PART I

Perception

WHAT IS PERCEPTION? It's how we see and understand what occurs around us—and what we decide those events will mean. Our perceptions can be a source of strength or of great weakness. If we are emotional, subjective and shortsighted, we only add to our troubles. To prevent becoming overwhelmed by the world around us, we must, as the ancients practiced, learn how to limit our passions and their control over our lives. It takes skill and discipline to bat away the pests of bad perceptions, to separate reliable signals from deceptive ones, to filter out prejudice, expectation, and fear. But it's worth it, for what's left is *truth*. While others are excited or afraid, we will remain calm and imperturbable. We will see things simply and straightforwardly, as they truly are—neither good nor bad. This will be an incredible advantage for us in the fight against obstacles.

THE DISCIPLINE OF PERCEPTION

Before he was an oilman, John D. Rockefeller was a bookkeeper and aspiring investor—a small-time financier in Cleveland, Ohio. The son of an alcoholic criminal who'd abandoned his family, the young Rockefeller took his first job in 1855 at the age of sixteen (a day he celebrated as "Job Day" for the rest of his life). All was well enough at fifty cents a day.

Then the panic struck. Specifically, the Panic of 1857, a massive national financial crisis that originated in Ohio and hit Cleveland particularly hard. As businesses failed and the price of grain plummeted across the country, westward expansion quickly came to a halt. The result was a crippling depression that lasted for several years.

Rockefeller could have gotten scared. Here was the greatest market depression in history and it hit him just as he was finally getting the hang of things. He could have pulled out and run like his father. He could have quit finance altogether for a different career with less risk. But even as a young man, Rockefeller had sangfroid: unflappable coolness under pressure. He could keep his head while he was losing his shirt. Better yet, he kept his head while everyone else lost theirs.

And so instead of bemoaning this economic upheaval, Rockefeller eagerly observed the momentous events. Almost perversely, he chose to look at it all as an opportunity to learn, a baptism in the market. He quietly saved his money and watched what others did wrong. He saw the weaknesses in the economy that many took for granted and how this left them all unprepared for change or shocks.

He internalized an important lesson that would stay with him forever: The market was inherently unpredictable and often vicious—only the

rational and disciplined mind could hope to profit from it. Speculation led to disaster, he realized, and he needed to always ignore the “mad crowd” and its inclinations.

Rockefeller immediately put those insights to use. At twenty-five, a group of investors offered to invest approximately $500,000 at his direction if he could find the right oil wells in which to deploy the money. Grateful for the opportunity, Rockefeller set out to tour the nearby oil fields. A few days later, he shocked his backers by returning to Cleveland empty-handed, not having spent or invested a dollar of the funds. The opportunity didn’t feel right to him at the time, no matter how excited the rest of the market was—so he refunded the money and stayed away from drilling.

It was this intense self-discipline and objectivity that allowed Rockefeller to seize advantage from obstacle after obstacle in his life, during the Civil War, and the panics of 1873, 1907, and 1929. As he once put it: He was inclined to see the opportunity in every disaster. To that we could add: He had the strength to resist temptation or excitement, no matter how seductive, no matter the situation.

Within twenty years of that first crisis, Rockefeller would alone control 90 percent of the oil market. His greedy competitors had perished. His nervous colleagues had sold their shares and left the business. His weak-hearted doubters had missed out.

For the rest of his life, the greater the chaos, the calmer Rockefeller would become, particularly when others around him were either panicked or mad with greed. He would make much of his fortune during these market fluctuations—because he could see while others could not. This insight lives on today in Warren Buffet’s famous adage to “be fearful when others are greedy and greedy when others are fearful.” Rockefeller, like all great investors, could resist impulse in favor of cold, hard common sense.

One critic, in awe of Rockefeller’s empire, described the Standard Oil trust as a “mythical protean creature” capable of metamorphosing with every attempt by the competitors or the government to dismantle it. They meant it as a criticism, but it was actually a function of Rockefeller’s personality: resilient, adaptable, calm, brilliant. He could not be rattled—not by economic crisis, not by a glittery mirage of false opportunities, not by aggressive, bullying enemies, not even by federal prosecutors (for whom

he was a notoriously difficult witness to cross-examine, never rising to take the bait or defend himself or get upset).

Was he born this way? No. This was learned behavior. And Rockefeller got this lesson in discipline somewhere. It began in that crisis of 1857 in what he called “the school of adversity and stress.”

“Oh, how blessed young men are who have to struggle for a foundation and beginning in life,” he once said. “I shall never cease to be grateful for the three and half years of apprenticeship and the difficulties to be overcome, all along the way.”

Of course, many people experienced the same perilous times as Rockefeller—they all attended the same school of bad times. But few reacted as he did. Not many had trained themselves to see opportunity inside this obstacle, that what befell them was not unsalvageable misfortune but the gift of education—a chance to *learn* from a rare moment in economic history.

You will come across obstacles in life—fair and unfair. And you will discover, time and time again, that what matters most is not what these obstacles are but how we see them, how we react to them, and whether we keep our composure. You will learn that this reaction determines how successful we will be in overcoming—or possibly thriving because of—them.

Where one person sees a crisis, another can see opportunity. Where one is blinded by success, another sees reality with ruthless objectivity. Where one loses control of emotions, another can remain calm. Desperation, despair, fear, powerlessness—these reactions are functions of our perceptions. You must realize: Nothing *makes* us feel this way; we *choose* to give in to such feelings. Or, like Rockefeller, choose *not* to.

And it is precisely at this divergence—between how Rockefeller perceived his environment and how the rest of the world typically does—that his nearly incomprehensible success was born. His careful, cautious self-confidence was an incredible form of power. To perceive what others see as negative, as something to be approached rationally, clearly, and, most important, as an opportunity—not as something to fear or bemoan.

Rockefeller is more than just an analogy.

We live in our own Gilded Age. In less than a decade, we’ve experienced two major economic bubbles, entire industries are crumbling, lives have

been disrupted. What feels like unfairness abounds. Financial downturns, civil unrest, adversity. People are afraid and discouraged, angry and upset and gathered in Zuccotti Park or in communities online. As they should be, right?

Not necessarily.

Outward appearances are deceptive. What's within them, beneath them, is what matters.

We can learn to perceive things differently, to cut through the illusions that others believe or fear. We can stop seeing the "problems" in front of us as problems. We can learn to focus on what things really are.

Too often we react emotionally, get despondent, and lose our perspective. All that does is turn bad things into really bad things. Unhelpful perceptions can invade our minds—that sacred place of reason, action and will—and throw off our compass.

Our brains evolved for an environment very different from the one we currently inhabit. As a result, we carry all kinds of biological baggage. Humans are still primed to detect threats and dangers that no longer exist—think of the cold sweat when you're stressed about money, or the fight-or-flight response that kicks in when your boss yells at you. Our safety is not truly at risk here—there is little danger that we will starve or that violence will break out—though it certainly feels that way sometimes.

We have a choice about how we respond to this situation (or any situation, for that matter). We can be blindly led by these primal feelings or we can understand them and learn to filter them. Discipline in perception lets you clearly see the advantage and the proper course of action in every situation—without the pestilence of panic or fear.

Rockefeller understood this well and threw off the fetters of bad, destructive perceptions. He honed the ability to control and channel and understand these signals. It was like a superpower; because most people can't access this part of themselves, they are slaves to impulses and instincts they have never questioned.

We can see disaster rationally. Or rather, like Rockefeller, we can see *opportunity* in every disaster, and transform that negative situation into an education, a skill set, or a fortune. Seen properly, everything that happens—be it an economic crash or a personal tragedy—is a chance to move forward. Even if it is on a bearing that we did not anticipate.

There are a few things to keep in mind when faced with a seemingly insurmountable obstacle. We must try:

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

This is how you see the opportunity within the obstacle. It does not happen on its own. It is a process—one that results from self-discipline and logic.

And that logic is available to you. You just need to deploy it.

RECOGNIZE YOUR POWER

> Choose not to be harmed—and you won't feel harmed. Don't feel harmed —and you haven't been.
>
> —MARCUS AURELIUS

Rubin "Hurricane" Carter, a top contender for the middleweight title, at the height of his boxing career in the mid-1960s, was wrongly accused of a horrific crime he did not commit: triple homicide. He went on trial, and a biased, bogus verdict followed: three life sentences.

It was a dizzying fall from the heights of success and fame. Carter reported to prison in an expensive, tailored suit, wearing a $5,000 diamond ring and a gold watch. And so, waiting in line to be entered into the general inmate population, he asked to speak to someone in charge.

Looking the warden in the eye, Carter proceeded to inform him and the guards that he was not giving up the last thing he controlled: himself. In his remarkable declaration, he told them, in so many words, "I know you had nothing to do with the injustice that brought me to this jail, so I'm willing to stay here until I get out. But I will not, under any circumstances, be treated like a prisoner—because I am not and never will be *powerless.*"

Instead of breaking down—as many would have done in such a bleak situation—Carter declined to surrender the freedoms that were innately his: his attitude, his beliefs, his choices. Whether they threw him in prison or threw him in solitary confinement for weeks on end, Carter maintained that he still had choices, choices that could not be taken from him even though his physical freedom had been.

Was he angry about what happened? Of course. He was furious. But understanding that anger was not constructive, he refused to rage. He refused to break or grovel or despair. He would not wear a uniform, eat prison food, accept visitors, attend parole hearings, or work in the commissary to reduce his sentence. And he wouldn't be touched. No one could lay a hand on him, unless they wanted a fight.

All of this had a purpose: Every second of his energy was to be spent on his legal case. Every waking minute was spent reading—law books, philosophy, history. They hadn't ruined his life—they'd just put him somewhere he didn't deserve to be and he did not intend to stay there. He would learn and read and make the most of the time he had on his hands. He would leave prison not only a free and innocent man, but a better and improved one.

It took nineteen years and two trials to overturn that verdict, but when Carter walked out of prison, he simply resumed his life. No civil suit to recover damages, Carter did not even request an apology from the court. Because to him, that would imply that they'd taken something of his that Carter felt he was owed. That had never been his view, even in the dark depths of solitary confinement. He had made his choice: This can't harm me—I might not have wanted it to happen, but I decide how it will affect me. *No one else has the right.*

We decide what we will make of each and every situation. We decide whether we'll break or whether we'll resist. We decide whether we'll assent or reject. No one can force us to give up or to believe something that is untrue (such as, that a situation is absolutely hopeless or impossible to improve). Our perceptions are the thing that we're in complete control of.

They can throw us in jail, label us, deprive us of our possessions, but they'll never control our thoughts, our beliefs, our *reactions*.

Which is to say, we are never completely powerless.

Even in prison, deprived of nearly everything, some freedoms remain. Your mind remains your own (if you're lucky, you have books) and you have time—lots of time. Carter did not have much power, but he understood that that was not the same thing as being *powerless*. Many great figures, from Nelson Mandela to Malcolm X, have come to understand this fundamental distinction. It's how they turned prison into the workshop

where they transformed themselves and the schoolhouse where they began to transform others.

If an unjust prison sentence can be not only salvaged but transformative and beneficial, then for our purposes, nothing we'll experience is likely without potential benefit. In fact, if we have our wits fully about us, we can step back and remember that situations, by themselves, cannot be good or bad. This is something—a judgment—that we, as human beings, bring to them with our perceptions.

To one person a situation may be negative. To another, that same situation may be positive.

"Nothing either good or bad, but thinking makes it so," as Shakespeare put it.

Laura Ingalls Wilder, author of the classic series *Little House*, lived that idea, facing some of the toughest and unwelcoming elements on the planet: harsh and unyielding soil, Indian territory, Kansas prairies, and the humid backwoods of Florida. Not afraid, not jaded—because she saw it all as an adventure. Everywhere was a chance to do something new, to persevere with cheery pioneer spirit whatever fate befell her and her husband.

That isn't to say she saw the world through delusional rose-colored glasses. Instead, she simply chose to see each situation for what it could be—accompanied by hard work and a little upbeat spirit. Others make the opposite choice. As for us, we face things that are not nearly as intimidating, and then we promptly decide we're screwed.

This is how obstacles become obstacles.

In other words, through our perception of events, we are complicit in the creation—as well as the destruction—of every one of our obstacles.

There is no good or bad without us, there is only perception. There is the event itself and the story we tell ourselves about what it means.

That's a thought that changes everything, doesn't it?

An employee in your company makes a careless mistake that costs you business. This can be exactly what you spend so much time and effort trying to avoid. *Or,* with a shift in perception, it can be exactly what you were looking for—the chance to pierce through defenses and teach a lesson that can be learned only by experience. A *mistake* becomes *training*.

Again, the event is the same: Someone messed up. But the evaluation and the outcome are different. With one approach you took advantage; with

the other you succumbed to anger or fear.

Just because your mind tells you that something is awful or evil or unplanned or otherwise negative doesn't mean you have to agree. Just because other people say that something is hopeless or crazy or broken to pieces doesn't mean it is. We decide what story to tell ourselves. Or whether we will tell one at all.

Welcome to the power of perception. Applicable in each and every situation, impossible to obstruct. It can only be *relinquished.*

And that is your decision.

STEADY YOUR NERVES

> What such a man needs is not courage but nerve control, cool headedness. This he can get only by practice.
>
> —THEODORE ROOSEVELT

Ulysses S. Grant once sat for a photo shoot with the famous Civil War photographer, Mathew Brady. The studio was too dark, so Brady sent an assistant up to the roof to uncover a skylight. The assistant slipped and shattered the window. With horror, the spectators watched as shards of glass two inches long fell from the ceiling like daggers, crashing around Grant—each one of them plenty lethal.

As the last pieces hit the ground, Brady looked over and saw that Grant hadn't moved. He was unhurt. Grant glanced up at the hole in the ceiling, then back at the camera as though nothing had happened at all.

During the Overland Campaign, Grant was surveying the scene through field glasses when an enemy shell exploded, killing the horse immediately next to him. Grant's eyes stayed fixed on the front, never leaving the glasses. There's another story about Grant at City Point, Union headquarters, near Richmond. Troops were unloading a steamboat and it suddenly exploded. Everyone hit the dirt except Grant, who was seen running *toward* the scene of the explosion as debris and shells and even bodies rained down.

That's a man who has steadied himself properly. That's a man who has a job to do and would bear anything to get it done. That's nerve.

But back in our lives . . .

We are a pile of raw nerves.

Competitors surround our business. Unexpected problems suddenly rear their heads. Our best worker suddenly quits. The computer system can't handle the load we're putting on it. We're out of our comfort zone. The boss is making us do all the work. Everything is falling and crashing down around us, exactly when we feel like we can't handle any more.

Do we stare it down? Ignore it? Blink once or twice and redouble our concentration? Or do we get shaken up? Do we try to medicate these "bad" feelings away?

And that's just the stuff that happens unintentionally. Don't forget, there are always people out there looking to get you. They want to intimidate you. Rattle you. Pressure you into making a decision before you've gotten all the facts. They want you thinking and acting on their terms, not yours.

So the question is, are you going to let them?

When we aim high, pressure and stress obligingly come along for the ride. Stuff is going to happen that catches us off guard, threatens or scares us. Surprises (unpleasant ones, mostly) are almost guaranteed. The risk of being overwhelmed is always there.

In these situations, talent is not the most sought-after characteristic. Grace and poise are, because these two attributes precede the opportunity to deploy any other skill. We must possess, as Voltaire once explained about the secret to the great military success of the first Duke of Marlborough, that "tranquil courage in the midst of tumult and serenity of soul in danger, which the English call a cool head."

Regardless of how much actual danger we're in, stress puts us at the potential whim of our baser—fearful—instinctual reactions.

Don't think for a second that grace and poise and serenity are the soft attributes of some aristocrat. Ultimately, nerve is a matter of defiance and control.

Like: *I* refuse *to acknowledge that. I don't* agree *to be intimidated. I* resist *the temptation to declare this a failure.*

But nerve is also a matter of acceptance: *Well, I guess it's on me then. I don't have the luxury of being shaken up about this or replaying close calls in my head. I'm too busy and too many people are counting on me.*

Defiance and acceptance come together well in the following principle: There is always a countermove, always an escape or a way through, so there

is no reason to get worked up. No one said it would be easy and, of course, the stakes are high, but the path is there for those ready to take it.

This is what we've got to do. And we know that it's going to be tough, maybe even scary.

But we're ready for that. We're collected and serious and aren't going to be frightened off.

This means preparing for the realities of our situation, steadying our nerves so we can throw our best at it. Steeling ourselves. Shaking off the bad stuff as it happens and soldiering on—staring straight ahead as though nothing has happened.

Because, as you now realize, it's true. If your nerve holds, then nothing really did "happen"—our perception made sure it was nothing of consequence.

CONTROL YOUR EMOTIONS

> Would you have a great empire? Rule over yourself.
>
> —PUBLIUS SYRUS

When America raced to send the first men into space, they trained the astronauts in one skill more than in any other: the art of *not* panicking.

When people panic, they make mistakes. They override systems. They disregard procedures, ignore rules. They deviate from the plan. They become unresponsive and stop thinking clearly. They just react—not to what they need to react to, but to the survival hormones that are coursing through their veins.

Welcome to the source of most of our problems down here on Earth. Everything is planned down to the letter, then something goes wrong and the first thing we do is trade in our plan for a good ol' emotional freak-out. Some of us almost crave sounding the alarm, because it's easier than dealing with whatever is staring us in the face.

At 150 miles above Earth in a spaceship smaller than a VW, this is death. Panic is suicide.

So panic has to be trained out. And it does not go easily.

Before the first launch, NASA re-created the fateful day for the astronauts over and over, step by step, hundreds of times—from what they'd have for breakfast to the ride to the airfield. Slowly, in a graded series of "exposures," the astronauts were introduced to every sight and sound of the experience of their firing into space. They did it so many times

that it became as natural and familiar as breathing. They'd practice all the way through, holding nothing back but the liftoff itself, making sure to solve for every variable and remove all uncertainty.

Uncertainty and fear are relieved by authority. Training is authority. It's a release valve. With enough exposure, you can adapt out those perfectly ordinary, even innate, fears that are bred mostly from unfamiliarity. Fortunately, unfamiliarity is simple to fix (again, not easy), which makes it possible to increase our tolerance for stress and uncertainty.

John Glenn, the first American astronaut to orbit the earth, spent nearly a day in space still keeping his heart rate under a hundred beats per minute. That's a man not simply sitting *at* the controls but *in* control of his emotions. A man who had properly cultivated, what Tom Wolfe later called, "the Right Stuff."

But you . . . confront a client or a stranger on the street and your heart is liable to burst out of your chest; or you are called on to address a crowd and your stomach crashes through the floor.

It's time to realize that this is a luxury, an indulgence of our lesser self. In space, the difference between life and death lies in emotional regulation.

Hitting the wrong button, reading the instrument panels incorrectly, engaging a sequence too early—none of these could have been afforded on a successful Apollo mission—the consequences were too great.

Thus, the question for astronauts was not How skilled a pilot are you, but Can you keep an even strain? Can you fight the urge to panic and instead focus only on what you can change? On the task at hand?

Life is really no different. Obstacles make us emotional, but the only way we'll survive or overcome them is by keeping those emotions in check—if we can keep steady no matter what happens, no matter how much external events may fluctuate.

The Greeks had a word for this: *apatheia*.

It's the kind of calm equanimity that comes with the absence of irrational or extreme emotions. Not the loss of feeling altogether, just the loss of the harmful, unhelpful kind. Don't let the negativity in, don't let those emotions even get started. Just say: *No, thank you. I can't afford to panic.*

This is the skill that must be cultivated—freedom from disturbance and perturbation—so you can focus your energy exclusively on solving problems, rather than reacting to them.

A boss's urgent e-mail. An asshole at a bar. A call from the bank—your financing has been pulled. A knock at the door—there's been an accident.

As Gavin de Becker writes in *The Gift of Fear,* "When you worry, ask yourself, 'What am I choosing to not see right now?' What important things are you missing because you chose worry over introspection, alertness or wisdom?"

Another way of putting it: Does getting upset provide you with more options?

Sometimes it does. But in *this* instance?

No, I suppose not.

Well, then.

If an emotion can't change the condition or the situation you're dealing with, it is likely an unhelpful emotion. Or, quite possibly, a destructive one.

But it's what I feel.

Right, no one said anything about not feeling it. No one said you can't ever cry. Forget "manliness." If you need to take a moment, by all means, go ahead. Real strength lies in the *control* or, as Nassim Taleb put it, the *domestication* of one's emotions, not in pretending they don't exist.

So go ahead, feel it. Just don't lie to yourself by conflating emoting about a problem and dealing with it. Because they are as different as sleeping and waking.

You can always remind yourself: *I am in control, not my emotions. I see what's really going on here. I'm not going to get excited or upset.*

We defeat emotions with logic, or at least that's the idea. Logic is questions and statements. With enough of them, we get to root causes (which are always easier to deal with).

We lost money.

But aren't losses a pretty common part of business?

Yes.

Are these losses catastrophic?

Not necessarily.

So this is not totally unexpected, is it? How could that be so bad?

Why are you all worked up over something that is at least

occasionally supposed to happen?

Well . . . uhh . . . I . . .

And not only that, but you've dealt with worse situations than this. Wouldn't you be better off applying some of that resourcefulness rather than anger?

Try having that conversation with yourself and see how those extreme emotions hold up. They won't last long, trust that.

After all, you're probably not going to *die* from any of this.

It might help to say it over and over again whenever you feel the anxiety begin to come on: *I am not going to die from this. I am not going to die from this. I am not going to die from this.*

Or try Marcus's question:

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

Nope.

Then get back to work!

Subconsciously, we should be constantly asking ourselves this question: *Do I need to freak out about this?*

And the answer—like it is for astronauts, for soldiers, for doctors, and for so many other professionals—must be: *No, because I practiced for this situation and I can control myself.* Or, *No, because I caught myself and I'm able to realize that that doesn't add anything constructive.*

PRACTICE OBJECTIVITY

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

The phrase “This happened and it is bad” is actually two impressions. The first—“This happened”—is objective. The second—“it is bad”—is subjective.

The sixteenth-century Samurai swordsman Miyamoto Musashi won countless fights against feared opponents, even multiple opponents, in which he was swordless. In *The Book of Five Rings,* he notes the difference between observing and perceiving. The perceiving eye is weak, he wrote; the observing eye is strong.

Musashi understood that the observing eye sees simply what is there. The perceiving eye sees more than what is there.

The observing eye sees events, clear of distractions, exaggerations, and misperceptions. The perceiving eye sees “insurmountable obstacles” or “major setbacks” or even just “issues.” It brings its own issues to the fight. The former is helpful, the latter is not.

To paraphrase Nietzsche, sometimes being superficial—taking things only at first glance—is the most profound approach.

In our own lives, how many problems seem to come from applying judgments to things we don’t control, as though there were a way they were

supposed to be? How often do we see what we think is there or should be there, instead of what actually is there?

Having steadied ourselves and held back our emotions, we can see things as they really are. We can do that using our observing eye.

Perceptions are the problem. They give us the "information" that we don't need, exactly at the moment when it would be far better to focus on what is immediately in front of us: the thrust of a sword, a crucial business negotiation, an opportunity, a flash of insight or anything else, for that matter.

Everything about our animalistic brains tries to compress the space between impression and perception. Think, perceive, act—with milliseconds between them.

A deer's brain tells it to run because things are bad. It runs. Sometimes, right into traffic.

We can question that impulse. We can disagree with it. We can override the switch, examine the threat before we act.

But this takes strength. It's a muscle that must be developed. And muscles are developed by tension, by lifting and holding.

This is why Musashi and most martial arts practitioners focus on mental training as much as on physical training. Both are equally important—and require equally vigorous exercise and practice.

In the writings of the Stoics we see an exercise that might well be described as Contemptuous Expressions. The Stoics use contempt as an agent to lay things bare and *"to strip away the legend that encrusts them."*

Epictetus told his students, when they'd quote some great thinker, to picture themselves observing the person having sex. It's funny, you should try it the next time someone intimidates you or makes you feel insecure. See them in your mind, grunting, groaning, and awkward in their private life—just like the rest of us.

Marcus Aurelius had a version of this exercise where he'd describe glamorous or expensive things without their euphemisms—roasted meat is a dead animal and vintage wine is old, fermented grapes. The aim was to see these things as they really are, without any of the ornamentation.

We can do this for anyone or to anything that stands in our way. That promotion that means so much, what is it really? Our critics and naysayers who make us feel small, let's put them in their proper place. It's so much

better to see things as they truly, actually are, not as we've made them in our minds.

Objectivity means removing "you"—the subjective part—from the equation. Just think, what happens when we give others advice? Their problems are crystal clear to us, the solutions obvious. Something that's present when we deal with our own obstacles is always missing when we hear other people's problems: the baggage. With other people we can be objective.

We take the situation at face value and immediately set about helping our friend to solve it. Selfishly—and stupidly—we save the pity and the sense of persecution and the complaints for our own lives.

Take your situation and pretend it is not happening to you. Pretend it is not important, that it doesn't matter. How much easier would it be for you to know what to do? How much more quickly and dispassionately could you size up the scenario and its options? You could write it off, greet it calmly.

Think of all the ways that someone could solve a specific problem. No, *really* think. Give yourself clarity, not sympathy—there'll be plenty of time for that later. It's an exercise, which means it takes repetition. The more you try it, the better you get at it. The more skilled you become seeing things for what they are, the more perception will work for you rather than against you.

ALTER YOUR PERSPECTIVE

> Man does not simply exist but always decides what his existence will be, what he will become the next moment. By the same token, every human being has the freedom to change at any instant.
>
> —VIKTOR FRANKL

Once as the Athenian general Pericles cast off on a naval mission in the Peloponnesian War, the sun was eclipsed and his fleet of 150 ships was cast into darkness.

Surprised by this unexpected and confusing event, his men were thrown into a state of panic. Unlike the crew, Pericles was undaunted. He walked up to a lead steersman, removed the cloak he was wearing, and held it up around the man's face. He asked the man if he was scared of what he saw.

No, of course not.

So what does it matter, Pericles replied, when the cause of the darkness differs?

The Greeks were clever. But beneath this particular quip is the fundamental notion that girds not just Stoic philosophy but cognitive psychology: *Perspective is everything*.

That is, when you can break apart something, or look at it from some new angle, it loses its power over you.

Fear is debilitating, distracting, tiring, and often irrational. Pericles understood this completely, and he was able to use the power of perspective to defeat it.

The Greeks understood that we often choose the ominous explanation over the simple one, to our detriment. That we are scared of obstacles because our perspective is wrong—that a simple shift in perspective can change our reaction entirely. The task, as Pericles showed, is not to ignore fear but to explain it away. Take what you're afraid of—when fear strikes you—and break it apart.

Remember: We choose how we'll look at things. We retain the ability to inject perspective into a situation. We can't change the obstacles themselves—that part of the equation is set—but the power of perspective can change how the obstacles appear. How we approach, view, and contextualize an obstacle, and what we tell ourselves it means, determines how daunting and trying it will be to overcome.

It's your choice whether you want to put *I* in front of something (I *hate public speaking*. I *screwed up*. I *am harmed by this*). These add an extra element: *you* in relation to that obstacle, rather than just the obstacle itself. And with the wrong perspective, we become consumed and overwhelmed with something actually quite small. So why subject ourselves to that?

The right perspective has a strange way of cutting obstacles—and adversity—down to size.

But for whatever reason, we tend to look at things in isolation. We kick ourselves for blowing a deal or having to miss a meeting. Individually, that does suck—we just missed 100 percent of that opportunity.

What we're forgetting in that instance, as billionaire serial entrepreneur Richard Branson likes to say, is that "business opportunities are like buses; there's always another coming around." One meeting is nothing in a lifetime of meetings, one deal is just one deal. In fact, we may have actually dodged a bullet. The next opportunity might be better.

The way we look out at the world changes how we see these things. Is our perspective truly giving us *perspective* or is it what's actually causing the problem? That's the question.

What we can do is limit and expand our perspective to whatever will keep us calmest and most ready for the task at hand. Think of it as selective editing—not to deceive others, but to properly orient ourselves.

And it *works*. Small tweaks can change what once felt like impossible tasks. Suddenly, where we felt weak, we realize we are strong. With perspective, we discover leverage we didn't know we had.

Perspective has two definitions.

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

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

George Clooney spent his first years in Hollywood getting rejected at auditions. He wanted the producers and directors to like him, but they didn't and it hurt and he blamed the system for not seeing how good he was.

This perspective should sound familiar. It's the dominant viewpoint for the rest of us on job interviews, when we pitch clients, or try to connect with an attractive stranger in a coffee shop. We subconsciously submit to what Seth Godin, author and entrepreneur, refers to as the "tyranny of being picked."

Everything changed for Clooney when he tried a new perspective. He realized that casting is an obstacle for producers, too—they *need* to find somebody, and they're all hoping that the next person to walk in the room is the *right* somebody. Auditions were a chance to solve their problem, not his.

From Clooney's new perspective, he was that solution. He wasn't going to be someone groveling for a shot. He was someone with something special to offer. He was the answer to their prayers, not the other way around. That was what he began projecting in his auditions—not exclusively his acting skills but that he was the man for the job. That he understood what the casting director and producers were looking for in a specific role and that he would deliver it in each and every situation, in preproduction, on camera, and during promotion.

The difference between the right and the wrong perspective is everything.

How we interpret the events in our lives, our perspective, is the framework for our forthcoming response—whether there will even be one or whether we'll just lie there and take it.

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

IS IT UP TO YOU?

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

Tommy John, one of baseball's most savvy and durable pitchers, played twenty-six seasons in the majors. *Twenty-six* seasons! His rookie year, Kennedy was president. His final year, it was George H. W. Bush. He pitched to Mickey Mantle *and* Mark McGwire.

It's an almost superhuman accomplishment. But he was able to do it because he got really good at asking himself and others, in various forms, one question over and over again: *Is there a chance? Do I have a shot? Is there something I can do?*

All he ever looked for was a yes, no matter how slight or tentative or provisional the chance. If there was a chance, he was ready to take it and make good use of it—ready to give every ounce of effort and energy he had to make it happen. If effort would affect the outcome, he would die on the field before he let that chance go to waste.

The first time came during the middle of the 1974 season when Tommy John blew out his arm, permanently damaging the ulnar collateral ligament in his pitching elbow. Up until this point in baseball and sports medicine, when a pitcher blew out his arm that was it. They called it a "dead arm" injury. Game over.

John wouldn’t accept that. Was there *anything* that could give him a shot to get back on the mound? It turns out there was. The doctors suggested an experimental surgery in which they would try to replace the ligament in his pitching elbow with a tendon from his other arm. *What are the chances of me coming back after this surgery?* One in one hundred. And without it? *No chance*, they said.

He could have retired. But there was a one in one hundred chance. With rehab and training, the opportunity was *partially* in his control. He took it. And won 164 more games over the next thirteen seasons. That procedure is now famously known as Tommy John surgery.

Less than ten years later, John mustered the same spirit and effort he marshaled for his elbow surgery when his young son fell horrifyingly from a third-story window, swallowed his tongue, and nearly died. Even in the chaos of the emergency room, with doctors convinced that the boy probably wouldn’t survive, John reminded his family that whether it took one year or ten years, they wouldn’t give up until there was absolutely nothing left that they could do.

His son made a full recovery.

For John, his baseball career seemed to finally come to an end in 1988, when, at the age of forty-five, he was cut by the Yankees at the end of the season. Still, he would not accept it. He called the coach and demanded: If he showed up at spring training as a walk-on the next spring, would he get a fair look? They replied that he shouldn’t be playing baseball at his age. He repeated the question: *Be straight with me, if I come down there, would I have a chance?* The baseball officials answered, *Fine, yes, you’ll get one look.*

So Tommy John was the first to report to camp. He trained many hours a day, brought every lesson he’d learned playing the sport for a quarter century, and made the team—as the oldest player in the game. He started the season opener—and won, giving up a scant two runs over seven innings on the road at Minnesota.

The things that Tommy John could change—when he had a chance—got a full 100 percent of the effort he could muster. He used to tell coaches that he would die on the field before he quit. He understood that as a professional athlete his job was to parse the difference between the unlikely

and the impossible. Seeing that minuscule distinction was what made him who he was.

To harness the same power, recovering addicts learn the Serenity Prayer.

> *God, grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change*
> *The courage to change the things I can,*
> *And the wisdom to know the difference.*

This is how they focus their efforts. It's a lot easier to fight addiction when you aren't also fighting the fact that you were born, that your parents were monsters, or that you lost everything. That stuff is done. Delivered. Zero in one hundred chances that you can change it.

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

Behind the Serenity Prayer is a two-thousand-year-old Stoic phrase: *"ta eph'hemin, ta ouk eph'hemin."* What is up to us, what is not up to us.

And what is up to us?

Our emotions
Our judgments
Our creativity
Our attitude
Our perspective
Our desires
Our decisions
Our determination

This is our playing field, so to speak. Everything there is fair game.

What is not up to us?

Well, you know, everything else. The weather, the economy, circumstances, other people's emotions or judgments, trends, disasters, et cetera.

If what's up to us is the playing field, then what is not up to us are the rules and conditions of the game. Factors that winning athletes make the best of and don't spend time arguing against (because there is no point).

To argue, to complain, or worse, to just give up, these are choices. Choices that more often than not, do *nothing* to get us across the finish line.

When it comes to perception, this is the crucial distinction to make: the difference between the things that are in our power and the things that aren't. That's the difference between the people who can accomplish great things, and the people who find it impossible to stay sober—to avoid not just drugs or alcohol but *all* addictions.

In its own way, the most harmful dragon we chase is the one that makes us think we can change things that are simply not ours to change. That someone decided not to fund your company, this isn't up to you. But the decision to refine and improve your pitch? That is. That someone stole your idea or got to it first? No. To pivot, improve it, or fight for what's yours? Yes.

Focusing exclusively on what is in our power magnifies and enhances our power. But every ounce of energy directed at things we can't actually influence is wasted—self-indulgent and self-destructive. So much power—ours, and other people's—is frittered away in this manner.

To see an obstacle as a challenge, to make the best of it anyway, that is also a choice—a choice that is *up to us*.

Will I have a chance, Coach?

Ta eph'hemin?

Is this up to me?

LIVE IN THE PRESENT MOMENT

The trick to forgetting the big picture is to look at everything close up.

—CHUCK PALAHNIUK

Do yourself a favor and run down the list of businesses started during depressions or economic crises.

Fortune magazine (ninety days after the market crash of 1929)
FedEx (oil crisis of 1973)
UPS (Panic of 1907)
Walt Disney Company (After eleven months of smooth operation, the twelfth was the market crash of 1929.)
Hewlett-Packard (Great Depression, 1935)
Charles Schwab (market crash of 1974–75)
Standard Oil (Rockefeller bought out his partners in what became Standard Oil and took over in February 1865, the final year of the Civil War.)
Coors (Depression of 1873)
Costco (recession in the late 1970s)
Revlon (Great Depression, 1932)
General Motors (Panic of 1907)
Proctor & Gamble (Panic of 1837)
United Airlines (1929)
Microsoft (recession in 1973–75)

LinkedIn (2002, post–dot-com bubble)

For the most part, these businesses had little awareness they were in some historically significant depression. Why? Because the founders were too busy existing in the present—actually dealing with the situation at hand. They didn't know whether it would get better or worse, they just knew what *was*. They had a job they wanted to do, a great idea they believed in or a product they thought they could sell. They knew they had payroll to meet.

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

Our understanding of the world of business is all mixed up with storytelling and mythology. Which is funny because we're missing the real story by focusing on individuals. In fact, half the companies in the Fortune 500 were started during a bear market or recession. *Half.*

The point is that *most people* start from disadvantage (often with no idea they are doing so) and do just fine. It's not unfair, it's universal. Those who survive it, survive because they took things day by day—that's the real secret.

Focus on the moment, not the monsters that may or may not be up ahead.

A business must take the operating constraints of the world around it as a given and work for whatever gains are possible. Those people with an entrepreneurial spirit are like animals, blessed to have no time and no ability to think about the ways things should be, or how they'd prefer them to be.

For all species other than us humans, things just are what they are. Our problem is that we're always trying to figure out what things *mean*—why things are the way they are. As though the *why* matters. Emerson put it best: "We cannot spend the day in explanation." Don't waste time on false constructs.

It doesn’t matter whether this is the worst time to be alive or the best, whether you’re in a good job market or a bad one, or that the obstacle you face is intimidating or burdensome. What matters is that right now is right now.

The implications of our obstacle are theoretical—they exist in the past and the future. We live *in the moment.* And the more we embrace that, the easier the obstacle will be to face and move.

You can take the trouble you’re dealing with and use it as an opportunity to focus on the present moment. To ignore the totality of your situation and learn to be content with what happens, as it happens. To have no “way” that the future needs to be to confirm your predictions, because you didn’t make any. To let each new moment be a refresh wiping clear what came before and what others were hoping would come next.

You’ll find the method that works best for you, but there are many things that can pull you into the present moment: Strenuous exercise. Unplugging. A walk in the park. Meditation. Getting a dog—they’re a constant reminder of how pleasant the present is.

One thing is certain. It’s not simply a matter of saying: *Oh, I’ll live in the present.* You have to *work* at it. Catch your mind when it wanders—don’t let it get away from you. Discard distracting thoughts. Leave things well enough alone—no matter how much you feel like doing otherwise.

But it’s easier when the choice to limit your scope feels like editing rather than acting. Remember that this moment is not your life, it’s just a moment *in* your life. Focus on what is in front of you, right now. Ignore what it “represents” or it “means” or “why it happened to you.”

There is plenty else going on right here to care about any of that.

THINK DIFFERENTLY

> Genius is the ability to put into effect what is in your mind. There's no other definition of it.
>
> —F. SCOTT FITZGERALD

Steve Jobs was famous for what observers called his "reality distortion field." Part motivational tactic, part sheer drive and ambition, this field made him notoriously dismissive of phrases such as "It can't be done" or "We need more time."

Having learned early in life that reality was falsely hemmed in by rules and compromises that people had been taught as children, Jobs had a much more aggressive idea of what was or wasn't possible. To him, when you factored in vision and work ethic, much of life was malleable.

For instance, in the design stages for a new mouse for an early Apple product, Jobs had high expectations. He wanted it to move fluidly in any direction—a new development for any mouse at that time—but a lead engineer was told by one of his designers that this would be commercially impossible. What Jobs wanted wasn't realistic and wouldn't work. The next day, the lead engineer arrived at work to find that Steve Jobs had fired the employee who'd said that. When the replacement came in, his first words were: "I can build the mouse."

This was Jobs's view of reality at work. Malleable, adamant, self-confident. Not in the delusional sense, but for the purposes of accomplishing something. He knew that to aim low meant to accept mediocre accomplishment. But a high aim could, if things went right, create

something extraordinary. He was Napoleon shouting to his soldiers: “There shall be no Alps!”

For most of us, such confidence does not come easy. It’s understandable. So many people in our lives have preached the need to be realistic or conservative or worse—to not rock the boat. This is an enormous disadvantage when it comes to trying big things. Because though our doubts (and self-doubts) feel real, they have very little bearing on what is and isn’t possible.

Our perceptions determine, to an incredibly large degree, what we are and are not capable of. In many ways, they determine reality itself. When we believe in the obstacle more than in the goal, which will inevitably triumph?

For instance, think of artists. It’s their unique vision and voice that push the definition of “art” forward. What was possible for an artist before Caravaggio and after he stunned us with his dark masterpieces were two very different things. Plug in any other thinker or writer or painter in their own time, and the same applies.

This is why we shouldn’t listen too closely to what other people say (or to what the voice in our head says, either). We’ll find ourselves erring on the side of accomplishing nothing.

Be open. Question.

Though of course we don’t *control* reality, our perceptions do influence it.

One week before the first Macintosh computer was supposed to ship, the engineers told Jobs they couldn’t make the deadline. On a hastily assembled conference call, the engineers explained that they needed just two additional weeks’ work before it was ready. Jobs responded calmly, explaining to the engineers that if they could make it in two weeks, they could surely make it one—there was no real difference in such a short period of time. And, more important, since they’d come this far and done so much good work, there was no way they would *not* ship on January 16, the original ship date. The engineers rallied and made their deadline. His insistence pushed them, once again, past what they ever thought possible.

Now, how do you and I usually deal with an impossible deadline handed down from someone above us? We complain. We get angry. We question.

How could they? What's the point? Who do they think I am? We look for a way out and feel sorry for ourselves.

Of course, none of these things affect the objective reality of that deadline. Not in the way that pushing forward can. Jobs refused to tolerate people who didn't believe in their own abilities to succeed. Even if his demands were unfair, uncomfortable, or ambitious.

The genius and wonder of his products—which often felt impossibly intuitive and futuristic—embody that trait. He had pushed through what others thought were hard limitations and, as a result, he created something totally new. No one believed Apple could make the products it made. In fact, Jobs was pushed out in 1985 because the board members at that time felt that Apple's foray into consumer products was a "lunatic plan." Of course, they were wrong.

Jobs learned to reject the first judgments and the objections that spring out of them because those objections are almost always rooted in fear. When he ordered a special kind of glass for the first iPhone, the manufacturer was aghast at the aggressive deadline. "We don't have capacity," they said. "Don't be afraid," Jobs replied. "You can do it. Get your mind around it. You can do it." Nearly overnight, manufacturers transformed their facilities into glass-making behemoths, and within six months they'd made enough for the whole first run of the phone.

This is radically different from how we've been taught to act. *Be realistic,* we're told. *Listen to feedback. Play well with others. Compromise.* Well, what if the "other" party is wrong? What if conventional wisdom is too conservative? It's this all-too-common impulse to *complain, defer, and then give up* that holds us back.

An entrepreneur is someone with faith in their ability to make something where there was nothing before. To them, the idea that no one has *ever* done this or that is a good thing. When given an unfair task, some rightly see it as a chance to test what they're made of—to give it all they've got, knowing full well how difficult it will be to win. They see it as an opportunity because it is often in that desperate nothing-to-lose state that we are our most creative.

Our best ideas come from there, where obstacles illuminate new options.

FINDING THE OPPORTUNITY

> A good person dyes events with his own color . . . and turns whatever happens to his own benefit.
>
> —SENECA

One of the most intimidating and shocking developments in modern warfare was the German Blitzkrieg (lightning war). In World War II the Germans wanted to avoid the drawn-out trench fighting of previous wars. So they concentrated mobile divisions into rapid, narrow offensive forces that caught their enemies completely unprepared.

Like the tip of a spear, columns of panzer tanks rushed into Poland, the Netherlands, Belgium, and France with devastating results and little opposition. In most cases, the opposing commanders simply surrendered rather than face what felt like an invincible, indefatigable monster bearing down on them. The Blitzkrieg strategy was designed to exploit the flinch of the enemy—he must collapse at the sight of what appears to be overwhelming force. Its success depends completely on this response. This military strategy works because the set-upon troops see the offensive force as an enormous obstacle bearing down on them.

This is how the Allied opposition regarded the Blitzkrieg for most of the war. They could see only its power, and their own vulnerability to it. In the weeks and months after the successful invasion of Normandy by Allied forces, they faced it again: a set of massive German counteroffensives. How could they stop it? Would it throw them back to the very beaches they just purchased at such high cost?

A great leader answered that question. Striding into the conference room at headquarters in Malta, General Dwight D. Eisenhower made an announcement: He'd have no more of this quivering timidity from his deflated generals. "The present situation is to be regarded as opportunity for us and not disaster," he commanded. "There will be only cheerful faces at this conference table."

In the surging counteroffensive, Eisenhower was able to see the tactical solution that had been in front of them the entire time: the Nazi strategy carried its own destruction within itself.

Only then were the Allies able to see the opportunity *inside* the obstacle rather than simply the obstacle that threatened them. Properly seen, as long as the Allies could bend and not break, this attack would send more than fifty thousand Germans rushing headfirst into a net—or a "meat grinder," as Patton eloquently put it.

The Battle of the Bulge and before that the Battle of the Falaise Pocket, both of which were feared to be major reversals and the end of the Allies' momentum, in fact were their greatest triumphs. By allowing a forward wedge of the German army through and then attacking from the sides, the Allies encircled the enemy completely from the rear. The invincible, penetrating thrust of the German Panzers wasn't just impotent but suicidal—a textbook example of why you never leave your flanks exposed.

More important, it's a textbook example of the role our own perceptions play in the success or failures of those who oppose us.

It's one thing to not be overwhelmed by obstacles, or discouraged or upset by them. This is something that few are able to do. But after you have controlled your emotions, and you can see objectively and stand steadily, the next step becomes possible: a mental flip, so you're looking not at the obstacle but at the opportunity within it.

As Laura Ingalls Wilder put it: "There is good in everything, if only we look for it."

Yet we are so bad at looking. We close our eyes to the gift. Imagine if you'd been in Eisenhower's shoes, with an army racing toward you, and you could see only impending defeat. How much longer would the war have gone on? How many more lives lost?

It's our preconceptions that are the problem. They tell us that things should or need to be a certain way, so when they're not, we naturally

assume that we are at a disadvantage or that we'd be wasting our time to pursue an alternate course. When really, it's all fair game, and every situation is an opportunity for us to act.

Let's take a circumstance we've all been in: having a bad boss. All we see is the hell. All we see is that thing bearing down on us. We flinch.

But what if you regarded it as an opportunity instead of a disaster?

If you mean it when you say you're at the end of your rope and would rather quit, you actually have a unique chance to grow and improve yourself. A unique opportunity to experiment with different solutions, to try different tactics, or to take on new projects to add to your skill set. You can study this bad boss and learn from him—while you fill out your résumé and hit up contacts for a better job elsewhere. You can prepare yourself for that job by trying new styles of communication or standing up for yourself, all with a perfect safety net for yourself: quitting and getting out of there.

With this new attitude and fearlessness, who knows, you might be able to extract concessions and find that you like the job again. One day, the boss will make a mistake, and then you'll make your move and outmaneuver them. It will feel so much better than the alternative—whining, bad-mouthing, duplicity, spinelessness.

Or take that longtime rival at work (or that rival company), the one who causes endless headaches? Note the fact that they also:

- keep you alert
- raise the stakes
- motivate you to prove them wrong
- harden you
- help you to appreciate true friends
- provide an instructive antilog—an example of whom you don't want to become

Or that computer glitch that erased all your work? You will now be twice as good at it since you will do it again.

How about that business decision that turned out to be a mistake? Well, you had a hypothesis and it turned out to be wrong. Why should that upset you? It wouldn't piss off a scientist, it would *help* him. Maybe don't bet so

much on it next time. And now you've learned two things: that your instinct was wrong, and the kind of appetite for risk you really have.

Blessings and burdens are not mutually exclusive. It's a lot more complicated. Socrates had a mean, nagging wife; he always said that being married to her was good practice for philosophy.

Of course you'd want to avoid something negative if you could. But what if you were able to remember, in the moment, the second act that seems to come with the unfortunate situations we try so hard to avoid?

Sports psychologists recently did a study of elite athletes who were struck with some adversity or serious injury. Initially, each reported feeling isolation, emotional disruption, and doubts about their athletic ability. Yet afterward, each reported gaining a desire to help others, additional perspective, and realization of their own strengths. In other words, every fear and doubt they felt during the injury turned into greater abilities in those exact areas.

It's a beautiful idea. Psychologists call it adversarial growth and post-traumatic growth. "That which doesn't kill me makes me stronger" is not a cliché but fact.

The struggle against an obstacle inevitably propels the fighter to a new level of functioning. The extent of the struggle determines the extent of the growth. The obstacle is an advantage, not adversity. The enemy is any perception that prevents us from seeing this.

Of all the strategies we've talked about, this is the one you can always use. Everything can be flipped, seen with this kind of gaze: a piercing look that ignores the package and sees only the gift.

Or we can fight it the entire way. The result is the same. The obstacle still exists. One just hurts less. The benefit is still there below the surface. What kind of idiot decides not to take it?

Now the things that other people avoid, or flinch away from, we're thankful for.

When people are:

—rude or disrespectful:

They underestimate us. A huge advantage.

—conniving:

> We won’t have to apologize when we make an example out of them.

—critical or question our abilities:

> Lower expectations are easier to exceed.

—lazy:

> Makes whatever we accomplish seem all the more admirable.

It’s striking: These are perfectly fine starting points, better, in some cases, than whatever you’d have hoped for in the best scenario. What advantage do you derive from someone being polite? Or pulling their punches? Behind the behaviors that provoke an immediate negative reaction is opportunity—some exposed benefit that we can seize mentally and then act upon.

So focus on that—on the poorly wrapped and initially repulsive present you’ve been handed in every seemingly disadvantageous situation. Because beneath the packaging is what we need—often something of real value. A gift of great benefit.

No one is talking glass-half-full-style platitudes here. This must be a complete flip. Seeing through the negative, past its underside, and into its corollary: the positive.