether we will tell one at all. The power of your personal perception is impossible to obstruct - it can only be relinquished. And that is your decision.

### **Steady Your Nerves**

When we aim high, pressure and stress obligingly come along for the ride. Unintentional, unexpected problems impossible to foresee, or intentional acts from others trying to intimidate you, pressuring you to act on their terms. In these situations, talent is not the most sought-after characteristic. Grace and poise are, because these two attributes precede the opportunity to deploy any other skill.

Nerve is a matter of defiance and control but also a matter of acceptance of the current reality. There is always a countermove, always an escape or a way through, so there is no reason to lose your nerve. If your nerve holds, then nothing really did “happen” - our perception made sure it was nothing of consequence.

### **Control Your Emotions**

“Would you have a great empire? Rule over yourself.” **Publius Syrus**

Some of us almost crave sounding the alarm, because it’s easier than dealing with whatever is staring us in the face.

Uncertainty and fear are relieved by authority. Training is authority. It’s a release valve. With enough training and authority you can adapt those perfectly ordinary, even innate, fears that are bred mostly from unfamiliarity. This is simple to fix - but not easy.

*Being a slave to our emotions is a luxury, an indulgence of our lesser selves.* This is the skill that must be cultivated - freedom from disturbance and perturbation - so you can focus your energy exclusively on solving problems, rather than reacting to them. What important things are you missing because you chose to worry over introspection, alertness and wisdom? Does getting upset provide you with more options or less?

Real strength lies in the control, the domestication, of one’s emotions, not in pretending they don’t exist. We defeat emotions with logic.

“Does what happened keep you from acting with justice, generosity, self-control, sanity, prudence, honesty, humility, straightforwardness?” **Marcus Aurelius**

### **Practice Objectivity**

“Don’t let the force of an impression when it first hits you knock you off your feet; just say to it: Hold on a moment; let me see who you are and what you represent. Let me put you to the test.”

### **Epictetus**

Everything in our animalistic brain tries to compress the space between impression and perception and then action - with milliseconds in between them. We can question that impulse. We can disagree with it. We can override the switch, examine the threat before we act. But this takes strength. It’s a muscle that must be developed by tension, by lifting and holding.

*Objectivity means removing “you” - the subjective part - from the equation. Take any situation and pretend it is not happening to you. Pretend it is not important, that it doesn’t matter. How much easier would it be for you to know what to do? How much more quickly and dispassionately could you size up the scenario and its options? Give yourself clarity, not sympathy.*

### **Alter Your Perspective**

“People do not simply exist but always decide what their existence will be, what they will become the next moment. By the same token, every human being has the freedom to change at any instant.” **Viktor Frankel**

Perspective is everything. When you can break apart something, or look at it from some new angle, it loses its power over you. How we approach, view, and contextualize an obstacle, and what we tell ourselves it means, determines how daunting and trying it will be to overcome.

Perspective has two definitions:

1. Context - a sense of the larger picture of the world, not just what is immediately in front of us.
2. Framing - an individual’s unique way of looking at the world, a way that interprets its events.

Both matter, both can be effectively injected to change a situation that previously seemed intimidating or impossible.

The difference between the right and the wrong perspective is everything. How we interpret the events in our lives, our perspective, is the framework for the forthcoming response - whether there will even be one or whether we will quit or be silent.

Where the head goes, the body follows. Perception precedes action. Right action follows the right perspective.

### **Is It Up To You?**

“In life our first job is this, to divide and distinguish things into two categories: externals I cannot control, and the choices I make with regard to them I do control. Where will I find good and bad? In me, in my choices.” **Epictetus**

So what if you focused on what you can change? That’s where you can make a difference.

And what is up to us?

Our emotions

Our judgements

Our creativity

Our attitude

Our perspective

Our desires

Our decisions

Our determination

Everything else, is everything else. To argue, to complain, or worse, to just give up, these are choices. Choices that more often than not, do nothing to solve our problems, to get us where we want to go.

In its own way, the most harmful dragon we chase is the one that makes us think we can change things that are simply not ours to change. Every ounce of energy directed at things we can't actually influence is wasted - self-indulgent and self-destructive.

Is it up to you? Yes? Then do something about it. If not? Disengage and move on. Stay in your lane. Row your boat.

### **Live In The Present Moment**

In most people's lives, we aren't content to deal with things as they happen. We have to dive endlessly into what everything "means", whether something is "fair" or not, what's "behind" this or that, and what everyone else is doing. Then we wonder why we don't have the energy to actually deal with our lives and our challenges. Or we get ourselves so worked up and intimidated because of overthinking, that if we'd just gotten to work we would probably have already done the work, solved the problem.

For all species other than humans, things are just what they are. Our problem is that we are always trying to figure out what things "mean" - why things are the way they are. As though the "why" matters.

"We can not spend the day in explanation". **Ralph Waldo Emerson**

The implications of our obstacles are theoretical - they exist in the past and the future. We live in the moment. And the more we embrace that, the easier the obstacle will be to face and conquer. Remember that this moment is not your life, it's just a moment in your life. Focus on what is in front of you, right now. Catch your mind when it wanders, discard distracting thoughts. Ignore what your challenges "represent", or what they "mean" or "why it is happening to you".

### **Think Differently**

“Genius is the ability to put into effect what is in your mind. There is no other definition of it”.

#### **F Scott Fitzgerald**

To aim low is the admission of accepting mediocrity. To aim high, if things go right, can create something extraordinary. Our perceptions determine, to an incredibly large degree, what we are and what we are not capable of. In many ways, they determine reality itself.

We should never listen too closely to what other people say, or to what the voice in our head is saying. Do not accept the limitations of the external world in your life. Do not accept constructs without due diligence and thought.

The first judgements and objections are almost always rooted in fear, and the unknown. An entrepreneur is someone with faith in their ability to make something where there was nothing before. Our best ideas, our most creative self, will be born from seemingly insurmountable obstacles. When the rest of the world says “no way”, you say, “why not?”.

### **Finding The Opportunity**

“A good person dyes events with their own color....and turns whatever happens to their own benefit”. **Seneca**

The opportunity to defeat an obstacle is almost always inherently within that obstacle. Every strength has its own inherent weakness that we can not see if our perceptions are false or flawed. We are bad at actually seeing the answer because we are so intent on seeing the problem.

The struggle against an obstacle inevitably propels us to a new level of functioning. “That which does not kill me makes me stronger”. Flip the script, search for answers. Ignore the package, look at the gift.

### **Prepare To Act**

Once you see the world as it really is, for what it is, you must act. The proper perception - objective, rational, ambitious, clean - isolates the obstacle and exposes it for what it is. A clearer head makes for steadier hands.

We all have to make assumptions in life, we have to weigh the costs and benefits. No one is asking for rose-colored glasses, noble failure or martyrdom. Boldness is acting anyway, even though you understand the negative and the reality of your obstacle.

## **Part II - Action**

### **Intro**

Action is commonplace, right action is not. Discipline is directed action. With persistence and flexibility we will act in the best interest of our goals and in the service of the whole. Action requires courage, not brashness - creative application and not brute force. Our movements and decisions define us: We must be sure to act with deliberation, boldness, and persistence. Those are the attributes of right and effective action.

Nothing else. Not over-thinking, or evasion or aid from others. Action is the solution and the cure for our predicaments.

### **The Discipline of Action**

Action is natural, innate. We have real strength, more than most people realize. But in our lives, we often default to our worst instincts. We dally, we act frail and are therefore powerless to make ourselves better. We expect someone else to solve our problems for us or that our obstacles will just magically disappear. We define ourselves by our lack of action, our lack of courage to act. Inaction becomes our master.

It feels better to ignore and pretend, to negotiate an easier decision - and then rationalize why we did it. We don't have time, we're too tired. It's always something outside of us - not us.

People turn bad situations into glorious triumphs everyday, and their situations are a lot worse than the ones we "perceive" ourselves to be in. Born with nothing, into poverty, strife or the chaos of decades past, certain types of people were freed from modern notions of "fairness" or good or bad, because none of it applied to them. What was in front of them was all they knew - all they had. And instead of complaining and negotiating with themselves and rationalizing away their lives they went to work. They made the best of it. Because they had to. Because they didn't give themselves a choice. Forward. Action.

**Stop. Take a breath. Think. Consider. Decide. Move.**

We must greet our obstacles:

- With energy
- With persistence
- With a coherent and deliberate process
- With iteration and resilience
- With pragmatism
- With strategic vision
- With craftiness and savvy
- With an eye for opportunity and pivotal moments.

### **Get Moving**

“We must all either wear out or rust out, every one of us. My choice is to wear out.

**Theodore Roosevelt**

For some reason, these days we tend to downplay the importance or aggression, of taking risks, of barreling forward. It's probably because it's been negatively associated with certain notions of violence or masculinity. More than likely, it's because you can't control someone that's in motion, getting things done, thinking for themselves with a plan for their lives.

Over and over, history reveals that those who attack problems and life with the most initiative and energy usually win. Right action produces momentum and in this case, momentum is your friend. It further fuels the fires of your actions, your ambitions.

What is courage? Courage at its most basic level is action. Action when it's hard, when you're tired, when there is danger, when the obstacles won't budge. Just because the conditions aren't exactly to your liking, or you don't feel ready yet and you're stuck again in analysis paralysis - doesn't mean you get a pass. If you want momentum, you'll have to create it yourself, right now, by getting up and getting started.

### **Practice Persistence**

“He says the best way out is always through

And I agree to that, or in so far

As I can see no way out but through”

Robert Frost

If we are to overcome our obstacles, this is the message to broadcast - internally and externally. We will not be stopped by failure, we will not be rushed or extracted by external noise. We will chisel and peg away at the obstacle until it is gone. Resistance to me is futile.

Sometimes you must try all the wrong ways to discover a totally new way - innovation. Turn over in your mind option after option knowing that eventually one will work. Welcoming the opportunity to test and test and test, grateful for the priceless knowledge this reveals within the process.

Slow pressure, repeated from many different angles, the elimination of so many other promising options, this will slowly and surely churn the solution to the top of the pile. Expertise and skill are rarely the issue. Do you have the patience to refine your idea? The persistence to slog through the politics and drama of group collaboration?

Once you can envision yourself quitting altogether, you might as well ring the bell. You're done. Epictetus said, "persist and resist". Persist in your efforts. Resist giving into distraction, discouragement or disorder. No need to sweat or feel rushed, to get upset or despair. You're not going anywhere and neither is the obstacle.

Things worth doing, things you are passionate about - it's supposed to be hard. Your first attempts aren't going to work. If it wasn't hard, it wouldn't be worth your efforts.

### **Iterate**

"What is defeat? Nothing but education; nothing but the first steps to something better.  
Wendell Phillips

On the path to successful action, we will fail - possibly many times. And that's okay. It can be a good thing, even. Action and failure are two sides of the same coin. One doesn't come without the other. Change the relationship with failure. It means iterating, failing, and improving.

The one way to guarantee we don't benefit from failure - to ensure it is a bad thing - is to not learn from it. People fail in small ways all the time. But they don't learn. They don't listen. They don't see the problems that failure exposes. It doesn't make them better.

It's time you understand that the world is telling you something with each and every failure and action. It's feedback - giving you precise instructions on how to improve, it's trying to wake you up from your cluelessness. Listen!

Failure shows us the way - by showing us what isn't the way.

## **Follow The Process**

You've got something very difficult to do? Don't focus on that. Instead, break it down into pieces. Simply do what you need to do right now. And do it well. And then move on to the next thing. Follow the process and not the prize. The process will get you the prize. Exist in the present.

Finish each step, each goal, each part of the process. Finish it to the best of your ability, each day, right now. When it comes to our actions, distraction and disorder are death. The unordered mind loses track of what's in front of it - what actually matters - and gets distracted by thoughts of the future. The process is order, it keeps our perceptions in check and our actions in sync.

How often do we compromise or settle because we feel the real solution is too ambitious or outside our grasp? How often do we assume that change is impossible because it's too big? Involves too many different groups? Or worse, how many people are paralyzed by all of their ideals and inspirations? All these things are solvable. Each would collapse under the weight of the process. We just wrongly assume that it has to happen all at once, and we give up at the thought of it.

**We are A-Z thinkers, fretting about A, obsessing over Z, yet forget all about B through Y.**

When we get distracted, when we start caring about something other than our own progress and efforts, the process is the helpful, if occasionally bossy, voice in our head. It is the bark of the wise, older leader who knows exactly who she is and what she's got to do.

The process is the voice that demands we take responsibility and ownership. That prompts us to act, if even in a small way. Like a relentless machine, subjugating resistance each and every way it exists, little by little. Moving forward, one step at a time. Subordinate strength to the process. Replace fear with the process. Depend on it. Lean on it. Trust in it.

The process is about doing the right thing, right now.

## **Do Your Job, Do It Right**

Sometimes on the road to where we are going or where we want to be, we have to do things that we'd rather not do. Often when we are just starting out, our first jobs "introduce us to the broom," as Andrew Carnegie famously put it. There's nothing shameful about sweeping. It's just another opportunity to excel - and to learn.

Everything we do matters. Everything is a chance to do and be your best. Only self-absorbed jerks think they are too good for whatever their current station requires. Wherever we are, whatever we're doing and wherever we are going, we owe it to ourselves, to our art, to the world to do it well. That's our primary duty, and our obligation. When action is our priority, vanity falls away.

We will be and do many things in our lives. Some are prestigious, some are onerous, none are beneath us. To whatever we face, our job is to respond with:

Hard work  
Honesty  
Helping others as best we can

What are you supposed to do right now? *Your job*. Whether anyone notices, whether we're paid for it, whether the project turns out successfully - it doesn't matter. Your job is your duty, and duty is beautiful, inspiring and empowering.

The great psychologist, **Viktor Frankl**, survivor of three concentration camps, found presumptuousness in the age-old question: "What is the meaning of life?" As though it is someone else's responsibility to tell you. Instead, he said, the world is asking you that question. And it's your job to answer with your actions.

Try hard. Be honest. Help others along the way. That's all that's been asked of us. No more and no less. How you do anything is how you can do everything.

### **What's Right Is What Works**

Sometimes we spend a lot of time thinking about how things are supposed to be, or what the rules say we should do. Trying to get it all perfect. Most often it's more important to focus on what works instead of pretty methods.

Maybe you'll need to be a little more cunning or conniving than feels comfortable. Sometimes that requires ignoring some outdated regulations or asking for forgiveness later instead of permission right now. But if you've got an important mission, all that matters is if you accomplish it.

Pragmatism is not so much realism as flexibility. There are a lot of ways to get from point A to point B. It doesn't have to be a straight line. But so many of us spend so much time looking for the perfect solution that we pass up what's right in front of us. Because you are never going to find that perfection.

Start thinking like a radical pragmatist: still ambitious, aggressive, and rooted in ideals, but also imminently practical and guided by the possible. Don't think small, but make the distinction between the critical and the extra. Think progress - not perfection.

### **In Praise Of The Flank Attack**

Whoever cannot seek  
The unforeseen sees nothing,  
For the known way  
Is an impasse

#### **Heraclitus**

Hit and run. Stick and move. Never attack where it is obvious.

In a study of some 30 conflicts comprising more than 280 campaigns from ancient to modern history, the brilliant strategist and historian **B.H. Liddell Hart** came to a stunning conclusion: In only 6 of the 280 campaigns was the decisive victory a result of a direct attack on the enemy's main army. 2%.

Where do we find victory? From everywhere else. From the flanks. From the unexpected. From psychological. From drawing opponents out from their defenses. From the untraditional. Take a step back, then go around the problem. Find some leverage. Approach from what is called the "line of least expectation."

Part of the reason why a certain skill often seems so effortless to others is not just because they've mastered the process. They really are doing less than the rest of us who don't know any better. They choose to exert only calculated force where it will be effective, rather than straining and struggling with pointless attrition tactics.

In fact, having the advantage of size or strength or power is often the birthing ground for true and fatal weakness. These advantages work, until they don't. When they meet you, you make quick work of them with deft and oblique maneuvers, when you refuse to face them in the one setting they know: head to head.

You don't convince people by challenging their longest and most firmly held opinions. You find common ground and work from there. Or you look for leverage to make them listen.

There's a lot of pressure to try to match people move for move, as if sticking with what works for you is somehow cheating. Let me save you the guilt and self-flagellation: It's not. You're acting like a real strategist. You aren't just throwing your weight around and hoping it works. You're not wasting your energy in battles driven by ego and pride rather than tactical advantage.

Remember, sometimes the longest way around is the shortest way home.

### **Use Obstacles Against Themselves**

Wise men are able to make a fitting use even of their enmities. **Plutarch**

Sometimes you overcome obstacles not by attacking them but by withdrawing and letting them attack you. You can use the actions of others against themselves instead of acting yourself. Opposites work. Nonaction can be action. It uses the powers of others and allows us to absorb their power as our own. Letting them - or the obstacle - do the work for us.

So instead of fighting an obstacle, find a means of making it defeat itself. Sometimes a problem simply needs less of you - less of people in general - and not more.

There is a certain humility required in some approaches. It means accepting the way you originally wanted to do things is not possible. Let's be clear, using obstacles against themselves is very different from doing nothing. Passive resistance is, in fact, incredibly active. But those actions come in the form of discipline, self-control, fearlessness, determination, and grand strategy.

### **Channel Your Energy**

Adversity can harden you. Or it can loosen you up and make you better - if you let it. Rename it and claim it. We all have our constraints to deal with and we can deal with these constraints by allowing them to let us be loose and bold.

To be physically and mentally loose takes no talent. That's just recklessness. We want right action, not action at any cost. To be physically and mentally tight? That's called anxiety and it doesn't work either. But physical looseness combined with mental restraint via channeled energy? That is powerful.

It's a power that drives our opponents and competitors nuts. They think we're toying with them. It's maddening - like we aren't even trying, like we've tuned out the world. Like we are immune to external stressors and limitations on the march towards our goals. Because we are.

## **Seize The Offensive**

The best people are not those who have waited for chances but who have taken them; besieged chance, conquered the chance, and made chance the servitor. **E. H. Chapin**

If you think it's simply enough to take advantage of the opportunities that arise in your life, you will fall short of greatness. Anyone sentient can do that. What you must do is learn how to press forward precisely when everyone around you sees disaster.

It's at the seemingly bad moments, when people least expect it, that we act swiftly and unexpectedly to pull off a big victory. While others are arrested with discouragement, we are not. We see the moment differently, and act accordingly.

But the crisis is in front of you? You're wasting it feeling sorry for yourself, feeling tired or disappointed. You forge: Life speeds on the bold and favors the brave.

Pay attention, develop that "sixth sense" that is the combination of all sensory input into one "thing" - that gut instinct - that will tell when the time is right to act boldly and fearlessly. Great commanders look for these decision points, for it is bursts of energy directed at decisive points that break things wide open. Press, press, press, then when all seems deadlocked - press one more time.

It's the one who rises the next morning after a long day of fighting and rallies, instead of retreating - the one who says, "I intend to attack and whip them right here and now" - who will carry victory home...intelligently.

Oftentimes, an obstacle is really a catapult. Load it up and move forward with due speed.

## **Prepare For None Of It To Work**

"In the meantime, cling tooth and nail to the following rule: not to give into adversity, not to trust prosperity, and always take full note of fortune's habit of behaving just as she pleases". **Seneca**

Learn to accept that bad things happen. Practice humility. Acknowledge your hubris if it arises.

It's an infinitely elastic formula: In every situation, that which blocks our path actually presents a new path with a new part of us. Just do your best, that's it - Not the impossible.

We must be willing to roll the dice and lose. Prepare at the end of the day, for none of it to work. The world could use fewer martyrs. Whatever verdict comes in, accept it, move on.

## Part III - Will

### Intro

Will is our internal power, which can never be affected by the outside world. It is our final trump card. Will is what we depend on when all seems lost. Willpower must be cultivated. The will has a lot more to do with surrender than with strength. True will is quiet humility, resilience, and flexibility; the other kind of will is weakness disguised by bluster and ambition. See which lasts longer under the hardest of obstacles.

### The Discipline Of The Will

Leadership requires determination and energy. And certain situations, at times, call on leaders to marshal that determined energy simply to endure. To provide strength in terrible times.

This is the avenue for the final discipline: the Will. If perception and action were the disciplines of the mind and the body, then Will is the discipline of the heart and soul. The will is the one thing we control completely, always.

Will is fortitude and wisdom - not just about specific obstacles but about life itself and where the obstacles we are facing fit within it. It gives us ultimate strength. As is: the strength to endure, contextualize, and derive meaning from the obstacles we cannot simply overcome - to flip the unflippable.

The stoic maxim: **sustine et absinthe**. Bear and forbear. Acknowledge the pain but trod onward toward your task.

Certain things in life will cut you open like a knife. When that happens - at that exposing moment - the world gets a glimpse of what's truly inside you. So, what will be revealed when you're sliced open by tension and pressure? Iron? Or air? Or bullshit?

As such, the will is the critical third discipline. We can think, act and finally adjust to a world that is inherently unpredictable. It is what allows us to stand undisturbed while others wilt and give into disorder. Willing and able to continue, even during the unthinkable, even when our worst nightmares have come true.

It is much easier to control our perceptions and emotions than it is to give up our desire to control other people and events.

## **Building Your Inner Citadel**

We take weakness for granted. We assume the way we are born is the way we simply are, that our disadvantages are permanent. And then we atrophy from there.

Not everyone accepts their bad start in life. They remake their bodies and their lives with activities and exercise. They prepare themselves for the hard road. No one is born with a steel backbone. We have to forge that ourselves. We craft our spiritual strength through physical exercise, and our physical hardiness through mental practice - sound mind in a strong body.

Many ancient philosophers saw themselves as mental athletes. The mind can be built up and toned through the right exercises. Over time their muscle memory grew to the point that they could intuitively respond to every situation. Especially obstacles.

The stoics defined our Inner Citadel, the fortress inside of us that no external adversity can ever break down. We are not born with such a structure; it must be built and actively reinforced. During the good times, we strengthen ourselves and our bodies so that during the difficult times, we can depend on ourselves. We protect our inner fortress so it can protect us.

You'll have far better luck toughening yourself up than you ever will trying to take the teeth out of the world that is - at best - indifferent to your existence. The strength in will must be built.

The path of least resistance is a terrible teacher. We can't afford to shy away from the things that intimidate us. We should never take our weaknesses for granted, ignore them, or wish them away. Things will happen to you. No one knows when or how, but their appearance is certain. And life will demand an answer.

## **Anticipation (Thinking Negatively)**

Using a premortem (vs a postmortem), via psychologist Gary Klein, we look to envision what could go wrong, what will go wrong, in advance, before we start. Far too many ambitious undertakings fail for preventable reasons.

Your plan and the way things turn out rarely resemble each other. What you think you deserve is rarely what you'll get. Yet we constantly deny this fact and are repeatedly shocked by the events of the world as they unfold.

Per the stoics, premeditatio malorum - **premeditation of evils**.

Always prepare for disruption, always work those possible disruptions into your plans. Be fitted for defeat or victory. Manage expectations. Not everyone can be counted on like you can and people are going to make mistakes. If this comes as a constant surprise each and every time it occurs, you're not only going to be miserable, you're going to have a much harder time accepting it and moving on to attempts two, three and four.

Wisdom provides us with these maxims:

Beware the calm before the storm.

Hope for the best, prepare for the worst.

The worst is yet to come.

It gets worse before it gets better.

We will be prepared in advance for adversity - it's other people who are not. This "bad luck" is actually a chance for us to make up some time because we're already looking and moving forward. As a result of our anticipation, we understand the range of possible outcomes and know that they are not all good. We are ready to be driven off course because we've already plotted a way back. We are prepared for failure and ready for success.

### **The Art of Acquiescence**

"The Fates Guide the person who accepts them and hinder the person who resists them.

Cleanthes

It doesn't always feel that way but constraints in life are a good thing. Especially if we can accept them and let them direct us. They push us to places and to develop skills that we would otherwise never have pursued.

Dr. Samuel Johnson once said, "True genius is a mind of large general powers accidentally determined in some particular direction". This channeling requires consent. It requires acceptance. We have to allow some accidents to happen to us.

Life sometimes tells us to come to a stop right here. Or that some intersection is blocked or a particular road has been rerouted through an inconvenient detour. We can't argue or yell this problem away. We simply accept it.

The stoics have a beautiful name for this attitude. They call it the Art of Acquiescence.

And things can always be worse. We squirm and complain about what was taken from us. We still can't appreciate what we actually have. The hubris is that we think we can change everything. That we have some power over the universe.

Letters used to be signed “Deo volente” - God willing. The ancients used the word fate far more frequently than us because they were better acquainted with and exposed to how capricious and random the world could be. It’s time to be humble and flexible enough to acknowledge the same in our own lives. As the saying goes, “Man proposes but God disposes.”

As fate would have it.

Heaven forbid.

Nature permitting.

Murphy’s Law.

Whatever version you prefer, it’s all the same. Not much if anything has really changed since their time and ours - they were just more self-aware and cognizant of it.

The way life actually is, give you plenty to work with, plenty to leave your imprint on. Taking people and events as they are is quite enough material already. Follow where the events take you, like water rolling down a hill - it always gets to the bottom eventually, doesn’t it?

Look at a big enough picture and a long enough timeline that whatever you have to accept is still only a negligible blip on the way to your goals.

“Nature, in order to be commanded, must be obeyed.” **Francis Bacon**

### **Love Everything That Happens: *Amori Fati***

“My formula for greatness in a human being is *amori fati* (love of fate): that one wants nothing to be different, not forward, not backward, not in all eternity. Not merely bear what is necessary, still less conceal it....but love it. **Neitzsche**

We must engage and live the act of turning what we must do into what we get to do. We are in our own fight with our own obstacles. We can wear them down with our relentless smile (frustrating the people or impediments attempting to frustrate us.

As the stoics commanded themselves: Cheerfulness in all situations, especially the bad ones. We don’t get to choose what happens to us, but we can always choose how we feel about it. And why on earth would we choose to feel anything but good? We can always choose to give a good account of ourselves. Always.

It’s a little unnatural to feel gratitude for things we never wanted to happen in the first place. But at this point, we know the opportunities and benefits that lie within adversities. We know that in overcoming them, we emerge stronger, sharper and empowered. You love it, because it’s all fuel. And you don’t just want fuel, you need fuel. So be grateful for the fuel of adversity.

## **Perseverance**

If persistence is attempting to solve some difficult problem with dogged determination and hammering until the break occurs, then plenty of people can be said to be persistent. But perseverance is something larger. It's the long game. It's about what happens not just in round one, but in round two and every round after - and then the fight after that, and the fight after that, until the end.

Persistence is an action. Perseverance is a matter of will. One is energy. The other is endurance.

"Made weak by time and fate, but strong in will  
To strive, to seek, to find, and not to yield." **Tennyson**

There are far more failures in the world due to a collapse of will than there will ever be from objectively conclusive external events. Persist and persevere.

"With the exercise of self-trust, new powers shall appear." **Emerson**

Determination, if you think about it, is invincible. Nothing other than death can prevent us from following **Winston Churchill's** old acronym: KBO. Keep Bugging On. Despair? That's on you. No one else is to blame when you throw in the towel. We control ourselves - and that is sufficient.

## **Something Bigger Than Yourself**

"A man's job is to make the world a better place to live in, so far as he is able - always remembering the results will be infinitesimal - and to attend to his own soul". Leroy Percy

When we focus on others, on helping them or simply providing a good example, our own personal fears and troubles will diminish. With fear or heartache no longer our primary concern, we don't have time for it. Shared purpose gives us strength.

At any moment, you may need to take it for granted, for a second, that there is nothing else in it for us, nothing we can do for ourselves. How can we use this situation to benefit others? How can we salvage some good out of this? If not for me, then for my family or the others I'm leading or those who might later find themselves in a similar situation.

*What doesn't help is making this all about you, all the time.* Why did this happen to me becomes what am I going to do about it. Stop making it harder on yourself by thinking about I, I, I. Stop putting that dangerous "I" in front of events. I did this. I was smart. I had that. I deserve better than this. No wonder you take losses personally, no wonder you feel so alone. You've inflated your own role and importance. Start thinking "Unity over Self". We're in this together.

Even if we can't carry the load all the way, we're going to take our crack at picking up the heavy end. We help ourselves by helping them. We become more. We all become more. Compassion is always an option, camaraderie as well. These are the powers of your will that can never be taken away, only relinquished.

Stop pretending that what you're going through is somehow special or unfair. Whatever trouble you're having is not some unique misfortune picked out especially for you. It just is what it is. This kind of myopia is what convinces us, to our own detriment, that we're the center of the universe. We are not special or unique simply by virtue of being. We make ourselves unique by building and refining ourselves. God willing, It's up to us.

### **Meditate On Your Mortality**

One can meditate on death - be well aware of our own mortality - without being morbid or a downer. Embracing the precariousness of our own existence can be exhilarating and empowering. As the Romans would remind themselves - Remember you are mortal.

**Thomas Gray** wrote, "The paths of glory lead but to the grave."

Reminding ourselves each day that we will die helps us treat our time as a gift, and the time we give is our life. Choose wisely.

### **Prepare To Start Again**

The great law of nature is that it never stops. There is no end. Just when you have successfully navigated one obstacle, another emerges. But that's what keeps life interesting. This is what creates opportunities.

Each time you break through you'll develop strength, wisdom and perspective. Each time a little more of the competition falls away. Until all that is left is you: the best version of you.

The more you accomplish, the more things will stand in your way. You will always be fighting uphill. Get used to it and train accordingly. Life is a marathon and not a sprint. Conserve your energy and keep all things in real perspective.

Simply flip the obstacles that life throws at you by improving in spite of them - because of them.  
And therefore no longer afraid. But excited, cheerful and eagerly anticipating the next round.

First, see clearly.

Next, act correctly.

Finally, endure and accept the world as it is.

*Vires acquirit eundo* - We Gather Strength As We Go

**What blocked the path is now the path.  
What once impeded action advances action.  
The Obstacle is the Way.**