

The Obstacle Is the Way: The Timeless Art of Turning Trials into Triumph

How skilled we are at cataloging what holds us back!

Every obstacle is unique to each of us. But the responses they elicit are the same: Fear. Frustration. Confusion. Helplessness. Depression. Anger.

“The obstacle in the path becomes the path. Never forget, within every obstacle is an opportunity to improve our condition.”

Our actions may be impeded . . . but there can be no impeding our intentions or dispositions. Because we can accommodate and adapt. The mind adapts and converts to its own purposes the obstacle to our acting. And then he concluded with powerful words destined for maxim. The impediment to action advances action. What stands in the way becomes the way.

Carter did not have much power, but he understood that that was not the same thing as being powerless.

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.

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.

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.”

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.

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

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.

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

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

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.

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.

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.

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.

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.

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

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.

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.

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.

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.

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.

Consider this mind-set. never in a hurry never worried never desperate never stopping short

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.

Settle in for the long haul and then try each and every possibility, and you’ll get there.

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.

The one way to guarantee we don’t benefit from failure—to ensure it is a bad thing—is to not learn from it.

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.

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.

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.

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.

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.

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.

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.

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.

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.

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.

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.

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.

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

What you must do is learn how to press forward precisely when everyone around you sees disaster.

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

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.

Placed in some situation that seems unchangeable and undeniably negative, we can turn it into a learning experience, a humbling experience, a chance to provide comfort to others. That's will power.

True will is quiet humility, resilience, and flexibility; the other kind of will is weakness disguised by bluster and ambition. See which lasts longer under the hardest of obstacles.

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

With all our modern technology has come the conceited delusion that we control the world around us. We're convinced that we can now, finally, control the uncontrollable. Of course that is not true. It's highly unlikely we will ever get rid of all the unpleasant and unpredictable parts of life.

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

Not everyone accepts their bad start in life. They remake their bodies and their lives with activities and exercise. They prepare themselves for the hard road. Do they hope they never have to walk it? Sure. But they are prepared for it in any case.

We craft our spiritual strength through physical exercise, and our physical hardiness through mental practice (*mens sana in corpore sano*—sound mind in a strong body). This approach goes back to the ancient philosophers. Every bit of the philosophy they developed was intended to reshape, prepare, and fortify them for the challenges to come.

You'll have far better luck toughening yourself up than you ever will trying to take the teeth out of a world that is—at best—indifferent to your existence.

The path of least resistance is a terrible teacher. We can't afford to shy away from the things that intimidate us. We don't need to take our weaknesses for granted.

A premortem is different. In it, we look to envision what could go wrong, what will go wrong, in advance, before we start. Far too many ambitious undertakings fail for preventable reasons. Far too many people don't have a backup plan because they refuse to consider that something might not go exactly as they wish.

No one has ever said this better than Mike Tyson, who, reflecting on the collapse of his fortune and fame, told a reporter, "If you're not humble, life will visit humbleness upon you."

"Nothing happens to the wise man against his expectation," he wrote to a friend. "... nor do all things turn out for him as he wished but as he reckoned—and above all he reckoned that something could block his plans."

Common wisdom provides us with the maxims: Beware the calm before the storm. Hope for the best, prepare for the worst. The worst is yet to come. It gets worse before it gets better.

It's better to meditate on what could happen, to probe for weaknesses in our plans, so those inevitable failures can be correctly perceived, appropriately addressed, or simply endured.

About the worst thing that can happen is not something going wrong, but something going wrong and catching you by surprise. Why? Because unexpected failure is discouraging and being beaten back hurts.

It doesn't always feel that way but constraints in life are a good thing. Especially if we can accept them and let them direct us. They push us to places and to develop skills that we'd otherwise never have pursued. Would we rather have everything? Sure, but that isn't up to us. "True genius," as the infamous Dr. Samuel Johnson once said, "is a mind of large general powers accidentally determined in some particular direction

When the cause of our problem lies outside of us, we are better for accepting it and moving on. For ceasing to kick and fight against it, and coming to terms with it. The Stoics have a beautiful name for this attitude. They call it the Art of Acquiescence.

Let's be clear, that is not the same thing as giving up. This has nothing to do with action—this is for the things that are immune to action. It is far easier to talk of the way things should be. It takes toughness, humility, and will to accept them for what they actually are. It takes a real man or woman to face necessity.

Unfortunately, we are often too greedy to do this. We instinctively think about how much better we'd like any given situation to be. We start thinking about what we'd rather have. Rarely do we consider how much worse things could have been. And things can always be worse. Not to be glib, but the next time you:

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

The next step after we discard our expectations and accept what happens to us, after understanding that certain things—particularly bad things—are outside our control, is this: loving whatever happens to us and facing it with unflinching cheerfulness.

It is the act of turning what we must do into what we get to do.

We put our energies and emotions and exertions where they will have real impact. This is that place. We will tell ourselves: This is what I've got to do or put up with? Well, I might as well be happy about it.

Your obstacle may not be so serious or violent. But they are nevertheless significant and outside your control. They warrant only one response: a smile.

Learning not to kick and scream about matters we can't control is one thing. Indifference and acceptance are certainly better than disappointment or rage. Very few understand or practice that art. But it is only a first step. Better than all of that is love for all that happens to us, for every situation

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

Persist and persevere.

We whine and complain and mope when things won't go our way. We're crushed when what we were "promised" is revoked—as if that's not allowed to happen. Instead of doing much about it, we sit at home and play video games or travel or worse, pay for more school with more loan debt that will never be forgiven. And then we wonder why it isn't getting any better.

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

People are getting a little desperate. People might not show their best elements to you. You must never lower yourself to being a person you don't like. There is no better time than now to have a moral and civic backbone. To have a moral and civic true north. This is a tremendous opportunity for you, a young person, to be heroic.

Not that you need to martyr yourself. See, when we focus on others, on helping them or simply providing a good example, our own personal fears and troubles will diminish. With fear or heartache no longer our primary concern, we don't have time for it.

Shared purpose gives us strength.

Sometimes when we are personally stuck with some intractable or impossible problem, one of the best ways to create opportunities or new avenues for movement is to think: If I can't solve this for myself, how can I at least make this better for other people? Take it for granted, for a second, that there is nothing else in it for us, nothing we can do for ourselves. How can we use this situation to benefit others? How can we salvage some good out of this? If not for me, then for my family or the others I'm leading or those who might later find themselves in a similar situation.

What doesn't help anyone is making this all about you, all the time. Why did this happen to me? What am I going to do about this?

Stop making it harder on yourself by thinking about I, I, I. Stop putting that dangerous "I" in front of events. I did this. I was so smart. I had that. I deserve better than this. No wonder you take losses personally, no wonder you feel so alone. You've inflated your own role and importance. Start thinking: Unity over Self. We're in this together.

Pride can be broken. Toughness has its limits. But a desire to help? No harshness, no deprivation, no toil should interfere with our empathy toward others. Compassion is always an option. Camaraderie as well. That's a power of the will that can never be taken away, only relinquished.

Stop pretending that what you're going through is somehow special or unfair. Whatever trouble you're having—no matter how difficult—is not some unique misfortune picked out especially for you. It just is what it is.

This kind of myopia is what convinces us, to our own detriment, that we're the center of the universe. When really, there is a world beyond our own personal experience filled with people who have dealt with worse. We're not special or unique simply by virtue of being. We're all, at varying points in our lives, the subject of random and often incomprehensible events.

When a man knows he is to be hanged in a fortnight, it concentrates his mind wonderfully. —DR. JOHNSON

Part of the reason we have so much trouble with acceptance is because our relationship with our own existence is totally messed up. We may not say it, but deep down we act and behave like we're invincible. Like we're impervious to the trials and tribulations of morality. That stuff happens to other people, not to ME. I have plenty of time left. We forget how light our grip on life really is.

Otherwise, we wouldn't spend so much time obsessing over trivialities, or trying to become famous, make more money than we could ever spend in our lifetime, or make plans far off in the future. All of these are negated by death. All these assumptions presume that death won't affect us, or at least, not when we don't want it to. The paths of glory, Thomas Gray wrote, lead but to the grave.

Nicholas Taleb defined a Stoic as someone who “transforms fear into prudence, pain into transformation, mistakes into initiation and desire into undertaking.” It’s a loop that becomes easier over time.

There’s a saying in Latin: *Vires acquirit eundo* (We gather strength as we go). That’s how it works. That’s our motto.