THE SUBTLE ART OF NOT GIVING A F*CK

A COUNTERINTUITIVE APPROACH TO LIVING A GOOD LIFE

MARK MANSON

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CHAPTER 1

Don’t Try

Charles Bukowski was an alcoholic, a womanizer, a chronic gambler, a lout, a cheapskate, a deadbeat, and on his worst days, a poet. He’s probably the last person on earth you would ever look to for life advice or expect to see in any sort of self-help book.

Which is why he’s the perfect place to start.

Bukowski wanted to be a writer. But for decades his work was rejected by almost every magazine, newspaper, journal, agent, and publisher he submitted to. His work was horrible, they said. Crude. Disgusting. Depraved. And as the stacks of rejection slips piled up, the weight of his failures pushed him deep into an alcohol-fueled depression that would follow him for most of his life.

Bukowski had a day job as a letter-filer at a post office. He got paid shit money and spent most of it on booze. He gambled away the rest at the racetrack. At night, he would drink alone and sometimes hammer out poetry on his beat-up old typewriter. Often, he’d wake up on the floor, having passed out the night before.

Thirty years went by like this, most of it a meaningless blur of alcohol, drugs, gambling, and prostitutes. Then, when Bukowski was fifty, after a lifetime of failure and self-loathing, an editor at a small independent publishing house took a strange interest in him. The editor couldn’t offer Bukowski much money or much promise of sales. But he had a weird affection for the drunk loser, so he decided to take a chance on him. It was the first real shot Bukowski had ever gotten, and, he realized, probably the only one he would ever get. Bukowski wrote back to the editor: “I have one of two choices—stay in the post office and go crazy . . . or stay out here and play at writer and starve. I have decided to starve.”

Upon signing the contract, Bukowski wrote his first novel in three weeks. It was called simply *Post Office.* In the dedication, he wrote, “Dedicated to nobody.”

Bukowski would make it as a novelist and poet. He would go on and publish six novels and hundreds of poems, selling over two million copies of his books. His popularity defied everyone’s expectations, particularly his own.

Stories like Bukowski’s are the bread and butter of our cultural narrative. Bukowski’s life embodies the American Dream: a man fights for what he wants, never gives up, and eventually achieves his wildest dreams. It’s practically a movie waiting to happen. We all look at stories like Bukowski’s and say, “See? He never gave up. He never stopped trying. He always believed in himself. He persisted against all the odds and made something of himself!”

It is then strange that on Bukowski’s tombstone, the epitaph reads: “Don’t try.”

See, despite the book sales and the fame, Bukowski was a loser. He knew it. And his success stemmed not from some determination to be a winner, but from the fact that he *knew* he was a loser, accepted it, and then wrote honestly about it. He never tried to be anything other than what he was. The genius in Bukowski’s work was not in overcoming unbelievable odds or developing himself into a shining literary light. It was the opposite. It was his simple ability to be completely, unflinchingly honest with himself—especially the worst parts of himself—and to share his failings without hesitation or doubt.

This is the real story of Bukowski’s success: his comfort with himself as a failure. Bukowski didn’t give a fuck about success. Even after his fame, he still showed up to poetry readings hammered and verbally abused people in his audience. He still exposed himself in public and tried to sleep with every woman he could find. Fame and success didn’t make him a better person. Nor was it by becoming a better person that he became famous and successful.

Self-improvement and success often occur together. But that doesn’t necessarily mean they’re the same thing.

Our culture today is obsessively focused on unrealistically positive expectations: Be happier. Be healthier. Be the best, better than the rest. Be smarter, faster, richer, sexier, more popular, more productive, more envied, and more admired. Be perfect and amazing and crap out twelve-karat-gold

nuggets before breakfast each morning while kissing your selfie-ready spouse and two and a half kids goodbye. Then fly your helicopter to your wonderfully fulfilling job, where you spend your days doing incredibly meaningful work that's likely to save the planet one day.

But when you stop and really think about it, conventional life advice—all the positive and happy self-help stuff we hear all the time—is actually fixating on what you *lack*. It lasers in on *what you perceive your personal shortcomings and failures to already be*, and then emphasizes them for you. You learn about the best ways to make money *because* you feel you don't have enough money already. You stand in front of the mirror and repeat affirmations saying that you're beautiful *because* you feel as though you're not beautiful already. You follow dating and relationship advice *because* you feel that you're unlovable already. You try goofy visualization exercises about being more successful *because* you feel as though you aren't successful enough already.

Ironically, this fixation on the positive—on what's better, what's superior—only serves to remind us over and over again of what we are not, of what we lack, of what we should have been but failed to be. After all, no truly happy person feels the need to stand in front of a mirror and recite that she's happy. She just *is*.

There's a saying in Texas: "The smallest dog barks the loudest." A confident man doesn't feel a need to prove that he's confident. A rich woman doesn't feel a need to convince anybody that she's rich. Either you are or you are not. And if you're dreaming of something all the time, then you're reinforcing the same unconscious reality over and over: that you are *not that.*

Everyone and their TV commercial wants you to believe that the key to a good life is a nicer job, or a more rugged car, or a prettier girlfriend, or a hot tub with an inflatable pool for the kids. The world is constantly telling you that the path to a better life is more, more, more—buy more, own more, make more, fuck more, *be* more. You are constantly bombarded with messages to give a fuck about everything, all the time. Give a fuck about a new TV. Give a fuck about having a better vacation than your coworkers. Give a fuck about buying that new lawn ornament. Give a fuck about having the right kind of selfie stick.

Why? My guess: because giving a fuck about more stuff is good for business.

And while there's nothing wrong with good business, the problem is that giving too many fucks is bad for your mental health. It causes you to become overly attached to the superficial and fake, to dedicate your life to chasing a mirage of happiness and satisfaction. The key to a good life is not giving a fuck about more; it's giving a fuck about less, giving a fuck about only what is true and immediate and important.

The Feedback Loop from Hell

There's an insidious quirk to your brain that, if you let it, can drive you absolutely batty. Tell me if this sounds familiar to you:

You get anxious about confronting somebody in your life. That anxiety cripples you and you start wondering why you're so anxious. Now you're becoming *anxious about being anxious.* Oh no! Doubly anxious! Now you're anxious about your anxiety, which is causing *more* anxiety. Quick, where's the whiskey?

Or let's say you have an anger problem. You get pissed off at the stupidest, most inane stuff, and you have no idea why. And the fact that you get pissed off so easily starts to piss you off even more. And then, in your petty rage, you realize that being angry all the time makes you a shallow and mean person, and you hate this; you hate it so much that you get angry at yourself. Now look at you: you're angry at yourself getting angry about being angry. Fuck you, wall. Here, have a fist.

Or you're so worried about doing the right thing all the time that you become worried about how much you're worrying. Or you feel so guilty for every mistake you make that you begin to feel guilty about how guilty you're feeling. Or you get sad and alone so often that it makes you feel even more sad and alone just thinking about it.

Welcome to the Feedback Loop from Hell. Chances are you've engaged in it more than a few times. Maybe you're engaging in it right now: "God, I do the Feedback Loop all the time—I'm such a loser for doing it. I should stop. Oh my God, I feel like such a loser for calling myself a loser. I should stop calling myself a loser. Ah, fuck! I'm doing it again! See? I'm a loser! Argh!"

Calm down, amigo. Believe it or not, this is part of the beauty of being human. Very few animals on earth have the ability to think cogent thoughts

to begin with, but we humans have the luxury of being able to have thoughts *about* our thoughts. So I can think about watching Miley Cyrus videos on YouTube, and then immediately think about what a sicko I am for wanting to watch Miley Cyrus videos on YouTube. Ah, the miracle of consciousness!

Now here's the problem: Our society today, through the wonders of consumer culture and hey-look-my-life-is-cooler-than-yours social media, has bred a whole generation of people who believe that having these negative experiences—anxiety, fear, guilt, etc.—is totally not okay. I mean, if you look at your Facebook feed, everybody there is having a fucking grand old time. Look, eight people got married this week! And some sixteen-year-old on TV got a Ferrari for her birthday. And another kid just made two billion dollars inventing an app that automatically delivers you more toilet paper when you run out.

Meanwhile, you're stuck at home flossing your cat. And you can't help but think your life sucks even more than you thought.

The Feedback Loop from Hell has become a borderline epidemic, making many of us overly stressed, overly neurotic, and overly self-loathing.

Back in Grandpa's day, he would feel like shit and think to himself, "Gee whiz, I sure do feel like a cow turd today. But hey, I guess that's just life. Back to shoveling hay."

But now? Now if you feel like shit for even five minutes, you're bombarded with 350 images of people *totally happy and having amazing fucking lives*, and it's impossible to not feel like there's something wrong with you.

It's this last part that gets us into trouble. We feel bad about feeling bad. We feel guilty for feeling guilty. We get angry about getting angry. We get anxious about feeling anxious. *What is wrong with me?*

This is why not giving a fuck is so key. This is why it's going to save the world. And it's going to save it by accepting that the world is totally fucked and that's all right, because it's always been that way, and always will be.

By not giving a fuck that you feel bad, you short-circuit the Feedback Loop from Hell; you say to yourself, "I feel like shit, but who gives a fuck?" And then, as if sprinkled by magic fuck-giving fairy dust, you stop hating yourself for feeling so bad.

George Orwell said that to see what's in front of one's nose requires a constant struggle. Well, the solution to our stress and anxiety is right there in

front of our noses, and we're too busy watching porn and advertisements for ab machines that don't work, wondering why we're not banging a hot blonde with a rocking six-pack, to notice.

We joke online about "first-world problems," but we really have become victims of our own success. Stress-related health issues, anxiety disorders, and cases of depression have skyrocketed over the past thirty years, despite the fact that everyone has a flat-screen TV and can have their groceries delivered. Our crisis is no longer material; it's existential, it's spiritual. We have so much fucking stuff and so many opportunities that we don't even know what to give a fuck about anymore.

Because there's an infinite amount of things we can now see or know, there are also an infinite number of ways we can discover that we don't measure up, that we're not good enough, that things aren't as great as they could be. And this rips us apart inside.

Because here's the thing that's wrong with all of the "How to Be Happy" shit that's been shared eight million times on Facebook in the past few years—here's what nobody realizes about all of this crap:

> **The desire for more positive experience is itself a negative experience. And, paradoxically, the acceptance of one's negative experience is itself a positive experience.**

This is a total mind-fuck. So I'll give you a minute to unpretzel your brain and maybe read that again: *Wanting positive experience is a negative experience; accepting negative experience is a positive experience.* It's what the philosopher Alan Watts used to refer to as "the backwards law"—the idea that the more you pursue feeling better all the time, the less satisfied you become, as pursuing something only reinforces the fact that you lack it in the first place. The more you desperately want to be rich, the more poor and unworthy you feel, regardless of how much money you actually make. The more you desperately want to be sexy and desired, the uglier you come to see yourself, regardless of your actual physical appearance. The more you desperately want to be happy and loved, the lonelier and more afraid you become, regardless of those who surround you. The more you want to be spiritually enlightened, the more self-centered and shallow you become in trying to get there.

It’s like this one time I tripped on acid and it felt like the more I walked toward a house, the farther away the house got from me. And yes, I just used my LSD hallucinations to make a philosophical point about happiness. No fucks given.

As the existential philosopher Albert Camus said (and I’m pretty sure he wasn’t on LSD at the time): “You will never be happy if you continue to search for what happiness consists of. You will never live if you are looking for the meaning of life.”

Or put more simply:

Don’t try.

Now, I know what you’re saying: “Mark, this is making my nipples all hard, but what about the Camaro I’ve been saving up for? What about the beach body I’ve been starving myself for? After all, I paid a lot of money for that ab machine! What about the big house on the lake I’ve been dreaming of? If I stop giving a fuck about those things—well, then I’ll never achieve *anything*. I don’t want that to happen, do I?”

So glad you asked.

Ever notice that sometimes when you care *less* about something, you do better at it? Notice how it’s often the person who is the least invested in the success of something that actually ends up achieving it? Notice how sometimes when you stop giving a fuck, everything seems to fall into place?

What’s with that?

What’s interesting about the backwards law is that it’s called “backwards” for a reason: not giving a fuck works in reverse. If pursuing the positive *is* a negative, then pursuing the negative generates the positive. The pain you pursue in the gym results in better all-around health and energy. The failures in business are what lead to a better understanding of what’s necessary to be successful. Being open with your insecurities paradoxically makes you more confident and charismatic around others. The pain of honest confrontation is what generates the greatest trust and respect in your relationships. Suffering through your fears and anxieties is what allows you to build courage and perseverance.

Seriously, I could keep going, but you get the point. *Everything worthwhile in life is won through surmounting the associated negative experience.* Any attempt to escape the negative, to avoid it or quash it or silence it, only backfires. The avoidance of suffering *is* a form of suffering.

The avoidance of struggle *is* a struggle. The denial of failure *is* a failure. Hiding what is shameful *is* itself a form of shame.

Pain is an inextricable thread in the fabric of life, and to tear it out is not only impossible, but destructive: attempting to tear it out unravels everything else with it. To try to avoid pain is to give too many fucks about pain. In contrast, if you're able to not give a fuck about the pain, you become unstoppable.

In my life, I have given a fuck about many things. I have also *not* given a fuck about many things. And like the road not taken, it was the fucks not given that made all the difference.

Chances are you know somebody in your life who, at one time or another, did not give a fuck and then went on to accomplish amazing feats. Perhaps there was a time in your own life when you simply did not give a fuck and excelled to some extraordinary height. For myself, quitting my day job in finance after only six weeks to start an Internet business ranks pretty high up there in my own "didn't give a fuck" hall of fame. Same with deciding to sell most of my possessions and move to South America. Fucks given? None. Just went and did it.

These moments of non-fuckery are the moments that most define our lives. The major switch in careers; the spontaneous choice to drop out of college and join a rock band; the decision to finally dump that deadbeat boyfriend whom you caught wearing your pantyhose a few too many times.

To not give a fuck is to stare down life's most terrifying and difficult challenges and still take action.

While not giving a fuck may seem simple on the surface, it's a whole new bag of burritos under the hood. I don't even know what that sentence means, but I don't give a fuck. A bag of burritos sounds awesome, so let's just go with it.

Most of us struggle throughout our lives by giving too many fucks in situations where fucks do not deserve to be given. We give too many fucks about the rude gas station attendant who gave us our change in nickels. We give too many fucks when a show we liked was canceled on TV. We give too many fucks when our coworkers don't bother asking us about our awesome weekend.

Meanwhile, our credit cards are maxed out, our dog hates us, and Junior is snorting meth in the bathroom, yet we're getting pissed off about nickels

and *Everybody Loves Raymond.*

Look, this is how it works. You're going to die one day. I know that's kind of obvious, but I just wanted to remind you in case you'd forgotten. You and everyone you know are going to be dead soon. And in the short amount of time between here and there, you have a limited amount of fucks to give. Very few, in fact. And if you go around giving a fuck about everything and everyone without conscious thought or choice—well, then you're going to get fucked.

There is a subtle art to not giving a fuck. And though the concept may sound ridiculous and I may sound like an asshole, what I'm talking about here is essentially learning how to focus and prioritize your thoughts effectively—how to pick and choose what matters to you and what does not matter to you based on finely honed personal values. This is incredibly difficult. It takes a lifetime of practice and discipline to achieve. And you will regularly fail. But it is perhaps the most worthy struggle one can undertake in one's life. It is perhaps the *only* struggle in one's life.

Because when you give too many fucks—when you give a fuck about everyone and everything—you will feel that you're perpetually entitled to be comfortable and happy at all times, that everything is supposed to be just exactly the fucking way *you* want it to be. This is a sickness. And it will eat you alive. You will see every adversity as an injustice, every challenge as a failure, every inconvenience as a personal slight, every disagreement as a betrayal. You will be confined to your own petty, skull-sized hell, burning with entitlement and bluster, running circles around your very own personal Feedback Loop from Hell, in constant motion yet arriving nowhere.

The Subtle Art of Not Giving a Fuck

When most people envision giving no fucks whatsoever, they imagine a kind of serene indifference to everything, a calm that weathers all storms. They imagine and aspire to be a person who is shaken by nothing and caves in to no one.

There's a name for a person who finds no emotion or meaning in anything: a psychopath. Why you would want to emulate a psychopath, I have no fucking clue.

So what *does* not giving a fuck mean? Let's look at three "subtleties" that

should help clarify the matter.

Subtlety #1: Not giving a fuck does not mean being indifferent; it means being comfortable with being different.

Let's be clear. There's absolutely nothing admirable or confident about indifference. People who are indifferent are lame and scared. They're couch potatoes and Internet trolls. In fact, indifferent people often attempt to be indifferent because in reality they give way too many fucks. They give a fuck about what everyone thinks of their hair, so they never bother washing or combing it. They give a fuck about what everyone thinks of their ideas, so they hide behind sarcasm and self-righteous snark. They're afraid to let anyone get close to them, so they imagine themselves as some special, unique snowflake who has problems that nobody else would ever understand.

Indifferent people are afraid of the world and the repercussions of their own choices. That's why they don't make any meaningful choices. They hide in a gray, emotionless pit of their own making, self-absorbed and self-pitying, perpetually distracting themselves from this unfortunate thing demanding their time and energy called life.

Because here's a sneaky truth about life. There's no such thing as not giving a fuck. *You must give a fuck about something.* It's part of our biology to always care about something and therefore to always give a fuck.

The question, then, is, *What* do we give a fuck about? What are we *choosing* to give a fuck about? And how can we not give a fuck about what ultimately does not matter?

My mother was recently screwed out of a large chunk of money by a close friend of hers. Had I been indifferent, I would have shrugged my shoulders, sipped my mocha, and downloaded another season of *The Wire.* Sorry, Mom.

But instead, I was indignant. I was pissed off. I said, "No, screw that, Mom. We're going to lawyer the fuck up and go after this asshole. Why? Because I don't give a fuck. I will ruin this guy's life if I have to."

This illustrates the first subtlety of not giving a fuck. When we say, "Damn, watch out, Mark Manson just don't give a fuck," we don't mean that Mark Manson doesn't care about *anything;* on the contrary, we mean that Mark Manson doesn't care about adversity in the face of his goals, he doesn't care about pissing some people off to do what he feels is right or important or

noble. We mean that Mark Manson is the type of guy who would write about himself in third person just because he thought it was the right thing to do. He just doesn't give a fuck.

This is what is so admirable. No, not me, dumbass—the overcoming adversity stuff, the willingness to be different, an outcast, a pariah, all for the sake of one's own values. The willingness to stare failure in the face and shove your middle finger back at it. The people who don't give a fuck about adversity or failure or embarrassing themselves or shitting the bed a few times. The people who just laugh and then do what they believe in anyway. Because they know it's right. They know it's more important than they are, more important than their own feelings and their own pride and their own ego. They say, "Fuck it," not to everything in life, but rather to everything *unimportant* in life. They reserve their fucks for what truly matters. Friends. Family. Purpose. Burritos. And an occasional lawsuit or two. And because of that, because they reserve their fucks for only the big things that matter, people give a fuck about them in return.

Because here's another sneaky little truth about life. You can't be an important and life-changing presence for some people without also being a joke and an embarrassment to others. You just can't. Because there's no such thing as a lack of adversity. It doesn't exist. The old saying goes that no matter where you go, there you are. Well, the same is true for adversity and failure. No matter where you go, there's a five-hundred-pound load of shit waiting for you. And that's perfectly fine. The point isn't to get away from the shit. The point is to find the shit you enjoy dealing with.

Subtlety #2: To not give a fuck about adversity, you must first give a fuck about something more important than adversity.

Imagine you're at a grocery store, and you watch an elderly lady scream at the cashier, berating him for not accepting her thirty-cent coupon. Why does this lady give a fuck? It's just thirty cents.

I'll tell you why: That lady probably doesn't have anything better to do with her days than to sit at home cutting out coupons. She's old and lonely. Her kids are dickheads and never visit. She hasn't had sex in over thirty years. She can't fart without extreme lower-back pain. Her pension is on its last legs, and she's probably going to die in a diaper thinking she's in Candy Land.

So she snips coupons. That's all she's got. It's her and her damn coupons. It's all she can give a fuck about because there *is* nothing else to give a fuck about. And so when that pimply-faced seventeen-year-old cashier refuses to accept one of them, when he defends his cash register's purity the way knights used to defend maidens' virginity, you can bet Granny is going to erupt. Eighty years of fucks will rain down all at once, like a fiery hailstorm of "Back in my day" and "People used to show more respect" stories.

The problem with people who hand out fucks like ice cream at a goddamn summer camp is that they don't have anything more fuck-worthy to dedicate their fucks to.

If you find yourself consistently giving too many fucks about trivial shit that bothers you—your ex-boyfriend's new Facebook picture, how quickly the batteries die in the TV remote, missing out on yet another two-for-one sale on hand sanitizer—chances are you don't have much going on in your life to give a legitimate fuck about. And that's your real problem. Not the hand sanitizer. Not the TV remote.

I once heard an artist say that when a person has no problems, the mind automatically finds a way to invent some. I think what most people—especially educated, pampered middle-class white people—consider "life problems" are really just side effects of not having anything more important to worry about.

It then follows that finding something important and meaningful in your life is perhaps the most productive use of your time and energy. Because if you don't find that meaningful something, your fucks will be given to meaningless and frivolous causes.

Subtlety #3: Whether you realize it or not, you are always choosing what to give a fuck about.

People aren't just born not giving a fuck. In fact, we're born giving way too many fucks. Ever watch a kid cry his eyes out because his hat is the wrong shade of blue? Exactly. Fuck that kid.

When we're young, everything is new and exciting, and everything seems to matter so much. Therefore, we give tons of fucks. We give a fuck about everything and everyone—about what people are saying about us, about whether that cute boy/girl called us back or not, about whether our socks match or not, or what color our birthday balloon is.

As we get older, with the benefit of experience (and having seen so much time slip by), we begin to notice that most of these sorts of things have little lasting impact on our lives. Those people whose opinions we cared about so much before are no longer present in our lives. Rejections that were painful in the moment have actually worked out for the best. We realize how little attention people pay to the superficial details about us, and we choose not to obsess so much over them.

Essentially, we become more selective about the fucks we're willing to give. This is something called maturity. It's nice; you should try it sometime. Maturity is what happens when one learns to only give a fuck about what's truly fuckworthy. As Bunk Moreland said to his partner Detective McNulty in *The Wire* (which, fuck you, I still downloaded): "That's what you get for giving a fuck when it wasn't your turn to give a fuck."

Then, as we grow older and enter middle age, something else begins to change. Our energy level drops. Our identity solidifies. We know who we are and we accept ourselves, including some of the parts we aren't thrilled about.

And, in a strange way, this is liberating. We no longer need to give a fuck about everything. Life is just what it is. We accept it, warts and all. We realize that we're never going to cure cancer or go to the moon or feel Jennifer Aniston's tits. And that's okay. Life goes on. We now reserve our ever-dwindling fucks for the most truly fuck-worthy parts of our lives: our families, our best friends, our golf swing. And, to our astonishment, *this is enough*. This simplification actually makes us really fucking happy on a consistent basis. And we start to think, Maybe that crazy alcoholic Bukowski was onto something. *Don't try.*

So Mark, What the Fuck Is the Point of This Book Anyway?

This book will help you think a little bit more clearly about what you're choosing to find important in life and what you're choosing to find unimportant.

I believe that today we're facing a psychological epidemic, one in which people no longer realize it's okay for things to suck sometimes. I know that sounds intellectually lazy on the surface, but I promise you, it's a life/death sort of issue.

Because when we believe that it's not okay for things to suck sometimes, then we unconsciously start blaming ourselves. We start to feel as though something is inherently wrong with us, which drives us to all sorts of overcompensation, like buying forty pairs of shoes or downing Xanax with a vodka chaser on a Tuesday night or shooting up a school bus full of kids.

This belief that it's not okay to be inadequate sometimes is the source of the growing Feedback Loop from Hell that is coming to dominate our culture.

The idea of not giving a fuck is a simple way of reorienting our expectations for life and choosing what is important and what is not. Developing this ability leads to something I like to think of as a kind of "practical enlightenment."

No, not that airy-fairy, eternal bliss, end-of-all-suffering, bullshitty kind of enlightenment. On the contrary, I see practical enlightenment as becoming comfortable with the idea that some suffering is always inevitable—that no matter what you do, life is comprised of failures, loss, regrets, and even death. Because once you become comfortable with all the shit that life throws at you (and it will throw a lot of shit, trust me), you become invincible in a sort of low-level spiritual way. After all, the only way to overcome pain is to first learn how to bear it.

This book doesn't give a fuck about alleviating your problems or your pain. And that is precisely why you will know it's being honest. This book is not some guide to greatness—it couldn't be, because greatness is merely an illusion in our minds, a made-up destination that we obligate ourselves to pursue, our own psychological Atlantis.

Instead, this book will turn your pain into a tool, your trauma into power, and your problems into slightly better problems. That is real progress. Think of it as a guide to suffering and how to do it better, more meaningfully, with more compassion and more humility. It's a book about moving lightly despite your heavy burdens, resting easier with your greatest fears, laughing at your tears as you cry them.

This book will not teach you how to gain or achieve, but rather how to lose and let go. It will teach you to take inventory of your life and scrub out all but the most important items. It will teach you to close your eyes and trust that you can fall backwards and still be okay. It will teach you to give fewer fucks. It will teach you to not try.

CHAPTER 2

Happiness Is a Problem

About twenty-five hundred years ago, in the Himalayan foothills of present-day Nepal, there lived in a great palace a king who was going to have a son. For this son the king had a particularly grand idea: he would make the child's life perfect. The child would never know a moment of suffering—every need, every desire, would be accounted for at all times.

The king built high walls around the palace that prevented the prince from knowing the outside world. He spoiled the child, lavishing him with food and gifts, surrounding him with servants who catered to his every whim. And just as planned, the child grew up ignorant of the routine cruelties of human existence.

All of the prince's childhood went on like this. But despite the endless luxury and opulence, the prince became kind of a pissed-off young man. Soon, every experience felt empty and valueless. The problem was that no matter what his father gave him, it never seemed enough, never *meant* anything.

So late one night, the prince snuck out of the palace to see what was beyond its walls. He had a servant drive him through the local village, and what he saw horrified him.

For the first time in his life, the prince saw human suffering. He saw sick people, old people, homeless people, people in pain, even people dying.

The prince returned to the palace and found himself in a sort of existential crisis. Not knowing how to process what he'd seen, he got all emo about everything and complained a lot. And, as is so typical of young men, the prince ended up blaming his father for the very things his father had tried to do for him. It was the riches, the prince thought, that had made him so miserable, that had made life seem so meaningless. He decided to run away.

But the prince was more like his father than he knew. He had grand ideas too. He wouldn't just run away; he would give up his royalty, his family, and all of his possessions and live in the streets, sleeping in dirt like an animal. There he would starve himself, torture himself, and beg for scraps of food from strangers for the rest of his life.

The next night, the prince snuck out of the palace again, this time never to return. For years he lived as a bum, a discarded and forgotten remnant of society, the dog shit caked to the bottom of the social totem pole. And as planned, the prince suffered greatly. He suffered through disease, hunger, pain, loneliness, and decay. He confronted the brink of death itself, often limited to eating a single nut each day.

A few years went by. Then a few more. And then . . . nothing happened. The prince began to notice that this life of suffering wasn't all that it was cracked up to be. It wasn't bringing him the insight he had desired. It wasn't revealing any deeper mystery of the world or its ultimate purpose.

In fact, the prince came to know what the rest of us have always kind of known: that suffering totally sucks. And it's not necessarily that meaningful either. As with being rich, there is no value in suffering when it's done without purpose. And soon the prince came to the conclusion that his grand idea, like his father's, was in fact a fucking terrible idea and he should probably go do something else instead.

Totally confused, the prince cleaned himself up and went and found a big tree near a river. He decided that he would sit under that tree and not get up until he came up with another grand idea.

As the legend goes, the confused prince sat under that tree for forty-nine days. We won't delve into the biological viability of sitting in the same spot for forty-nine days, but let's just say that in that time the prince came to a number of profound realizations.

One of those realizations was this: that life itself is a form of suffering. The rich suffer because of their riches. The poor suffer because of their poverty. People without a family suffer because they have no family. People with a family suffer because of their family. People who pursue worldly pleasures suffer because of their worldly pleasures. People who abstain from worldly pleasures suffer because of their abstention.

This isn't to say that all suffering is equal. Some suffering is certainly more painful than other suffering. But we all must suffer nonetheless.

Years later, the prince would build his own philosophy and share it with the world, and this would be its first and central tenet: that pain and loss are inevitable and we should let go of trying to resist them. The prince would later become known as the Buddha. And in case you haven't heard of him, he was kind of a big deal.

There is a premise that underlies a lot of our assumptions and beliefs. The premise is that happiness is algorithmic, that it can be worked for and earned and achieved as if it were getting accepted to law school or building a really complicated Lego set. If I achieve X, then I can be happy. If I look like Y, then I can be happy. If I can be with a person like Z, then I can be happy.

This premise, though, *is the problem.* Happiness is not a solvable equation. Dissatisfaction and unease are inherent parts of human nature and, as we'll see, necessary components to creating consistent happiness. The Buddha argued this from a theological and philosophical perspective. I will make the same argument in this chapter, but I will make it from a biological perspective, and with pandas.

The Misadventures of Disappointment Panda

If I could invent a superhero, I would invent one called Disappointment Panda. He'd wear a cheesy eye mask and a shirt (with a giant capital T on it) that was way too small for his big panda belly, and his superpower would be to tell people harsh truths about themselves that they needed to hear but didn't want to accept.

He would go door-to-door like a Bible salesman and ring doorbells and say things like, "Sure, making a lot of money makes you feel good, but it won't make your kids love you," or "If you have to ask yourself if you trust your wife, then you probably don't," or "What you consider 'friendship' is really just your constant attempts to impress people." Then he'd tell the homeowner to have a nice day and saunter on down to the next house.

It would be awesome. And sick. And sad. And uplifting. And necessary. After all, the greatest truths in life are usually the most unpleasant to hear.

Disappointment Panda would be the hero that none of us would want but all of us would need. He'd be the proverbial vegetables to our mental diet of junk food. He'd make our lives better despite making us feel worse. He'd make us stronger by tearing us down, brighten our future by showing us the

darkness. Listening to him would be like watching a movie where the hero dies in the end: you love it even more despite making you feel horrible, because it feels real.

So while we're here, allow me to put on my Disappointment Panda mask and drop another unpleasant truth on you:

We suffer for the simple reason that suffering is biologically useful. It is nature's preferred agent for inspiring change. We have evolved to always live with a certain degree of dissatisfaction and insecurity, because it's the mildly dissatisfied and insecure creature that's going to do the most work to innovate and survive. We are wired to become dissatisfied with whatever we have and satisfied by only what we do not have. This constant dissatisfaction has kept our species fighting and striving, building and conquering. So no—our own pain and misery aren't a bug of human evolution; they're a feature.

Pain, in all of its forms, is our body's most effective means of spurring action. Take something as simple as stubbing your toe. If you're like me, when you stub your toe you scream enough four-letter words to make Pope Francis cry. You also probably blame some poor inanimate object for your suffering. "Stupid table," you say. Or maybe you even go so far as to question your entire interior design philosophy based on your throbbing foot: "What kind of idiot puts a table there anyway? Seriously?"

But I digress. That horrible stubbed-toe-induced pain, the one you and I and the pope hate so much, exists for an important reason. Physical pain is a product of our nervous system, a feedback mechanism to give us a sense of our own physical proportions—where we can and cannot move and what we can and cannot touch. When we exceed those limits, our nervous system duly punishes us to make sure that we pay attention and never do it again.

And this pain, as much as we hate it, *is* useful. Pain is what teaches us what to pay attention to when we're young or careless. It helps show us what's good for us versus what's bad for us. It helps us understand and adhere to our own limitations. It teaches us to not fuck around near hot stoves or stick metal objects into electrical sockets. Therefore, it's not always beneficial to avoid pain and seek pleasure, since pain can, at times, be life-or-death important to our well-being.

But pain is not merely physical. As anyone who has had to sit through the first *Star Wars* prequel can tell you, we humans are capable of experiencing acute psychological pain as well. In fact, research has found that our brains

don’t register much difference between physical pain and psychological pain. So when I tell you that my first girlfriend cheating on me and leaving me felt like having an ice pick slowly inserted into the center of my heart, that’s because, well, it hurt so much I might as well have had an ice pick slowly inserted into the center of my heart.

Like physical pain, our psychological pain is an indication of something out of equilibrium, some limitation that has been exceeded. And like our physical pain, our psychological pain is not necessarily always bad or even undesirable. In some cases, experiencing emotional or psychological pain can be healthy or necessary. Just like stubbing our toe teaches us to walk into fewer tables, the emotional pain of rejection or failure teaches us how to avoid making the same mistakes in the future.

And this is what’s so dangerous about a society that coddles itself more and more from the inevitable discomforts of life: we lose the benefits of experiencing healthy doses of pain, a loss that disconnects us from the reality of the world around us.

You may salivate at the thought of a problem-free life full of everlasting happiness and eternal compassion, but back here on earth the problems never cease. Seriously, problems don’t end. Disappointment Panda just dropped by. We had margaritas, and he told me all about it: problems never fucking go away, he said—they just improve. Warren Buffett’s got money problems; the drunk hobo down at Kwik-E Mart’s got money problems. Buffett’s just got *better* money problems than the hobo. All of life is like this.

“Life is essentially an endless series of problems, Mark,” the panda told me. He sipped his drink and adjusted the little pink umbrella. “The solution to one problem is merely the creation of the next one.”

A moment passed, and then I wondered where the fuck the talking panda came from. And while we’re at it, who made these margaritas?

“Don’t hope for a life without problems,” the panda said. “There’s no such thing. Instead, hope for a life full of good problems.”

And with that, he set his glass down, adjusted his sombrero, and sauntered off into the sunset.

Happiness Comes from Solving Problems

Problems are a constant in life. When you solve your health problem by

buying a gym membership, you create new problems, like having to get up early to get to the gym on time, sweating like a meth-head for thirty minutes on an elliptical, and then getting showered and changed for work so you don't stink up the whole office. When you solve your problem of not spending enough time with your partner by designating Wednesday night "date night," you generate new problems, such as figuring out what to do every Wednesday that you both won't hate, making sure you have enough money for nice dinners, rediscovering the chemistry and spark you two feel you've lost, and unraveling the logistics of fucking in a small bathtub filled with too many bubbles.

Problems never stop; they merely get exchanged and/or upgraded.

Happiness comes from solving problems. The keyword here is "solving." If you're avoiding your problems or feel like you don't have any problems, then you're going to make yourself miserable. If you feel like you have problems that you can't solve, you will likewise make yourself miserable. The secret sauce is in the *solving* of the problems, not in not having problems in the first place.

To be happy we need something to solve. Happiness is therefore a form of action; it's an activity, not something that is passively bestowed upon you, not something that you magically discover in a top-ten article on the Huffington Post or from any specific guru or teacher. It doesn't magically appear when you finally make enough money to add on that extra room to the house. You don't find it waiting for you in a place, an idea, a job—or even a book, for that matter.

Happiness is a constant work-in-progress, because solving problems is a constant work-in-progress—the solutions to today's problems will lay the foundation for tomorrow's problems, and so on. True happiness occurs only when you find the problems you enjoy having and enjoy solving.

Sometimes those problems are simple: eating good food, traveling to some new place, winning at the new video game you just bought. Other times those problems are abstract and complicated: fixing your relationship with your mother, finding a career you can feel good about, developing better friendships.

Whatever your problems are, the concept is the same: solve problems; be happy. Unfortunately, for many people, life doesn't feel that simple. That's because they fuck things up in at least one of two ways:

1. *Denial.* Some people deny that their problems exist in the first place. And because they deny reality, they must constantly delude or distract themselves from reality. This may make them feel good in the short term, but it leads to a life of insecurity, neuroticism, and emotional repression.
2. *Victim Mentality.* Some choose to believe that there is nothing they can do to solve their problems, even when they in fact could. Victims seek to blame others for their problems or blame outside circumstances. This may make them feel better in the short term, but it leads to a life of anger, helplessness, and despair.

People deny and blame others for their problems for the simple reason that it's easy and feels good, while solving problems is hard and often feels bad. Forms of blame and denial give us a quick high. They are a way to temporarily escape our problems, and that escape can provide us a quick rush that makes us feel better.

Highs come in many forms. Whether it's a substance like alcohol, the moral righteousness that comes from blaming others, or the thrill of some new risky adventure, highs are shallow and unproductive ways to go about one's life. Much of the self-help world is predicated on peddling highs to people rather than solving legitimate problems. Many self-help gurus teach you new forms of denial and pump you up with exercises that feel good in the short term, while ignoring the underlying issue. Remember, nobody who is actually happy has to stand in front of a mirror and tell himself that he's happy.

Highs also generate addiction. The more you rely on them to feel better about your underlying problems, the more you will seek them out. In this sense, almost anything can become addictive, depending on the motivation behind using it. We all have our chosen methods to numb the pain of our problems, and in moderate doses there is nothing wrong with this. But the longer we avoid and the longer we numb, the more painful it will be when we finally do confront our issues.

Emotions Are Overrated

Emotions evolved for one specific purpose: to help us live and reproduce a little bit better. That's it. They're feedback mechanisms telling us that something is either likely right or likely wrong for us—nothing more, nothing

less.

Much as the pain of touching a hot stove teaches you not to touch it again, the sadness of being alone teaches you not to do the things that made you feel so alone again. Emotions are simply biological signals designed to nudge you in the direction of beneficial change.

Look, I don't mean to make light of your midlife crisis or the fact that your drunk dad stole your bike when you were eight years old and you still haven't gotten over it, but when it comes down to it, if you feel crappy it's because your brain is telling you that there's a problem that's unaddressed or unresolved. In other words, negative emotions are a *call to action*. When you feel them, it's because you're supposed to *do something*. Positive emotions, on the other hand, are rewards for taking the proper action. When you feel them, life seems simple and there is nothing else to do but enjoy it. Then, like everything else, the positive emotions go away, because more problems inevitably emerge.

Emotions are part of the equation of our lives, but not the *entire* equation. Just because something feels good doesn't mean it *is* good. Just because something feels bad doesn't mean it *is* bad. Emotions are merely signposts, *suggestions* that our neurobiology gives us, not commandments. Therefore, we shouldn't always trust our own emotions. In fact, I believe we should make a habit of questioning them.

Many people are taught to repress their emotions for various personal, social, or cultural reasons—particularly negative emotions. Sadly, to deny one's negative emotions is to deny many of the feedback mechanisms that help a person solve problems. As a result, many of these repressed individuals struggle to deal with problems throughout their lives. And if they can't solve problems, then they can't be happy. Remember, pain serves a purpose.

But then there are those people who overidentify with their emotions. Everything is justified for no other reason than they *felt* it. "Oh, I broke your windshield, but I was *really* mad; I couldn't help it." Or "I dropped out of school and moved to Alaska just because it *felt* right." Decision-making based on emotional intuition, without the aid of reason to keep it in line, pretty much always sucks. You know who bases their entire lives on their emotions? Three-year-old kids. And dogs. You know what else three-year-olds and dogs do? Shit on the carpet.

An obsession and overinvestment in emotion fails us for the simple reason that emotions never last. Whatever makes us happy today will no longer make us happy tomorrow, because our biology always needs something more. A fixation on happiness inevitably amounts to a never-ending pursuit of "something else"—a new house, a new relationship, another child, another pay raise. And despite all of our sweat and strain, we end up feeling eerily similar to how we started: inadequate.

Psychologists sometimes refer to this concept as the "hedonic treadmill": the idea that we're always working hard to change our life situation, but we actually never feel very different.

This is why our problems are recursive and unavoidable. The person you marry is the person you fight with. The house you buy is the house you repair. The dream job you take is the job you stress over. Everything comes with an inherent sacrifice—whatever makes us feel good will also inevitably make us feel bad. What we gain is also what we lose. What creates our positive experiences will define our negative experiences.

This is a difficult pill to swallow. We *like* the idea that there's some form of ultimate happiness that can be attained. We *like* the idea that we can alleviate all of our suffering permanently. We *like* the idea that we can feel fulfilled and satisfied with our lives forever.

But we cannot.

Choose Your Struggle

If I ask you, "What do you want out of life?" and you say something like, "I want to be happy and have a great family and a job I like," your response is so common and expected that it doesn't really mean anything.

Everybody enjoys what feels good. Everyone wants to live a carefree, happy, and easy life, to fall in love and have amazing sex and relationships, to look perfect and make money and be popular and well-respected and admired and a total baller to the point that people part like the Red Sea when they walk into the room.

Everybody wants that. It's easy to want that.

A more interesting question, a question that most people never consider, is, "What *pain* do you want in your life? What are you willing to struggle for?" Because that seems to be a greater determinant of how our lives turn

out.

For example, most people want to get the corner office and make a boatload of money—but not many people want to suffer through sixty-hour workweeks, long commutes, obnoxious paperwork, and arbitrary corporate hierarchies to escape the confines of an infinite cubicle hell.

Most people want to have great sex and an awesome relationship, but not everyone is willing to go through the tough conversations, the awkward silences, the hurt feelings, and the emotional psychodrama to get there. And so they settle. They settle and wonder, “What if?” for years and years, until the question morphs from “What if?” into “What else?” And when the lawyers go home and the alimony check is in the mail, they say, “What for?” If not for their lowered standards and expectations twenty years prior, then what for?

Because happiness requires struggle. It grows from problems. Joy doesn’t just sprout out of the ground like daisies and rainbows. Real, serious, lifelong fulfillment and meaning have to be earned through the choosing and managing of our struggles. Whether you suffer from anxiety or loneliness or obsessive-compulsive disorder or a dickhead boss who ruins half of your waking hours every day, the solution lies in the acceptance and active engagement of that negative experience—not the avoidance of it, not the salvation from it.

People want an amazing physique. But you don’t end up with one unless you legitimately appreciate the pain and physical stress that come with living inside a gym for hour upon hour, unless you love calculating and calibrating the food you eat, planning your life out in tiny plate–sized portions.

People want to start their own business. But you don’t end up a successful entrepreneur unless you find a way to appreciate the risk, the uncertainty, the repeated failures, the insane hours devoted to something that may earn absolutely nothing.

People want a partner, a spouse. But you don’t end up attracting someone amazing without appreciating the emotional turbulence that comes with weathering rejections, building the sexual tension that never gets released, and staring blankly at a phone that never rings. It’s part of the game of love. You can’t win if you don’t play.

What determines your success isn’t, “What do you want to enjoy?” The relevant question is, “What pain do you want to sustain?” The path to

happiness is a path full of shitheaps and shame.

You have to choose something. You can't have a pain-free life. It can't all be roses and unicorns all the time. Pleasure is the easy question. And pretty much all of us have a similar answer.

The more interesting question is the pain. What is the pain that you want to sustain? That's the hard question that matters, the question that will actually get you somewhere. It's the question that can change a perspective, a life. It's what makes me, me, and you, you. It's what defines us and separates us and ultimately brings us together.

For most of my adolescence and young adulthood, I fantasized about being a musician—a rock star, in particular. Any badass guitar song I heard, I would always close my eyes and envision myself up on stage, playing it to the screams of the crowd, people absolutely losing their minds to my sweet finger-noodling glory. This fantasy could keep me occupied for hours on end. For me, it was never a question of *if* I'd ever be up playing in front of screaming crowds, but *when*. I had it all planned out. I was simply biding my time before I could invest the proper amount of energy and effort into getting out there and making my mark. First I needed to finish school. Then I needed to make some extra money to buy gear. Then I needed to find enough free time to practice. Then I had to network and plan my first project. Then . . . and then nothing.

Despite my fantasizing about this for over half my lifetime, the reality never came to fruition. And it took me a long time and a lot of struggle to finally figure out why: *I didn't actually want it.*

I was in love with the result—the image of me on stage, people cheering, me rocking out, pouring my heart into what I was playing—but I wasn't in love with the process. And because of that, I failed at it. Repeatedly. Hell, I didn't even try hard enough to fail at it. I hardly tried at all. The daily drudgery of practicing, the logistics of finding a group and rehearsing, the pain of finding gigs and actually getting people to show up and give a shit, the broken strings, the blown tube amp, hauling forty pounds of gear to and from rehearsals with no car. It's a mountain of a dream and a mile-high climb to the top. And what it took me a long time to discover is that I didn't like to climb much. I just liked to imagine the summit.

The common cultural narratives would tell me that I somehow failed myself, that I'm a quitter or a loser, that I just didn't "have it," that I gave up

on my dream and that maybe I let myself succumb to the pressures of society.

But the truth is far less interesting than any of these explanations. The truth is, I thought I wanted something, but it turns out I didn't. End of story.

I wanted the reward and not the struggle. I wanted the result and not the process. I was in love with not the fight but only the victory.

And life doesn't work that way.

Who you are is defined by what you're willing to struggle for. People who *enjoy* the struggles of a gym are the ones who run triathlons and have chiseled abs and can bench-press a small house. People who *enjoy* long workweeks and the politics of the corporate ladder are the ones who fly to the top of it. People who *enjoy* the stresses and uncertainties of the starving artist lifestyle are ultimately the ones who live it and make it.

This is not about willpower or grit. This is not another admonishment of "no pain, no gain." This is the most simple and basic component of life: our struggles determine our successes. Our problems birth our happiness, along with slightly better, slightly upgraded problems.

See: it's a never-ending upward spiral. And if you think at any point you're allowed to stop climbing, I'm afraid you're missing the point. Because the joy is in the climb itself.

CHAPTER 3

You Are Not Special

I once knew a guy; we'll call him Jimmy.

Jimmy always had various business ventures going. On any given day, if you asked him what he was doing, he'd rattle off the name of some firm he was consulting with, or he'd describe a promising medical app he was looking for angel investors to fund, or he'd talk about some charity event he was supposed to be the keynote speaker for, or how he had an idea for a more efficient type of gas pump that was going to make him billions. The guy was always rolling, always on, and if you gave him an inch of conversational daylight, he'd pulverize you about how world-spinning his work was, how brilliant his latest ideas were, and he'd name-drop so much it felt like you were talking to a tabloid reporter.

Jimmy was all positivity all the time. Always pushing himself, always working an angle—a real go-getter, whatever the fuck that means.

The catch was that Jimmy was also a total deadbeat—all talk and no walk. Stoned a majority of the time, and spending as much money in bars and fine restaurants as he did on his "business ideas," Jimmy was a professional leech, living off his family's hard-won money by spinning them as well as everybody else in the city on false ideas of future tech glory. Sure, sometimes he'd put in some token effort, or pick up the phone and cold-call some bigwig and name-drop until he ran out of names, but nothing ever actually happened. None of these "ventures" ever blossomed into anything.

Yet the guy kept this up for years, living off girlfriends and more and more distant relatives well into his late twenties. And the most screwed-up part was that Jimmy *felt good about it.* He had a delusional level of self-confidence. People who laughed at him or hung up on him were, in his mind, "missing the opportunity of their lives." People who called him out on his

bogus business ideas were “too ignorant and inexperienced” to understand his genius. People who pointed out his deadbeat lifestyle were “jealous”; they were “haters” who envied his success.

Jimmy did make some money, although it was usually through the sketchiest of means, like selling another person’s business idea as his own, or finagling a loan from someone, or worse, talking someone into giving him equity in their start-up. He actually occasionally talked people into paying him to do some public speaking. (About what, I can’t even imagine.)

The worst part was that Jimmy *believed* his own bullshit. His delusion was so bulletproof, it was honestly hard to get mad at him, it was actually kind of amazing.

Sometime in the 1960s, developing “high self-esteem”—having positive thoughts and feelings about oneself—became all the rage in psychology. Research found that people who *thought* highly about themselves generally performed better and caused fewer problems. Many researchers and policymakers at the time came to believe that raising a population’s self-esteem could lead to some tangible social benefits: lower crime, better academic records, greater employment, lower budget deficits. As a result, beginning in the next decade, the 1970s, self-esteem practices began to be taught to parents, emphasized by therapists, politicians, and teachers, and instituted into educational policy. Grade inflation, for example, was implemented to make low-achieving kids feel better about their lack of achievement. Participation awards and bogus trophies were invented for any number of mundane and expected activities. Kids were given inane homework assignments, like writing down all the reasons why they thought they were special, or the five things they liked most about themselves. Pastors and ministers told their congregations that they were each uniquely special in God’s eyes, and were destined to excel and not be average. Business and motivational seminars cropped up chanting the same paradoxical mantra: every single one of us can be exceptional and massively successful.

But it’s a generation later and the data is in: we’re *not* all exceptional. It turns out that merely feeling good about yourself doesn’t really mean anything unless you have a *good reason* to feel good about yourself. It turns out that adversity and failure are actually useful and even necessary for developing strong-minded and successful adults. It turns out that teaching

people to believe they're exceptional and to feel good about themselves no matter what doesn't lead to a population full of Bill Gateses and Martin Luther Kings. It leads to a population full of Jimmys.

Jimmy, the delusional start-up founder. Jimmy, who smoked pot every day and had no real marketable skills other than talking himself up and believing it. Jimmy, the type of guy who yelled at his business partner for being "immature," and then maxed out the company credit card at Le Bernardin trying to impress some Russian model. Jimmy, who was quickly running out of aunts and uncles who could loan him more money.

Yes, that confident, high-self-esteem Jimmy. The Jimmy who spent so much time talking about how good he was that he forgot to, you know, actually do something.

The problem with the self-esteem movement is that it measured self-esteem by how positively people felt about themselves. But a true and accurate measurement of one's self-worth is how people feel about the *negative* aspects of themselves. If a person like Jimmy feels absolutely fucking great 99.9 percent of the time, despite his life falling apart around him, then how can that be a valid metric for a successful and happy life?

Jimmy is entitled. That is, he feels as though he deserves good things without actually earning them. He believes he should be able to be rich without actually working for it. He believes he should be liked and well-connected without actually helping anyone. He believes he should have an amazing lifestyle without actually sacrificing anything.

People like Jimmy become so fixated on feeling good about themselves that they manage to delude themselves into believing that they *are* accomplishing great things even when they're not. They believe they're the brilliant presenter on stage when actually they're making a fool of themselves. They believe they're the successful start-up founder when, in fact, they've never had a successful venture. They call themselves life coaches and charge money to help others, even though they're only twenty-five years old and haven't actually accomplished anything substantial in their lives.

Entitled people exude a delusional degree of self-confidence. This confidence can be alluring to others, at least for a little while. In some instances, the entitled person's delusional level of confidence can become contagious and help the people around the entitled person feel more confident

in themselves too. Despite all of Jimmy's shenanigans, I have to admit that it *was* fun hanging out with him sometimes. You felt indestructible around him.

But the problem with entitlement is that it makes people *need* to feel good about themselves all the time, even at the expense of those around them. And because entitled people always need to feel good about themselves, they end up spending most of their time thinking about themselves. After all, it takes a lot of energy and work to convince yourself that your shit doesn't stink, especially when you've actually been living in a toilet.

Once people have developed the thought pattern to constantly construe what happens around them as self-aggrandizing, it's extremely hard to break them out of it. Any attempt to reason with them is seen as simply another "threat" to their superiority by another person who "can't handle" how smart/talented/good-looking/successful they are.

Entitlement closes in upon itself in a kind of narcissistic bubble, distorting anything and everything in such a way as to reinforce itself. People who feel entitled view every occurrence in their life as either an affirmation of, or a threat to, their own greatness. If something good happens to them, it's because of some amazing feat they accomplished. If something bad happens to them, it's because somebody is jealous and trying to bring them down a notch. Entitlement is impervious. People who are entitled delude themselves into whatever feeds their sense of superiority. They keep their mental facade standing at all costs, even if it sometimes requires being physically or emotionally abusive to those around them.

But entitlement is a failed strategy. It's just another high. It's *not* happiness.

The true measurement of self-worth is not how a person feels about her *positive* experiences, but rather how she feels about her *negative* experiences. A person like Jimmy hides from his problems by making up imagined successes for himself at every turn. And because he can't face his problems, no matter how good he feels about himself, he is weak.

A person who actually has a high self-worth is able to look at the negative parts of his character frankly—"Yes, sometimes I'm irresponsible with money," "Yes, sometimes I exaggerate my own successes," "Yes, I rely too much on others to support me and should be more self-reliant"—and then acts to improve upon them. But entitled people, because they are incapable of acknowledging their own problems openly and honestly, are incapable of

improving their lives in any lasting or meaningful way. They are left chasing high after high and accumulate greater and greater levels of denial.

But eventually reality must hit, and the underlying problems will once again make themselves clear. It's just a question of when, and how painful it will be.

Things Fall Apart

I sat in my 9:00 A.M. biology class, arms cradling my head on my desk as I stared at the clock's second hand making laps, each tick syncopated with the teacher's dronings-on about chromosomes and mitosis. Like most thirteen-year-olds stuck in a stuffy, fluorescent classroom, I was bored.

A knock came on the door. Mr. Price, the school's assistant principal, stuck his head in. "Excuse me for interrupting. Mark, can you step outside with me for a moment? Oh, and bring your things with you."

Strange, I thought. Kids get sent to the principal, but the principal rarely gets sent to them. I gathered my things and stepped out.

The hallway was empty. Hundreds of beige lockers converged on the horizon. "Mark, can you take me to your locker, please?"

"Sure," I say, and slug myself down the hall, baggy jeans and moppy hair and oversized Pantera T-shirt and all.

We get to my locker. "Open it, please," Mr. Price says; so I do. He steps in front of me and gathers my coat, my gym bag, my backpack—all of the locker's contents, minus a few notebooks and pencils. He starts walking away. "Come with me, please," he says, without looking back. I start to get an uneasy feeling.

I follow him to his office, where he asks me to sit down. He closes the door and locks it. He goes over to the window and adjusts the blinds to block the view from outside. My palms begin to sweat. This is *not* a normal principal visit.

Mr. Price sits down and quietly rummages through my things, checking pockets, unzipping zippers, shaking out my gym clothes and placing them on the floor.

Without looking up at me, Mr. Price asks, "Do you know what I'm looking for, Mark?"

"No," I say.

“Drugs.”

The word shocks me into nervous attention.

“D-d-drugs?” I stammer. “What kind?”

He looks at me sternly. “I don’t know; what kind do you have?” He opens one of my binders and checks the small pockets meant for pens.

My sweat blossoms like a fungal growth. It spreads from my palms to my arms and now my neck. My temples pulsate as blood floods my brain and face. Like most thirteen-year-olds freshly accused of possessing narcotics and bringing them to school, I want to run away and hide.

“I don’t know what you’re talking about,” I protest, the words sounding far meeker than I’d like. I feel as if I should be sounding confident in myself right now. Or maybe not. Maybe I should be scared. Do liars sound more scared or confident? Because however they sound, I want to sound the opposite. Instead, my lack of confidence compounds, unconfidence about my sounding unconfident making me more unconfident. That fucking Feedback Loop from Hell.

“We’ll see about that,” he says, turning his attention to my backpack, which seemingly has one hundred pockets. Each is loaded with its own silly teen desiderata—colored pens, old notes passed in class, early-nineties CDs with cracked cases, dried-up markers, an old sketchpad with half its pages missing, dust and lint and crap accumulated during a maddeningly circuitous middle school existence.

My sweat must be pumping at the speed of light, because time extends itself and dilates such that what is mere seconds on that 9:00 A.M. second-period biology clock now feels like Paleolithic eons, and I’m growing up and dying every minute. Just me and Mr. Price and my bottomless backpack.

Somewhere around the Mesolithic Age, Mr. Price finishes searching the backpack. Having found nothing, he seems flustered. He turns the pack upside down and lets all of my crap crash onto his office floor. He’s now sweating as profusely as I am, except in place of my terror, there is his anger.

“No drugs today, eh?” He tries to sound casual.

“Nope.” So do I.

He spreads my stuff out, separating each item and coagulating them into little piles beside my gym gear. My coat and backpack now lie empty and lifeless on his lap. He sighs and stares at the wall. Like most thirteen-year-olds locked in an office with a man angrily throwing their shit all over the

floor, I want to cry.

Mr. Price scans the contents organized on the floor. Nothing illicit or illegal, no narcotics, not even anything against school policy. He sighs and then throws the coat and backpack on the floor too. He bends over and puts his elbows on his knees, making his face level with mine.

“Mark, I’m going to give you one last chance to be honest with me. If you are honest, this will turn out much better for you. If it turns out you’re lying, then it’s going to be much worse.”

As if on cue, I gulp.

“Now tell me the truth,” Mr. Price demands. “Did you bring drugs to school today?”

Fighting back tears, screams clawing at my throat, I stare my tormentor in the face and, in a pleading voice, dying to be relieved of its adolescent horrors, I say, “No, I don’t have any drugs. I have no idea what you’re talking about.”

“Okay,” he says, signaling surrender. “I guess you can collect your things and go.”

He takes one last, longing gaze at my deflated backpack, lying like a broken promise there on his office floor. He casually puts one foot down on the pack, stomping lightly, a last-ditch effort. I anxiously wait for him to get up and leave so I can get on with my life and forget this whole nightmare.

But his foot stops on something. “What is this?” he asks, tapping with his foot.

“What is what?” I say.

“There’s still something in here.” He picks up the bag and starts feeling around the bottom of it. For me the room gets fuzzy; everything goes wobbly.

When I was young, I was smart. I was friendly. But I was also a shithead. I mean that in the most loving way possible. I was a rebellious, lying little shithead. Angry and full of resentment. When I was twelve, I hacked my house’s security system with refrigerator magnets so I could sneak out undetected in the middle of the night. My friend and I would put his mom’s car in neutral and push it into the street so we could drive around without waking her up. I would write papers about abortion because I knew my English teacher was a hardcore conservative Christian. Another friend and I stole cigarettes from his mom and sold them to kids out behind the school.

And I also cut a secret compartment into the bottom of my backpack to

hide my marijuana.

That was the same hidden compartment Mr. Price found after stepping on the drugs I was hiding. I had been lying. And, as promised, Mr. Price didn't go easy on me. A few hours later, like most thirteen-year-olds handcuffed in the back of a police car, I thought my life was over.

And I was kind of right, in a way. My parents quarantined me at home. I was to have no friends for the foreseeable future. Having been expelled from school, I was to be homeschooled for the rest of the year. My mom made me get a haircut and threw out all of my Marilyn Manson and Metallica shirts (which, for an adolescent in 1998, was tantamount to being sentenced to death by lameness). My dad dragged me to his office with him in the mornings and made me file papers for hours on end. Once homeschooling was over, I was enrolled in a small, private Christian school, where—and this may not surprise you—I didn't exactly fit in.

And just when I had finally cleaned up my act and turned in my assignments and learned the value of good clerical responsibility, my parents decided to get divorced.

I tell you all of this only to point out that my adolescence sucked donkey balls. I lost all of my friends, my community, my legal rights, and my family within the span of about nine months. My therapist in my twenties would later call this "some real traumatic shit," and I would spend the next decade-and-change working on unraveling it and becoming less of a self-absorbed, entitled little prick.

The problem with my home life back then was not all of the horrible things that were said or done; rather, it was all of the horrible things that needed to be said and done but weren't. My family stonewalls the way Warren Buffett makes money or Jenna Jameson fucks: we're champions at it. The house could have been burning down around us and it would have been met with, "Oh no, everything's fine. A tad warm in here, perhaps—but really, everything's fine."

When my parents got divorced, there were no broken dishes, no slammed doors, no screaming arguments about who fucked whom. Once they had reassured my brother and me that it wasn't our fault, we had a Q&A session—yes, you read that right—about the logistics of the new living arrangements. Not a tear was shed. Not a voice was raised. The closest peek my brother and I got into our parents' unraveling emotional lives was

hearing, “Nobody cheated on anybody.” Oh, that’s nice. It was a tad warm in the room, but really, everything was fine.

My parents are good people. I don’t blame them for any of this (not anymore, at least). And I love them very much. They have their own stories and their own journeys and their own problems, just as all parents do. And just as all of *their* parents do, and so on. And like all parents, my parents, with the best of intentions, imparted some of their problems to me, as I probably will to my kids.

When “real traumatic shit” like this happens in our lives, we begin to unconsciously feel as though we have problems that we’re incapable of ever solving. And this assumed inability to solve our problems causes us to feel miserable and helpless.

But it also causes something else to happen. If we have problems that are unsolvable, our unconscious figures that we’re either uniquely special or uniquely defective in some way. That we’re somehow unlike everyone else and that the rules must be different for us.

Put simply: we become entitled.

The pain from my adolescence led me down a road of entitlement that lasted through much of my early adulthood. Whereas Jimmy’s entitlement played out in the business world, where he pretended to be a huge success, my entitlement played out in my relationships, particularly with women. My trauma had revolved around intimacy and acceptance, so I felt a constant need to overcompensate, to prove to myself that I was loved and accepted at all times. And as a result, I soon took to chasing women the same way a cocaine addict takes to a snowman made out of cocaine: I made sweet love to it, and then promptly suffocated myself in it.

I became a player—an immature, selfish, albeit sometimes charming player. And I strung up a long series of superficial and unhealthy relationships for the better part of a decade.

It wasn’t so much the sex I craved, although the sex was fun. It was the validation. I was wanted; I was loved; for the first time since I could remember, I was *worthy*. My craving for validation quickly fed into a mental habit of self-aggrandizing and overindulgence. I felt entitled to say or do whatever I wanted, to break people’s trust, to ignore people’s feelings, and then justify it later with shitty, half-assed apologies.

While this period certainly had its moments of fun and excitement, and I

met some wonderful women, my life was more or less a wreck the whole time. I was often unemployed, living on friends' couches or with my mom, drinking way more than I should have been, alienating a number of friends—and when I did meet a woman I really liked, my self-absorption quickly torpedoed everything.

The deeper the pain, the more helpless we feel against our problems, and the more entitlement we adopt to compensate for those problems. This entitlement plays out in one of two ways:

1. I'm awesome and the rest of you all suck, so I deserve special treatment.
2. I suck and the rest of you are all awesome, so I deserve special treatment.

Opposite mindset on the outside, but the same selfish creamy core in the middle. In fact, you will often see entitled people flip back and forth between the two. Either they're on top of the world or the world is on top of them, depending on the day of the week, or how well they're doing with their particular addiction at that moment.

Most people correctly identify a person like Jimmy as a raging narcissistic ass-hat. That's because he's pretty blatant in his delusionally high self-regard. What most people don't correctly identify as entitlement are those people who perpetually feel as though they're inferior and unworthy of the world.

Because construing everything in life so as to make yourself out to be constantly victimized requires just as much selfishness as the opposite. It takes just as much energy and delusional self-aggrandizement to maintain the belief that one has insurmountable problems as that one has no problems at all.

The truth is that there's no such thing as a personal problem. If you've got a problem, chances are millions of other people have had it in the past, have it now, and are going to have it in the future. Likely people you know too. That doesn't minimize the problem or mean that it shouldn't hurt. It doesn't mean you aren't legitimately a victim in some circumstances.

It just means that you're not special.

Often, it's this realization—that you and your problems are actually *not* privileged in their severity or pain—that is the first and most important step toward solving them.

But for some reason, it appears that more and more people, particularly young people, are forgetting this. Numerous professors and educators have noted a lack of emotional resilience and an excess of selfish demands in today's young people. It's not uncommon now for books to be removed from a class's curriculum for no other reason than that they made someone feel bad. Speakers and professors are shouted down and banned from campuses for infractions as simple as suggesting that maybe some Halloween costumes really aren't that offensive. School counselors note that more students than ever are exhibiting severe signs of emotional distress over what are otherwise run-of-the-mill daily college experiences, such as an argument with a roommate, or getting a low grade in a class.

It's strange that in an age when we are more connected than ever, entitlement seems to be at an all-time high. Something about recent technology seems to allow our insecurities to run amok like never before. The more freedom we're given to express ourselves, the more we want to be free of having to deal with anyone who may disagree with us or upset us. The more exposed we are to opposing viewpoints, the more we seem to get upset that those other viewpoints exist. The easier and more problem-free our lives become, the more we seem to feel entitled for them to get even better.

The benefits of the Internet and social media are unquestionably fantastic. In many ways, this is the best time in history to be alive. But perhaps these technologies are having some unintended social side effects. Perhaps these same technologies that have liberated and educated so many are simultaneously enabling people's sense of entitlement more than ever before.

The Tyranny of Exceptionalism

Most of us are pretty average at most things we do. Even if you're exceptional at one thing, chances are you're average or below average at most other things. That's just the nature of life. To become truly great at something, you have to dedicate shit-tons of time and energy to it. And because we all have limited time and energy, few of us ever become truly exceptional at more than one thing, if anything at all.

We can then say that it's a statistical improbability that any single person will be an extraordinary performer in all areas of life, or even in many areas of their life. Brilliant businesspeople are often fuckups in their personal lives.

Extraordinary athletes are often shallow and as dumb as a lobotomized rock. Many celebrities are probably just as clueless about life as the people who gawk at them and follow their every move.

We're all, for the most part, pretty average people. But it's the extremes that get all of the publicity. We kind of know this already, but we rarely think and/or talk about it, and we certainly never discuss why this could be a problem.

Having the Internet, Google, Facebook, YouTube, and access to five hundred–plus channels of television is amazing. But our attention is limited. There's no way we can process the tidal waves of information flowing past us constantly. Therefore, the only zeroes and ones that break through and catch our attention are the truly exceptional pieces of information—those in the 99.999th percentile.

All day, every day, we are flooded with the truly extraordinary. The best of the best. The worst of the worst. The greatest physical feats. The funniest jokes. The most upsetting news. The scariest threats. Nonstop.

Our lives today are filled with information from the extremes of the bell curve of human experience, because in the media business that's what gets eyeballs, and eyeballs bring dollars. That's the bottom line. Yet the vast majority of life resides in the humdrum middle. The vast majority of life is *un*extraordinary, indeed quite average.

This flood of extreme information has conditioned us to believe that exceptionalism is the new normal. And because we're all quite average most of the time, the deluge of exceptional information drives us to feel pretty damn insecure and desperate, because clearly we are somehow not good enough. So more and more we feel the need to compensate through entitlement and addiction. We cope the only way we know how: either through self-aggrandizing or through other-aggrandizing.

Some of us do this by cooking up get-rich-quick schemes. Others do it by taking off across the world to save starving babies in Africa. Others do it by excelling in school and winning every award. Others do it by shooting up a school. Others do it by trying to have sex with anything that talks and breathes.

This ties in to the growing culture of entitlement that I talked about earlier. Millennials often get blamed for this cultural shift, but that's likely because millennials are the most plugged-in and visible generation. In fact,

the tendency toward entitlement is apparent across all of society. And I believe it's linked to mass-media-driven exceptionalism.

The problem is that the pervasiveness of technology and mass marketing is screwing up a lot of people's expectations for themselves. The inundation of the exceptional makes people feel worse about themselves, makes them feel that they need to be more extreme, more radical, and more self-assured to get noticed or even matter.

When I was a young man, my insecurities around intimacy were exacerbated by all the ridiculous narratives of masculinity circulating throughout pop culture. And those same narratives are *still* circulating: to be a cool guy, you have to party like a rock star; to be respected, you have to be admired by women; sex is the most valuable thing a man can attain, and it's worth sacrificing anything (including your own dignity) to get it.

This constant stream of unrealistic media dogpiles onto our existing feelings of insecurity, by overexposing us to the unrealistic standards we fail to live up to. Not only do we feel subjected to unsolvable problems, but we feel like losers because a simple Google search shows us thousands of people without those same problems.

Technology has solved old economic problems by giving us new psychological problems. The Internet has not just open-sourced information; it has also open-sourced insecurity, self-doubt, and shame.

B-b-b-but, If I'm Not Going to Be Special or Extraordinary, What's the Point?

It has become an accepted part of our culture today to believe that we are *all* destined to do something truly extraordinary. Celebrities say it. Business tycoons say it. Politicians say it. Even Oprah says it (so it must be true). Each and every one of us can be extraordinary. We all *deserve* greatness.

The fact that this statement is inherently contradictory—after all, if *everyone* were extraordinary, then by definition *no one* would be extraordinary—is missed by most people. And instead of questioning what we actually deserve or don't deserve, we eat the message up and ask for more.

Being "average" has become the new standard of failure. The worst thing you can be is in the middle of the pack, the middle of the bell curve. When a

culture's standard of success is to "be extraordinary," it then becomes better to be at the extreme low end of the bell curve than to be in the middle, because at least there you're still special and deserve attention. Many people choose this strategy: to prove to everyone that they are the most miserable, or the most oppressed, or the most victimized.

A lot of people are afraid to accept mediocrity because they believe that if they accept it, they'll never achieve anything, never improve, and that their life won't matter.

This sort of thinking is dangerous. Once you accept the premise that a life is worthwhile only if it is truly notable and great, then you basically accept the fact that most of the human population (including yourself) sucks and is worthless. And this mindset can quickly turn dangerous, to both yourself and others.

The rare people who do become truly exceptional at something do so not because they believe they're exceptional. On the contrary, they become amazing because they're obsessed with improvement. And that obsession with improvement stems from an unerring belief that they are, in fact, not that great at all. It's *anti*-entitlement. People who become great at something become great because they understand that they're not already great—they are mediocre, they are average—and that they could be so much better.

All of this "every person can be extraordinary and achieve greatness" stuff is basically just jerking off your ego. It's a message that tastes good going down, but in reality is nothing more than empty calories that make you emotionally fat and bloated, the proverbial Big Mac for your heart and your brain.

The ticket to emotional health, like that to physical health, comes from eating your veggies—that is, accepting the bland and mundane truths of life: truths such as "Your actions actually don't matter *that much* in the grand scheme of things" and "The vast majority of your life will be boring and not noteworthy, and that's okay." This vegetable course will taste bad at first. Very bad. You will avoid accepting it.

But once ingested, your body will wake up feeling more potent and more alive. After all, that constant pressure to be something amazing, to be the next big thing, will be lifted off your back. The stress and anxiety of always feeling inadequate and constantly needing to prove yourself will dissipate. And the knowledge and acceptance of your own mundane existence will

actually free you to accomplish what you truly wish to accomplish, without judgment or lofty expectations.

You will have a growing appreciation for life's basic experiences: the pleasures of simple friendship, creating something, helping a person in need, reading a good book, laughing with someone you care about.

Sounds boring, doesn't it? That's because these things are ordinary. But maybe they're ordinary for a reason: because they are what *actually* matters.

CHAPTER 4

The Value of Suffering

In the closing months of 1944, after almost a decade of war, the tide was turning against Japan. Their economy was floundering, their military overstretched across half of Asia, and the territories they had won throughout the Pacific were now toppling like dominoes to U.S. forces. Defeat seemed inevitable.

On December 26, 1944, Second Lieutenant Hiroo Onoda of the Japanese Imperial Army was deployed to the small island of Lubang in the Philippines. His orders were to slow the United States' progress as much as possible, to stand and fight at all costs, and to never surrender. Both he and his commander knew it was essentially a suicide mission.

In February 1945, the Americans arrived on Lubang and took the island with overwhelming force. Within days, most of the Japanese soldiers had either surrendered or been killed, but Onoda and three of his men managed to hide in the jungle. From there, they began a guerrilla warfare campaign against the U.S. forces and the local population, attacking supply lines, shooting at stray soldiers, and interfering with the American forces in any way that they could.

That August, half a year later, the United States dropped atomic bombs on the cities of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Japan surrendered, and the deadliest war in human history came to its dramatic conclusion.

However, thousands of Japanese soldiers were still scattered among the Pacific isles, and most, like Onoda, were hiding in the jungle, unaware that the war was over. These holdouts continued to fight and pillage as they had before. This was a real problem for rebuilding eastern Asia after the war, and the governments agreed something must be done.

The U.S. military, in conjunction with the Japanese government, dropped

thousands of leaflets throughout the Pacific region, announcing that the war was over and it was time for everyone to go home. Onoda and his men, like many others, found and read these leaflets, but unlike most of the others, Onoda decided that they were fake, a trap set by the American forces to get the guerrilla fighters to show themselves. Onoda burned the leaflets, and he and his men stayed hidden and continued to fight.

Five years went by. The leaflets had stopped, and most of the American forces had long since gone home. The local population on Lubang attempted to return to their normal lives of farming and fishing. Yet there were Hiroo Onoda and his merry men, still shooting at the farmers, burning their crops, stealing their livestock, and murdering locals who wandered too far into the jungle. The Philippine government then took to drawing up new flyers and spreading them out across the jungle. Come out, they said. The war is over. You lost.

But these, too, were ignored.

In 1952, the Japanese government made one final effort to draw the last remaining soldiers out of hiding throughout the Pacific. This time, letters and pictures from the missing soldiers' families were air-dropped, along with a personal note from the emperor himself. Once again, Onoda refused to believe that the information was real. Once again, he believed the airdrop to be a trick by the Americans. Once again, he and his men stood and continued to fight.

Another few years went by and the Philippine locals, sick of being terrorized, finally armed themselves and began firing back. By 1959, one of Onoda's companions had surrendered, and another had been killed. Then, a decade later, Onoda's last companion, a man called Kozuka, was killed in a shootout with the local police while he was burning rice fields—*still* waging war against the local population a full quarter-century after the end of World War II!

Onoda, having now spent more than half of his life in the jungles of Lubang, was all alone.

In 1972, the news of Kozuka's death reached Japan and caused a stir. The Japanese people thought the last of the soldiers from the war had come home years earlier. The Japanese media began to wonder: if Kozuka had still been on Lubang until 1972, then perhaps Onoda himself, the last known Japanese holdout from World War II, might still be alive as well. That year, both the

Japanese and Philippine governments sent search parties to look for the enigmatic second lieutenant, now part myth, part hero, and part ghost.

They found nothing.

As the months progressed, the story of Lieutenant Onoda morphed into something of an urban legend in Japan—the war hero who sounded too insane to actually exist. Many romanticized him. Others criticized him. Others thought he was the stuff of fairy tale, invented by those who still wanted to believe in a Japan that had disappeared long ago.

It was around this time that a young man named Norio Suzuki first heard of Onoda. Suzuki was an adventurer, an explorer, and a bit of a hippie. Born after the war ended, he had dropped out of school and spent four years hitchhiking his way across Asia, the Middle East, and Africa, sleeping on park benches, in stranger's cars, in jail cells, and under the stars. He volunteered on farms for food, and donated blood to pay for places to stay. He was a free spirit, and perhaps a little bit nuts.

In 1972, Suzuki needed another adventure. He had returned to Japan after his travels and found the strict cultural norms and social hierarchy to be stifling. He hated school. He couldn't hold down a job. He wanted to be back on the road, back on his own again.

For Suzuki, the legend of Hiroo Onoda came as the answer to his problems. It was a new and worthy adventure for him to pursue. Suzuki believed that *he* would be the one who would find Onoda. Sure, search parties conducted by the Japanese, Philippine, and American governments had not been able to find Onoda; local police forces had been scavenging the jungle for almost thirty years with no luck; thousands of leaflets had met with no response—but fuck it, this deadbeat, college-dropout hippie was going to be the one to find him.

Unarmed and untrained for any sort of reconnaissance or tactical warfare, Suzuki traveled to Lubang and began wandering around the jungle all by himself. His strategy: scream Onoda's name really loudly and tell him that the emperor was worried about him.

He found Onoda in four days.

Suzuki stayed with Onoda in the jungle for some time. Onoda had been alone by that point for over a year, and once found by Suzuki he welcomed the companionship and was desperate to learn what had been happening in the outside world from a Japanese source he could trust. The two men

became sorta-kinda friends.

Suzuki asked Onoda why he had stayed and continued to fight. Onoda said it was simple: he had been given the order to "never surrender," so he stayed. For nearly thirty years he had simply been following an order. Onoda then asked Suzuki why a "hippie boy" like himself came looking for him. Suzuki said that he'd left Japan in search of three things: "Lieutenant Onoda, a panda bear, and the Abominable Snowman, in that order."

The two men had been brought together under the most curious of circumstances: two well-intentioned adventurers chasing false visions of glory, like a real-life Japanese Don Quixote and Sancho Panza, stuck together in the damp recesses of a Philippine jungle, both imagining themselves heroes, despite both being alone with nothing, doing nothing. Onoda had already by then given up most of his life to a phantom war. Suzuki would give his up too. Having already found Hiroo Onoda and the panda bear, he would die a few years later in the Himalayas, still in search of the Abominable Snowman.

Humans often choose to dedicate large portions of their lives to seemingly useless or destructive causes. On the surface, these causes make no sense. It's hard to imagine how Onoda could have been happy on that island for those thirty years—living off insects and rodents, sleeping in the dirt, murdering civilians decade after decade. Or why Suzuki trekked off to his own death, with no money, no companions, and no purpose other than to chase an imaginary Yeti.

Yet, later in his life, Onoda said he regretted nothing. He claimed that he was proud of his choices and his time on Lubang. He said that it had been an honor to devote a sizable portion of his life in service to a nonexistent empire. Suzuki, had he survived, likely would have said something similar: that he was doing exactly what he was meant to do, that he regretted nothing.

These men both chose how they wished to suffer. Hiroo Onoda chose to suffer for loyalty to a dead empire. Suzuki chose to suffer for adventure, no matter how ill-advised. To both men, their suffering *meant* something; it fulfilled some greater cause. And because it meant something, they were able to endure it, or perhaps even enjoy it.

If suffering is inevitable, if our problems in life are unavoidable, then the question we should be asking is not "How do I stop suffering?" but "*Why* am I suffering—for what purpose?"

Hiroo Onoda returned to Japan in 1974 and became a kind of celebrity in his home country. He was shuttled around from talk show to radio station; politicians clamored to shake his hand; he published a book and was even offered a large sum of money by the government.

But what he found when he returned to Japan horrified him: a consumerist, capitalist, superficial culture that had lost all of the traditions of honor and sacrifice upon which his generation had been raised.

Onoda tried to use his sudden celebrity to espouse the values of Old Japan, but he was tone-deaf to this new society. He was seen more as a showpiece than as a serious cultural thinker—a Japanese man who had emerged from a time capsule for all to marvel at, like a relic in a museum.

And in the irony of ironies, Onoda became far more depressed than he'd ever been in the jungle for all those years. At least in the jungle his life had stood for something; it had meant something. That had made his suffering endurable, indeed even a little bit desirable. But back in Japan, in what he considered to be a vacuous nation full of hippies and loose women in Western clothing, he was confronted with the unavoidable truth: that his fighting had meant nothing. The Japan he had lived and fought for no longer existed. And the weight of this realization pierced him in a way that no bullet ever had. Because his suffering had meant nothing, it suddenly became realized and true: thirty years wasted.

And so, in 1980, Onoda packed up and moved to Brazil, where he remained until he died.

The Self-Awareness Onion

Self-awareness is like an onion. There are multiple layers to it, and the more you peel them back, the more likely you're going to start crying at inappropriate times.

Let's say the first layer of the self-awareness onion is a simple understanding of one's emotions. "This is when I feel happy." "This makes me feel sad." "This gives me hope."

Unfortunately, there are many people who suck at even this most basic level of self-awareness. I know because I'm one of them. My wife and I sometimes have a fun back-and-forth that goes something like this:

HER. What's wrong?
ME. Nothing's wrong. Nothing at all.
HER. No, something's wrong. Tell me.
ME. I'm fine. Really.
HER. Are you sure? You look upset.
ME, *with nervous laughter*. Really? No, I'm okay, seriously.

[*Thirty minutes later . . .*]

ME. . . . And that's why I'm so fucking pissed off! He just acts as if I don't exist half the time.

We all have emotional blind spots. Often they have to do with the emotions that we were taught were inappropriate growing up. It takes years of practice and effort to get good at identifying blind spots in ourselves and then expressing the affected emotions appropriately. But this task is hugely important, and worth the effort.

The second layer of the self-awareness onion is an ability to ask *why* we feel certain emotions.

These *why* questions are difficult and often take months or even years to answer consistently and accurately. Most people need to go to some sort of therapist just to hear these questions asked for the first time. Such questions are important because they illuminate what we consider success or failure. Why do you feel angry? Is it because you failed to achieve some goal? Why do you feel lethargic and uninspired? Is it because you don't think you're good enough?

This layer of questioning helps us understand the root cause of the emotions that overwhelm us. Once we understand that root cause, we can ideally do something to change it.

But there's another, even deeper level of the self-awareness onion. And that one is full of fucking tears. The third level is our personal values: *Why* do I consider this to be success/failure? How am I choosing to measure myself? By what standard am I judging myself and everyone around me?

This level, which takes constant questioning and effort, is incredibly difficult to reach. But it's the most important, because our values determine the nature of our problems, and the nature of our problems determines the

quality of our lives.

Values underlie everything we are and do. If what we value is unhelpful, if what we consider success/failure is poorly chosen, then everything based upon those values—the thoughts, the emotions, the day-to-day feelings—will all be out of whack. Everything we think and feel about a situation ultimately comes back to how valuable we perceive it to be.

Most people are horrible at answering these *why* questions accurately, and this prevents them from achieving a deeper knowledge of their own values. Sure, they may *say* they value honesty and a true friend, but then they turn around and lie about you behind your back to make themselves feel better. People may perceive that they feel lonely. But when they ask themselves *why* they feel lonely, they tend to come up with a way to blame others—everyone else is mean, or no one is cool or smart enough to understand them—and thus they further avoid their problem instead of seeking to solve it.

For many people this passes as self-awareness. And yet, if they were able to go deeper and look at their underlying values, they would see that their original analysis was based on avoiding responsibility for their own problem, rather than accurately identifying the problem. They would see that their decisions were based on chasing highs, not generating true happiness.

Most self-help gurus ignore this deeper level of self-awareness as well. They take people who are miserable because they want to be rich, and then give them all sorts of advice on how to make more money, all the while ignoring important values-based questions: *Why* do they feel such a need to be rich in the first place? How are they choosing to measure success/failure for themselves? Is it not perhaps some particular value that's the root cause of their unhappiness, and not the fact that they don't drive a Bentley yet?

Much of the advice out there operates at a shallow level of simply trying to make people feel good in the short term, while the real long-term problems never get solved. People's perceptions and feelings may change, but the underlying values, and the metrics by which those values are assessed, stay the same. This is not real progress. This is just another way to achieve more highs.

Honest self-questioning is difficult. It requires asking yourself simple questions that are uncomfortable to answer. In fact, in my experience, the more uncomfortable the answer, the more likely it is to be true.

Take a moment and think of something that's really bugging you. Now

ask yourself *why* it bugs you. Chances are the answer will involve a failure of some sort. Then take that failure and ask why it seems "true" to you. What if that failure wasn't really a failure? What if you've been looking at it the wrong way?

A recent example from my own life:

"It bugs me that my brother doesn't return my texts or emails."
Why?
"Because it feels like he doesn't give a shit about me."
Why does this seem true?
"Because if he wanted to have a relationship with me, he would take ten seconds out of his day to interact with me."
Why does his lack of relationship with you feel like a failure?
"Because we're brothers; we're supposed to have a good relationship!"

Two things are operating here: a value that I hold dear, and a metric that I use to assess progress toward that value. My value: brothers are supposed to have a good relationship with one another. My metric: being in contact by phone or email—this is how I measure my success as a brother. By holding on to this metric, I make myself feel like a failure, which occasionally ruins my Saturday mornings.

We could dig even deeper, by repeating the process:

Why are brothers supposed to have a good relationship?
"Because they're family, and family are supposed to be close!"
Why does that seem true?
"Because your family is supposed to matter to you more than anyone else!"
Why does that seem true?
"Because being close with your family is 'normal' and 'healthy,' and I don't have that."

In this exchange I'm clear about my underlying value—having a good relationship with my brother—but I'm still struggling with my metric. I've given it another name, "closeness," but the metric hasn't really changed: I'm still judging myself as a brother based on frequency of contact—and

comparing myself, using that metric, against other people I know. Everyone else (or so it seems) has a close relationship with their family members, and I don't. So obviously there must be something wrong with me.

But what if I'm choosing a poor metric for myself and my life? What else could be true that I'm not considering? Well, perhaps I don't need to be *close* to my brother to have that good relationship that I *value*. Perhaps there just needs to be some mutual respect (which there is). Or maybe mutual trust is what to look for (and it's there). Perhaps *these* metrics would be better assessments of brotherhood than how many text messages he and I exchange.

This clearly makes sense; it feels true for me. But it still fucking hurts that my brother and I aren't close. And there's no positive way to spin it. There's no secret way to glorify myself through this knowledge. Sometimes brothers—even brothers who love each other—don't have close relationships, and that's fine. It is hard to accept at first, but that's fine. What is objectively true about your situation is not as important as how you come to see the situation, how you choose to measure it and value it. Problems may be inevitable, but the *meaning* of each problem is not. We get to control what our problems mean based on how we choose to think about them, the standard by which we choose to measure them.

Rock Star Problems

In 1983, a talented young guitarist was kicked out of his band in the worst possible way. The band had just been signed to a record deal, and they were about to record their first album. But a couple days before recording began, the band showed the guitarist the door—no warning, no discussion, no dramatic blowout; they literally woke him up one day by handing him a bus ticket home.

As he sat on the bus back to Los Angeles from New York, the guitarist kept asking himself: How did this happen? What did I do wrong? What will I do now? Record contracts didn't exactly fall out of the sky, especially for raucous, upstart metal bands. Had he missed his one and only shot?

But by the time the bus hit L.A., the guitarist had gotten over his self-pity and had vowed to start a new band. He decided that this new band would be so successful that his old band would forever regret their decision. He would become so famous that they would be subjected to decades of seeing him on

TV, hearing him on the radio, seeing posters of him in the streets and pictures of him in magazines. They'd be flipping burgers somewhere, loading vans from their shitty club gigs, fat and drunk with their ugly wives, and he'd be rocking out in front of stadium crowds live on television. He'd bathe in the tears of his betrayers, each tear wiped dry by a crisp, clean hundred-dollar bill.

And so the guitarist worked as if possessed by a musical demon. He spent months recruiting the best musicians he could find—far better musicians than his previous bandmates. He wrote dozens of songs and practiced religiously. His seething anger fueled his ambition; revenge became his muse. Within a couple years, his new band had signed a record deal of their own, and a year after that, their first record would go gold.

The guitarist's name was Dave Mustaine, and the new band he formed was the legendary heavy-metal band Megadeth. Megadeth would go on to sell over 25 million albums and tour the world many times over. Today, Mustaine is considered one of the most brilliant and influential musicians in the history of heavy-metal music.

Unfortunately, the band he was kicked out of was Metallica, which has sold over 180 million albums worldwide. Metallica is considered by many to be one of the greatest rock bands of all time.

And because of this, in a rare intimate interview in 2003, a tearful Mustaine admitted that he couldn't help but *still* consider himself a failure. Despite all that he had accomplished, in his mind he would always be the guy who got kicked out of Metallica.

We're apes. We think we're all sophisticated with our toaster ovens and designer footwear, but we're just a bunch of finely ornamented apes. And because we are apes, we instinctually measure ourselves against others and vie for status. The question is not *whether* we evaluate ourselves against others; rather, the question is *by what standard* do we measure ourselves?

Dave Mustaine, whether he realized it or not, chose to measure himself by whether he was more successful and popular than Metallica. The experience of getting thrown out of his former band was so painful for him that he adopted "success relative to Metallica" as the metric by which to measure himself and his music career.

Despite taking a horrible event in his life and making something positive out of it, as Mustaine did with Megadeth, his choice to hold on to Metallica's

success as his life-defining metric continued to hurt him decades later. Despite all the money and the fans and the accolades, he still considered himself a failure.

Now, you and I may look at Dave Mustaine's situation and laugh. Here's this guy with millions of dollars, hundreds of thousands of adoring fans, a career doing the thing he loves best, and *still* he's getting all weepy-eyed that his rock star buddies from twenty years ago are way more famous than he is.

This is because you and I have different values than Mustaine does, and we measure ourselves by different metrics. Our metrics are probably more like "I don't want to work a job for a boss I hate," or "I'd like to earn enough money to send my kid to a good school," or "I'd be happy to not wake up in a drainage ditch." And by these metrics, Mustaine is wildly, unimaginably successful. But by *his* metric, "Be more popular and successful than Metallica," he's a failure.

Our values determine the metrics by which we measure ourselves and everyone else. Onoda's value of loyalty to the Japanese empire is what sustained him on Lubang for almost thirty years. But this same value is also what made him miserable upon his return to Japan. Mustaine's metric of being better than Metallica likely helped him launch an incredibly successful music career. But that same metric later tortured him in spite of his success.

If you want to change how you see your problems, you have to change what you value and/or how you measure failure/success.

As an example, let's look at another musician who got kicked out of another band. His story eerily echoes that of Dave Mustaine, although it happened two decades earlier.

It was 1962 and there was a buzz around an up-and-coming band from Liverpool, England. This band had funny haircuts and an even funnier name, but their music was undeniably good, and the record industry was finally taking notice.

There was John, the lead singer and songwriter; Paul, the boyish-faced romantic bass player; George, the rebellious lead guitar player. And then there was the drummer.

He was considered the best-looking of the bunch—the girls all went wild for him, and it was his face that began to appear in the magazines first. He was the most professional member of the group too. He didn't do drugs. He had a steady girlfriend. There were even a few people in suits and ties who

thought *he* should be the face of the band, not John or Paul.

His name was Pete Best. And in 1962, after landing their first record contract, the other three members of the Beatles quietly got together and asked their manager, Brian Epstein, to fire him. Epstein agonized over the decision. He liked Pete, so he put it off, hoping the other three guys would change their minds.

Months later, a mere three days before the recording of the first record began, Epstein finally called Best to his office. There, the manager unceremoniously told him to piss off and find another band. He gave no reason, no explanation, no condolences—just told him that the other guys wanted him out of the group, so, uh, best of luck.

As a replacement, the band brought in some oddball named Ringo Starr. Ringo was older and had a big, funny nose. Ringo agreed to get the same ugly haircut as John, Paul, and George, and insisted on writing songs about octopuses and submarines. The other guys said, Sure, fuck it, why not?

Within six months of Best's firing, Beatlemania had erupted, making John, Paul, George, and ~~Pete~~ Ringo arguably four of the most famous faces on the entire planet.

Meanwhile, Best understandably fell into a deep depression and spent a lot of time doing what any Englishman will do if you give him a reason to: drink.

The rest of the sixties were not kind to Pete Best. By 1965, he had sued two of the Beatles for slander, and all of his other musical projects had failed horribly. In 1968, he attempted suicide, only to be talked out of it by his mother. His life was a wreck.

Best didn't have the same redemptive story Dave Mustaine did. He never became a global superstar or made millions of dollars. Yet, in many ways, Best ended up better off than Mustaine. In an interview in 1994, Best said, "I'm happier than I would have been with the Beatles."

What the hell?

Best explained that the circumstances of his getting kicked out of the Beatles ultimately led him to meet his wife. And then his marriage led him to having children. His values changed. He began to measure his life differently. Fame and glory would have been nice, sure—but he decided that what he already had was more important: a big and loving family, a stable marriage, a simple life. He even still got to play drums, touring Europe and recording

albums well into the 2000s. So what was really lost? Just a lot of attention and adulation, whereas what was gained meant so much more to him.

These stories suggest that some values and metrics are better than others. Some lead to good problems that are easily and regularly solved. Others lead to bad problems that are not easily and regularly solved.

Shitty Values

There are a handful of common values that create really poor problems for people—problems that can hardly be solved. So let's go over some of them quickly:

1. *Pleasure.* Pleasure is great, but it's a horrible value to prioritize your life around. Ask any drug addict how his pursuit of pleasure turned out. Ask an adulterer who shattered her family and lost her children whether pleasure ultimately made her happy. Ask a man who almost ate himself to death how pleasure helped him solve his problems.

   Pleasure is a false god. Research shows that people who focus their energy on superficial pleasures end up more anxious, more emotionally unstable, and more depressed. Pleasure is the most superficial form of life satisfaction and therefore the easiest to obtain and the easiest to lose.

   And yet, pleasure is what's marketed to us, twenty-four/seven. It's what we fixate on. It's what we use to numb and distract ourselves. But pleasure, while necessary in life (in certain doses), isn't, by itself, sufficient.

   Pleasure is not the cause of happiness; rather, it is the effect. If you get the other stuff right (the other values and metrics), then pleasure will naturally occur as a by-product.
2. *Material Success.* Many people measure their self-worth based on how much money they make or what kind of car they drive or whether their front lawn is greener and prettier than the next-door neighbor's.

   Research shows that once one is able to provide for basic physical needs (food, shelter, and so on), the correlation between happiness and worldly success quickly approaches zero. So if you're starving and living on the street in the middle of India, an extra ten

thousand dollars a year would affect your happiness a lot. But if you're sitting pretty in the middle class in a developed country, an extra ten thousand dollars per year won't affect anything much—meaning that you're killing yourself working overtime and weekends for basically nothing.

The other issue with overvaluing material success is the danger of prioritizing it over other values, such as honesty, nonviolence, and compassion. When people measure themselves not by their behavior, but by the status symbols they're able to collect, then not only are they shallow, but they're probably assholes as well.

3. *Always Being Right.*Our brains are inefficient machines. We consistently make poor assumptions, misjudge probabilities, misremember facts, give in to cognitive biases, and make decisions based on our emotional whims. As humans, we're wrong pretty much constantly, so if your metric for life success is to be right—well, you're going to have a difficult time rationalizing all of the bullshit to yourself.

   The fact is, people who base their self-worth on being right about everything prevent themselves from learning from their mistakes. They lack the ability to take on new perspectives and empathize with others. They close themselves off to new and important information.

   It's far more helpful to assume that you're ignorant and don't know a whole lot. This keeps you unattached to superstitious or poorly informed beliefs and promotes a constant state of learning and growth.

4. *Staying Positive.* Then there are those who measure their lives by the ability to be positive about, well, pretty much everything. Lost your job? Great! That's an opportunity to explore your passions. Husband cheated on you with your sister? Well, at least you're learning what you really mean to the people around you. Child dying of throat cancer? At least you don't have to pay for college anymore!

   While there is something to be said for "staying on the sunny side of life," the truth is, sometimes life sucks, and the healthiest thing you can do is admit it.

   Denying negative emotions leads to experiencing deeper and more prolonged negative emotions and to emotional dysfunction. Constant positivity is a form of avoidance, not a valid solution to life's problems—problems which, by the way, if you're choosing the right values and

metrics, should be invigorating you and motivating you.

It's simple, really: things go wrong, people upset us, accidents happen. These things make us feel like shit. And that's fine. Negative emotions are a necessary component of emotional health. To deny that negativity is to *perpetuate* problems rather than solve them.

The trick with negative emotions is to 1) express them in a socially acceptable and healthy manner and 2) express them in a way that aligns with your values. Simple example: A value of mine is nonviolence. Therefore, when I get mad at somebody, I express that anger, but I also make a point of not punching them in the face. Radical idea, I know. But the anger is not the problem. Anger is natural. Anger is a part of life. Anger is arguably quite healthy in many situations. (Remember, emotions are just feedback.)

See, it's the punching people in the face that's the problem. Not the anger. The anger is merely the messenger for my fist in your face. Don't blame the messenger. Blame my fist (or your face).

When we force ourselves to stay positive at all times, we deny the existence of our life's problems. And when we deny our problems, we rob ourselves of the chance to solve them and generate happiness. Problems add a sense of meaning and importance to our life. Thus to duck our problems is to lead a meaningless (even if supposedly pleasant) existence.

In the long run, completing a marathon makes us happier than eating a chocolate cake. Raising a child makes us happier than beating a video game. Starting a small business with friends while struggling to make ends meet makes us happier than buying a new computer. These activities are stressful, arduous, and often unpleasant. They also require withstanding problem after problem. Yet they are some of the most meaningful moments and joyous things we'll ever do. They involve pain, struggle, even anger and despair—yet once they're accomplished, we look back and get all misty-eyed telling our grandkids about them.

As Freud once said, "One day, in retrospect, the years of struggle will strike you as the most beautiful."

This is why these values—pleasure, material success, always being right, staying positive—are poor ideals for a person's life. Some of the greatest

moments of one's life are *not* pleasant, *not* successful, *not* known, and *not* positive.

The point is to nail down some good values and metrics, and pleasure and success will naturally emerge as a result. These things are side effects of good values. By themselves, they are empty highs.

Defining Good and Bad Values

Good values are 1) reality-based, 2) socially constructive, and 3) immediate and controllable.

Bad values are 1) superstitious, 2) socially destructive, and 3) not immediate or controllable.

Honesty is a good value because it's something you have complete control over, it reflects reality, and it benefits others (even if it's sometimes unpleasant). Popularity, on the other hand, is a bad value. If that's your value, and if your metric is being the most popular guy/girl at the dance party, much of what happens will be out of your control: you don't know who else will be at the event, and you probably won't know who half those people are. Second, the value/metric isn't based on reality: you may *feel* popular or unpopular, when in fact you have no fucking clue what anybody else really thinks about you. (Side Note: As a rule, people who are terrified of what others think about them are actually terrified of all the shitty things they think about themselves being reflected back at them.)

Some examples of good, healthy values: honesty, innovation, vulnerability, standing up for oneself, standing up for others, self-respect, curiosity, charity, humility, creativity.

Some examples of bad, unhealthy values: dominance through manipulation or violence, indiscriminate fucking, feeling good all the time, always being the center of attention, not being alone, being liked by everybody, being rich for the sake of being rich, sacrificing small animals to the pagan gods.

You'll notice that good, healthy values are achieved internally. Something like creativity or humility can be experienced right now. You simply have to orient your mind in a certain way to experience it. These values are immediate and controllable and engage you with the world as it is rather than how you wish it were.

Bad values are generally reliant on external events—flying in a private jet, being told you're right all the time, owning a house in the Bahamas, eating a cannoli while getting blown by three strippers. Bad values, while sometimes fun or pleasurable, lie outside of your control and often require socially destructive or superstitious means to achieve.

Values are about prioritization. *Everybody* would love a good cannoli or a house in the Bahamas. The question is your priorities. What are the values that you prioritize above everything else, and that therefore influence your decision-making more than anything else?

Hiroo Onoda's highest value was complete loyalty and service to the Japanese empire. This value, in case you couldn't tell from reading about him, stank worse than a rotten sushi roll. It created really shitty problems for Hiroo—namely, he got stuck on a remote island where he lived off bugs and worms for thirty years. Oh, and he felt compelled to murder innocent civilians too. So despite the fact that Hiroo saw himself as a success, and despite the fact he lived up to his metrics, I think we can all agree that his life really sucked—none of us would trade shoes with him given the opportunity, nor would we commend his actions.

Dave Mustaine achieved great fame and glory and felt like a failure anyway. This is because he'd adopted a crappy value based on some arbitrary comparison to the success of others. This value gave him awful problems such as, "I need to sell 150 million more records; *then* everything will be great," and "My next tour needs to be nothing but stadiums"—problems he thought he needed to solve in order to be happy. It's no surprise that he wasn't.

On the contrary, Pete Best pulled a switcheroo. Despite being depressed and distraught by getting kicked out of the Beatles, as he grew older he learned to reprioritize what he cared about and was able to measure his life in a new light. Because of this, Best grew into a happy and healthy old man, with an easy life and great family—things that, ironically, the four Beatles would spend decades struggling to achieve or maintain.

When we have poor values—that is, poor standards we set for ourselves and others—we are essentially giving fucks about the things that don't matter, things that in fact make our life worse. But when we choose better values, we are able to divert our fucks to something better—toward things that matter, things that improve the state of our well-being and that generate

happiness, pleasure, and success as side effects.

This, in a nutshell, is what “self-improvement” is really about: prioritizing better values, choosing better things to give a fuck about. Because when you give better fucks, you get better problems. And when you get better problems, you get a better life.

The rest of this book is dedicated to five counterintuitive values that I believe are the most beneficial values one can adopt. All follow the “backwards law” we talked about earlier, in that they’re “negative.” All require *confronting* deeper problems rather than avoiding them through highs. These five values are both unconventional and uncomfortable. But, to me, they are life-changing.

The first, which we’ll look at in the next chapter, is a radical form of responsibility: taking responsibility for everything that occurs in your life, regardless of who’s at fault. The second is uncertainty: the acknowledgement of your own ignorance and the cultivation of constant doubt in your own beliefs. The next is failure: the willingness to discover your own flaws and mistakes so that they may be improved upon. The fourth is rejection: the ability to both say and hear no, thus clearly defining what you will and will not accept in your life. The final value is the contemplation of one’s own mortality; this one is crucial, because paying vigilant attention to one’s own death is perhaps the only thing capable of helping us keep all our other values in proper perspective.

CHAPTER 5

You Are Always Choosing

Imagine that somebody puts a gun to your head and tells you that you have to run 26.2 miles in under five hours, or else he'll kill you and your entire family.

That would suck.

Now imagine that you bought nice shoes and running gear, trained religiously for months, and completed your first marathon with all of your closest family and friends cheering you on at the finish line.

That could potentially be one of the proudest moments of your life.

Exact same 26.2 miles. Exact same person running them. Exact same pain coursing through your exact same legs. But when you chose it freely and prepared for it, it was a glorious and important milestone in your life. When it was forced upon you against your will, it was one of the most terrifying and painful experiences of your life.

Often the only difference between a problem being painful or being powerful is a sense that we *chose* it, and that we are responsible for it.

If you're miserable in your current situation, chances are it's because you feel like some part of it is outside your control—that there's a problem you have no ability to solve, a problem that was somehow thrust upon you without your choosing.

When we feel that we're choosing our problems, we feel empowered. When we feel that our problems are being forced upon us against our will, we feel victimized and miserable.

The Choice

William James had problems. Really bad problems.

Although born into a wealthy and prominent family, from birth James

suffered life-threatening health issues: an eye problem that left him temporarily blinded as a child; a terrible stomach condition that caused excessive vomiting and forced him to adopt an obscure and highly sensitive diet; trouble with his hearing; back spasms so bad that for days at a time he often couldn't sit or stand upright.

Due to his health problems, James spent most of his time at home. He didn't have many friends, and he wasn't particularly good at school. Instead, he passed the days painting. That was the only thing he liked and the only thing he felt particularly good at.

Unfortunately, nobody else thought he was good at it. When he grew to adulthood, nobody bought his work. And as the years dragged on, his father (a wealthy businessman) began ridiculing him for his laziness and his lack of talent.

Meanwhile, his younger brother, Henry James, went on to become a world-renowned novelist; his sister, Alice James, made a good living as a writer as well. William was the family oddball, the black sheep.

In a desperate attempt to salvage the young man's future, James's father used his business connections to get him admitted into Harvard Medical School. It was his last chance, his father told him. If he screwed this up, there was no hope for him.

But James never felt at home or at peace at Harvard. Medicine never appealed to him. He spent the whole time feeling like a fake and a fraud. After all, if he couldn't overcome his own problems, how could he ever hope to have the energy to help others with theirs? After touring a psychiatric facility one day, James mused in his diary that he felt he had more in common with the patients than with the doctors.

A few years went by and, again to his father's disapproval, James dropped out of medical school. But rather than deal with the brunt of his father's wrath, he decided to get away: he signed up to join an anthropological expedition to the Amazon rain forest.

This was in the 1860s, so transcontinental travel was difficult and dangerous. If you ever played the computer game *Oregon Trail* when you were a kid, it was kind of like that, with the dysentery and drowning oxen and everything.

Anyway, James made it all the way to the Amazon, where the real adventure was to begin. Surprisingly, his fragile health held up that whole

way. But once he finally made it, on the first day of the expedition, he promptly contracted smallpox and nearly died in the jungle.

Then his back spasms returned, painful to the point of making James unable to walk. By this time, he was emaciated and starved from the smallpox, immobilized by his bad back, and left alone in the middle of South America (the rest of the expedition having gone on without him) with no clear way to get home—a journey that would take months and likely kill him anyway.

But somehow he eventually made it back to New England, where he was greeted by an (even more) disappointed father. By this point the young man wasn't so young anymore—nearly thirty years old, still unemployed, a failure at everything he had attempted, with a body that routinely betrayed him and wasn't likely to ever get better. Despite all the advantages and opportunities he'd been given in life, everything had fallen apart. The only constants in his life seemed to be suffering and disappointment. James fell into a deep depression and began making plans to take his own life.

But one night, while reading lectures by the philosopher Charles Peirce, James decided to conduct a little experiment. In his diary, he wrote that he would spend one year believing that he was 100 percent responsible for everything that occurred in his life, no matter what. During this period, he would do everything in his power to change his circumstances, no matter the likelihood of failure. If nothing improved in that year, then it would be apparent that he was truly powerless to the circumstances around him, and then he would take his own life.

The punch line? William James went on to become the father of American psychology. His work has been translated into a bazillion languages, and he's regarded as one of the most influential intellectuals/philosophers/psychologists of his generation. He would go on to teach at Harvard and would tour much of the United States and Europe giving lectures. He would marry and have five children (one of whom, Henry, would become a famous biographer and win a Pulitzer Prize). James would later refer to his little experiment as his "rebirth," and would credit it with *everything* that he later accomplished in his life.

There is a simple realization from which all personal improvement and growth emerges. This is the realization that we, individually, are responsible for everything in our lives, no matter the external circumstances.

We don't always control what happens to us. But we *always* control how we interpret what happens to us, as well as how we respond.

Whether we consciously recognize it or not, we are always responsible for our experiences. It's impossible not to be. Choosing to *not* consciously interpret events in our lives is still an interpretation of the events of our lives. Choosing to *not* respond to the events in our lives is still a response to the events in our lives. Even if you get run over by a clown car and pissed on by a busload of schoolchildren, it's still *your responsibility* to interpret the meaning of the event and choose a response.

Whether we like it or not, we are *always* taking an active role in what's occurring to and within us. We are always interpreting the meaning of every moment and every occurrence. We are always choosing the values by which we live and the metrics by which we measure everything that happens to us. Often the same event can be good or bad, depending on the metric we choose to use.

The point is, we are *always* choosing, whether we recognize it or not. Always.

It comes back to how, in reality, there is no such thing as not giving a single fuck. It's impossible. We must all give a fuck about something. To not give a fuck about *anything* is still to give a fuck about *something.*

The real question is, What are we choosing to give a fuck about? What values are we choosing to base our actions on? What metrics are we choosing to use to measure our life? And are those *good* choices—good values and good metrics?

The Responsibility/Fault Fallacy

Years ago, when I was much younger and stupider, I wrote a blog post, and at the end of it I said something like, "And as a great philosopher once said: 'With great power comes great responsibility.'" It sounded nice and authoritative. I couldn't remember who had said it, and my Google search had turned up nothing, but I stuck it in there anyway. It fit the post nicely.

About ten minutes later, the first comment came in: "I think the 'great philosopher' you're referring to is Uncle Ben from the movie *Spider-Man.*"

As another great philosopher once said, "Doh!"

"With great power comes great responsibility." The last words of Uncle

Ben before a thief whom Peter Parker let get away murders him on a sidewalk full of people for absolutely no explicable reason. *That* great philosopher.

Still, we've all heard the quote. It gets repeated a lot—usually ironically and after about seven beers. It's one of those perfect quotes that sound really intelligent, and yet it's basically just telling you what you already know, even if you've never quite thought about the matter before.

"With great power comes great responsibility."

It is true. But there's a better version of this quote, a version that actually *is* profound, and all you have to do is switch the nouns around: "With great responsibility comes great power."

The more we choose to accept responsibility in our lives, the more power we will exercise over our lives. Accepting responsibility for our problems is thus the first step to solving them.

I once knew a man who was convinced that the reason no woman would date him was because he was too short. He was educated, interesting, and good-looking—a good catch, in principle—but he was absolutely convinced that women found him too short to date.

And because *he* felt that he was too short, he didn't often go out and try to meet women. The few times he did, he would home in on the smallest behaviors from any woman he talked with that could possibly indicate he wasn't attractive enough for her and then convince himself that she didn't like him, even if she really did. As you can imagine, his dating life sucked.

What he didn't realize was that *he* had chosen the value that was hurting him: height. Women, he assumed, are attracted only to height. He was screwed, no matter what he did.

This choice of value was disempowering. It gave this man a really crappy problem: not being tall enough in a world meant (in his view) for tall people. There are far better values that he could have adopted in his dating life. "I want to date only women who like me for who I am" might have been a nice place to start—a metric that assesses the values of honesty and acceptance. But he did not choose these values. He likely wasn't even aware that he *was* choosing his value (or *could* do so). Even though he didn't realize it, he was responsible for his own problems.

Despite that responsibility, he went on complaining: "But I don't have a choice," he would tell the bartender. "There's nothing I can do! Women are

superficial and vain and will never like me!" Yes, it's *every single woman's fault* for not liking a self-pitying, shallow guy with shitty values. Obviously.

A lot of people hesitate to take responsibility for their problems because they believe that to be *responsible* for your problems is to also be *at fault* for your problems.

Responsibility and fault often appear together in our culture. But they're not the same thing. If I hit you with my car, I am both at fault and likely legally responsible to compensate you in some way. Even if hitting you with my car was an accident, I am still responsible. This is the way fault works in our society: if you fuck up, you're on the hook for making it right. And it should be that way.

But there are also problems that we *aren't* at fault for, yet we are still responsible for them.

For example, if you woke up one day and there was a newborn baby on your doorstep, it would not be your *fault* that the baby had been put there, but the baby would now be your *responsibility*. You would have to choose what to do. And whatever you ended up choosing (keeping it, getting rid of it, ignoring it, feeding it to a pit bull), there would be problems associated with your choice—and you would be responsible for those as well.

Judges don't get to choose their cases. When a case goes to court, the judge assigned to it did not commit the crime, was not a witness to the crime, and was not affected by the crime, but he or she is still *responsible* for the crime. The judge must then choose the consequences; he or she must identify the metric against which the crime will be measured and make sure that the chosen metric is carried out.

We are responsible for experiences that aren't our fault all the time. This is part of life.

Here's one way to think about the distinction between the two concepts. Fault is past tense. Responsibility is present tense. Fault results from choices that have already been made. Responsibility results from the choices you're currently making, every second of every day. You are choosing to read this. You are choosing to think about the concepts. You are choosing to accept or reject the concepts. It may be *my* fault that you think my ideas are lame, but *you* are responsible for coming to your own conclusions. It's not *your* fault that I chose to write this sentence, but you are still responsible for choosing to read it (or not).

There's a difference between blaming someone else for your situation and that person's actually being responsible for your situation. Nobody else is ever responsible for your situation but you. Many people may be to blame for your unhappiness, but nobody is ever *responsible* for your unhappiness but you. This is because *you* always get to choose how you see things, how you react to things, how you value things. You always get to choose the metric by which to measure your experiences.

My first girlfriend dumped me in spectacular fashion. She was cheating on me with her teacher. It was awesome. And by awesome, I mean it felt like getting punched in the stomach about 253 times. To make things worse, when I confronted her about it, she promptly left me for him. Three years together, down the toilet just like that.

I was miserable for months afterward. That was to be expected. But I also held her responsible for my misery. Which, take it from me, didn't get me very far. It just made the misery worse.

See, I couldn't control her. No matter how many times I called her, or screamed at her, or begged her to take me back, or made surprise visits to her place, or did other creepy and irrational ex-boyfriend things, I could never control her emotions or her actions. Ultimately, while she was *to blame* for how I felt, she was never *responsible* for how I felt. I was.

At some point, after enough tears and alcohol, my thinking began to shift and I began to understand that although she had done something horrible to me and she could be blamed for that, it was now my own responsibility to make myself happy again. She was never going to pop up and fix things for me. I had to fix them for myself.

When I took that approach, a few things happened. First, I began to improve myself. I started exercising and spending more time with my friends (whom I had been neglecting). I started deliberately meeting new people. I took a big study-abroad trip and did some volunteer work. And slowly, I started to feel better.

I still resented my ex for what she had done. But at least now I was taking responsibility for my own emotions. And by doing so, I was choosing better values—values aimed at taking care of myself, learning to feel better about myself, rather than aimed at getting her to fix what she'd broken.

(By the way, this whole "holding her responsible for my emotions" thing is probably part of why she left in the first place. More on that in a couple

chapters.)

Then, about a year later, something funny began to happen. As I looked back on our relationship, I started to notice problems I had never noticed before, problems that *I* was to blame for and that *I* could have done something to solve. I realized that it was likely that I hadn't been a great boyfriend, and that people don't just magically cheat on somebody they've been with unless they are unhappy for some reason.

I'm not saying that this excused what my ex did—not at all. But recognizing my mistakes helped me to realize that I perhaps hadn't been the innocent victim I'd believed myself to be. That I had a role to play in enabling the shitty relationship to continue for as long as it did. After all, people who date each other tend to have similar values. And if I dated someone with shitty values for that long, what did that say about me and my values? I learned the hard way that if the people in your relationships are selfish and doing hurtful things, it's likely you are too, you just don't realize it.

In hindsight, I was able to look back and see warning signs of my ex-girlfriend's character, signs I had chosen to ignore or brush off when I was with her. *That* was my fault. I could look back and see that I hadn't exactly been the Boyfriend of the Year to her either. In fact, I had often been cold and arrogant toward her; other times I took her for granted and blew her off and hurt her. *These* things were my fault too.

Did my mistakes justify her mistake? No. But still, I took on the responsibility of never making those same mistakes again, and never overlooking the same signs again, to help guarantee that I will never suffer the same consequences again. I took on the responsibility of striving to make my future relationships with women that much better. And I'm happy to report that I have. No more cheating girlfriends leaving me, no more 253 stomach punches. I took responsibility for my problems and improved upon them. I took responsibility for my role in that unhealthy relationship and improved upon it with later relationships.

And you know what? My ex leaving me, while one of the most painful experiences I've ever had, was also one of the most important and influential experiences of my life. I credit it with inspiring a significant amount of personal growth. I learned more from that single problem than dozens of my successes combined.

We all love to take responsibility for success and happiness. Hell, we often *fight over* who gets to be responsible for success and happiness. But taking responsibility for our problems is far more important, because that's where the real learning comes from. That's where the real-life improvement comes from. To simply blame others is only to hurt yourself.

Responding to Tragedy

But what about really awful events? A lot of people can get on board with taking responsibility for work-related problems and maybe watching too much TV when they should really be playing with their kids or being productive. But when it comes to horrible tragedies, they pull the emergency cord on the responsibility train and get off when it stops. Some things just feel too painful for them to own up to.

But think about it: the intensity of the event doesn't change the underlying truth. If you get robbed, say, you're obviously not at fault for being robbed. No one would ever choose to go through that. But as with the baby on your doorstep, you are immediately thrust into responsibility for a life-and-death situation. Do you fight back? Do you panic? Do you freeze up? Do you tell the police? Do you try to forget it and pretend it never happened? These are all choices and reactions you're responsible for making or rejecting. You didn't choose the robbery, but it's still your responsibility to manage the emotional and psychological (and legal) fallout of the experience.

In 2008, the Taliban took control of the Swat Valley, a remote part of northeastern Pakistan. They quickly implemented their Muslim extremist agenda. No television. No films. No women outside the house without a male escort. No girls attending school.

By 2009, an eleven-year-old Pakistani girl named Malala Yousafzai had begun to speak out against the school ban. She continued to attend her local school, risking both her and her father's lives; she also attended conferences in nearby cities. She wrote online, "How dare the Taliban take away my right for education?"

In 2012, at the age of fourteen, she was shot in the face as she rode the bus home from school one day. A masked Taliban soldier armed with a rifle boarded the bus and asked, "Who is Malala? Tell me, or I will shoot everyone here." Malala identified herself (an amazing choice in and of itself),

and the man shot her in the head in front of all the other passengers.

Malala went into a coma and almost died. The Taliban stated publicly that if she somehow survived the attempt, they would kill both her and her father.

Today, Malala is still alive. She still speaks out against violence and oppression toward women in Muslim countries, now as a best-selling author. In 2014 she received the Nobel Peace Prize for her efforts. It would seem that being shot in the face only gave her a larger audience and more courage than before. It would have been easy for her to lie down and say, “I can’t do anything,” or “I have no choice.” That, ironically, would still have been her choice. But she chose the opposite.

A few years ago, I had written about some of the ideas in this chapter on my blog, and a man left a comment. He said that I was shallow and superficial, adding that I had no real understanding of life’s problems or human responsibility. He said that his son had recently died in a car accident. He accused me of not knowing what true pain was and said that I was an asshole for suggesting that he himself was responsible for the pain he felt over his son’s death.

This man had obviously suffered pain much greater than most people ever have to confront in their lives. He didn’t choose for his son to die, nor was it his fault that his son died. The responsibility for coping with that loss was given to him even though it was clearly and understandably unwanted. But despite all that, he was still responsible for his own emotions, beliefs, and actions. How he reacted to his son’s death was his own choice. Pain of one sort or another is inevitable for all of us, but we get to choose what it means to and for us. Even in claiming that he had *no* choice in the matter and simply wanted his son back, he was making a choice—one of many ways he could have chosen to use that pain.

Of course, I didn’t say any of this to him. I was too busy being horrified and thinking that yes, perhaps I was way in over my head and had no idea what the fuck I was talking about. That’s a hazard that comes with my line of work. A problem that I chose. And a problem that I was responsible for dealing with.

At first, I felt awful. But then, after a few minutes, I began to get angry. His objections had little to do with what I was actually saying, I told myself. And what the hell? Just because I don’t have a kid who died doesn’t mean I haven’t experienced terrible pain myself.

But then I actually applied my own advice. I chose my problem. I could get mad at this man and argue with him, try to "outpain" him with my own pain, which would just make us both look stupid and insensitive. Or I could choose a better problem, working on practicing patience, understanding my readers better, and keeping that man in mind every time I wrote about pain and trauma from then on. And that's what I've tried to do.

I replied simply that I was sorry for his loss and left it at that. What else can you say?

Genetics and the Hand We're Dealt

In 2013, the BBC rounded up half a dozen teenagers with obsessive-compulsive disorder (OCD) and followed them as they attended intensive therapies to help them overcome their unwanted thoughts and repetitive behaviors.

There was Imogen, a seventeen-year-old girl who had a compulsive need to tap every surface she walked past; if she failed to do so, she was flooded with horrible thoughts of her family dying. There was Josh, who needed to do everything with both sides of his body—shake a person's hand with both his right and his left hand, eat his food with each hand, step through a doorway with both feet, and so on. If he didn't "equalize" his two sides, he suffered from severe panic attacks. And then there was Jack, a classic germophobe who refused to leave his house without wearing gloves, boiled all his water before drinking it, and refused to eat food not cleaned and prepared himself.

OCD is a terrible neurological and genetic disorder that cannot be cured. At best, it can be managed. And, as we'll see, managing the disorder comes down to managing one's values.

The first thing the psychiatrists on this project do is tell the kids that they're to accept the imperfections of their compulsive desires. What that means, as one example, is that when Imogen becomes flooded with horrible thoughts of her family dying, she is to accept that her family may actually die and that there's nothing she can do about it; simply put, she is told that what happens to her is not her fault. Josh is forced to accept that over the long term, "equalizing" all of his behaviors to make them symmetrical is actually destroying his life more than occasional panic attacks would. And Jack is reminded that no matter what he does, germs are always present and always

infecting him.

The goal is to get the kids to recognize that their values are not rational—that in fact their values are not even theirs, but rather are the disorder's—and that by fulfilling these irrational values they are actually harming their ability to function in life.

The next step is to encourage the kids to choose a value that is more important than their OCD value and to focus on that. For Josh, it's the possibility of not having to hide his disorder from his friends and family all the time, the prospect of having a normal, functioning social life. For Imogen, it's the idea of taking control over her own thoughts and feelings and being happy again. And for Jack, it's the ability to leave his house for long periods of time without suffering traumatic episodes.

With these new values held front and center in their minds, the teenagers set out on intensive desensitization exercises that force them to live out their new values. Panic attacks ensue; tears are shed; Jack punches an array of inanimate objects and then immediately washes his hands. But by the end of the documentary, major progress has been made. Imogen no longer needs to tap every surface she comes across. She says, "There are still monsters in the back of my mind, and there probably always will be, but they're getting quieter now." Josh is able to go periods of twenty-five to thirty minutes without "equalizing" his behaviors between both sides of his body. And Jack, who makes perhaps the most improvement, is actually able to go out to restaurants and drink out of bottles and glasses without washing them first. Jack sums up well what he learned: "I didn't choose this life; I didn't choose this horrible, horrible condition. But I get to choose how to live with it; I *have to* choose how to live with it."

A lot of people treat being born with a disadvantage, whether OCD or small stature or something very different, as though they were screwed out of something highly valuable. They feel that there's nothing they can do about it, so they avoid responsibility for their situation. They figure, "I didn't choose my crappy genetics, so it's not my fault if things go wrong."

And it's true, it's not their fault.

But it's still their responsibility.

Back in college, I had a bit of a delusional fantasy of becoming a professional poker player. I won money and everything, and it was fun, but after almost a year of serious play, I quit. The lifestyle of staying up all night