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Ego is the Enemy: The Fight to Master Our Greatest Opponent

by Ryan Holiday

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48 Highlights

Highlight (Yellow) | Page 6

Aspire. Success. Failure. The aim of that structure is simple: to help you suppress ego early before bad habits take hold, to replace the temptations of ego with humility and discipline when we experience success, and to cultivate strength and fortitude so that when fate turns against you, you're not wrecked by failure. In short, it will help us be: Humble in our aspirations Gracious in our success Resilient in our failures

Highlight (Yellow) | Page 7

We can seek to rationalize the worst behavior by pointing to outliers. But no one is truly successful because they are delusional, self-absorbed, or disconnected. Even if these traits are correlated or associated with certain well-known individuals, so are a few others: addiction, abuse (of themselves and others), depression, mania. In fact, what we see when we study these people is that they did their best work in the moments when they fought back against these impulses, disorders, and flaws. Only when free of ego and baggage can anyone perform to their utmost.

Highlight (Yellow) | Page 21

What is rare is not raw talent, skill, or even confidence, but humility, diligence, and self-awareness.

Highlight (Yellow) | Page 22

We will learn that though we think big, we must act and live small in order to accomplish what we seek. Because we will be action and education focused, and forgo validation and status, our ambition will not be grandiose but iterative—one foot in front of the other, learning and growing and putting in the time.

Highlight (Yellow) | Page 26

Anyone can talk about himself or herself. Even a child knows how to gossip and chatter. Most people are decent at hype and sales. So what is scarce and rare? Silence. The ability to deliberately keep yourself out of the conversation and subsist without its validation. Silence is the respite of the confident and the strong.

Highlight (Yellow) | Page 26

Talk depletes us. Talking and doing fight for the same resources. Research shows that while goal visualization is important, after a certain point our mind begins to confuse it with actual progress. The same goes for verbalization.

Highlight (Yellow) | Page 28

The only relationship between work and chatter is that one kills the other.

Highlight (Yellow) | Page 39

The mixed martial arts pioneer and multi-title champion Frank Shamrock has a system he trains fighters in that he calls plus, minus, and equal. Each fighter, to become great, he said, needs to have someone better that they can learn from, someone lesser who they can teach, and someone equal that they can challenge themselves against.

Highlight (Yellow) | Page 40

To become great and to stay great, they must all know what came before, what is going on now, and what comes next. They must internalize the fundamentals of their domain and what surrounds them, without ossifying or becoming stuck in time. They must be always learning. We must all become our own teachers, tutors, and critics.

Highlight (Yellow) | Page 40

A true student is like a sponge. Absorbing what goes on around him, filtering it, latching on to what he can hold. A student is self-critical and self-motivated, always trying to improve his understanding so that he can move on to the next topic, the next challenge. A real student is also his own teacher and his own critic. There is no room for ego there.

Highlight (Yellow) | Page 44

Here's what those same people haven't told you: your passion may be the very thing holding you back from power or influence or accomplishment. Because just as often, we fail with—no, because of—passion.

Highlight (Yellow) | Page 45

As a genteel, accomplished, and patient woman born while the embers of the quiet Victorian virtues were still warm, Roosevelt was above passion. She had purpose. She had direction. She wasn't driven by passion, but by reason.

Highlight (Yellow) | Page 48

Passion typically masks a weakness. Its breathlessness and impetuosity and franticness are poor substitutes for discipline, for mastery, for strength and purpose and perseverance. You need to be able to spot this in others

and in yourself, because while the origins of passion may be earnest and good, its effects are comical and then monstrous.

Highlight (Yellow) | Page 49

What humans require in our ascent is purpose and realism. Purpose, you could say, is like passion with boundaries. Realism is detachment and perspective.

Highlight (Yellow) | Page 49

Passion is about. (I am so passionate about _____.) Purpose is to and for. (I must do _____. I was put here to accomplish _____. I am willing to endure _____ for the sake of this.) Actually, purpose deemphasizes the I. Purpose is about pursuing something outside yourself as opposed to pleasuring yourself.

Highlight (Yellow) | Page 49

“Great passions are maladies without hope,” as Goethe once said.

Highlight (Yellow) | Page 50

Passion is form over function. Purpose is function, function, function. The critical work that you want to do will require your deliberation and consideration. Not passion. Not naïveté.

Highlight (Yellow) | Page 56

There is an old saying, “Say little, do much.” What we really ought to do is update and apply a version of that to our early approach. Be lesser, do more. Imagine if for every person you met, you thought of some way to help them, something you could do for them? And you looked at it in a way that entirely benefited them and not you. The cumulative effect this would have over time would be profound: You’d learn a great deal by solving diverse problems.

Highlight (Yellow) | Page 66

A person who thinks all the time has nothing to think about except thoughts, so he loses touch with reality and lives in a world of illusions. — ALAN WATTS

Highlight (Yellow) | Page 70

Anyone—particularly the ambitious—can fall prey to this narration, good and bad. It is natural for any young, ambitious person (or simply someone whose ambition is young) to get excited and swept up by their thoughts and feelings. Especially in a world that tells us to keep and promote a “personal brand.” We’re required to tell stories in order to sell our work and our talents, and after enough time, forget where the line is that separates our fictions from reality.

Highlight (Yellow) | Page 77

Khan groomed his sons and generals to succeed him later in life, he repeatedly warned them, “If you can’t swallow your pride, you can’t lead.” He told them that pride would be harder to subdue than a wild lion. He liked the analogy of a mountain. He would say, “Even the tallest mountains have animals that, when they stand on it, are higher than the mountain.”

Highlight (Yellow) | Page 80

“The hard thing isn’t setting a big, hairy, audacious goal. The hard thing is laying people off when you miss the big goal.... The hard thing isn’t dreaming big. The hard thing is waking up in the middle of the night in a cold sweat when the dream turns into a nightmare.”

Highlight (Yellow) | Page 81

As a young man, Bill Clinton began a collection of note cards upon which he would write names and phone numbers of friends and acquaintances who might be of service when he eventually entered politics. Each night, before he ever had a reason to, he would flip through the box, make phone calls, write letters, or add notations about their interactions. Over the years, this collection grew—to ten thousand cards (before it was eventually digitized). It’s what put him in the Oval Office and continues to return dividends.

Highlight (Yellow) | Page 83

Work is finding yourself alone at the track when the weather kept everyone else indoors. Work is pushing through the pain and crappy first drafts and prototypes. It is ignoring whatever plaudits others are getting, and more importantly, ignoring whatever plaudits you may be getting. Because there is work to be done. Work doesn’t want to be good. It is made so, despite the headwind.

Highlight (Yellow) | Page 96

“That we have made a hero out of Howard Hughes,” a young Joan Didion wrote, “tells us something interesting about ourselves.” She’s absolutely right. For Howard Hughes, despite his reputation, was quite possibly one of the worst businessmen of the twentieth century.

Highlight (Yellow) | Page 104

It is not enough only to be a student at the beginning. It is a position that one has to assume for life. Learn from everyone and everything. From the people you beat, and the people who beat you, from the people you dislike, even from your supposed enemies. At every step and every juncture in life, there is the opportunity to learn—and even if the lesson is purely remedial, we must not let ego block us from hearing it again.

Highlight (Yellow) | Page 111

Jeff Bezos, the founder of Amazon, has talked about this temptation. He reminds himself that there was “no aha moment” for his billion-dollar behemoth, no matter what he might read in his own press clippings. The founding

of a company, making money in the market, or the formation of an idea is messy. Reducing it to a narrative retroactively creates a clarity that never was and never will be there.

Highlight (Yellow) | Page 111

few years ago, one of the founders of Google gave a talk in which he said that the way he judges prospective companies and entrepreneurs is by asking them “if they’re going to change the world.” Which is fine, except that’s not how Google started. (Larry Page and Sergey Brin were two Stanford PhDs working on their dissertations.) It’s not how You-Tube started. (Its founders weren’t trying to reinvent TV; they were trying to share funny video clips.) It’s not how most true wealth was created, in fact.

Highlight (Yellow) | Page 117

According to Seneca, the Greek word *euthymia* is one we should think of often: it is the sense of our own path and how to stay on it without getting distracted by all the others that intersect it. In other words, it’s not about beating the other guy. It’s not about having more than the others. It’s about being what you are, and being as good as possible at it, without succumbing to all the things that draw you away from it. It’s about going where you set out to go. About accomplishing the most that you’re capable of in what you choose. That’s it.

Highlight (Yellow) | Page 120

One of the symptoms of approaching nervous breakdown is the belief that one’s work is terribly important.

Highlight (Yellow) | Page 122

It doesn’t matter if you’re a billionaire, a millionaire, or just a kid who snagged a good job early. The complete and utter sense of certainty that got you here can become a liability if you’re not careful. The demands and dream you had for a better life? The ambition that fueled your effort? These begin as earnest drives but left unchecked become hubris and entitlement. The same goes for the instinct to take charge; now you’re addicted to control. Driven to prove the doubters wrong? Welcome to the seeds of paranoia. Yes, there are legitimate stresses and

Highlight (Yellow) | Page 137

There is a balance. Soccer coach Tony Adams expresses it well. Play for the name on the front of the jersey, he says, and they’ll remember the name on the back.

Highlight (Yellow) | Page 145

Merkel is the embodiment of Aesop’s fable about the tortoise. She is slow and steady. The historic night the Berlin Wall fell, she was thirty-five. She had one beer, went to bed, and showed up early for work the next day. A few years later, she had worked to become a respected but obscure physicist. Only then did she enter politics. In her fifties, she became chancellor. It was a diligent, plodding path.

Highlight (Yellow) | Page 161

This fate is as much written for us as it was written five thousand years ago for the young king in Gilgamesh: He will face a battle he knows not, he will ride a road he knows not.

Highlight (Yellow) | Page 166

To paraphrase Epicurus, the narcissistically inclined live in an “unwalled city.” A fragile sense of self is constantly under threat. Illusions and accomplishments are not defenses, not when you’ve got the special sensitive antennae trained to receive (and create) the signals that challenge your precarious balancing act. It is a miserable way to live.

Highlight (Yellow) | Page 171

According to Greene, there are two types of time in our lives: dead time, when people are passive and waiting, and alive time, when people are learning and acting and utilizing every second. Every moment of failure, every moment or situation that we did not deliberately choose or control, presents this choice: Alive time. Dead time. Which will it be?

Highlight (Yellow) | Page 178

It’s far better when doing good work is sufficient. In other words, the less attached we are to outcomes the better. When fulfilling our own standards is what fills us with pride and self-respect. When the effort—not the results, good or bad—is enough.

Highlight (Yellow) | Page 179

Well, get ready for it. It will happen. Maybe your parents will never be impressed. Maybe your girlfriend won’t care. Maybe the investor won’t see the numbers. Maybe the audience won’t clap. But we have to be able

Highlight (Yellow) | Page 180

Do your work. Do it well. Then “let go and let God.” That’s all there needs to be. Recognition and rewards—those are just extra. Rejection, that’s on them, not on us.

Highlight (Yellow) | Page 186

Psychologists often say that threatened egotism is one of the most dangerous forces on earth. The gang member whose “honor” is impugned. The narcissist who is rejected. The bully who is made to feel shame. The impostor who is exposed. The plagiarist or the embellisher whose story stops adding up.

Highlight (Yellow) | Page 192

Most trouble is temporary... unless you make that not so. Recovery is not grand, it’s one step in front of the other. Unless your cure is more of the disease.

Highlight (Yellow) | Page 193

Ego says we're the immovable object, the unstoppable force. This delusion causes the problems. It meets failure and adversity with rule breaking—betting everything on some crazy scheme; doubling down on behind-the-scenes machinations or unlikely Hail Marys—even though that's what got you to this pain point in the first place.

Highlight (Yellow) | Page 196

This is characteristic of how great people think. It's not that they find failure in every success. They just hold themselves to a standard that exceeds what society might consider to be objective success. Because of that, they don't much care what other people think; they care whether they meet their own standards. And these standards are much, much higher than everyone else's.

Highlight (Yellow) | Page 198

Think of the times that you've excused your own with "no one will know." This is the moral gray area that our ego loves to exploit. Holding your ego against a standard (inner or indifferent or whatever you want to call it) makes it less and less likely that excess or wrongdoing is going to be tolerated by you. Because it's not about what you can get away with, it's about what you should or shouldn't

Highlight (Yellow) | Page 204

Take inventory for a second. What do you dislike? Whose name fills you with revulsion and rage? Now ask: Have these strong feelings really helped you accomplish anything? Take an even wider inventory. Where has hatred and rage ever really gotten anyone?

Highlight (Yellow) | Page 209

Aspiration leads to success (and adversity). Success creates its own adversity (and, hopefully, new ambitions). And adversity leads to aspiration and more success. It's an endless loop. All of us exist on this continuum. We occupy different places on it at various points in our lives. But when we do fail, it sucks. No question. Whatever is next for us, we can be sure of one thing we'll want to avoid. Ego. It makes all the steps hard, but failure is the one it will make permanent. Unless we learn, right here and right now, from our mistakes. Unless we use this moment as an opportunity to understand ourselves and our own mind better, ego will seek out failure like true north.

Highlight (Yellow) | Page 212

Daniele Bolelli once gave me a helpful metaphor. He explained that training was like sweeping the floor. Just because we've done it once, doesn't mean the floor is clean forever. Every day the dust comes back. Every day we must sweep. The same is true for ego. You would be stunned at what kind of damage dust and dirt can do over time. And how quickly it accumulates and becomes utterly unmanageable.

Highlight (Yellow) | Page 223

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