

## THE BIG IDEAS

### Perception

Key #1: Think clearly.

### Action

Key #2: Act correctly.

### Will

Key #3: Accept + endure reality.

### Panic Button

Don't hit it.

### Post-Traumatic Growth

Is much better than PTSD.

### Equation for Genius

Purpose + Focus + Desire.

### The Process

And telephone poles.

### The Obstacle

Is the Way.

*"The impediment to action  
advances the action.  
What stands in the way  
becomes the way."*

~ Marcus Aurelius

# The Obstacle Is the Way

The Timeless Art of Turning Trials into Triumph

BY RYAN HOLIDAY · PORTFOLIO/PENGUIN © 2014 · 201 PAGES

"Whatever we face, we have a choice: Will we be blocked by obstacles, or will we advance through and over them?"

We might not be emperors, but the world is still constantly testing us. It asks: Are you worthy? Can you get past the things that inevitably fall in your way? Will you stand up and show us what you're made of?

Plenty of people have answered this question in the affirmative. And a rarer breed still has shown that they not only have what it takes, but they thrive and rally at every such challenge. That the challenge makes them better than if they'd never faced the adversity at all.

Now it's your turn to see if you're one of them, if you'll join their company.

This book shows you the way."

~ Ryan Holiday from *The Obstacle Is the Way*

Learning to turn our biggest challenges into our biggest opportunities is what this book is all about—"The timeless art of turning trials into triumph."

Marcus Aurelius tells: "The impediment to action advances the action. What stands in the way becomes the way."

In short, the obstacle is the way.

Ryan Holiday is a brilliant writer (and guy) and this book is a \*really\* smart, lucid, compelling, inspiring manual on the art of living invincibly.

Ryan masterfully integrates ancient Stoic wisdom from Marcus Aurelius + Seneca + Epictetus and brings that wisdom to life via inspiring stories featuring everyone from John D. Rockefeller, Ulysses S. Grant and Theodore Roosevelt to Amelia Earhart and Steve Jobs.

My book is all marked up and peppered with "wow"s and "YES!"s. If you're enjoying this Note, I think you'll really dig it. Get it [here](#).

The book has three parts: Perception + Action + Will.

Let's take a quick look at each of those and then a quick look at a few of my favorite Big Ideas you can bring into your life today. Hope you enjoy!

## PERCEPTION

"WHAT IS PERCEPTION? It's how we see and understand what occurs around us—and what we decide those events will mean. Our perception can be a source of strength or of great weakness. If we are emotional, subjective, and short-sighted, we only add to our troubles. To prevent becoming overwhelmed by the world around us, we must, as the ancients practiced, learn how to limit our passions and their control over our lives. It takes skill and discipline to bat away the

*"Would you have a great empire? Rule over yourself."*

~ Publius Syrus

pests of bad perceptions, to separate reliable signals from deceptive ones, to filter out prejudice, expectation, and fear. But it's worth it, for what's left is *truth*. While others are excited or afraid, we will remain calm and imperturbable. We will see things simply and straightforwardly, as they truly are—neither good nor bad. This will be an incredible advantage for us in the fight against obstacles."

Perception.

It's the first key to turning obstacles into assets.

Ryan walks us through the mechanics of properly conditioning our minds and brings the wisdom to life with some incredibly compelling stories.

Know this: We ALWAYS have a choice as to how we respond to any given situation. Between stimulus and response, there's always a choice. We want to choose wisely.

As we master our perception, we turn our attention to the second principle: Action.

## ACTION

*"Genius is the ability to put into effect what is in your mind. There's no other definition of it."*

~ F. Scott Fitzgerald

"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."

Step one: Get your mind right. Properly see the event as an opportunity to demonstrate our strength.

Step two: Take right action. With deliberation, boldness and persistence.

Again, Ryan brilliantly (!) walks us through how to go about doing this and we'll take a quick look at a couple of my favorite Big Ideas in a moment.

For now, let's go to step three: Will.

## WILL

*"If Perception and Action were the disciplines of the mind and the body, then Will is the discipline of the heart and soul."*

~ Ryan Holiday

"WHAT IS WILL? Will is our internal power, which can never be affected by the outside world. It is our final trump card. If action is what we do when we still have some agency over our situation, the will is what we depend on when agency has all but disappeared. 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*. But that needs to be cultivated. We must prepare for adversity and turmoil, we must learn the art of acquiescence and practice cheerfulness even in dark times. Too often people think that will is how bad we want something. In actuality, the will has a lot more to do with surrender than strength. Try "God willing" over "the will to win" or "willing it into existence," for even those attributes can be broken. True will is quiet humility, resilience, and flexibility; the other kind of will is weakness disguised as bluster and ambition. See which lasts longer under the hardest of obstacles."

Ah. Genius.

So, those are the three parts to turning trials into triumph: Perception + Action + Will.

Now let's dive in a little deeper.

*"The phrase "This happened and this is bad" is actually two impressions. The first- "This happened"-is objective. The second-"it is bad"-is subjective."*

~ Ryan Holiday

*"What such a man needs is not courage but nerve control, cool headedness. This he can get only by practice."*

~ Theodore Roosevelt

*"My formula for greatness in a human being is amor fati: that one wants nothing to be different, not forward, not backward, not in all eternity. Not merely bear what is necessary, still less conceal it . . . but to love it."*

~ Friedrich Nietzsche

## DON'T HIT THE PANIC BUTTON

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

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

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

Hah. Love that.

John Glenn FLIES INTO SPACE and his heartbeat never goes over one hundred beats per minute.

We have a little challenge in our lives and our heart rate soars. Laughing. D'oh.

We must (!) TRAIN ourselves to control our emotions.

Ryan tells us about the first NASA missions. Can you guess what the astronauts were most thoroughly trained in?

... To NOT panic.

Freaking out in outer space is not OK. Those astronauts needed remarkable emotional regulation to keep their minds right when the inevitable challenge came their way.

We need to cultivate the same ability to control our perception—stepping in between stimulus and response to consciously, deliberately CHOOSE the optimal way to view the situation.

Good news is we can build that skill.

As Ryan says throughout the book, it's simple, just not easy.

(So, next time you feel your heart rate climbing during your normal day, take a few deep breaths, slow down that monkey mind and think of Mr. Glenn with his Right Stuff orbiting our little blue marble and take that inspiration with you as you rock whatever you're up to! :)

## POST-TRAUMATIC GROWTH

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

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

Post-traumatic growth.

Imagine that. Something super challenging happens to us.

We can either break down. OR grow.

The \*same\* event can elicit post-traumatic stress or post-traumatic growth. Seriously. Same exact event. Two different people. Two different responses. Two different results.

What's the key determinant?

Our PERCEPTION, of course.

[Martin Seligman](#), one of the leading figures in the Positive Psychology movement, talks about

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

~ Ryan Holiday

this in his book *Flourish* (and his book *Learned Optimism* is essentially a manual on the science cultivating our perception; see Notes on both books). Here's how he puts it: "First, students learn the ABC model: how beliefs (B) about an adversity (A)—and not the adversity itself—cause the consequent (C) feelings. This is a point of major insight for students: emotions don't follow inexorably from external events but from what you think about those events, and you can actually change what you think."

A + B + C. Got it.

And, I just love the way Ryan tells us that "The extent of the struggle determines the extent of the growth." Our only true enemy is a story that tells us something different from that.

Joseph Campbell puts it this way (see Notes on *The Power of Myth*): "There is an important idea in Nietzsche, of *Amor fati*, the 'love of your fate,' which is in fact your life. As he says, if you say no to a single factor in your life, you have unraveled the whole thing. Furthermore, the more challenging or threatening the situation or context to be assimilated and affirmed, the greater the stature of the person who can achieve it. The demon that you can swallow gives you its power, and the greater life's pain, the greater life's reply."

Nassim Taleb echoes that wisdom in his genius book *Anti-Fragile*, reminding us that "Wind extinguishes a candle and energizes fire."

Let's eat our challenges like an energy bar—getting fueled not crushed.

## UNITY OF PURPOSE + DEAFNESS TO DOUBT + DESIRE TO STAY AT IT

"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."

That's a great equation for genius:

Unity of Purpose + Deafness to Doubt + The Desire to Stay at It = GENIUS.

As Edison tells us, genius is 1% inspiration and 99% perspiration.

We are seduced into believing the myth of genius being a flash of insight with the outcome easily falling into the hands of its creator.

BUT THAT'S NOT HOW IT WORKS.

PERIOD.

Carol Dweck asks us in her seminal book *Mindset* (see Notes): "Is it ability or mindset? Was it Mozart's musical ability or the fact that he worked till his hands were deformed? Was it Darwin's scientific ability or the fact that he collected specimens non-stop from early childhood?"

Mozart worked so hard he made his hands DEFORMED.

Did you know that?

Because most of us buy into the myth that he was just magically born a genius. Sure, he was born into a musical family (his father literally wrote the book on music instruction) but he worked RIDICULOUSLY hard to achieve all that he did at such a young age.

Let's re-write the genius equation.

It is \*not\*: Born a Genius + Inspiration + Stars Aligning = Genius

*"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."*

~ Ryan Holiday

It is: Unity of Purpose + Deafness to Doubt + The Desire to Stay at It = GENIUS.

How's *your* unity of purpose? You deaf to doubt? You have an insatiable desire to stay at it? (Fantastic.)

## THE PROCESS

“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, 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.”

The Process.

Wow. Now THAT is a Big Idea.

You have a big goal? A big challenge? Don't focus on the hugeness of it. Focus on the little things you can do to chip away at it.

Joe De Sena, uber-athlete and creator of Spartan Race puts it in his great book *Spartan Up!* ([see Notes](#)): “The way to get through anything mentally painful is to take it a little at a time. The mind can't handle dealing with a massive iceberg of pain in front of it, but it can deal with short nuggets that will come to an end. So instead of thinking, Ugh, I've got twenty-four miles to go, focus on making it to the next telephone pole in the distance. Whether you're running twenty or one hundred and twenty miles at a time, the distance has to be tackled mentally and physically one mile at a time. The ability to compartmentalize pain into these small bite sizes is key.”

Telephone pole to telephone pole. That's how we want to roll.

Here's another quick story on making The Process primary. In *With Winning in Mind* ([see Notes](#)), Lanny Bassham tells us: “I suggested that instead of setting a goal to win Ben should goal set to make the process of playing well his primary focus. “Process is Primary” became a theme for the year. Ben's job while playing was to think about executing his mental and technical systems and not to think about winning. Scoring is a function of great execution, and winning is the result, but thinking about winning can pull your focus off of proper execution in a competition. Thinking about process is the answer.

In the fourth tournament of the year at San Diego's Torrey Pines course, Crane found himself just 30” from the cup on 18. The crowd knew Ben needed to make the putt for the win, but Crane had no idea. When the ball rolled in, his playing partner Ryuji Imada offered his hand in congratulations. Thinking this was just the customary handshake after the round, Ben did not realize he had won until Heather [his wife] ran on to the green.

“Did I win?” Crane said. This was proof that a player can cause his mind to think about process instead of outcome even with the possibility of winning pulling at him. Crane's third career victory earned him \$954,000 sending him on to his best year in goal at that point.”

—> “Did I win?”

Can you imagine sinking a million dollar putt but being so focused on the process that you ask that question? Let's make that the goal. All hail THE PROCESS!

*“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.”*

~ Ryan Holiday

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

~ Ryan Holiday

## THE OBSTACLE IS THE WAY

"So that under pressure and trial we get better—become better people, leaders, and thinkers. Because those trials and pressures will inevitably come. And they won't ever stop coming.

But don't worry, you're prepared for this now, this life of obstacles and adversity. You know how to handle them, how to brush aside obstacles and even benefit from them. You understand the process.

... let's say it once again just to remind ourselves:

See things for what they are.

Do what we can.

Endure and bear what we must.

What blocked the path is now a path.

What once impeded action advances action.

The Obstacle is the Way."

So good. [Vernon Howard](#) comes to mind as we wrap this up.

He tells us: *"If it takes apparent misfortune to turn us into true philosophers and doers of good to receive good, then apparent misfortune is our greatest fortune."*

Hope you enjoyed this quick look at a GREAT book. (Quick link to get it [here](#).)

Here's to seeing clearly, acting correctly, and enduring + accepting the world as it is as we see that The Obstacle is the Way!

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**Brian Johnson,**  
*Heroic Philosopher CEO*

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## About the Author of This Note

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Brian Johnson is the Founder + CEO of Heroic. He's spent half of the last 25 years as a Founder/CEO and the other half as a Philosopher. Brian loves integrating ancient wisdom and modern science to help YOU become the best, most heroic version of yourself so we can create a world in which 51% of humanity is flourishing by 2051. Learn more at [heroic.us](#).