"Ryan Holiday is one of his generation's finest thinkers, and this book is his best yet." –**Steven Pressfield**, author of *The War of Art*

EGO IS THE ENEMY

RYAN HOLIDAY

Bestselling author of *The Obstacle Is the Way*

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- Group 4: The Classified

PART II. SUCCESS

PART III. FAILURE

- Humble in our aspirations
- Gracious in our success
- Resilient in our failures

This is not to say that you're not unique and that you don't have something amazing to contribute in your short time on this planet. This is not to say that there is not room to push past creative boundaries, to invent, to feel inspired, or to aim for truly ambitious change and innovation. On the contrary, in order to properly do these things and take these risks we need balance. As the Quaker William Penn observed, "Buildings that lie so exposed to the weather need a good foundation."

SO, WHAT NOW?

This book you hold in your hands is written around one optimistic assumption: Your ego is not some power you're forced to satiate at every turn. It can be managed. It can be directed.

In this book, we'll look at individuals like William Tecumseh Sherman, Katharine Graham, Jackie Robinson, Eleanor Roosevelt, Bill Walsh, Benjamin Franklin, Belisarius, Angela Merkel, and George C. Marshall. Could they have accomplished what they accomplished—saving faltering companies, advancing the art of war, integrating baseball, revolutionizing football offense, standing up to tyranny, bravely bearing misfortune—if ego had left them ungrounded and self-absorbed? It was their sense of reality and awareness—one that the author and strategist Robert Greene once said we must take to like a spider in its web—that was at the core of their great art, great writing, great design, great business, great marketing, and great leadership.

What we find when we study these individuals is that they were grounded, circumspect, and unflinchingly real. Not that any of them were wholly without ego. But they knew how to suppress it, channel it, subsume it when it counted. They were great yet humble.

Wait, but so-and-so had a huge ego and was successful. But what about Steve Jobs? What about Kanye West?

We can seek to rationalize the worst behavior by pointing to outliers. But no one is truly successful *because* they are delusional, self-absorbed, or

give him his word on that? With every other general asking for as much rank and power as possible, Lincoln happily agreed.

At this point in time, Sherman felt more comfortable as a number two. He felt he had an honest appreciation for his own abilities and that this role best suited him. Imagine that—an ambitious person turning down a chance to advance in responsibilities because he actually wanted to be ready for them. Is that really so crazy?

Not that Sherman was always the perfect model of restraint and order. Early in the war, tasked with defending the state of Kentucky with insufficient troops, his mania and tendency to doubt himself combined in a wicked way. Ranting and raving about being undersupplied, unable to get out of his own head, paranoid about enemy movements, he broke form and spoke injudiciously to several newspaper reporters. In the ensuing controversy, he was temporarily recalled from his command. It took weeks of rest for him to recover. It was one of a few nearly catastrophic moments in his otherwise steadily ascendant career.

It was after this brief stumble—having learned from it—that Sherman truly made his mark. For instance, during the siege at Fort Donelson, Sherman technically held a senior rank to General Ulysses S. Grant. While the rest of Lincoln's generals fought amongst themselves for personal power and recognition, Sherman waived his rank, choosing to cheerfully support and reinforce Grant instead of issuing orders. This is your show, Sherman told him in a note accompanying a shipment of supplies; call upon me for any assistance I can provide. Together, they won one of the Union's first victories in the war.

Building on his successes, Sherman began to advocate for his famous march to the sea—a strategically bold and audacious plan, not born out of some creative genius but rather relying on the exact topography he had scouted and studied as a young officer in what had then seemed like a pointless backwater outpost.

Where Sherman had once been cautious, he was now confident. But unlike so many others who possess great ambition, he *earned* this opinion. As he carved a path from Chattanooga to Atlanta and then Atlanta to the sea, he avoided traditional battle after traditional battle. Any student of military history can see how the exact same invasion, driven by ego instead of a strong sense of purpose, would have had a far different ending.

effecting change was through the collection of pupils he mentored, protected, taught, and inspired.

There are no military bases named after him. No battleships. He retired assuming that he'd be forgotten, and without much more than a small apartment and a pension to his name. He almost certainly had more enemies than friends.

This unusual path—What if it were deliberate? What if it made him *more* influential? How crazy would that be?

In fact, Boyd was simply living the exact lesson he tried to teach each promising young acolyte who came under his wing, who he sensed had the potential to be something—to be something different. The rising stars he taught probably have a lot in common with us.

The speech Boyd gave to a protégé in 1973 makes this clear. Sensing what he knew to be a critical inflection point in the life of the young officer, Boyd called him in for a meeting. Like many high achievers, the soldier was insecure and impressionable. He wanted to be promoted, and he wanted to do well. He was a leaf that could be blown in any direction and Boyd knew it. So he heard a speech that day that Boyd would give again and again, until it became a tradition and a rite of passage for a generation of transformative military leaders.

"Tiger, one day you will come to a fork in the road," Boyd said to him. "And you're going to have to make a decision about which direction you want to go." Using his hands to illustrate, Boyd marked off these two directions. "If you go that way you can be somebody. You will have to make compromises and you will have to turn your back on your friends. But you will be a member of the club and you will get promoted and you will get good assignments." Then Boyd paused, to make the alternative clear. "Or," he said, "you can go that way and you can do something—something for your country and for your Air Force and for yourself. If you decide you want to do something, you may not get promoted and you may not get the good assignments and you certainly will not be a favorite of your superiors. But you won't have to compromise yourself. You will be true to your friends and to yourself. And your work might make a difference. To be somebody or to do something. In life there is often a roll call. That's when you will have to make a decision."

DON'T BE PASSIONATE

> You seem to want that *vivida vis animi* which spurs and excites most young men to please, to shine, to excel. Without the desire and the pains necessary to be considerable, depend upon it, you never can be so.
>
> —LORD CHESTERFIELD

Passion—it's all about passion. Find your passion. Live passionately. Inspire the world with your passion.

People go to Burning Man to find passion, to be around passion, to rekindle their passion. Same goes for TED and the now enormous SXSW and a thousand other events, retreats, and summits, all fueled by what they claim to be life's most important force.

Here's what those same people haven't told you: your passion may be the very thing holding you back from power or influence or accomplishment. Because just as often, we *fail* with—no, *because of*—passion.

Early on in her ascendant political career, a visitor once spoke of Eleanor Roosevelt's "passionate interest" in a piece of social legislation. The person had meant it as a compliment. But Eleanor's response is illustrative. "Yes," she did support the cause, she said. "But I hardly think the word 'passionate' applies to me."

As a genteel, accomplished, and patient woman born while the embers of the quiet Victorian virtues were still warm, Roosevelt was above passion. She had purpose. She had direction. She wasn't driven by passion, but by *reason.*

George W. Bush, Dick Cheney, and Donald Rumsfeld, on the other hand, were passionate about Iraq. Christopher McCandless was bursting with passion as he headed "into the wild." So was Robert Falcon Scott as he set

or support. You may even find that there's no reason to ever stop doing it, even once you've graduated to heading your own projects. Let it become natural and permanent; let others apply it to you while you're too busy applying it to those above you.

Because if you pick up this mantle once, you'll see what most people's egos prevent them from appreciating: the person who clears the path ultimately controls its direction, just as the canvas shapes the painting.

What successful people do is curb such flights of fancy. They ignore the temptations that might make them feel important or skew their perspective. General George C. Marshall—essentially the opposite of McClellan even though they briefly held the same position a few generations apart—refused to keep a diary during World War II despite the requests of historians and friends. He worried that it would turn his quiet, reflective time into a sort of performance and self-deception. That he might second-guess difficult decisions out of concern for his reputation and future readers and warp his thinking based on how they would look.

All of us are susceptible to these obsessions of the mind—whether we run a technology startup or are working our way up the ranks of the corporate hierarchy or have fallen madly in love. The more creative we are, the easier it is to lose the thread that guides us.

Our imagination—in many senses an asset—is dangerous when it runs wild. We have to rein our perceptions in. Otherwise, lost in the excitement, how can we accurately predict the future or interpret events? How can we stay hungry and aware? How can we appreciate the present moment? How can we be creative within the realm of practicality?

Living clearly and presently takes courage. Don't live in the haze of the abstract, live with the tangible and real, even if—especially if—it's uncomfortable. Be part of what's going on around you. Feast on it, adjust for it.

There's no one to perform for. There is just work to be done and lessons to be learned, in all that is around us.

FOR EVERYTHING THAT COMES NEXT, EGO IS THE ENEMY . . .

> ’Tis a common proof,
> That lowliness is young ambition’s ladder.
>
> —SHAKESPEARE

We know where we want to end up: success. We want to matter. Wealth and recognition and reputation are nice too. We want it all.

The problem is that we’re not sure that humility can get us there. We are petrified, as the Reverend Dr. Sam Wells put it, that if we are humble, we will end up “subjugated, trodden on, embarrassed and irrelevant.”

Midway through his career, if you’d asked our model Sherman how he felt, he probably would have described himself in almost exactly those terms. He had not made much money. He had won no great battles. He had not seen his name in lights or headlines. He might have, at that moment, before the Civil War, begun to question the path he’d chosen, and whether those who follow it finished last.

This is the thinking that creates the Faustian bargain that turns most clean ambition into shameless addiction. In the early stages, ego can be temporarily adaptive. Craziness can pass for audaciousness. Delusions can pass for confidence, ignorance for courage. But it’s just kicking the costs down the road.

Because no one ever said, reflecting on the whole of someone’s life, “Man, that monstrous ego sure was worth it.”

The internal debate about confidence calls to mind a well-known concept from the radio pioneer Ira Glass, which could be called the Taste/Talent Gap.

It would make sense to stop here to avoid belaboring the issue—but that would risk skipping Hughes's egregious tax fraud; the plane crashes and fatal car accidents; the millions he wasted on private investigators, lawyers, contracts for starlets he refused to let act, property he never lived in; the fact that the only thing that got him to behave responsibly was the threat of public exposure; the paranoia, racism, and bullying; the failed marriages; the drug addiction; and dozens of other ventures and businesses he mismanaged.

"That we have made a hero out of Howard Hughes," a young Joan Didion wrote, "tells us something interesting about ourselves." She's absolutely right. For Howard Hughes, despite his reputation, was quite possibly one of the worst businessmen of the twentieth century. Usually a bad businessman fails and ceases to be in business anymore, making it hard to see what truly caused his failures. But thanks to the steady chain of profits from his father's company, which he found too boring to interfere with, Hughes was able to stay afloat, allowing us to see the damage that his ego repeatedly wrought—to himself as a person, to the people around him, to what he wanted to accomplish.

There is a scene from Howard's slow descent into madness that bears illustrating. His biographers have him sitting naked in his favorite white chair, unwashed, unkempt, working around the clock to battle lawyers, investigations, investors, in an attempt to save his empire and to hide his shameful secrets. One minute he would dictate some irrational multipage memo about Kleenex, food preparation, or how employees should not speak to him directly, and then he would turn around and seize upon a genuinely brilliant strategy to outrun his creditors and enemies. It was as if, they observed, his mind and business were split in two parts. It was as if, they wrote, "IBM had deliberately established a pair of subsidiaries, one to produce computers and profits, another to manufacture Edsels and losses." If someone was looking for a flesh-and-blood metaphor for ego and destruction, it would be hard to do better than this image of a man working furiously with one hand toward a goal and with the other working equally hard to undermine it.

Howard Hughes, like all of us, was not completely crazy or completely sane. His ego, fueled and exacerbated by physical injuries (mostly from plane and car crashes for which he was at fault) and various addictions, led

what they're doing in the market are rarely to be trusted. Jeff Bezos, the founder of Amazon, has talked about this temptation. He reminds himself that there was "no aha moment" for his billion-dollar behemoth, no matter what he might read in his own press clippings. The founding of a company, making money in the market, or the formation of an idea is messy. Reducing it to a narrative retroactively creates a clarity that never was and never will be there.

When we are aspiring we must resist the impulse to reverse engineer success from other people's stories. When we achieve our own, we must resist the desire to pretend that everything unfolded exactly as we'd planned. There was no grand narrative. You should remember—you were there when it happened.

A few years ago, one of the founders of Google gave a talk in which he said that the way he judges prospective companies and entrepreneurs is by asking them "if they're going to change the world." Which is fine, except that's not how Google started. (Larry Page and Sergey Brin were two Stanford PhDs working on their dissertations.) It's not how YouTube started. (Its founders weren't trying to reinvent TV; they were trying to share funny video clips.) It's not how most true wealth was created, in fact.

Investor Paul Graham (who invested in Airbnb, reddit, Dropbox, and others), working in the same city as Walsh a few decades later, explicitly warns startups against having bold, sweeping visions early on. Of course, as a capitalist, he wants to fund companies that massively disrupt industries and change the world—that's where the money is. He wants them to have "frighteningly ambitious" ideas, but explains, "The way to do really big things seems to be to start with deceptively small things." He's saying you don't make a frontal attack out of ego; instead, you start with a small bet and iteratively scale your ambitions as you go. His other famous piece of advice, "Keep your identity small," fits well here. Make it about the work and the principles behind it—not about a glorious vision that makes a good headline.

Napoleon had the words "To Destiny!" engraved on the wedding ring he gave his wife. Destiny was what he'd always believed in, it was how he justified his boldest, most ambitious ideas. It was also why he overreached time and time again, until his real destiny was divorce, exile, defeat, and infamy. A great destiny, Seneca reminds us, is great slavery.

MANAGING YOURSELF

It is not enough to have great qualities; we should also have the management of them.

—LA ROCHEFOUCAULD

In 1953, Dwight D. Eisenhower returned from his inaugural parade and entered the White House for the first time as president late in the evening. As he walked into the Executive Mansion, his chief usher handed Eisenhower two letters marked "Confidential and Secret" that had been sent to him earlier in the day. Eisenhower's reaction was swift: "Never bring me a sealed envelope," he said firmly. "That's what I have a staff for."

How snobbish, right? Had the office really gone to his head already?

Not at all. Eisenhower recognized the seemingly insignificant event for what it was: a symptom of a disorganized, dysfunctional organization. Not everything needed to run through him. Who was to say that the envelope was even important? Why hadn't anyone screened it?

As president, his first priority in office was organizing the executive branch into a smooth, functioning, and order-driven unit, just like his military units had been—not because he didn't want to work himself, but because everyone had a job and he trusted and empowered them to do it. As his chief of staff later put it, "The president does the most important things. I do the *next* most important things."

The public image of Eisenhower is of the man playing golf. In reality, he was not someone who ever slacked off, but the leisure time he did have was available because he ran a tight ship. He knew that urgent and important were not synonyms. His job was to set the priorities, to think big picture, and then trust the people beneath him to do the jobs they were hired for.

Most of us are not *the* president, or even president of a *company*, but in moving up the ladder in life, the system and work habits that got us where

In this moment, he was experiencing what the Stoics would call *sympatheia*—a connectedness with the cosmos.The French philosopher Pierre Hadot has referred to it as the "oceanic feeling." A sense of belonging to something larger, of realizing that "human things are an infinitesimal point in the immensity." It is in these moments that we're not only free but drawn toward important questions: *Who am I? What am I doing? What is my role in this world?*

Nothing draws us away from those questions like material success—when we are always busy, stressed, put upon, distracted, reported to, relied on, apart from. When we're wealthy and told that we're important or powerful. Ego tells us that meaning comes from activity, that being the center of attention is the only way to matter.

When we lack a connection to anything larger or bigger than us, it's like a piece of our soul is gone. Like we've detached ourselves from the traditions we hail from, whatever that happens to be (a craft, a sport, a brotherhood or sisterhood, a family). Ego blocks us from the beauty and history in the world. It stands in the way.

No wonder we find success empty. No wonder we're exhausted. No wonder it feels like we're on a treadmill. No wonder we lose touch with the energy that once fueled us.

Here's an exercise: walk onto ancient battlefield or a place of historical significance. Look at the statues and you can't help but see how similar the people look, how little has changed since then—since before, and how it will be forever after. Here a great man once stood. Here another brave woman died. Here a cruel rich man lived, in this palatial home . . . It's the sense that others have been here before you, generations of them, in fact.

In those moments, we have a sense of the immensity of the world. Ego is impossible, because we realize, if only fleetingly, what Emerson meant when he said that "Every man is a quotation from all his ancestors." They are part of us, we are part of a tradition. Embrace the power of this position and learn from it. It is an exhilarating feeling to grasp this, like the one that Muir felt in Alaska. Yes, we are small. We are also a piece of this great universe and a process.

The astrophysicist Neil deGrasse Tyson has described this duality well—it's possible to bask in both your relevance and irrelevance to the cosmos. As he says, "When I look up in the universe, I know I'm small, but I'm also

PART III

again. You could say that failure always arrives uninvited, but through our ego, far too many of us allow it to stick around.

What did Graham need through all this? Not swagger. Not bluster. She needed to be strong. She needed confidence and a willingness to endure. A sense of right and wrong. *Purpose*. It wasn't about *her.* It was about preserving her family's legacy. Protecting the paper. Doing her job.

What about you? Will your ego betray you when things get difficult? Or can you proceed without it?

When we face difficulty, particularly public difficulty (doubters, scandals, losses), our friend the ego will show its true colors.

Absorbing the negative feedback, ego says: I knew you couldn't do it. *Why did you ever try?* It claims: This isn't worth it. This isn't fair. This is somebody else's problem. *Why don't you come up with a good excuse and wash your hands of this?* It tells us we shouldn't have to put up with this. It tells us that we're not the problem.

That is, it adds self-injury to every injury you experience.

To paraphrase Epicurus, the narcissistically inclined live in an "unwalled city." A fragile sense of self is constantly under threat. Illusions and accomplishments are not defenses, not when you've got the special sensitive antennae trained to receive (and create) the signals that challenge your precarious balancing act.

It is a miserable way to live.

The year before Walsh took over the 49ers, they went 2 and 14. His first year as head coach and general manager, they went . . . 2 and 14. Can you imagine the disappointment? All the changes, all the work that went into that first year, and to end up in the exact same spot as the incompetent coach who preceded you? That's how most of us would think. And then we'd probably start blaming other people.

Walsh realized he "had to look for evidence elsewhere" that it was turning around. For him, it was in how the games were being played, the good decisions and the changes that were being made inside the organization. Two seasons later, they won the Super Bowl and then several more after that. At rock bottom those victories must have felt like a long way off, which is why you have to be able to see past and through.

As Goethe once observed, the great failing is "to see yourself as more than you are and to value yourself at less than your true worth." A good

meeting, “It is a sore thing to have labored along and scaled arduous hilltops, and when all is done, find humanity indifferent to your achievement.”

Well, get ready for it. It will happen. Maybe your parents will never be impressed. Maybe your girlfriend won’t care. Maybe the investor won’t see the numbers. Maybe the audience won’t clap. But we have to be able to push through. We can’t let *that* be what motivates us.

Belisarius had one last run. He was found innocent of the charges and his honors restored—just in time to save the empire as a white-haired old man.

Except no, life is not a fairy tale. He was again wrongly suspected of plotting against the emperor. In the famous Longfellow poem about our poor general, at the end of his life he is impoverished and disabled. Yet he concludes with great strength:

> *This, too, can bear;—I still*
> *Am Belisarius!*

You will be unappreciated. You will be sabotaged. You will experience surprising failures. Your expectations will not be met. You will lose. You will fail.

How do you carry on then? How do you take pride in yourself and your work? John Wooden’s advice to his players says it: Change the definition of success. “Success is peace of mind, which is a direct result of self-satisfaction in knowing you made the *effort* to do your best to become the best that you are capable of becoming.” “Ambition,” Marcus Aurelius reminded himself, “means tying your well-being to what other people say or do . . . Sanity means tying it to your own actions.”

Do your work. Do it well. Then “let go and let God.“ That’s all there needs to be.

Recognition and rewards—those are just extra. Rejection, that’s on them, not on us.

John Kennedy Toole’s great book *A Confederacy of Dunces* was universally turned down by publishers, news that so broke his heart that he later committed suicide in his car on an empty road in Biloxi, Mississippi.

A *full stop.* It's not that these folks should have quit everything. It's that a fighter who can't tap out or a boxer who can't recognize when it's time to retire gets hurt. Seriously so. You have to be able to see the bigger picture.

But when ego is in control, who can?

Let's say you've failed and let's even say it was your fault. Shit happens and, as they say, sometimes shit happens *in public.* It's not fun. The questions remain: Are you going to make it worse? Or are you going to emerge from this with your dignity and character intact? Are you going to live to fight another day?

When a team looks like they're going to lose a game, the coach doesn't call them all over and lie to them. Instead, he or she reminds them who they are and what they're capable of, and urges them to go back out there and embody that. With winning or miracles off their minds, a good team does its best to complete the game at the highest standard possible (and share the playing time with other players who don't regularly play). And sometimes, they even come back and win.

Most trouble is temporary . . . unless you make that not so. Recovery is not grand, it's one step in front of the other. Unless your cure is more of the disease.

Only ego thinks embarrassment or failure are more than what they are. History is full of people who suffered abject humiliations yet recovered to have long and impressive careers. Politicians who lost elections or lost offices due to indiscretions—but came back to lead after time had passed. Actors whose movies bombed, authors who got writer's block, celebrities who made gaffes, parents who made mistakes, entrepreneurs with faltering companies, executives who got fired, athletes who were cut, people who lived too well at the top of the market. All these folks felt the hard edge of failure, just like we have. When we lose, we have a choice: Are we going to make this a lose-lose situation for ourselves and everyone involved? Or will it be a lose . . . and then win?

Because you will lose in life. It's a fact. A doctor has to call time of death at some point. They just do.

Ego says we're the immovable object, the unstoppable force. This delusion causes the problems. It meets failure and adversity with rule breaking—betting everything on some crazy scheme; doubling down on

lived a fulfilling and happy life. Eventually, *Citizen Kane* secured its place in the forefront of cinematic history. Seventy years after the movie's debut, it was finally played at Hearst Castle at San Simeon, which is now a state park.

The events he endured weren't exactly fair, but at least he didn't let it ruin his life. As Welles's girlfriend of twenty-plus years said in his eulogy, referring not just to Hearst, but to every slight he ever received in his long career in a notoriously ruthless industry, "I promise you it didn't make him bitter." In other words, he never became like Hearst.

Not everyone is capable of responding that way. At various points in our lives, we seem to have different capacities for forgiveness and understanding. And even when some people are able to carry on, they carry with them a needless load of resentment. Remember Kirk Hammett, who suddenly became the guitarist in Metallica? The man they kicked out to make room for him, Dave Mustaine, went on to form another band, Megadeth. Even amidst his own unbelievable success, he was eaten up with rage and hatred over the way he'd been treated those many years before. It drove him to addiction and could have killed him. It was eighteen years until he was able to even begin to process it, and said it still felt like yesterday that he'd been hurt and rejected. When you hear him tell it, as he did once on camera to his former bandmates, it sounds like he ended up living under a bridge. In reality, the man sold millions of records, produced great music, and lived the life of a rock star.

We have all felt this pain—and to quote his lyrics, "smile[d] its blacktooth grin." This obsession with the past, with something that someone did or how things should have been, as much as it hurts, is ego embodied. Everyone else has moved on, but you can't, because you can't see anything but your own way. You can't conceive of accepting that someone could hurt you, deliberately or otherwise. So you hate.

In failure or adversity, it's so easy to hate. Hate defers blame. It makes someone else responsible. It's a distraction too; we don't do much else when we're busy getting revenge or investigating the wrongs that have supposedly been done to us.

Does this get us any closer to where we want to be? No. It just keeps us where we are—or worse, arrests our development entirely. If we are already