

PART II

Action

WHAT IS ACTION? Action is commonplace, right action is not. As a discipline, it's not any kind of action that will do, but *directed* action. Everything must be done in the service of the whole. Step by step, action by action, we'll dismantle the obstacles in front of us. With persistence and flexibility, we'll act in the best interest of our goals. Action requires courage, not brashness—creative application and not brute force. Our movements and decisions define us: We must be sure to act with deliberation, boldness, and persistence. Those are the attributes of right and effective action. Nothing else—not thinking or evasion or aid from others. Action is the solution and the cure to our predicaments.

THE DISCIPLINE OF ACTION

There was little evidence that Demosthenes was destined to become the greatest orator of Athens, let alone all of history. He was born sickly and frail with a nearly debilitating speech impediment. At seven years old, he lost his father. And then things got worse.

The large inheritance left to him—intended to pay for tutors and the best schools—was stolen by the guardians entrusted to protect him. They refused to pay his tutors, depriving him of the education he was entitled to. Still weak and sick, Demosthenes was also unable to distinguish himself in the other critical sphere of Greek life: the floor of the gymnasias.

Here was this fatherless, effeminate, awkward child who no one understood, who everyone laughed at. Not exactly the boy you'd expect would soon hold the power to mobilize a nation to war by his voice alone.

Disadvantaged by nature, abandoned by the people he depended on, nearly every wrong that can be inflicted on a child befell Demosthenes. None of it was fair, none of it was right. Most of us, were we in his position, would have given up right then and there. But Demosthenes did not.

Stuck in his young mind was the image of a great orator, a man he'd once witnessed speaking at the court at Athens. This lone individual, so skilled and powerful, had held the admiration of the crowd, who hung on his every word for hours—subduing all opposition with no more than the sound of his voice and the strength of his ideas. It inspired and challenged Demosthenes, weak, beaten on, powerless, and ignored; for in many ways, this strong, confident speaker was the opposite of him.

So he did something about it.

To conquer his speech impediment, he devised his own strange exercises. He would fill his mouth with pebbles and practice speaking. He rehearsed full speeches into the wind or while running up steep inclines. He learned to give entire speeches with a single breath. And soon, his quiet, weak voice erupted with booming, powerful clarity.

Demosthenes locked himself away underground—literally—in a dugout he'd had built in which to study and educate himself. To ensure he wouldn't indulge in outside distractions, he shaved half his head so he'd be too embarrassed to go outside. And from that point forward, he dutifully descended each day into his study to work with his voice, his facial expressions, and his arguments.

When he did venture out, it was to learn even more. Every moment, every conversation, every transaction, was an opportunity for him to improve his art. All of it aimed at one goal: to face his enemies in court and win back what had been taken from him. Which he did.

When he came of age, he finally filed suits against the negligent guardians who had wronged him. They evaded his efforts and hired their own lawyers, but he refused to be stopped. Flexible and creative, he matched them suit for suit and delivered countless speeches. Confident in his new strengths, driven on by his own toil, they were no match. Demosthenes eventually won.

Only a fraction of the original inheritance remained, but the money had become secondary. Demosthenes's reputation as an orator, ability to command a crowd and his peerless knowledge of the intricacies of the law, was worth more than whatever remained of a once-great fortune.

Every speech he delivered made him stronger, every day that he stuck with it made him more determined. He could see through bullies and stare down fear. In struggling with his unfortunate fate, Demosthenes found his true calling: He would be the voice of Athens, its great speaker and conscience. He would be successful precisely because of what he'd been through and how he'd reacted to it. He had channeled his rage and pain into his training, and then later into his speeches, fueling it all with a kind of fierceness and power that could be neither matched nor resisted.

Some academic once asked Demosthenes what the three most important traits of speechmaking were. His reply says it all: "Action, Action, Action!"

Sure, Demosthenes lost the inheritance he'd been born with, and that was unfortunate. But in the process of dealing with this reality, he created a far better one—one that could never be taken from him.

But you, when you're dealt a bad hand. What's your response? Do you fold? Or do you play it for all you've got? There's an explosion, metaphoric or otherwise. Are you the guy running toward it? Or running away from it? Or worse, are you paralyzed and do nothing?

This little test of character says everything about us.

And it's sad that so many of us fail—opting away from action. Because action is natural, innate. You trip and fall right now, your body's instincts protect you. You extend your hands to break your fall, so you don't break your face. In a vicious accident, you go into shock but still manage to get your arms up around your face. That's where the term *defensive wounds* comes from. We don't think, we don't complain, we don't argue. We act. We have real strength—more strength than we know.

But in our lives, when our worst instincts are in control, we dally. We don't act like Demosthenes, we act frail and are powerless to make ourselves better. We may be able to articulate a problem, even potential solutions, but then weeks, months, or sometimes years later, the problem is still there. Or it's gotten worse. As though we expect someone else to handle it, as though we honestly believe that there is a chance of obstacles *unobstacle-ing* themselves.

We've all done it. Said: "I am so [overwhelmed, tired, stressed, busy, blocked, outmatched]."

And then what do we do about it? Go out and party. Or treat ourselves. Or sleep in. Or wait.

It feels better to ignore or pretend. But you know deep down that that isn't going to truly make it any better. You've got to act. And you've got to start now.

We forget: In life, it doesn't matter what happens to you or where you came from. It matters what you do with what happens and what you've been given. And the only way you'll do something spectacular is by using it all to your advantage.

People turn shit into sugar all the time—shit that's a lot worse than whatever we're dealing with. I'm talking physical disabilities, racial discrimination, battles against overwhelmingly superior armies. But those

people didn't quit. They didn't feel sorry for themselves. They didn't delude themselves with fantasies about easy solutions. They focused on the one thing that mattered: applying themselves with gusto and creativity.

Born with nothing, into poverty, strife, or the chaos of decades past, certain types of people were freed from modern notions of fairness or good or bad. Because none of it applied to them. What was in front of them was all they knew—all they had. And instead of complaining, they worked with it. They made the best of it. Because they had to, because they didn't have a choice.

No one wants to be born weak or to be victimized. No one wants to be down to their last dollar. No one wants to be stuck behind an obstacle, blocked from where they need to go. Such circumstances are not impressed by perception, but they are not indifferent—or rather immune—from action. In fact, that's the only thing these situations will respond to.

No one is saying you can't take a minute to think, *Dammit, this sucks*. By all means, vent. Exhale. Take stock. Just don't take too long. Because you have to get back to work. Because each obstacle we overcome makes us stronger for the next one.

But . . .

No. No excuses. No exceptions. No way around it: It's on you.

We don't have the luxury of running away. Of hiding. Because we have something very specific we're trying to do. We have an obstacle we have to lean into and transform.

No one is coming to save you. And if we'd like to go where we claim we want to go—to accomplish what we claim are our goals—there is only one way. And that's to meet our problems with the right action.

Therefore, we can always (and only) greet our obstacles

- with energy
- with persistence
- with a coherent and deliberate process
- with iteration and resilience
- with pragmatism
- with strategic vision
- with craftiness and savvy

- and an eye for opportunity and pivotal moments

Are you ready to get to work?

GET MOVING

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

—THEODORE ROOSEVELT

Amelia Earhart wanted to be a great aviator. But it was the 1920s, and people still thought that women were frail and weak and didn't have the stuff. Woman suffrage was not even a decade old.

She couldn't make her living as a pilot, so she took a job as a social worker. Then one day the phone rang. The man on the line had a pretty offensive proposition, along the lines of: *We have someone willing to fund the first female transatlantic flight. Our first choice has already backed out. You won't get to actually fly the plane, and we're going to send two men along as chaperones and guess what, we'll pay them a lot of money and you won't get anything. Oh, and you very well might die while doing it.*

You know what she said to that offer? She said *yes*.

Because that's what people who defy the odds do. That's how people who become great at things—whether it's flying or blowing through gender stereotypes—do. They start. Anywhere. Anyhow. They don't care if the conditions are perfect or if they're being slighted. Because they know that once they get started, if they can just get some momentum, they can make it work.

As it went for Amelia Earhart. Less than five years later she was the first woman to fly solo nonstop across the Atlantic and became, rightly, one of the most famous and respected people in the world.

But none of that would have happened had she turned up her nose at that offensive offer or sat around feeling sorry for herself. None of it could have happened if she'd stopped after that first accomplishment either. What mattered was that she took the opening and then pressed ahead. That was the reason for her success.

Life can be frustrating. Oftentimes we know what our problems are. We may even know what to do about them. But we fear that taking action is too risky, that we don't have the experience or that it's not how we pictured it or because it's too expensive, because it's too soon, because we think something better might come along, because it might not work.

And you know what happens as a result? Nothing. We do nothing.

Tell yourself: The time for that has passed. The wind is rising. The bell's been rung. Get started, get moving.

We often assume that the world moves at our leisure. We delay when we should initiate. We jog when we should be running or, better yet, sprinting. And then we're shocked—*shocked!*—when nothing big ever happens, when opportunities never show up, when new obstacles begin to pile up, or the enemies finally get their act together.

Of course they did, we gave them room to breathe. We gave them the chance.

So the first step is: Take the bat off your shoulder and give it a swing. You've got to start, to go anywhere.

Now let's say you've already done that. Fantastic. You're already ahead of most people. But let's ask an honest question: Could you be doing more? You probably could—there's always more. At minimum, you could be trying harder. You might have gotten started, but your full effort isn't in it—and that shows.

Is that going to affect your results? No question.

In the first years of World War II, there was no worse assignment for British troops than being sent to the North African front. Methodical and orderly, the British hated the grueling weather and terrain that wreaked havoc on their machines and their plans. They acted how they felt: slow, timid, cautious.

German Field Marshal General Erwin Rommel, on the other hand, loved it. He saw war as a game. A dangerous, reckless, untidy, fast-paced game.

And, most important, he took to this game with incredible energy and was perennially pushing his troops forward.

The German troops had a saying about him: Where Rommel is, there is the front.

That's the next step: ramming your feet into the stirrups and really *going* for it.

That's definitely not what they say about most leaders today. While overpaid CEOs take long vacations and hide behind e-mail autoresponders, some programmer is working eighteen-hour days coding the start-up that will destroy that CEO's business. And if we were honest, we're probably closer to the former than the latter when it comes to the problems we face (or don't face).

While you're sleeping, traveling, attending meetings, or messing around online, the same thing is happening to you. You're going soft. You're not aggressive enough. You're not pressing ahead. You've got a million reasons why you can't move at a faster pace. This all makes the obstacles in your life loom very large.

For some reason, these days we tend to downplay the importance of aggression, of taking risks, of barreling forward. It's probably because it's been negatively associated with certain notions of violence or masculinity.

But of course Earhart shows that that isn't true. In fact, on the side of her plane she painted the words, "Always think with your stick forward." That is: You can't ever let up your flying speed—if you do, you crash. Be deliberate, of course, but you always need to be moving forward.

And that's the final part: Stay moving, *always*.

Like Earhart, Rommel knew from history that those who attack problems and life with the most initiative and energy usually win. He was always pushing ahead, keeping the stampede on the more cautious British forces to devastating effect.

His string of offensives at Cyrenaica, Tobruk, and Tunisia led to some of the most astonishing victories in the history of warfare. He got started early, while the British were still trying to get comfortable, and as a result, Rommel was able to seize what appeared to be an unstoppable advantage in some of the most uninhabitable terrain on the planet. He blew right through the bleak battlefields of North Africa, with its enormous distances, blinding

sandstorms, scorching heat, and lack of water, because he never, ever stopped moving.

It surprised even his commanding officers, who time and time again attempted to slow Rommel down. They preferred deliberation and discourse to advancement. It had a devastating effect on the momentum that Rommel had built with his troops—just as it does in our own lives.

So when you're frustrated in pursuit of your own goals, don't sit there and complain that you don't have what you want or that this obstacle won't budge. If you haven't even tried yet, then of course you will still be in the exact same place. You haven't actually pursued anything.

We talk a lot about courage as a society, but we forget that at its most basic level it's really just taking action—whether that's approaching someone you're intimidated by or deciding to finally crack a book on a subject you need to learn. Just as Earhart did, all the greats you admire started by saying, *Yes, let's go*. And they usually did it in less desirable circumstances than we'll ever suffer.

Just because the conditions aren't exactly to your liking, or you don't feel ready yet, doesn't mean you get a pass. If you want momentum, you'll have to create it yourself, right now, by getting up and getting started.

PRACTICE PERSISTENCE

He says the best way out is always through
And I agree to that, or in so far
As I can see no way out but through.

—ROBERT FROST

For nearly a year, General Ulysses S. Grant tried to crack the defenses of Vicksburg, a city perched high on the cliffs of the Mississippi, critical to the Confederacy's stranglehold on the most important river in the country. He tried attacking head-on. He tried to go around. He spent months digging a new canal that would change the course of the river. He blew the levees upstream and literally tried to float boats down into the city over flooded land.

None of it worked. All the while, the newspapers chattered. It'd been months without progress. Lincoln had sent a replacement, and the man was waiting in the wings. But Grant refused to be rattled, refused to rush or cease. He knew there was a weak spot somewhere. He'd find it or he'd make one.

His next move ran contrary to nearly all conventional military theory. He decided to run his boats past the gun batteries guarding the river—a considerable risk, because once down, they could not come back up. Despite an unprecedented nighttime firefight, nearly all the boats made the run unharmed. A few days later, Grant crossed the river about thirty miles downstream at the appropriately named Hard Times, Louisiana.

Grant's plan was bold: Leaving most of their supplies behind, his troops had to live off the land and make their way up the river, taking town after town along the way. By the time Grant laid siege to Vicksburg itself, the message to his men and his enemies was clear: He would never give up. The defenses would eventually crack. Grant was unstoppable. His victory wouldn't be pretty, but it was inexorable.

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

At Vicksburg, Grant learned two things. First, persistence and pertinacity were incredible assets and probably his main assets as a leader. Second, as often is the result from such dedication, in exhausting all the other traditional options, he'd been forced to try something new. That option—cutting loose from his supply trains and living off the spoils of hostile territory—was a previously untested strategy that the North could now use to slowly deplete the South of its resources and will to fight.

In persistence, he'd not only broken through: In trying it all the wrong ways, Grant discovered a totally new way—the way that would eventually win the war.

Grant's story is not the exception to the rule. It *is* the rule. This is how innovation works.

In 1878, Thomas Edison wasn't the only person experimenting with incandescent lights. But he was the only man willing to test six thousand different filaments—including one made from the beard hair of one of his men— inching closer each time to the one that would finally work.

And, of course, he eventually found it—proving that genius often really is just persistence in disguise. In applying the entirety of his physical and mental energy—in never growing weary or giving up—Edison had outlasted impatient competitors, investors, and the press to discover, in a piece of bamboo, of all things, the power to illuminate the world.

Nikola Tesla, who spent a frustrated year in Edison's lab during the invention of the lightbulb, once sneered that if Edison needed to find a needle in a haystack, he would “proceed at once” to simply “examine straw after straw until he found the object of his search.” Well, sometimes that's exactly the right method.

As we butt up against obstacles, it is helpful to picture Grant and Edison. Grant with a cigar clenched in his mouth. Edison on his hands and knees in the laboratory for days straight. Both unceasing, embodying cool persistence and the spirit of the line from the Alfred Lord Tennyson poem about that other Ulysses, “to strive, to seek, to find.” Both, refusing to give up. Turning over in their minds option after option, and trying each one with equal enthusiasm. Knowing that eventually—*inevitably*—one will work. Welcoming the opportunity to test and test and test, grateful for the priceless knowledge this reveals.

The thing standing in your way isn’t going anywhere. You’re not going to outthink it or outcreate it with some world-changing epiphany. You’ve got to look at it and the people around you, who have begun their inevitable chorus of doubts and excuses, and say, as Margaret Thatcher famously did: “You turn if you want to. The lady’s not for turning.”

Too many people think that great victories like Grant’s and Edison’s came from a flash of insight. That they cracked the problem with pure genius. In fact, it was the slow pressure, repeated from many different angles, the elimination of so many other more promising options, that slowly and surely churned the solution to the top of the pile. Their genius was unity of purpose, deafness to doubt, and the desire to stay at it.

So what if this method isn’t as “scientific” or “proper” as others? The important part is that it works.

Working at it *works*. It’s that simple. (But again, not easy.)

For most of what we attempt in life, chops are not the issue. We’re usually skilled and knowledgeable and capable enough. But do we have the patience to refine our idea? The energy to beat on enough doors until we find investors or supporters? The persistence to slog through the politics and drama of working with a group?

Once you start attacking an obstacle, quitting is not an option. It cannot enter your head. Abandoning one path for another that might be more promising? Sure, but that’s a far cry from giving up. Once you can envision yourself quitting altogether, you might as well ring the bell. It’s done.

Consider this mind-set.

never in a hurry

never worried
never desperate
never stopping short

Remember and remind yourself of a phrase favored by Epictetus: “persist and resist.” Persist in your efforts. Resist giving in to distraction, discouragement, or disorder.

There’s no need to sweat this or feel rushed. No need to get upset or despair. You’re not going anywhere—you’re not going to be counted out. You’re in this for the long haul.

Because when you play all the way to the whistle, there’s no reason to worry about the clock. You know you won’t stop until it’s over—that every second available is yours to use. So temporary setbacks aren’t discouraging. They are just bumps along a long road that you intend to travel all the way down.

Doing new things invariably means obstacles. A new path is, by definition, uncleared. Only with persistence and time can we cut away debris and remove impediments. Only in struggling with the impediments that made others quit can we find ourselves on untrodden territory—only by persisting and resisting can we learn what others were too impatient to be taught.

It’s okay to be discouraged. It’s not okay to quit. To know you want to quit but to plant your feet and keep inching closer until you take the impenetrable fortress you’ve decided to lay siege to in your own life—*that’s* persistence.

Edison once explained that in inventing, “the first step is an intuition—and comes with a burst—*then* difficulties arise.” What set Edison apart from other inventors is tolerance for these difficulties, and the steady dedication with which he applied himself toward solving them.

In other words: It’s *supposed* to be hard. Your first attempts *aren’t going to work*. It’s going to take a lot out of you—but energy is an asset we can always find more of. It’s a renewable resource. Stop looking for an epiphany, and start looking for weak points. Stop looking for angels, and start looking for angles. There are options. Settle in for the long haul and then try each and every possibility, and you’ll get there.

When people ask where we are, what we're doing, how that "situation" is coming along, the answer should be clear: We're working on it. We're getting closer. When setbacks come, we respond by working twice as hard.

ITERATE

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

—WENDELL PHILLIPS

In Silicon Valley, start-ups don't launch with polished, finished businesses. Instead, they release their "Minimum Viable Product" (MVP)—the most basic version of their core idea with only one or two essential features.

The point is to immediately see how customers respond. And, if that response is poor, to be able to fail cheaply and quickly. To avoid making or investing in a product customers do not want.

As engineers now like to quip: Failure is a Feature.

But it's no joke. Failure really can be an asset if what you're trying to do is improve, learn, or do something new. It's the preceding feature of nearly all successes. There's nothing shameful about being wrong, about changing course. Each time it happens we have new options. Problems become opportunities.

The old way of business—where companies guess what customers want from research and then produce those products in a lab, isolated and insulated from feedback—reflects a fear of failure and is deeply fragile in relation to it. If the highly produced product flops on launch day, all that effort was wasted. If it succeeds, no one really knows why or what was responsible for that success. The MVP model, on the other hand, embraces failure and feedback. It gets stronger by failure, dropping the features that

don't work, that customers don't find interesting, and then focusing the developers' limited resources on improving the features that do.

In a world where we increasingly work for ourselves, are responsible for ourselves, it makes sense to view ourselves like a start-up—a start-up of one.

And that means changing the relationship with failure. It means iterating, failing, and improving. Our capacity to try, try, try is inextricably linked with our ability and tolerance to fail, fail, fail.

On the path to successful action, we will fail—possibly many times. And that's okay. It can be a good thing, even. Action and failure are two sides of the same coin. One doesn't come without the other. What breaks this critical connection down is when people stop acting—because they've taken failure the wrong way.

When failure does come, ask: *What went wrong here? What can be improved? What am I missing?* This helps birth alternative ways of doing what needs to be done, ways that are often much better than what we started with. Failure puts you in corners you have to think your way out of. It is a source of breakthroughs.

This is why stories of great success are often preceded by epic failure—because the people in them went back to the drawing board. They weren't ashamed to fail, but spurred on, piqued by it. Sometimes in sports it takes a close loss to finally convince an underdog that they've got the ability to compete that competitor that had intimidated (and beat) them for so long. The loss might be painful, but as Franklin put it, it can also instruct.

With a business, we take most failures less personally and understand they're part of the process. If an investment or a new product pays off, great. If it fails, we're fine because we're prepared for it—we didn't invest every penny in that option.

Great entrepreneurs are:

- never wedded to a position
- never afraid to lose a little of their investment
- never bitter or embarrassed
- never out of the game for long

They slip many times, but they don't fall.

Even though we know that there are great lessons from failure—lessons we've seen with our own two eyes—we repeatedly shrink from it. We do everything we can to avoid it, thinking it's embarrassing or shameful. We fail, kicking and screaming.

Well why would I want to fail? It hurts.

I would never claim it doesn't. But can we acknowledge that anticipated, temporary failure certainly hurts less than catastrophic, permanent failure? Like any good school, learning from failure isn't free. The tuition is paid in discomfort or loss and having to start over.

Be glad to pay the cost. There will be no better teacher for your career, for your book, for your new venture. There's a saying about how the Irish ship captain located all the rocks in the harbor—using the bottom of his boat. Whatever works, right?

Remember Erwin Rommel and the quick work he made of the British and American forces in North Africa? There's another part to that story. The Allied forces actually chose that disadvantageous battlefield on purpose. Churchill knew that they would have to take their first stand against the Germans somewhere, but to do that *and* lose in Europe would be disastrous for morale.

In North Africa, the British learned how to fight the Germans—and early on they learned mostly by failure. But that was acceptable, because they'd anticipated a learning curve and planned for it. They welcomed it because they knew, like Grant and Edison did, what it meant: victory further down the road. As a result, the Allied troops Hitler faced in Italy were far better than those he'd faced in Africa and the ones he ultimately faced in France and Germany were better still.

The one way to guarantee we don't benefit from failure—to ensure it is a bad thing—is to not learn from it. To continue to try the same thing over and over (which is the definition of insanity for a reason). People fail in small ways all the time. But they don't learn. They don't listen. They don't see the problems that failure exposes. It doesn't make them better.

Thickheaded and resistant to change, these are the types who are too self-absorbed to realize that the world doesn't have time to plead, argue, and convince them of their errors. Soft bodied and hardheaded, they have too much armor and ego to fail well.

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

Lessons come hard only if you're deaf to them. Don't be.

Being able to see and understand the world this way is part and parcel of overturning obstacles. Here, a negative becomes a positive. We turn what would otherwise be disappointment into opportunity. Failure shows us the way—by showing us what *isn't* the way.

FOLLOW THE PROCESS

Under the comb
the tangle and the straight path
are the same.

—HERACLITUS

Coach Nick Saban doesn't actually refer to it very often, but every one of his assistants and players lives by it. They say it for him, tattooing it at the front of their minds and on every action they take, because just two words are responsible for their unprecedented success: The Process.

Saban, the head coach of the University of Alabama football team—perhaps the most dominant dynasty in the history of college football—doesn't focus on what every other coach focuses on, or at least not the way they do. He teaches The Process.

“Don't think about winning the SEC Championship. Don't think about the national championship. Think about what you needed to do in this drill, on this play, in this moment. That's the process: Let's think about what we can do today, the task at hand.”

In the chaos of sport, as in life, process provides us a way.

It says: Okay, you've got to do something very difficult. Don't focus on that. Instead break it down into pieces. Simply do what you *need* to do *right now*. And do it well. And then move on to the next thing. Follow the process and not the prize.

The road to back-to-back championships is just that, a road. And you travel along a road in steps. Excellence is a matter of steps. Excelling at this one, then that one, and then the one after that. Saban's process is exclusively this—existing in the present, taking it one step at a time, not getting distracted by anything else. Not the other team, not the scoreboard or the crowd.

The process is about finishing. Finishing games. Finishing workouts. Finishing film sessions. Finishing drives. Finishing reps. Finishing plays. Finishing blocks. Finishing the smallest task you have right in front of you and finishing it well.

Whether it's pursuing the pinnacle of success in your field or simply surviving some awful or trying ordeal, the same approach works. Don't think about the end—think about surviving. Making it from meal to meal, break to break, checkpoint to checkpoint, paycheck to paycheck, one day at a time.

And when you really get it right, even the hardest things become manageable. Because the process is relaxing. Under its influence, we needn't panic. Even mammoth tasks become just a series of component parts.

This was what the great nineteenth-century pioneer of meteorology, James Pollard Espy, was shown in a chance encounter as a young man. Unable to read and write until he was eighteen, Espy attended a rousing speech by the famous orator Henry Clay. After the talk, a spellbound Espy tried to make his way toward Clay, but he couldn't form the words to speak to his idol. One of his friends shouted out for him: "He wants to be like you, even though he can't read."

Clay grabbed one of his posters, which had the word CLAY written in big letters. He looked at Espy and said, "You see that, boy?" pointing to a letter. "That's an A. Now, you've only got twenty-five more letters to go."

Espy had just been gifted the process. Within a year, he started college.

I know that seems almost too simple. But envision, for a second, a master practicing an exceedingly difficult craft and making it look effortless. There's no strain, no struggling. So relaxed. No exertion or worry. Just one clean movement after another. That's a result of the process.

We can channel this, too. We needn't scramble like we're so often inclined to do when some difficult task sits in front of us. Remember the

first time you saw a complicated algebra equation? It was a jumble of symbols and unknowns. But then you stopped, took a deep breath, and broke it down. You isolated the variables, solved for them, and all that was left was the answer.

Do that now, for whatever obstacles you come across. We can take a breath, do the immediate, composite part in front of us—and follow its thread into the next action. Everything in order, everything connected.

When it comes to our actions, disorder and distraction are death. The unordered mind loses track of what's in front of it—what matters—and gets distracted by thoughts of the future. The process is order, it keeps our perceptions in check and our actions in sync.

It seems obvious, but we forget this when it matters most.

Right now, if I knocked you down and pinned you to the ground, how would you respond? You'd probably panic. And then you'd push with all your strength to get me off you. It wouldn't work; just using my body weight, I would be able to keep your shoulders against the ground with little effort—and you'd grow exhausted fighting it.

That's the opposite of the process.

There is a much easier way. First, you don't panic, you conserve your energy. You don't do anything stupid like get yourself choked out by acting without thinking. You focus on not letting it get worse. Then you get your arms up, to brace and create some breathing room, some space. Now work to get on your side. From there you can start to break down my hold on you: Grab an arm, trap a leg, buck with your hips, slide in a knee and push away.

It'll take some time, but you'll get yourself out. At each step, the person on top is forced to give a little up, until there's nothing left. Then you're free—thanks to the process.

Being trapped is just a position, not a fate. You get out of it by addressing and eliminating each part of that position through small, deliberate actions—not by trying (and failing) to push it away with superhuman strength.

With our business rivals, we rack our brains to think of some mind-blowing new product that will make them irrelevant, and, in the process, we take our eye off the ball. We shy away from writing a book or making a film even though it's our dream because it's so much work—we can't imagine how we get from here to there.

How often do we compromise or settle because we feel that the real solution is too ambitious or outside our grasp? How often do we assume that change is impossible because it's too big? Involves too many different groups? Or worse, how many people are paralyzed by all their ideas and inspirations? They chase them all and go nowhere, distracting themselves and never making headway. They're brilliant, sure, but they rarely execute. They rarely get where they want and need to go.

All these issues are solvable. Each would collapse beneath the process. We've just wrongly assumed that it has to happen all at once, and we give up at the thought of it. We are A-to-Z thinkers, fretting about A, obsessing over Z, yet forgetting all about B through Y.

We want to have goals, yes, so everything we do can be in the service of something purposeful. When we know what we're really setting out to do, the obstacles that arise tend to seem smaller, more manageable. When we don't, each one looms larger and seems impossible. Goals help put the blips and bumps in proper proportion.

When we get distracted, when we start caring about something other than our own progress and efforts, the process is the helpful, if occasionally bossy, voice in our head. It is the bark of the wise, older leader who knows exactly who he is and what he's got to do: *Shut up. Go back to your stations and try to think about what we are going to do ourselves instead of worrying about what's going on out there. You know what your job is. Stop jawing and get to work.*

The process is the voice that demands we take responsibility and ownership. That prompts us to *act* even if only in a small way.

Like a relentless machine, subjugating resistance each and every way it exists, little by little. Moving forward, one step at a time. Subordinate strength to the process. Replace fear with the process. Depend on it. Lean on it. Trust in it.

Take your time, don't rush. Some problems are harder than others. Deal with the ones right in front of you first. Come back to the others later. You'll get there.

The process is about doing the right things, *right now*. Not worrying about what might happen later, or the results, or the whole picture.

DO YOUR JOB, DO IT RIGHT

Whatever is rightly done, however humble, is noble. (*Quidvis recte factum quamvis humile praeclarum.*)

—SIR HENRY ROYCE

Long past his humble beginnings, President Andrew Johnson would speak proudly of his career as a tailor before he entered politics. “My garments never ripped or gave way,” he would say.

On the campaign trail, a heckler once tried to embarrass him by shouting about his working-class credentials. Johnson replied without breaking stride: “That does not disconcert me in the least; for when I used to be a tailor I had the reputation of being a good one, and making close fits, always punctual with my customers, and always did good work.”

Another president, James Garfield, paid his way through college in 1851 by persuading his school, the Western Reserve Eclectic Institute, to let him be the janitor in exchange for tuition. He did the job every day smiling and without a hint of shame. Each morning, he’d ring the university’s bell tower to start the classes—his day already having long begun—and stomp to class with cheer and eagerness.

Within just one year of starting at the school he was a professor—teaching a full course load in addition to his studies. By his twenty-sixth birthday he was the dean.

This is what happens when you do your job—whatever it is—and do it well.

These men went from humble poverty to power by always doing what they were asked to do—and doing it right and with real pride. And doing it better than anyone else. In fact, doing it well because no one else wanted to do it.

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

But you, you're so busy thinking about the future, you don't take any pride in the tasks you're given right now. You just phone it all in, cash your paycheck, and dream of some higher station in life. Or you think, *This is just a job, it isn't who I am, it doesn't matter.*

Foolishness.

Everything we do matters—whether it's making smoothies while you save up money or studying for the bar—even after you already achieved the success you sought. Everything is a chance to do and be your best. Only self-absorbed assholes think they are too good for whatever their current station requires.

Wherever we are, whatever we're doing and wherever we are going, we owe it to ourselves, to our art, to the world to do it well. That's our primary duty. And our obligation. When action is our priority, vanity falls away.

An artist is given many different canvases and commissions in their lifetime, and what matters is that they treat each one as a priority. Whether it's the most glamorous or highest paying is irrelevant. Each project matters, and the only degrading part is giving less than one is capable of giving.

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

hard work

honesty

helping others as best we can

You should never have to ask yourself, *But what am I supposed to do now?* Because you know the answer: your job.

Whether anyone notices, whether we're paid for it, whether the project turns out successfully—it doesn't matter. We can and always should act with those three traits—no matter the obstacle.

There will never be any obstacles that can ever truly prevent us from carrying out our obligation—harder or easier challenges, sure, but never impossible. Each and every task requires our best. Whether we're facing down bankruptcy and angry customers, or raking in money and deciding how to grow from here, if we do our best we can be proud of our choices and confident they're the right ones. Because we did our job—whatever it is.

Yeah, yeah, I get it. “Obligations” sound stuffy and oppressive. You want to be able to do whatever you want.

But duty is beautiful, and inspiring and empowering.

Steve Jobs cared even about the inside of his products, making sure they were beautifully designed even though the users would never see them. Taught by his father—who finished even the back of his cabinets though they would be hidden against the wall—to think like a craftsman. In every design predicament, Jobs knew his marching orders: Respect the craft and make something beautiful.

Every situation is different, obviously. We're not inventing the next iPad or iPhone, but we are making something for someone—even if it's just our own résumé. Every part—especially the work that nobody sees, the tough things we wanted to avoid or could have skated away from—we can treat same way Jobs did: with pride and dedication.

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

In every situation, life is asking us a question, and our actions are the answer. Our job is simply to answer well.

Right action—unselfish, dedicated, masterful, creative—that is the answer to that question. That's one way to find the meaning of life. And how to turn every obstacle into an opportunity.

If you see any of this as a burden, you're looking at it the wrong way.

Because all we need to do is those three little duties—to try hard, to be honest, and to help others and ourselves. That's all that's been asked of us. No more and no less.

Sure, the goal is important. But never forget that each individual instance matters, too—each is a snapshot of the whole. The whole isn't certain, only the instances are.

How you do anything is how you can do everything.

We can always act right.

WHAT'S RIGHT IS WHAT WORKS

The cucumber is bitter? Then throw it out.
There are brambles in the path? Then go around.
That's all you need to know.

—MARCUS AURELIUS

In 1915, deep in the jungles of South America, the rising conflict between two rival American fruit companies came to a head. Each desperately wanted to acquire the same five thousand acres of valuable land.

The issue? Two different locals claimed to own the deed to the plantation. In the no-man's-land between Honduras and Guatemala, neither company was able to tell who was the rightful owner so they could buy it from them.

How they each responded to this problem was defined by their company's organization and ethos. One company was big and powerful, the other crafty and cunning. The first, one of the most powerful corporations in the United States: United Fruit. The second, a small upstart owned by Samuel Zemurray.

To solve the problem, United Fruit dispatched a team of high-powered lawyers. They set out in search of every file and scrap of paper in the country, ready to pay whatever it cost to win. Money, time, and resources were no object.

Zemurray, the tiny, uneducated competitor, was outmatched, right? He couldn't play their game. So he didn't. Flexible, fluid, and defiant, he just met separately with both of the supposed owners and bought the land from

each of them. He paid twice, sure, but it was *over*. The land was his. Forget the rule book, settle the issue.

This is *pragmatism* embodied. Don't worry about the "right" way, worry about the *right* way. This is how we get things done.

Zemurray always treated obstacles this way. Told he couldn't build a bridge he needed across the Utila River—because government officials had been bribed by competitors to make bridges illegal—Zemurray had his engineers build two long piers instead. And in between which reached out far into the center of the river, they strung a temporary pontoon that could be assembled and deployed to connect them in a matter of hours. Railroads ran down each side of the riverbank, going in opposite direction. When United Fruit complained, Zemurray laughed and replied: "Why, that's no bridge. It's just a couple of little old wharfs."

Sometimes you do it *this* way. Sometimes *that* way. Not deploying the tactics you learned in school but adapting them to fit each and every situation. Any way that *works*—that's the motto.

We spend a lot of time thinking about how things are supposed to be, or what the rules say we should do. Trying to get it all perfect. We tell ourselves that we'll get started once the conditions are right, or once we're sure we can trust this or that. When, really, it'd be better to focus on making due with what we've got. On focusing on results instead of pretty methods.

As they say in Brazilian jujitsu, it doesn't matter how you get your opponents to the ground, after all, only that you take them down.

What Zemurray never lost sight of was the mission: getting bananas across the river. Whether it was a bridge or two piers with a dock in the middle, it didn't matter so long as it got the cargo where it needed to go. When he wanted to plant bananas on a particular plantation, it wasn't important to find the rightful owner of the land—it was to *become* the rightful owner.

You've got your mission, whatever it is. To accomplish it, like the rest of us you're in the pinch between the way you wish things were and the way they actually are (which always seem to be a disaster). How far are you willing to go? What are you willing to do about it?

Scratch the complaining. No waffling. No submitting to powerlessness or fear. You can't just run home to Mommy. How are you going to solve

this problem? How are you going to get around the rules that hold you back?

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

At twenty-one, Richard Wright was not the world-famous author he would eventually be. But poor and black, he decided he would read and no one could stop him. Did he storm the library and make a scene? No, not in the Jim Crow South he didn't. Instead, he forged a note that said, "Dear Madam: Will you please let this nigger boy have some books by HL Mencken?" (because no one would write that about themselves, right?), and checked them out with a stolen library card, pretending they were for someone else.

With the stakes this high, you better be willing to bend the rules or do something desperate or crazy. To thumb your nose at the authorities and say: *What? This is not a bridge. I don't know what you're talking about.* Or, in some cases, giving the middle finger to the people trying to hold you down and blowing right through their evil, disgusting rules.

Pragmatism is not so much realism as flexibility. There are a lot of ways to get from point A to point B. It doesn't have to be a straight line. It's just got to get you where you need to go. But so many of us spend so much time looking for the perfect solution that we pass up what's right in front of us.

As Deng Xiaoping once said, "I don't care if the cat is black or white, so long as it catches mice."

The Stoics had their own reminder: "Don't go expecting Plato's Republic."

Because you're never going to find that kind of perfection. Instead, do the best with what you've got. Not that pragmatism is inherently at odds with idealism or pushing the ball forward. The first iPhone was revolutionary, but it still shipped without a copy-and-paste feature or a handful of other features Apple would have liked to have included. Steve Jobs, the supposed perfectionist, knew that at some point, you have to compromise. What mattered was that you got it done and it *worked*.

Start thinking like a radical pragmatist: still ambitious, aggressive, and rooted in ideals, but also imminently practical and guided by the possible. Not on everything you would like to have, not on changing the world right at this moment, but ambitious enough to get everything you *need*. Don't think small, but make the distinction between the critical and the extra.

Think progress, not perfection.

Under this kind of force, obstacles break apart. They have no choice. Since you're going around them or making them irrelevant, there is nothing for them to resist.

IN PRAISE OF THE FLANK ATTACK

Whoever cannot seek
the unforeseen sees nothing,
for the known way
is an impasse.

—HERACLITUS

The popular image of George Washington in American lore is of a brave and bold general, towering over everything he surveyed, repelling the occupied and tyrannical British. Of course, the true picture is a little less glorious. Washington wasn't a guerrilla, but he was close enough. He was wily, evasive, often refusing to battle.

His army was small, undertrained, undersupplied, and fragile. He waged a war mostly of defense, deliberately avoiding large formations of British troops. For all the rhetoric, most of his maneuvers were pinpricks against a stronger, bigger enemy. Hit and run. Stick and move.

Never attack where it is obvious, Washington told his men. Don't attack as the enemy would expect, he explained, instead, "Where little danger is apprehended, the more the enemy will be unprepared and consequently there is the fairest prospect of success." He had a powerful sense of which minor skirmishes would feel and look like major victories.

His most glorious "victory" wasn't even a direct battle with the British. Instead, Washington, nearly at the end of his rope, crossed the Delaware at dawn on Christmas Day to attack a group of sleeping German mercenaries who may or may not have been drunk.

He was actually better at withdrawing than at advancing—skilled at saving troops that otherwise would have been lost in defeat. Washington rarely got trapped—he always had a way out. Hoping simply to tire out his enemy, this evasiveness was a powerful weapon—though not necessarily a glamorous one.

It's not surprising then, as the general of the Continental Army and the country's first president, that his legacy has been whitewashed and embellished a little. And he's not the only general we've done it for. The great myth of history, propagated by movies and stories and our own ignorance, is that wars are won and lost by two great armies going head-to-head in battle. It's a dramatic, courageous notion—but also very, very wrong.

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

Only six. That's 2 percent.

If not from pitched battles, where do we find victory?

From everywhere else. From the flanks. From the unexpected. From the psychological. From drawing opponents out from their defenses. From the untraditional. From anything *but* . . .

As Hart writes in his masterwork *Strategy*:

[T]he Great Captain will take even the most hazardous indirect approach—if necessary over mountains, deserts or swamps, with only a fraction of the forces, even cutting himself loose from his communications. Facing, in fact, every unfavorable condition rather than accept the risk of stalemate invited by direct approach.

When you're at your wit's end, straining and straining with all your might, when people tell you you look like you might pop a vein . . .

Take a step back, then go around the problem. Find some leverage. Approach from what is called the "line of least expectation."

What's your first instinct when faced with a challenge? Is it to outspend the competition? Argue with people in an attempt to change long-held opinions? Are you trying to barge through the front door? Because the back door, side doors, and windows may have been left wide open.

Whatever you're doing, it's going to be harder (to say nothing of impossible) if your plan includes defying physics or logic. Instead, think of Grant realizing he had to bypass Vicksburg—not go at it—in order to capture it. Think of Hall of Fame coach Phil Jackson and his famous triangle offense, which is designed to automatically route the basketball *away* from defensive pressure rather than attack it directly.

If we're starting from scratch and the established players have had time to build up their defenses, there is just no way we are going to beat them on their strengths. So it's smarter to not even try, but instead focus our limited resources elsewhere.

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

As someone once put it after fighting Jigoro Kano, the legendary five-foot-tall founder of judo, “Trying to fight with Kano was like trying to fight with an empty jacket!”

That can be you.

Being outnumbered, coming from behind, being low on funds, these don't have to be disadvantages. They can be gifts. Assets that make us less likely to commit suicide with a head-to-head attack. These things *force* us to be creative, to find workarounds, to sublimate the ego and do anything to win besides challenging our enemies where they are strongest. These are the signs that tell us to approach from an oblique angle.

In fact, having the advantage of size or strength or power is often the birthing ground for true and fatal weakness. The inertia of success makes it much harder to truly develop good technique. People or companies who have that size advantage never really have to learn the process when they've been able to coast on brute force. And that works for them . . . until it doesn't. Until they meet you and you make quick work of them with deft

and oblique maneuvers, when you refuse to face them in the one setting they know: head-to-head.

We're in the game of little defeating big. Therefore, Force can't try to match Force.

Of course, when pushed, the natural instinct is always to push back. But martial arts teach us that we have to ignore this impulse. We can't push back, we have to *pull* until opponents lose their balance. Then we make our move.

The art of the side-door strategy is a vast, creative space. And it is by no means limited to war, business, or sales.

The great philosopher Søren Kierkegaard rarely sought to convince people directly from a position of authority. Instead of lecturing, he practiced a method he called "indirect communication." Kierkegaard would write under pseudonyms, where each fake personality would embody a different platform or perspective—writing multiple times on the same subject from multiple angles to convey his point emotionally and dramatically. He would rarely tell the reader "do this" or "think that." Instead he would *show* new ways of looking at or understanding the world.

You don't convince people by challenging their longest and most firmly held opinions. You find common ground and work from there. Or you look for leverage to make them listen. Or you create an alternative with so much support from other people that the opposition voluntarily abandons its views and joins your camp.

The way that works isn't always the most impressive. Sometimes it even feels like you're taking a shortcut or fighting unfairly. There's a lot of pressure to try to match people move for move, as if sticking with what works for you is somehow cheating. Let me save you the guilt and self-flagellation: It's not.

You're acting like a real strategist. You aren't just throwing your weight around and hoping it works. You're not wasting your energy in battles driven by ego and pride rather than tactical advantage.

Believe it or not, *this* is the hard way. That's why it works.

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

USE OBSTACLES AGAINST THEMSELVES

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

—PLUTARCH

Gandhi didn't fight for independence for India. The British Empire did all of the fighting—and, as it happens, all of the losing.

That was deliberate, of course. Gandhi's extensive satyagraha campaign and civil disobedience show that *action* has many definitions. It's not always moving forward or even obliquely. It can also be a matter of positions. It can be a matter of taking a stand.

Sometimes you overcome obstacles not by attacking them but by withdrawing and letting them attack you. You can use the actions of others against themselves instead of acting yourself.

Weak compared to the forces he hoped to change, Gandhi leaned into that weakness, exaggerated it, exposed himself. He said to the most powerful occupying military in the world, *I'm marching to the ocean to collect salt in direct violation of your laws*. He was provoking them—*What are you going to do about it? There is nothing wrong with what we're doing*—knowing that it placed authorities in an impossible dilemma: Enforce a bankrupt policy or abdicate. Within that framework, the military's enormous strength is neutralized. Its very usage is counterproductive.

Martin Luther King Jr., taking Gandhi's lead, told his followers that they would meet “physical force with soul force.” In other words, they would use the power of opposites. In the face of violence they would be peaceful,

to hate they would answer with love—and in the process, they would expose those attributes as indefensible and evil.

Opposites work. Nonaction can be action. It uses the power of others and allows us to absorb their power as our own. Letting them—or the obstacle—do the work for us.

Just ask the Russians, who defeated Napoléon and the Nazis not by rigidly protecting their borders but by retreating into the interior and leaving the winter to do their work on the enemy, bogged down in battles far from home.

Is this an action? You bet it is.

Perhaps your enemy or obstacle really is insurmountable—as it was for many of these groups. Perhaps in this case, you haven't got the ability to win through attrition (persistence) or you don't want to risk learning on the job (iterate). Okay. You're still a long way from needing to give up.

It is, however, time to acknowledge that some adversity might be impossible for you to defeat—no matter how hard you try. Instead, you must find some way to use the adversity, its *energy*, to help yourself.

Before the invention of steam power, boat captains had an ingenious way of defeating the wickedly strong current of the Mississippi River. A boat going upriver would pull alongside a boat about to head downriver, and after wrapping a rope around a tree or a rock, the boats would tie themselves to each other. The second boat would let go and let the river take it downstream, slingshotting the other vessel upstream.

So instead of fighting obstacles, find a means of *making them defeat themselves*.

There is a famous story of Alexander the Great doing just that—and it was Alexander's masterful use of an obstacle against itself that gave observers their first hint that the ambitious teenager might one day conquer the world. As a young man, he trained his famous horse Bucephalus—the horse that even his father, King Philip II of Macedon, could not break—by tiring him out. While others had tried sheer force and whips and ropes, only to be bucked off, Alexander succeeded by lightly mounting and simply hanging on until the horse was calm. Having exhausted himself, Bucephalus had no choice but to submit to his rider's influence. Alexander would ride into battle on this faithful horse for the next twenty years.

Now what of your obstacles?

Yes, sometimes we need to learn from Amelia Earhart and just take action. But we also have to be ready to see that *restraint* might be the best action for us to take. Sometimes in your life you need to have patience—wait for temporary obstacles to fizzle out. Let two jousting egos sort themselves out instead of jumping immediately into the fray. Sometimes a problem needs *less* of you—fewer people period—and not more.

When we want things too badly we can be our own worst enemy. In our eagerness, we strip the very screw we want to turn and make it impossible to ever get what we want. We spin our tires in the snow or mud and dig a deeper rut—one that we'll never get out of.

We get so consumed with moving forward that we forget that there are other ways to get where we are heading. It doesn't naturally occur to us that standing still—or in some cases, even going backward—might be the best way to advance. Don't just do something, stand there!

We push and push—to get a raise, a new client, to prevent some exigency from happening. In fact, the best way to get what we want might be to reexamine those desires in the first place. Or it might be to aim for something else entirely, and use the impediment as an opportunity to explore a new direction. In doing so, we might end up creating a new venture that replaces our insufficient income entirely. Or we might discover that in ignoring clients, we attract more—finding that they want to work with someone who does not so badly want to work with them. Or we rethink that disaster we feared (along with everyone else) and come up with a way to profit from it when and if it happens.

We wrongly assume that moving forward is the only way to progress, the only way we can win. Sometimes, staying put, going sideways, or moving backward is actually the best way to eliminate what blocks or impedes your path.

There is a certain humility required in the approach. It means accepting that the way you originally wanted to do things is not possible. You just haven't got it in you to do it the “traditional” way. But so what?

What matters is whether a certain approach gets you to where you want to go. And let's be clear, using obstacles against themselves is very different from doing nothing. Passive resistance is, in fact, incredibly active. But those actions come in the form of discipline, self-control, fearlessness, determination, and grand strategy.

The great strategist Saul Alinsky believed that if you “push a negative hard enough and deep enough it will break through into its counterside.” Every positive has its negative. Every negative has its positive. The *action* is in the pushing through—all the way through to the other side. *Making* a negative into a positive.

This should be great solace. It means that very few obstacles are ever too big for us. Because that bigness might in fact be an advantage. Because we can use that bigness against the obstacle itself. Remember, a castle can be an intimidating, impenetrable fortress, or it can be turned into a prison when surrounded. The difference is simply a shift in action and approach.

We can use the things that block us to our advantage, letting them do the difficult work for us. Sometimes this means leaving the obstacle as is, instead of trying so hard to change it.

The harder Bucephalus ran, the sooner he got tired out. The more vicious the police response to civil disobedience, the more sympathetic the cause becomes. The more they fight, the easier it becomes. The harder you fight, the less you’ll achieve (other than exhaustion).

So it goes with our problems.

CHANNEL YOUR ENERGY

When jarred, unavoidably, by circumstance revert at once to yourself and don't lose the rhythm more than you can help. You'll have a better grasp of harmony if you keep going back to it.

—MARCUS AURELIUS

As a tennis player, Arthur Ashe was a beautiful contradiction. To survive segregation in the 1950s and 1960s, he learned from his father to mask his emotions and feelings on the court. No reacting, no getting upset at missed shots, and no challenging bad calls. Certainly, as a black player he could not afford to show off, celebrate, or be seen as trying too hard.

But his actual form and playing style was something quite different. All the energy and emotion he had to suppress was channeled into a bold and graceful playing form. While his face was controlled, his body was alive—fluid, brilliant, and all over the court. His style is best described in the epithet he created for himself: “physically loose and mentally tight.”

For Arthur Ashe, this combination created a nearly unbeatable tennis game. As a person he'd control his emotions, but as a player he was swashbuckling, bold, and cool. He dove for balls and took—and made—the kind of shots that made other players gasp. He was able to do this because he was free. He was free where it mattered: inside.

Other players, free to celebrate, free to throw tantrums or glower at refs and opponents, never seemed to be able to handle the pressure of high-stakes matches the way Ashe could. They often mistook Ashe as inhuman,

as bottled up. Feelings need an outlet, of course, but Ashe deployed them to fuel his explosive speed, in his slams and chips and dives. In the abandon with which he played, there was none of the quiet prudence with which he composed himself.

Adversity can harden you. Or it can loosen you up and make you better—if you let it.

Rename it and claim it, that's what Ashe did—as have many other black athletes. The boxer Joe Louis, for example, knew that racist white boxing fans would not tolerate an emotional black fighter, so he sublimated all displays behind a steely, blank face. Known as the Ring Robot, he greatly intimidated opponents by seeming almost inhuman. He took a disadvantage and turned it into an unexpected asset in the ring.

We all have our own constraints to deal with—rules and social norms we're required to observe that we'd rather not. Dress codes, protocols, procedures, legal obligations, and company hierarchies that are all telling us how we have to behave. Think about it too much and it can start to feel oppressive, even suffocating. If we're not careful, this is likely to throw us off our game.

Instead of giving in to frustration, we can put it to good use. It can power our actions, which, unlike our disposition, become stronger and better when loose and bold. While others obsess with observing the rules, we're subtly undermining them and subverting them to our advantage. Think water. When dammed by a man-made obstacle, it does not simply sit stagnant. Instead, its energy is stored and deployed, fueling the power plants that run entire cities.

Toussaint Louverture, the former Haitian slave turned general, so exasperated his French enemies that they once remarked: “*Cet homme fait donc l'ouverture partout*” (“This man makes an opening everywhere”). He was so fluid, so uncontainable, he was actually given the surname Louverture, meaning “the opening.” It makes sense. Everything in his life had been an obstacle, and he turned as many of his experiences as he could into openings. Why should troops or politics or mountains or Napoléon himself have been any different?

And yet we feel like going to pieces when the PowerPoint projector won't work (instead of throwing it aside and delivering an exciting talk

without notes). We stir up gossip with our coworkers (instead of pounding something productive out on our keyboards). We act out, instead of *act*.

But think of an athlete “in the pocket,” “in the zone,” “on a streak,” and the seemingly insurmountable obstacles that fall in the face of that effortless state. Enormous deficits collapse, every pass or shot hits its intended target, fatigue melts away. Those athletes might be stopped from carrying out this or that action, but not from their goal. External factors influence the path, but not the direction: forward.

What setbacks in our lives could resist that elegant, fluid, and powerful mastery?

To be physically and mentally loose takes no talent. That’s just recklessness. (We want right action, not action *period*.) To be physically and mentally tight? That’s called anxiety. It doesn’t work, either. Eventually we snap. But physical looseness combined with mental restraint? That is powerful.

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

Because we are.

SEIZE THE OFFENSIVE

The best men are not those who have waited for chances but who have taken them; besieged chance, conquered the chance, and made chance the servitor.

—E. H. CHAPIN

In the spring of 2008, Barack Obama's presidential candidacy was imperiled. A race scandal involving inflammatory remarks by his pastor, Reverend Jeremiah Wright, threatened to unravel his campaign—to break the thin bond he'd established between black and white voters at a critical moment in the primaries.

Race, religion, demographics, controversy emulsified into one. It was the kind of political disaster that political campaigns do not survive, leaving most candidates so paralyzed by fear that they defer taking action. Their typical response is to hide, ignore, obfuscate, or distance themselves.

Whatever one thinks about Obama's politics, no one can deny what happened next. He turned one of the lowest moments in his campaign into a surprise offensive.

Against all advice and convention, he decided that he would take action and that this negative situation was actually a “teachable moment.” Obama channeled the attention and energy swirling around the controversy to draw a national audience and speak directly to the American people of the divisive issue of race.

This speech, known today as the “A More Perfect Union” speech, was a transformative moment. Instead of distancing himself, Obama addressed

everything directly. In doing so, he not only neutralized a potentially fatal controversy but created an opportunity to seize the electoral high ground. Absorbing the power of that negative situation, his campaign was instantly infused with an energy that propelled it into the White House.

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

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

Ignore the politics and focus on the brilliant strategic advice that Obama's adviser Rahm Emanuel, once gave him. "You never want a serious crisis to go to waste. Things that we had postponed for too long, that were long-term, are now immediate and must be dealt with. [A] crisis provides the opportunity for us to do things that you could not do before."

If you look at history, some of our greatest leaders used shocking or negative events to push through much-needed reforms that otherwise would have had little chance of passing. We can apply that in our own lives.

You always planned to do something. Write a screenplay. Travel. Start a business. Approach a possible mentor. Launch a movement.

Well, now something has happened—some disruptive event like a failure or an accident or a tragedy. *Use it.*

Perhaps you're stuck in bed recovering. Well, now you have time to write. Perhaps your emotions are overwhelming and painful, turn it into material. You lost your job or a relationship? That's awful, but now you can travel unencumbered. You're having a problem? Now you know exactly what to approach that mentor about. Seize this moment to deploy the plan that has long sat dormant in your head. Every chemical reaction requires a catalyst. Let this be yours.

Ordinary people shy away from negative situations, just as they do with failure. They do their best to avoid trouble. What great people do is the opposite. They are their best in these situations. They turn personal tragedy or misfortune—really anything, everything—to their advantage.

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

We sit here and complain that we're not being given opportunities or chances. But we are.

At certain moments in our brief existences we are faced with great trials. Often those trials are frustrating, unfortunate, or unfair. They seem to come exactly when we think we need them the least. The question is: Do we accept this as an exclusively negative event, or can we get past whatever negativity or adversity it represents and mount an offensive? Or more precisely, can we see that this "problem" presents an opportunity for a solution that we have long been waiting for?

If you don't *take* that, it's on you.

Napoleon described war in simple terms: Two armies are two bodies that clash and attempt to frighten each other. At impact, there is a moment of panic and it is *that moment* that the superior commander turns to his advantage.

Rommel, for instance, was renowned for his *Fronterführung*, his sixth sense for the decisive point in battle. He had an acute ability to feel—even in the heat of the moment—the precise instance when going on the offensive would be most effective. It's what allowed him to, repeatedly and often unbelievably, snatch victory from the jaws of defeat.

Where others saw disaster or, at best, simply the normal noise and dust of a battle, Rommel sensed opportunities. "It is given to me," he said, "to feel where the enemy is weak." And on these feelings he would attack with every iota of his energy. Seizing control of the tempo and never giving it up.

Great commanders look for decision points. For it is bursts of energy directed at decisive points that break things wide open. They press and press and press and then, exactly when the situation seems hopeless—or, more likely, hopelessly deadlocked—they press once more.

In many battles, as in life, the two opposing forces will often reach a point of mutual exhaustion. It's the one who rises the next morning after a long day of fighting and rallies, instead of retreating—the one who says, *I intend to attack and whip them right here and now*—who will carry victory home . . . intelligently.

This is what Obama did. Not shirking, not giving in to exhaustion despite the long neck-and-neck primary. But rallying at the last moment. Transcending the challenge and reframing it, triumphing as a result of it. He turned an ugly incident into that “teachable moment,” and one of the most profound speeches on race in our history.

The obstacle is not only turned upside down but used as a catapult.

PREPARE FOR NONE OF IT TO WORK

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

—SENECA

Perceptions can be managed. Actions can be directed.

We can always think clearly, respond creatively. Look for opportunity, seize the initiative.

What we can't do is control the world around us—not as much as we'd like to, anyway. We might perceive things well, then act rightly, and fail anyway.

Run it through your head like this: Nothing can ever prevent us from trying. Ever.

All creativity and dedication aside, after we've tried, *some* obstacles may turn out to be impossible to overcome. Some actions are rendered impossible, some paths impassable. Some things are bigger than us.

This is not necessarily a bad thing. Because we can turn that obstacle upside down, too, simply by using it as an opportunity to practice some other virtue or skill—even if it is just learning to accept that bad things happen, or practicing humility.

It's an infinitely elastic formula: In every situation, that which blocks our path actually presents a new path with a new part of us. If someone you love hurts you, there is a chance to practice forgiveness. If your business

fails, now you can practice acceptance. If there is nothing else you can do for yourself, at least you can try to help others.

Problems, as Duke Ellington once said, are a chance for us to do our best.

Just our best, that's it. Not the impossible.

We must be willing to roll the dice and lose. Prepare, at the end of the day, for none of it to work.

Anyone in pursuit of a goal comes face-to-face with this time and time again. Sometimes, no amount of planning, no amount of thinking—no matter how hard we try or patiently we persist—will change the fact that some things just aren't going to work.

The world could use fewer martyrs.

We have it within us to be the type of people who try to get things done, try with everything we've got and, whatever verdict comes in, are ready to accept it instantly and move on to whatever is next.

Is that you? Because it can be.