

Introduction

*Everyone thinks of changing the world,
but no one thinks of changing himself.*

Leo Tolstoy, *Pamphlets: Translated From The Russian*

It was an early-afternoon ambush. An unannounced violation.

Allison's family pulled into the driveway in separate vehicles on a sunless day, then solemnly entered the modest rancher one by one. Everyone sat on the two living room sofas except for Tyler, who veered down the narrow hallway to his bedroom.

Hank remained the only person (other than myself) whose eyes were not glued to a variety of personal electronics. Omitting the usual niceties, he began to spout off about how he and Mildred were taking custody of the kids, moving into the house, and kicking me out.

My entire body tensed up from sheer panic, as mind-numbing confusion engulfed my thoughts. I was blindsided by this brash thunderbolt that had come from nowhere, followed by the relentless amount of bullshit and deception that was now forcing its way into my ears.

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Hindsight is both a gift and a curse.

The same goes for sudden, triggered flashbacks of better times and the unstoppable dreams that still awaken me at all hours of the night, with no one for me to share the heart-pounding details. On some days, it all feels like yesterday. Other days... a million years ago.

I was always told that I could be whomever I wanted to be. But there can be a huge difference between what you enjoy and what you're actually good at. And no one ever warns you of the jolting

speed bumps that may accompany your pursuits in either direction, nor how to predict or handle those perils. Therefore, it seems rare to benefit from life's lessons without first making so many mistakes—the kind that hit you with rock-bottom desperation, longing for simpler and brighter moments of the past; the kind that make you risk ending up alone because you decided to go against the norm and stick to your principles, while others take the credit and prosper. This has made me realize that no one can fully rescue you from the resulting consequences and bitterness that make it harder to recognize the good in people.

It was impossible to predict that Allison would be stricken with an incurable disease in her early forties that would lead to countless doctor visits, shelves of medications, and a potential legal battle for her young children.

Years earlier, no one could have also predicted that I would be driving Savannah to the hospital, while the rest of our small town slept soundly in their warm beds. Through fog-filled winter woods and misty, solitary back roads, my subconscious knew the truth, but my optimism never ceased to foolishly fight it. All while my maternal, Sicilian aunt lived to be 104 with no problems whatsoever. (She attributed her longevity to eating raw cloves of garlic, drinking many glasses of red wine, and never dealing with the stress of raising children of her own!)

Events like these have forced me to involuntarily face episodes of stabbing guilt that must be dealt with on a daily basis, compounded with a premature divorce in my thirties, broken bonds with relatives in my forties, one partner's drug addiction, moving between sixteen different addresses, and all of the arguments that could have been avoided if everyone had remained levelheaded and even-tempered. The list keeps growing with new revelations and all of the unbearable, tacky clichés, like not knowing what you have until it's gone, and seeing firsthand how blissful ignorance really can be.

Why does it take such misery for some of us to learn how to become better people? Is it from centuries ago when our primitive

instincts for food and shelter necessitated us to be so self-serving? Did we brush aside any guilt then, too, only to warrant it with survival?

Then again, there are other events that are not our fault at all, yet we still end up paying the price for them. I know that the ideal concept of staying with the same person for over half a century and raising a family together (as most of my ancestors had done) no longer exists for me. Being laid off from five different jobs is another uncontrollable example that I am embarrassed to admit.

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This book began as vengeful retribution for all of the scathing wrongdoings that I felt had been done to me. Eight years after scribbling the first paragraph, it is no longer about “Hey! Look at me! I need vindication!” It is about “Look at what I have been through and survived!” in hopes that any readers will think twice before making rash choices that you may never be able to revert. These harrowing accounts are about confronting your own disservice, working toward forgiveness, and figuring out the best ways to get through tough times, especially the depression that seems to be at its peak during holidays, birthdays, anniversaries, and the changing of seasons.

My story is only one out of millions, but I also know that it may help at least a few other people out there. That makes these writings worth it. The poet and musician Bob Dylan is known for saying, “What else can you do for anyone but inspire them?”¹ I feel the same way about the hardships in our lives and the personal wars that have been lost and won. I’m the type of guy who believes in the entrepreneurial spirit, fighting for underdogs, and desperately trying to avoid the common “rat race.” I watch the end credits of a movie out of respect for its hard-working crew (while also catching any secret endings!) and still prefer to hold musty, hardcover books in my bare hands, refusing to fully succumb to a cold, digital future.

¹ Cott, Johnathan. “Bob Dylan: The Rolling Stone Interview.” *Rolling Stone*, January 26, 1978.

This memoir of reflections is not meant to discredit past loves, but rather acknowledge the impactful experiences and tribulations from my most meaningful and longest-lasting relationships; to heed any signs of a connection that may be going south or any decisions that will surely become shameful and repentant in the not-too-distant future. It is about recognizing what is truly important to you and drawing attention to creating resolutions, versus living with the needless drama that often binds us and clouds our well-intended thoughts.

Perhaps this book is also written out of remorse after facing the blunders that have led me down the wrong paths, losing good-natured people along the way, and coming to grips with how all good things end sooner or later. Is it for therapeutic reasons? Probably, considering the rarity of going through certain life-altering events before the age of fifty that some people will never have to endure. You know... the “lucky” ones whom we envy with the average 2.5 kids, a McMansion surrounded by a white picket fence, and who live with a finite definition of what a “rough week” actually is.

It's easy for people on the outside to tell you that everything is going to be okay, despite knowing that they most likely have never been in your situation. Their unintentional ignorance sometimes leaves you no choice but to be your own cheerleader, knowing that you never truly “get over” someone. You only learn how to adjust every little detail in your life to accommodate a new reality that was not your doing, while also living with the fact that *you* are the one who is still alive (for some strange reason) and they aren't.

It's also easy for people to believe that just because you have been through a lot in your life, good things will eventually come your way. This is known as the “gambler's fallacy,” as if there was a mysterious, sympathetic balance in nature that will automatically even out the odds for you. There's not. Trust me. At least not for everyone.

I have wasted many years trying to hold on to anything that is capable of remaining constant, resisting change and searching for

perfection like a ruthless robot. I am filled with jealousy just from watching my favorite rock bands stick together for over forty years! However, life is not based on predictable routines. Some of our lives are a short, twisted adventure, full of twisted people and gut-wrenching, rigorous ups and downs that will test you, mercilessly. The sooner you accept that fact, the more chances for you to take the reins and be happy will be revealed. And if you have lost someone important along the way for reasons beyond your control, or have been wrongly accused to the point that it annihilates your physical and mental well-being, I've been there, too... multiple times.

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I certainly have never claimed to know everything about people and the world we live in, though my adversaries love to tell me otherwise. Most people—privileged or not—have indisputably had similar pleasures and traumas that come from sharing so much of your life with strong, thought-provoking individuals. I could have easily spent an *additional* eight years filling this book with more treasured events, detailed memories, and lengthy discussions. Or editing and downplaying specific chapters to appease critics, satisfy bullying opposition, and avoid coming across as a generic pity-ography.

Even so, in our universal school of hard knocks, how do you find the solace to live with so many unfixable errors while moving forward at the same time? How do you distinguish between a person's regretful actions and internal feelings without underestimating their true intent and inner monologue?

It's a powerful ability to see things from a broader perspective. At times, there are no other options. A greater reach empowers all parties involved to understand what makes each partnership and bond so unique. Recognizing the signs of quarrel that inevitably occur may save precious time, in addition to accepting what cannot be changed, what *should* be changed, and what should be let go before it ruins you and the people you love.