

Rolf Dobelli

Author of
the million-copy-
bestseller *The
Art of Thinking
Clearly*

The

~~Not~~

To-Do

List

The Surprisingly
Simple Art
of Success

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Praise for Rolf Dobelli

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Also by Rolf Dobelli

The Art of Thinking Clearly

The Art of the Good Life

Stop Reading the News

The ~~Not~~ To-Do List

The Surprisingly
Simple Art
of Success

ROLF DOBELLI

Translated from the German by Isabel Adey


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For my wife Clara Maria Bagus and our sons

FOREWORD

Some people collect vinyl, video game consoles or vintage clothes. For years, I've been accumulating stories of failure – botched attempts at work, family life, marriage and life in general.

Leo Tolstoy's monumental novel *Anna Karenina* opens with the line 'Happy families are all alike; every unhappy family is unhappy in its own way.' Meaning: unadulterated joy makes for a dull read. Happiness is bland and one-dimensional, smooth like Teflon. Unhappiness, on the other hand, tells us more about the world. Misery is textured. And it teaches us lessons. That's why I'm an avid collector of woe and misfortune.

On graduation day, colleges and universities invite a guest speaker to share their insights and wisdom with the fledglings being released into the world of work. These speakers are usually former students of the institution who have excelled in their chosen career. This was the case on 13 June 1986, when Charlie Munger, then aged 62, was invited to deliver the commencement speech at the Harvard School in Los Angeles. The American investor, together with Warren Buffett, had built arguably the most successful holding company in history: Berkshire Hathaway. Munger's speech was most extraordinary. Even the title had a bizarre ring to it: 'How to Guarantee a Life of Misery'. Instead of imparting insights to help his audience achieve better personal outcomes, he shared four failsafe ways to achieve zero success in life. He simply flipped the whole thing on its head. It was a brilliant stroke of inspiration; after all, negative rules are more powerful than their positive counterparts, more concrete and memorable. Despite all the research into happiness, for example, we still don't know exactly what makes us happy. We certainly know what destroys happiness, though. We can't pinpoint what leads to success, but we know for sure what makes it an impossibility. The key is to keep the killer in your sights and give him the slip, then the right path will automatically open up ahead.

Munger's idea was by no means new. The Prussian mathematician Carl Gustav Jacobi applied this approach back in the nineteenth century. Sometimes, he realized, the only way to solve an academic problem is to turn it around completely. The technical term is 'inversion'. This is what led Einstein to adapt Newton's theory of gravity to Maxwell's electromagnetism, instead of approaching the problem the other way round like everyone else had done before him. Long-term investors ask themselves how best to run a company into the ground, then they invest in indestructible prospects. Munger's witty one-liner sums up this approach perfectly: 'All I want to know is where I'm going to die, so I'll never go there.' In addition to being a brilliant investor, Charlie Munger was an equally ingenious thinker who was never one to hold back. As the source of so many incisive remarks, he is someone I quote often. He sadly passed away at the age of 99 while I was writing this book.

Back to the subject at hand: inversion. We tend to dissect successes, but not failures, in our own life or in the media. There is an additional bias here: in the case of success, we systematically overestimate the role of skills, decisions and actions, and underestimate the role of chance, luck, randomness. Why? Because we hear about successful companies, projects and people in the media. Flops, on the other hand – no one wants to know about them. Deadbeats don't usually write autobiographies. And in the rare event that they do, they fail to find a publisher, let alone an audience. So we study these shining examples and delude ourselves into thinking that achievements are the result of a series of carefully orchestrated success factors, when really what matters is steering clear of common pitfalls. Tip: visit the graveyards of failed companies, projects, people, marriages and families. That's where you'll learn the most – namely, what to avoid.

Of the twelve books I've written, three were major successes and a handful were veritable flops. I have no idea what made *The Art of Thinking Clearly* an international bestseller, but I know exactly where the others went wrong. If you view the world from a negative perspective, you bring light into the darkness.

My previous books employed the same approach as the conventional graduation speech. They offer advice on how to think clearly, act wisely and live a better life. But in this book, I'm turning the tables. I give you a whole catalogue of habits, behaviours and thought patterns that are best avoided – a 'not-to-do list', if you will, a sort of encyclopaedia of foolishness. Some of them may even remind you of advice you've encountered from celebrity life coaches, self-help gurus or online influencers. If you know what they are, you can also steer clear of them. Each chapter then offers, as an antidote, a gentle word from the quiet voice of reason.