



THE 3 STOIC DISCIPLINES

How to Turn Your Trials Into Triumphs

RYAN HOLIDAY

This thing in front of you. This issue.

This obstacle—this frustrating, unfortunate, problematic, unexpected problem preventing you from doing what you want to do.

That thing you dread or secretly hope will never happen. What if it wasn't so bad?

What if you could actually turn it into a positive?
There is a way.

While there are countless lessons and programs (and business books) out there about achieving success, few bother to teach us about how to overcome failure, how to think about obstacles we are sure to face and, least of all, how to treat and triumph over them.

No wonder we're stuck. No wonder many of us feel helpless.

On the other hand, not everyone is paralyzed. We watch in awe as some seem to turn those very obstacles, which stymie us, into launching pads for themselves. How do they do that? What's the secret? What do these figures have that we lack? What are we missing? It's simple: a method and a framework for understanding, appreciating, and acting upon the obstacles life throws at us.

Subjected to those pressures, these individuals were transformed. They were transformed in the way that Andy Grove, former CEO of Intel, outlined when he described what happens to businesses in tumultuous times: *"Bad companies are destroyed by crisis. Good companies survive them. Great companies are improved by them."*

The truth behind these words goes back thousands of years—not to another businessman but to an emperor. On a dark night at the front in the year 170 Marcus Aurelius, the most powerful man in the world, wrote the following prescription to himself: *"The impediment to action advances action. What stands in the way becomes the way."*

Great individuals, like great companies, find a way to transform weakness into strength. It's a rather amazing and even touching feat. They take what should have held them back—what in fact might be holding you back right this very second—and used it to move forward. Like these great individuals we can also flip our obstacles and turn adversity into advantage.

As it turns out, this is one thing all great men and women of history have in common. Like oxygen to a fire, obstacles became fuel for the blaze that was their ambition. Nothing could stop them, they were (and continue to be) impossible to discourage or contain. Every impediment only served to make the inferno within them burn with greater ferocity.

These were people who flipped their obstacles upside down. Who lived the words of Marcus Aurelius and followed a group which Cicero called the only “*real philosophers*”—the ancient Stoics—even if they’d never read them. They had the ability to see obstacles for what they were, the ingenuity to tackle them, and the will to endure a world mostly beyond their comprehension and control.

“Great individuals, like great companies, find a way to transform weakness into strength. ... They take what should have held them back—what in fact might be holding you back right this very second—and used it to move forward.”

This manifesto will show you the basic framework for turning negative situations we encounter in our lives into positive ones—or at least to snatch whatever benefit we can from them, to steal good fortune from misfortune.

It's not just *"How can I think this is not so bad?"* No, it is how to will yourself to see that this must be good—an opportunity to gain a new foothold, move forward, or go in a better direction.

Not to *"be positive,"* but to learn to be ceaselessly creative and opportunistic.

Not: *"This is not so bad."*

But: *"I can make this good."*

Because it can be done. In fact, it has and is being done. Every day. That's the power we will unlock in this manifesto. This is how the Obstacle becomes the Way.

“We can see opportunity in every disaster, and transform that negative situation into an education and a skill set—and maybe even a fortune.”

The Way Through Them

“Objective judgment, now at this very moment. Unselfish action, now at this very moment. Willing acceptance—now at this very moment—of all external events. That’s all you need.”

—MARCUS AURELIUS

Overcoming obstacles is a discipline of three critical steps.

It begins with how we look at our specific problems, our attitude or approach; then the energy and creativity with which we actively break them down and turn them into opportunities; finally, the cultivation and maintenance of an inner will that allows us to handle defeat and difficulty. It’s three, interdependent, interconnected, and fluidly contingent disciplines: Perception, Action, and the Will. Each of the following examples will explain an aspect of these disciplines, of which there are many. To understand each one deeply, you must familiarize yourself with the essential aspects of each to become a true “philosopher”—a man of action.

The Discipline of Perception

“Choose not to be harmed—and you won’t feel harmed. Don’t feel harmed—and you haven’t been.”

—MARCUS AURELIUS

John D. Rockefeller took his first job in 1855 at the age of sixteen making fifty cents a day (a day he celebrated as “Job Day” for the rest of his life). Then the Panic of 1857 struck.

It was the greatest market depression in history and it struck just as Rockefeller was getting on his feet. Rockefeller could have gotten scared and quit. He could have become depressed and despondent over his fate. But even as a young man Rockefeller had sangfroid: unflappable coolness under pressure. He could keep his head while everyone lost theirs.

Instead, Rockefeller chose to look at the crisis as an opportunity to learn, a baptism in the market. He internalized an important lesson that would stay with him forever: The market was inherently unpredictable and often vicious—only a rational and disciplined mind can hope to profit from it.

As he once put it, he was inclined to see the opportunity in every disaster. Within twenty years of that first crisis, Rockefeller would alone control 90 percent of the oil market. His insight into the market lives on today in Warren Buffett’s famous adage to, *“Be fearful when others are greedy and greedy when others are fearful.”*

But Rockefeller wasn't born this way. He received his lesson in discipline during the crisis of 1857, what he called "*the school of adversity and stress.*"

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

We can learn to focus on what things really are. Unhelpful perceptions can invade our minds, that sacred place of reason, action, and will—and throw off our compass. We can see only disaster. Or rather, like Rockefeller, we can see opportunity in every disaster, and transform that negative situation into an education and a skill set—and maybe even a fortune.

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

We must try:

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

The Discipline of Action

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

—THEODORE ROOSEVELT

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 problem was two different locals claimed to own the deed to the plantation, so neither company was able to tell who the rightful owner of the land was.

On one side of the dispute was one of the most powerful companies in the United States, United Fruit. They responded by dispatching a team of high-powered lawyers. Money, time, and resources were no object.

Samuel Zemurray, owner of an upstart fruit company was simply overmatched. He could never pay the legal fees that would take the case to court. So instead of playing United Fruit's game, he started his own. Zemurray 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. He was the rightful owner of the land before United Fruit's lawyers blinked.

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

As they say in Brazilian jiu jitsu, it doesn't matter how you get your opponent to the ground, after all, only that you take them down. What Samuel Zemurray never lost sight of was this mission. 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.

Start thinking like a radical pragmatist: still ambitious, aggressive, and rooted in ideals, but also imminently practical and guided by the possible. Think progress, not perfection.

To accomplish our goals, there is only one way. And that is to meet our problems with 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?

The Discipline of Will

“If they faint in the day of adversity, thy strength is small.”

—PROVERBS 24:10

At age sixty-seven, Thomas Edison returned home early one evening from another day at the lab. Shortly after dinner, a man came rushing into his house with urgent news: A fire had broken out at Edison’s research and production campus a few miles away.

As he calmly made his way to the fire, he called out to his son, “*Go get your mother and all her friends. They’ll never see another fire like this again.*” Don’t worry, Edison told his son. “*It’s all right. We’ve just got rid of a lot of rubbish.*”

You see, acceptance is not the same thing as resignation. All though Edison unquestionably—even joyously—embraced the calamity that befell him, that did not mean he gave up.

Instead of being devastated by a fire that destroyed his life’s work, it invigorated him. He told a reporter the next day, “*I’ve been through a lot of things like this. It prevents a man from being afflicted with ennui.*”

Within about three weeks the factory was partially back up and running. Despite a loss of almost one million dollars (\$23 million in today's dollars), Edison would marshal enough energy to make nearly ten million dollars in revenue that year (\$200-plus million today).

Edison not only suffered a spectacular disaster, but he recovered and replied to it spectacularly. He was able to turn what he had to do into what he got to do. We can all be like Edison, our factory on fire, not bemoaning our fate but enjoying the spectacular scene and then starting the recovery effort the very next day—roaring back soon enough.

Your obstacles may not be so serious, but that still warrant only one response: a smile.

As the Stoics commanded themselves: Cheerfulness in all situations, especially the bad ones

The goal is:

Not: *"I'm okay with this."*

Not: *"I think I can feel good about this."*

But: *"I feel great about it. Because if it happened, then it was meant to happen, and I am glad that it did when it did. I mean to make the best of it."*

We don't get to choose what happens to us, but we can always choose how we feel about it. Opportunities and benefits lay within these feelings.

These lessons come harder but are, in the end, the most critical to wresting advantage from adversity.

In every situation, we can:

- Always prepare ourselves for more difficult times
- Always accept what we're unable to change
- Always persevere
- Always learn to love our fate and what happens to us
- Always protect our inner self, and retreat into ourselves
- Always submit to a greater, larger cause
- Always remind ourselves of our own mortality

“Start thinking like a radical pragmatist: still ambitious, aggressive, and rooted in ideals, but also imminently practical and guided by the possible. Think progress, not perfection.”

The Obstacle Is The Way

At this point it is clear that there's a pattern in every one of the stories in this manifesto.

Something stands in someone's way. They stare it down, and they aren't intimidated. Leaning into their problem or weakness or issue, they give everything they have—mentally and physically. Even though they did not always overcome it in the way they intended or expected, each individual emerged better, stronger.

What stood in the way became the way. What impeded action in some way advanced it.

It's inspiring. It's moving. It's an art we need to bring to our own lives.

Not everyone looks at obstacles—often the same ones you and I face—and sees reason to despair. In fact, they see the opposite. They see a problem with a ready solution.

They see a chance to test and improve themselves.

Nothing stands in their way. Rather, everything guides them on the way.

It is so much better to be this way, isn't it? There is a lightness and a flexibility to this approach that seem very different from how we—and most people—choose to live, with our disappointments and resentments and frustrations. We can see the “bad” things

that happen in our lives with gratitude and not with regret because we turn them from disaster to real benefit—from defeat to victory.

With this approach we are able to perceive things as they are, leaving no option unexplored, then stand strong and transform whatever can't be changed. And they all feed into one another: Our actions give us the confidence to ignore or control our perceptions. We prove and support our will with our actions.

You have been shown an aspect of each of the three Stoic disciplines. But in mastering all three you will have the tools to flip any obstacle upside down. You will be worthy of any and every challenge.

Of course, it is not enough to simply read this or say it. We must practice these maxims, rolling them over and over in our minds and acting on them until they become muscle memory.

“There is a lightness and a flexibility to this approach that seem very different from how we—and most people—choose to live, with our disappointments and resentments and frustrations.

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.

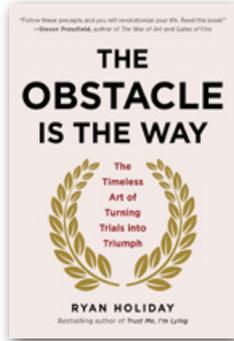
This manifesto has started you on the path to uncovering these Stoic disciplines. With further study you can be prepared for this life of obstacles and adversity. You will learn how to handle them, how to brush aside obstacles and find benefits within them. You will learn the Obstacle is the Way.

What blocked your path is now a path.

What once impeded action, advances action.

The Obstacle is the Way. 📖

Info



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ABOUT THE AUTHOR | Ryan Holiday is a media strategist for notorious clients like Tucker Max and Dov Charney. After dropping out of college at 19 to apprentice under the strategist Robert Greene, he went on to advise many bestselling authors and multi-platinum musicians. He is the Director of Marketing at American Apparel, where his work in advertising was internationally known. His strategies are used as case studies by Twitter, YouTube and Google and have been written about in *AdAge*, *The New York Times*, *Gawker* and *Fast Company*. His first book, *Trust Me I'm Lying* was a Wall Street Journal bestseller.

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