

"Ryan Holiday is one of his generation's finest thinkers, and this book is his best yet." –**Steven Pressfield**, author of *The War of Art*

EGGO IS THE ENEMY



RYAN HOLIDAY

Bestselling author of *The Obstacle Is the Way*

“Ryan Holiday is one of his generation’s finest thinkers, and this book is his best yet.”

—STEVEN PRESSFIELD, author of *The War of Art*

“The comedian Bill Hicks said the world was tainted with fevered egos. In *Ego Is the Enemy*, Ryan Holiday writes us all a prescription: humility. This book is packed with stories and quotes that will help you get out of your own way. Whether you’re starting out or starting over, you’ll find something to steal here.”

—AUSTIN KLEON, author of *Steal Like an Artist*

“This is a book I want every athlete, aspiring leader, entrepreneur, thinker, and doer to read. Ryan Holiday is one of the most promising young writers of his generation.”

—GEORGE RAVELING, Hall of Fame Basketball coach and Nike’s Director of International Basketball

“I see the toxic vanity of ego at play every day and it never ceases to amaze me how often it wrecks promising creative endeavors. Read this book before it wrecks you or the projects and people you love. Consider it as urgently as you do a proper workout regimen and eating right. Ryan’s insights are priceless.”

—MARC ECKO, founder of Ecko Unltd and Complex

“I don’t have many rules in life, but one I never break is: If Ryan Holiday writes a book, I read it as soon as I can get my hands on it.”

—BRIAN KOPPELMAN, screenwriter and director of *Rounders*, *Ocean’s Thirteen*, and *Billions*

“In his new book Ryan Holiday attacks the greatest obstacle to mastery and true success in life—our insatiable ego. In an inspiring yet practical way, he teaches us how to manage and tame this beast within us so that we can focus on what really matters—producing the best work possible.”

—ROBERT GREENE, author of *Mastery*

“We’re often told that to achieve success, we need confidence. With refreshing candor, Ryan Holiday challenges that assumption, highlighting how we can earn confidence by pursuing something bigger than our own success.”

—ADAM GRANT, author of *Originals* and *Give and Take*

“Once again Ryan Holiday has laid down the gauntlet for readers willing to challenge themselves with the tough questions of our time. Every reader will find truths that are pertinent to each of our lives. Ego can be the enemy if we are unarmed with the cautionary insights of history, scripture, and philosophy. As was said to St. Augustine more than a thousand years ago, ‘Pick it up and read’; for to not do so is to allow the enemy to bring despair.”

—DR. DREW PINSKY, host of HLN’s *Dr. Drew On Call* and *Loveline*

“In this day and age where everyone seeks instant gratification, the idea of success is skewed—many believing the road to their goals is a linear path. As a former professional athlete I can tell you that the road is anything but linear. In fact, it is one that consists of twists, turns, and ups and downs—it requires you to put your head down and put in the work. Ryan Holiday hits the nail on the head with this book, reminding us that the real success is in the journey and learning process. I only wish I had had this gem as a reference during my playing days.”

—LORI LINDSEY, former U.S. Women’s National Team soccer player

“Philosophy has gotten a bad rap, but Ryan Holiday is restoring it to its rightful place in our lives. This book—packed with unforgettable stories, strategies, and lessons—is perfect for anyone who strives to do and accomplish. It’s no exaggeration to say that, after finishing it, you’ll never open your laptop and sit down to work the same way again.”

—JIMMY SONI, Former Managing Editor of *The Huffington Post* and author of *Rome’s Last Citizen*

“I would like to rip out every page and use them as wallpaper so I could be reminded constantly of the humility and work it takes to truly succeed. In the margins of my copy, I have scrawled the same message over and over —‘pre-Gold.’ Reading this inspiring book brought me back to the humility and work ethic it took to win the Olympics.”

—CHANDRA CRAWFORD, Olympic Gold Medalist

“What a valuable book for those in positions of authority! It has made me a better judge.”

—THE HONORABLE FREDERIC BLOCK, U.S. District Judge and author of *Disrobed*

ALSO BY RYAN HOLIDAY

Growth Hacker Marketing: A Primer on the Future of PR, Marketing, and Advertising

Trust Me, I'm Lying: Confessions of a Media Manipulator

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



RYAN HOLIDAY

EGO
IS THE
ENEMY

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Do not believe that he who seeks to comfort you lives untroubled among the simple and quiet words that sometimes do you good. His life has much difficulty and sadness and remains far behind yours. Were it otherwise he would never have been able to find those words.

—RAINER MARIA RILKE

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THE PAINFUL PROLOGUE

This is not a book about me. But since this is a book about ego, I'm going to address a question that I'd be a hypocrite not to have thought about.

Who the hell am I to write it?

My story is not particularly important for the lessons that follow, but I want to tell it briefly here at the beginning in order to provide some context. For I have experienced ego at each of its stages in my short life: Aspiration. Success. Failure. And back again and back again.

When I was nineteen years old, sensing some astounding and life-changing opportunities, I dropped out of college. Mentors vied for my attention, groomed me as their protégé. Seen as going places, I was *the kid*. Success came quickly.

After I became the youngest executive at a Beverly Hills talent management agency, I helped sign and work with a number of huge rock bands. I advised on books that went on to sell millions of copies and invent their own literary genres. Around the time I turned twenty-one, I came on as a strategist for American Apparel, then one of the hottest fashion brands in the world. Soon, I was the director of marketing.

By twenty-five, I had published my first book—which was an immediate and controversial best seller—with my face prominently on the cover. A studio optioned the rights to create a television show about my life. In the next few years, I accumulated many of the trappings of success—influence, a platform, press, resources, money, even a little notoriety. Later, I built a successful company on the back of those assets, where I worked with well-known, well-paying clients and did the kind of work that got me invited to speak at conferences and fancy events.

With success comes the temptation to tell oneself a story, to round off the edges, to cut out your lucky breaks and add a certain mythology to it all. You know, that arcing narrative of Herculean struggle for greatness against all odds: sleeping on the floor, being disowned by my parents, suffering for my ambition. It's a type of storytelling in which eventually

your talent becomes your identity and your accomplishments become your worth.

But a story like this is never honest or helpful. In my retelling to you just now, I left a lot out. Conveniently omitted were the stresses and temptations; the stomach-turning drops and the mistakes—all the mistakes—were left on the cutting-room floor in favor of the highlight reel. They are the times I would rather not discuss: A public evisceration by someone I looked up to, which so crushed me at the time that I was later taken to the emergency room. The day I lost my nerve, walked into my boss's office, and told him I couldn't cut it and was going back to school—and meant it. The ephemeral nature of best-sellerdom, and how short it actually was (a week). The book signing that *one* person showed up at. The company I founded tearing itself to pieces and having to rebuild it. Twice. These are just some of the moments that get nicely edited out.

This fuller picture itself is still only a fraction of a life, but at least it hits more of the important notes—at least the important ones for this book: ambition, achievement, and adversity.

I'm not someone who believes in epiphanies. There is no one moment that changes a person. There are many. During a period of about six months in 2014, it seemed those moments were all happening in succession.

First, American Apparel—where I did much of my best work—teetered on the edge of bankruptcy, hundreds of millions of dollars in debt, a shell of its former self. Its founder, who I had deeply admired since I was a young man, was unceremoniously fired by his own handpicked board of directors, and down to sleeping on a friend's couch. Then the talent agency where I made my bones was in similar shape, sued preemptorily by clients to whom it owed a lot of money. Another mentor of mine seemingly unraveled around the same time, taking our relationship with him.

These were the people I had shaped my life around. The people I looked up to and trained under. Their stability—financially, emotionally, psychologically—was not just something I took for granted, it was central to my existence and self-worth. And yet, there they were, imploding right in front of me, one after another.

The wheels were coming off, or so it felt. To go from wanting to be like someone your whole life to realizing you *never* want to be like him is a kind of whiplash that you can't prepare for.

Nor was I exempt from this dissolution myself. Just when I could least afford it, problems I had neglected in my own life began to emerge.

Despite my successes, I found myself back in the city I started in, stressed and overworked, having handed much of my hard-earned freedom away because I couldn't say no to money and the thrill of a good crisis. I was wound so tight that the slightest disruption sent me into a sputtering, inconsolable rage. My work, which had always come easy, became labored. My faith in myself and other people collapsed. My quality of life did too.

I remember arriving at my house one day, after weeks on the road, and having an intense panic attack because the Wi-Fi wasn't working—*If I don't send these e-mails. If I don't send these e-mails. If I don't send these e-mails. If I don't send these e-mails . . .*

You think you're doing what you're supposed to. Society rewards you for it. But then you watch your future wife walk out the door because you aren't the person you used to be.

How does something like this happen? Can you really go from feeling like you're standing on the shoulders of giants one day, and then the next you're prying yourself out of the rubble of multiple implosions, trying to pick up the pieces from the ruins?

One benefit, however, was that it forced me to come to terms with the fact that I was a workaholic. Not in an "Oh, he just works too much" kind of way, or in the "Just relax and play it off" sense, but more, "If he doesn't start going to meetings and get clean, he will die an early death." I realized that the same drive and compulsion that had made me successful so early came with a price—as it had for so many others. It wasn't so much the amount of work but the outsized role it had taken in my sense of self. I was trapped so terribly inside my own head that I was a prisoner to my own thoughts. The result was a sort of treadmill of pain and frustration, and I needed to figure out why—unless I wanted to break in an equally tragic fashion.

For a long time, as a researcher and writer, I have studied history and business. Like anything that involves people, seen over a long enough timeline universal issues begin to emerge. These are the topics I had long been fascinated with. Foremost among them was ego.

I was not unfamiliar with ego and its effects. In fact, I had been researching this book for nearly a year before the events I have just recounted for you. But my painful experiences in this period brought the

notions I was studying into focus in ways that I could never have previously understood.

It allowed me to see the ill effects of ego played out not just in myself, or across the pages of history, but in friends and clients and colleagues, some at the highest levels of many industries. Ego has cost the people I admire hundreds of millions of dollars, and like Sisyphus, rolled them back from their goals just as they've achieved them. I have now at least peeked over that precipice myself.

A few months after my own realization, I had the phrase "EGO IS THE ENEMY" tattooed on my right forearm. Where the words came from I don't know, probably from a book I read long, long ago, but they were immediately a source of great solace and direction. On my left arm, of similarly muddled attribution, it says: "THE OBSTACLE IS THE WAY." It's these two phrases that I look at now, every single day, and use them to guide the decisions in my life. I can't help but see them when I swim, when I meditate, when I write, when I get out of the shower in the morning, and both prepare me—admonish me—to choose the right course in essentially any situation I might face.

I wrote this book not because I have attained some wisdom I feel qualified to preach, but because it's the book I wish existed at critical turning points in my own life. When I, like everyone else, was called to answer the most critical questions a person can ask themselves in life: Who do I want to be? And: What path will I take? (*Quod vitae sectabor iter.*)

And because I've found these questions to be timeless and universal, except for this note, I have tried to rely on philosophy and historical examples in this book instead of my personal life.

While the history books are filled with tales of obsessive, visionary geniuses who remade the world in their image with sheer, almost irrational force, I've found that if you go looking you'll find that history is also made by individuals who fought their egos at every turn, who eschewed the spotlight, and who put their higher goals above their desire for recognition. Engaging with and retelling these stories has been my method of learning and absorbing them.

Like my other books, this one is deeply influenced by Stoic philosophy and indeed all the great classical thinkers. I borrow heavily from them all in my writing just as I have leaned on them my entire life. If there is anything that helps you in this book, it will be because of them and not me.

The orator Demosthenes once said that virtue begins with understanding and is fulfilled by courage. We must begin by seeing ourselves and the world in a new way for the first time. Then we must fight to be different and fight to stay different—that’s the hard part. I’m not saying you should repress or crush every ounce of ego in your life—or that doing so is even possible. These are just reminders, moral stories to encourage our better impulses.

In Aristotle’s famous *Ethics*, he uses the analogy of a warped piece of wood to describe human nature. In order to eliminate warping or curvature, a skilled woodworker slowly applies pressure in the opposite direction—essentially, bending it straight. Of course, a couple of thousand years later Kant snorted, “Out of the crooked timber of humanity, nothing can be made straight.” We might not ever be straight, but we can strive for *straighter*.

It’s always nice to be made to feel special or empowered or inspired. But that’s not the aim of this book. Instead, I have tried to arrange these pages so that you might end in the same place I did when I finished writing it: that is, you will think less of yourself. I hope you will be less invested in the story you tell about your own specialness, and as a result, you will be liberated to *accomplish* the world-changing work you’ve set out to achieve.

INTRODUCTION

The first principle is that you must not fool yourself—and you are the easiest person to fool.

—RICHARD FEYNMAN

Maybe you're young and brimming with ambition. Maybe you're young and you're struggling. Maybe you've made that first couple million, signed your first deal, been selected to some elite group, or maybe you're already accomplished enough to last a lifetime. Maybe you're stunned to find out how empty it is at the top. Maybe you're charged with leading others through a crisis. Maybe you just got fired. Maybe you just hit rock bottom.

Wherever you are, whatever you're doing, your worst enemy already lives inside you: your ego.

“Not me,” you think. “No one would ever call me an egomaniac.” Perhaps you've always thought of yourself as a pretty balanced person. But for people with ambitions, talents, drives, and potential to fulfill, ego comes with the territory. Precisely what makes us so promising as thinkers, doers, creatives, and entrepreneurs, what drives us to the top of those fields, makes us vulnerable to this darker side of the psyche.

Now this is not a book about ego in the Freudian sense. Freud was fond of explaining the ego by way of analogy—our ego was the rider on a horse, with our unconscious drives representing the animal while the ego tried to direct them. Modern psychologists, on the other hand, use the word “egotist” to refer to someone dangerously focused on themselves and with disregard for anyone else. All these definitions are true enough but of little value outside a clinical setting.

The ego we see most commonly goes by a more casual definition: an unhealthy belief in our own importance. Arrogance. Self-centered ambition. That's the definition this book will use. It's that petulant child inside every person, the one that chooses getting his or her way over

anything or anyone else. The need to be *better* than, *more* than, *recognized* for, far past any reasonable utility—that's ego. It's the sense of superiority and certainty that exceeds the bounds of confidence and talent.

It's when the notion of ourselves and the world grows so inflated that it begins to distort the reality that surrounds us. When, as the football coach Bill Walsh explained, "self-confidence becomes arrogance, assertiveness becomes obstinacy, and self-assurance becomes reckless abandon." This is the ego, as the writer Cyril Connolly warned, that "sucks us down like the law of gravity."

In this way, ego is the enemy of what you want and of what you have: Of mastering a craft. Of real creative insight. Of working well with others. Of building loyalty and support. Of longevity. Of repeating and retaining your success. It repulses advantages and opportunities. It's a magnet for enemies and errors. It is Scylla and Charybdis.

Most of us aren't "egomaniacs," but ego is there at the root of almost every conceivable problem and obstacle, from why we can't win to why we need to win all the time and at the expense of others. From why we don't have what we want to why having what we want doesn't seem to make us feel any better.

We don't usually see it this way. We think something else is to blame for our problems (most often, other people). We are, as the poet Lucretius put it a few thousand years ago, the proverbial "sick man ignorant of the cause of his malady." Especially for successful people who can't see what ego prevents them from doing because all they can see is what they've already done.

With every ambition and goal we have—big or small—ego is there undermining us on the very journey we've put everything into pursuing.

The pioneering CEO Harold Geneen compared egoism to alcoholism: "The egotist does not stumble about, knocking things off his desk. He does not stammer or drool. No, instead, he becomes more and more arrogant, and some people, not knowing what is underneath such an attitude, mistake his arrogance for a sense of power and self-confidence." You could say they start to mistake that about themselves too, not realizing the disease they've contracted or that they're killing themselves with it.

If ego is the voice that tells us we're better than we really are, we can say ego inhibits true success by preventing a direct and honest connection to the world around us. One of the early members of Alcoholics

Anonymous defined ego as “a conscious separation *from*.” From what? Everything.

The ways this separation manifests itself negatively are immense: We can’t work with other people if we’ve put up walls. We can’t improve the world if we don’t understand it or ourselves. We can’t take or receive feedback if we are incapable of or uninterested in hearing from outside sources. We can’t recognize opportunities—or create them—if instead of seeing what is in front of us, we live inside our own fantasy. Without an *accurate* accounting of our own abilities compared to others, what we have is not confidence but delusion. How are we supposed to reach, motivate, or lead other people if we can’t relate to their needs—because we’ve lost touch with our own?

The performance artist Marina Abramović puts it directly: “If you start believing in your greatness, it is the death of your creativity.”

Just one thing keeps ego around—comfort. Pursuing great work—whether it is in sports or art or business—is often terrifying. Ego soothes that fear. It’s a salve to that insecurity. Replacing the rational and aware parts of our psyche with bluster and self-absorption, ego tells us what we want to hear, when we want to hear it.

But it is a short-term fix with a long-term consequence.

EGO WAS ALWAYS THERE. NOW IT’S EMBOLDENED.

Now more than ever, our culture fans the flames of ego. It’s never been easier to talk, to puff ourselves up. We can brag about our goals to millions of our fans and followers—things only rock stars and cult leaders used to have. We can follow and interact with our idols on Twitter, we can read books and sites and watch TED Talks, drink from a fire hose of inspiration and validation like never before (there’s an app for that). We can name ourselves CEO of our exists-only-on-paper company. We can announce big news on social media and let the congratulations roll in. We can publish articles about ourselves in outlets that used to be sources of objective journalism.

Some of us do this more than others. But it’s only a matter of degree.

Besides the changes in technology, we’re told to believe in our uniqueness above all else. We’re told to think big, live big, to be memorable and “dare greatly.” We think that success requires a bold vision or some sweeping plan—after all, that’s what the founders of this

company or that championship team supposedly had. (But did they? Did they really?) We see risk-taking swagger and successful people in the media, and eager for our own successes, try to reverse engineer the right attitude, the right pose.

We intuit a causal relationship that isn't there. We assume the symptoms of success are the same as success itself—and in our naiveté, confuse the by-product with the cause.

Sure, ego has worked for some. Many of history's most famous men and women were notoriously egotistical. But so were many of its greatest failures. Far more of them, in fact. But here we are with a culture that urges us to roll the dice. To make the gamble, ignoring the stakes.

WHEREVER YOU ARE, EGO IS TOO.

At any given time in life, people find themselves at one of three stages. We're aspiring to something—trying to make a dent in the universe. We have achieved success—perhaps a little, perhaps a lot. Or we have failed—recently or continually. Most of us are in these stages in a fluid sense—we're aspiring until we succeed, we succeed until we fail or until we aspire to more, and after we fail we can begin to aspire or succeed again.

Ego is the enemy every step along this way. In a sense, ego is the enemy of building, of maintaining, and of recovering. When things come fast and easy, this might be fine. But in times of change, of difficulty . . .

And therefore, the three parts that this book is organized into: 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

This is not to say that you're not unique and that you don't have something amazing to contribute in your short time on this planet. This is not to say that there is not room to push past creative boundaries, to invent,

to feel inspired, or to aim for truly ambitious change and innovation. On the contrary, in order to properly do these things and take these risks we need balance. As the Quaker William Penn observed, “Buildings that lie so exposed to the weather need a good foundation.”

SO, WHAT NOW?

This book you hold in your hands is written around one optimistic assumption: Your ego is not some power you’re forced to satiate at every turn. It can be managed. It can be directed.

In this book, we’ll look at individuals like William Tecumseh Sherman, Katharine Graham, Jackie Robinson, Eleanor Roosevelt, Bill Walsh, Benjamin Franklin, Belisarius, Angela Merkel, and George C. Marshall. Could they have accomplished what they accomplished—saving faltering companies, advancing the art of war, integrating baseball, revolutionizing football offense, standing up to tyranny, bravely bearing misfortune—if ego had left them ungrounded and self-absorbed? It was their sense of reality and awareness—one that the author and strategist Robert Greene once said we must take to like a spider in its web—that was at the core of their great art, great writing, great design, great business, great marketing, and great leadership.

What we find when we study these individuals is that they were grounded, circumspect, and unflinchingly real. Not that any of them were wholly without ego. But they knew how to suppress it, channel it, subsume it when it counted. They were great yet humble.

Wait, but so-and-so had a huge ego and was successful. But what about Steve Jobs? What about Kanye West?

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.

For this reason, we’re also going to look at individuals like Howard Hughes, the Persian king Xerxes, John DeLorean, Alexander the Great, and at the many cautionary tales of others who lost their grip on reality and

in the process made it clear what a gamble ego can be. We'll look at the costly lessons they learned and the price they paid in misery and self-destruction. We'll look at how often even the most successful people vacillate between humility and ego and the problems this causes.

When we remove ego, we're left with what is real. What replaces ego is humility, yes—but rock-hard humility and confidence. Whereas ego is artificial, this type of confidence can hold weight. Ego is stolen. Confidence is earned. Ego is self-anointed, its swagger is artifice. One is girding yourself, the other gaslighting. It's the difference between potent and poisonous.

As you'll see in the pages that follow, that self-confidence took an unassuming and underestimated general and turned him into America's foremost warrior and strategist during the Civil War. Ego took a different general from the heights of power and influence after that same war and drove him to destitution and ignominy. One took a quiet, sober German scientist and made her not just a new kind of leader but a force for peace. The other took two different but equally brilliant and bold engineering minds of the twentieth century and built them up in a whirlwind of hype and celebrity before dashing their hopes against the rocks of failure, bankruptcy, scandal, and insanity. One guided one of the worst teams in NFL history to the Super Bowl in three seasons, and then on to be one of most dominant dynasties in the game. Meanwhile, countless other coaches, politicians, entrepreneurs, and writers have overcome similar odds—only to succumb to the more inevitable probability of handing the top spot right back to someone else.

Some learn humility. Some choose ego. Some are prepared for the vicissitudes of fate, both positive and negative. Others are not. Which will you choose? Who will you be?

You've picked up this book because you sense that you'll need to answer this question eventually, consciously or not.

Well, here we are. Let's get to it.