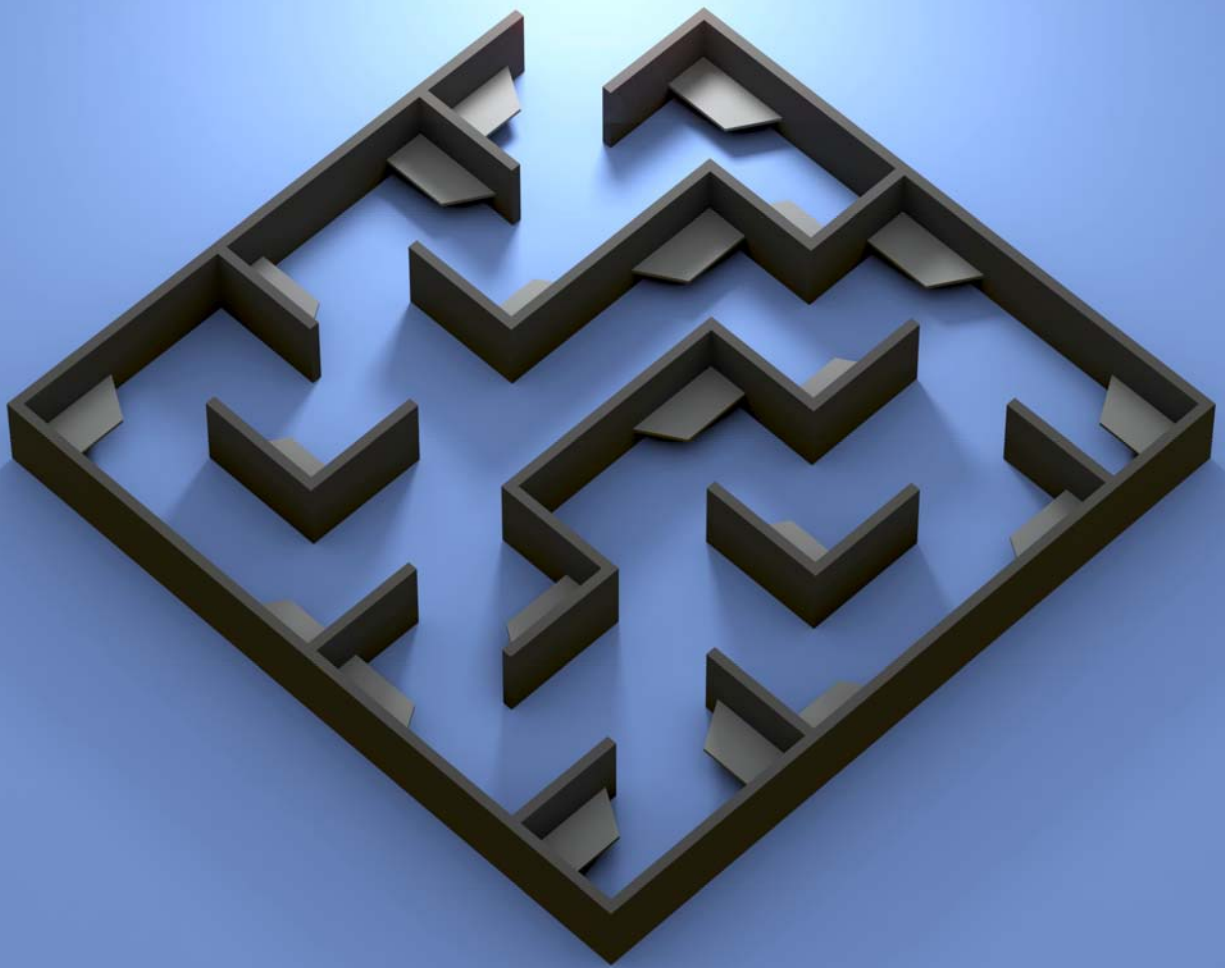
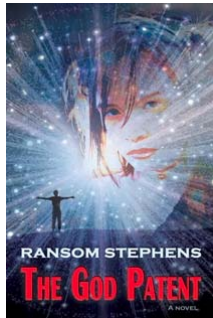


# YOUR PURSUIT OF GREATNESS



A WORKBOOK

by Ransom Stephens, Ph.D.



Ransom Stephens is also the author of *The God Patent* ([www.TheGodPatent.com](http://www.TheGodPatent.com), from Numina Press, San Rafael, 2009) – sex, drugs, and quantum physics collide with artificial intelligence, faith and free will in this perspective altering tale.

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For you and me.

## Part 1. Greatness

In the last decade I've presented "The Pursuit of Greatness" to thousands of people. The first audiences were high school students entering college and back then the title was "How I Avoided Growing Up." Over the last few years, the largest audiences have been professionals in career transition (i.e., unwillingly unemployed) and the title was "The Big Picture and Big Decisions." The words have evolved over the years, but the message hasn't.

The Pursuit of Greatness is for people at a point in their lives when they are making long-lasting decisions about who they are and what they want to be.

There is something about this speech that fires people up. I'm no bubbly optimist, though I do understand the power of positive thought and can explain it in terms that make sense (and I will in **Error! Reference source not found.**). I make wisecracks. I rub your nose in your own mortality. I mix metaphors. I make demands of you and am prone to making light of your most deeply held beliefs. I don't mean to be an asshole, but sometimes I am. Regardless of any of that, I am inextricably on your side. Maybe that's it. Whatever it is, people really like the presentation and love this book. This simple message helps them move on:

**Rule 1: You are obligated to fulfill your Greatest potential. Go on, no excuses, get to it right now!**

Not only do you owe it to yourself, you owe it to me! And the guy sitting next to you. And your dog. (You don't owe it to your cat though. Your cat doesn't actually care about you.)

### ***Chapter 1. How to use this book***

This book will help you understand, recognize, and approach each stage of your own unique Pursuit of Greatness. In many ways, you're making a transition into a new world. This "new world" business is more than a convenient metaphor. For the last 40,000 years or so, the worlds that people inhabit have shifted. The transition from physical evolution to cultural evolution reflects the fact that our cultural environments affect our lives as much as our physical environments.

Economics is the monetary image of a culture. It is ultimately bound by physical laws, but the so-called laws of economics, including market forces, supply and demand, and monopoly and commoditization, depend on a combination of politics, religion, social norms, and the values and ethics of a society; the sum of which is "culture." It is in this sense that the instant you begin your Pursuit of Greatness you begin the transition from one world to another.

In the course of this transition, I'll help you find ways to be realistic in charting your course to Greatness. And by "realistic," I mean a realistic evaluation of the stakes; "realistic" yes, but not in the cynical voice of the jerk who asks, "What are you, nuts?"

We'll have our cynical moments, some sarcasm, too, but always with the complete appreciation that Great challenges have been met by human beings hundreds of millions of times and there is simply no compelling reason to exclude you from that level of success. That said:

If you don't believe you can do it, no one will. So believe in yourself but avoid misconceptions. It won't be easy and it won't be cheap, but there will be opportunities and you need to be ready.

### ***Enlightening Blurb 1.***

- **To get the most out this book** read it all the way through and do the exercises as you go. Wherever you are in your quest, it will help you figure out where you're going and how to take the next step. As you set out, the first reading will help you prepare, like filling your canteen before setting out to cross a desert.
- **After the first read, keep this book nearby and as you work forward come back after you've had a success or failure and whenever you feel uncertain.**

I wrote this book for two people – you and me – and for one reason: to help us maintain the perspectives we need to navigate our separate ways with tempered expectations but without lowering our sights. We're not on the same path, you and I, but in these pages our paths intersect. And hey, all kidding aside, writing this book and doing these exercises have been an enormous help to me.

Each chapter describes a different stage in the Pursuit of Greatness. I can't promise that this book will make it easier. "Easier" isn't the right word. It's not going to be easy. The stuff of Greatness shouldn't be easy! If I can help you believe that success is possible, then I'll be one big step farther along my own path to Greatness.

This is a workbook and that means you need to do the exercises. Well, most of them (some of them?). Don't worry about writing on these pages, I'll give you the source file if you want to print another copy (send me a note: ransom@ransomstephens.com). As the author, I get to say things like: cover this book in your handwriting or else you're not doing it right. If you're reading the interactive version on a computer/tablet/iPad/whatever – type a lot in the fields provided! What the hell, you don't have to show it to anyone, right? And if you got the free, unformatted, no-bells-and-whistles electronic version, then use a notebook or buy a fancier version (at [www.yourpursuitofgreatness.com](http://www.yourpursuitofgreatness.com)).

The exercises are designed to help you both consciously and subconsciously assemble the tools you'll need. No matter how old you are, you have faced and conquered other challenges. It makes sense to dig through those experiences and use them to sharpen the tools you already have.

Exercise 1.1 is the most important, do it right now:

**Exercise 1.1:** List your top 10 all time Greatest successes. Include goals that you've achieved, problems you've overcome, and tragedies you've survived. Things like academic degrees,

awards, athletic/artistic success, careers you've launched, products you've produced, children you've raised, illnesses you've survived, etc. If you have trouble digging them up, here's a trick: think back to your earliest memory and then move forward year by year, consider each school you've attended, places you've lived, jobs you've had, things you've made, performances, and so forth. You can come up with at least ten and don't worry about the order.

1. \_\_\_\_\_
2. \_\_\_\_\_
3. \_\_\_\_\_
4. \_\_\_\_\_
5. \_\_\_\_\_
6. \_\_\_\_\_
7. \_\_\_\_\_
8. \_\_\_\_\_
9. \_\_\_\_\_
10. \_\_\_\_\_

We'll need your most memorable experiences, too:

**Exercise 1.2:** List several of your most poignant experiences, both good and bad. Include trips you've taken, enlightening encounters, relationships, losses, anything that stands out in your memory as a perspective-altering experience.

1. \_\_\_\_\_
2. \_\_\_\_\_
3. \_\_\_\_\_
4. \_\_\_\_\_
5. \_\_\_\_\_
6. \_\_\_\_\_
7. \_\_\_\_\_

## ***Chapter 2. Mixed metaphors, silly rules, enlightening blurbs, great questions, irritating clichés, and boring anecdotes***

I read dozens of self-help books while writing this and I made a few discoveries. First, most self-help books really suck. I hope this one doesn't. Second, they're all twice as long as they need to be. Few of them make more than one point and whatever they have to offer is presented in the first chapter and then repeated *ad nauseum* with no further enlightenment. So this book is short and makes lots of points and only a few of them are repeated over and over again in a redundant, repetitive fashion.

One thing that annoyed me while reading the pile of self-help books was that half of them advocated letting "the universe/God/whatever guide you" while the other half advocated a "relentless, determined pursuit of your goals." As I read them, I found myself agreeing with both types of books. I therefore assert *both* approaches but with balance. Any reasonable analysis of the two principles leads to one of life's most fundamental questions:

**Great Question 1: Each day and for every obstacle in your path you must answer this question: Will you float with the current or paddle upstream?**

The key to Great Question 1 is to answer it consciously.

>>> \* <<<

As you travel along this river of time you'll encounter stretches of calm and periods of rapids. Sometimes it will seem that you're about to drown and other times it will feel as though the entire universe is designed to advance you directly to your desired fate. Most of the time, though, in nitty gritty everyday life, no matter how pure your desire, your will is cluttered by unimportant but urgent problems, irritating emails, immediate hassle, the lure of Facebook, or the Oakland Raiders blog. It is your responsibility to decide whether to go with the flow of time and let the obstacles and currents guide you downstream or to take your metaphorical paddle and row as hard as you can in the direction you want to go.

Some days we have the vim and vigor to confront the universe/God/whatever and dictate who we are and what we're about. On those days we embody undaunted ambition. Other days, like today as I write this, with a lingering headache and a pile of laundry, well dude, if there's a hassle today, I'm going around it. Today it's mellow Ransom cruising downstream picking the low hanging fruit. I'm well aware, though, that badass Raider-Ransom will be back to do the necessary ass-kicking tomorrow or maybe the next day.

>>> \* <<<

*Be a duck: calm and cool on the surface while paddling like hell!*

- From a poster that I saw in the office of Nobel Prize winning physicist Robert Schrieffer



### ***Enlightening Blurb 2.***

Another thing I learned from all those self-help books is that, even when I disagree with most of what they have to say, I can always dissect something useful from the froth. In other words, just to make sure we're all on board here:

#### **Rule 2: Don't believe everything I say.**

There is no "rule" in this book that I have not violated, no lesson that I have not learned the hard way, no cliché I haven't driven into the ground. For example, I have a lot of trouble following Rule 2.

In addition to the mixed metaphors, silly rules, enlightening blurbs, great questions, and irritating clichés that litter these pages, there are boring anecdotes. Many of these vignettes are personal stories and I want to make one thing clear before we continue. I am a private person. Neither fame nor notoriety appeals to me. The anecdotes are not here for self-aggrandizement. Despite my nearly complete lack of modesty, I make no claim to have yet achieved Greatness, though I have pursued Greatness since I was ten and have gotten close a few times in a few different fields. The point of my anecdotes is to serve as examples in the sense of how worked examples in math texts help people work the exercises. Your anecdotes are the solutions to the exercises. Your personal stories of triumph and despair store the gold you must mine to pay your way through the gates toward Greatness.

### ***Chapter 3. Your potential for Greatness***

According to the 20-volume Oxford English Dictionary (the OED), the word "Great" (which requires five full, tiny-font pages) is derived from words that mean large in scale. It evolved from "Great" as "big, thick, and stout." From there, it became "large in emotion and courage;" then it got more abstract: "important, distinguished, or famous; extraordinary in ability, genius, or achievement." That is, the literal "Great" as "large" became Great as metaphorically large and ultimately Great in magnitude of achievement, transcendent in thought or action.

"Transcendent" is key here. In pursuing Greatness, we're really just trying to transcend the world we've been living in and pass into a Greater world.

"**Greatness**" means "large" but now in the abstract.

In order to pursue Greatness we must fulfill our **potential**. The OED says that potential comes from the root for "potent" which means possessed of power. The step from potent to potential alters the concept of power from the actual to the possible; potential is latent or undeveloped power.

*"Got it in me, I got it in me! Ain't gonna quit until it all comes out."*

- Ronnie Montrose, from his song, [Rock the Nation](#).

### ***Enlightening Blurb 3.***

In physics, a “potential” is an abstract expression used to determine the force exerted on an object. It doesn’t mean that those forces are out there pushing or pulling on things, but it includes all the information for how the pushing/pulling would behave should a thing be put in the potential field.

In the physics analogy, you’re putting yourself in position so that you can release your potential. As your potential becomes a force, it will propel you toward your Greatness.

So what of potential then? How much do you have? Is it talent? I have a suggestion: don’t worry about talent. There’s nothing you can do about it anyway. Concentrate on developing skill and let talent take care of itself. Besides, talent is by no means required for someone to be Great.

Let’s talk about career transition. For most of us, making the decision to pursue Greatness means that we’re ready to switch careers. The OED says that the word “career” is rooted in a person’s course through life. In the modern sense, a career is a profession, a chain of employment. The concept of a vocation differs from that of a career. Your vocation is your calling. The word vocation is rooted in the word “advocate” in the sense that you are called or summoned to a vocation. It stems from the assumption that a divine influence guides you toward a special work in life for which you are peculiarly fit. If you believe in higher power(s), milk the concept of vocation for all it’s worth. Use every tool at your disposal.

In any case, the transformation of potential into Greatness is catalyzed by being called to action. Whether that “call” comes from a decision you make, getting laid off, a random sequence of events, or a higher power doesn’t matter.

Here are the important pieces:

- Potential is something you already have in you
- Your career is the course that you travel as your potential is released
- The Pursuit of Greatness starts with a call to action results in transforming your potential into excellence

Keep an eye on that first bullet point: it’s something you already have. Consider this:

>>> \* <<<

An amazing thing happens when people face tragedy. In the days that follow a devastating event, like a tsunami, hurricane, typhoon, tornado, earthquake, or even an act of war, humans show greater courage, compassion, empathy, and generosity than at any other time. The pettiness dissolves and the will to Greatness emerges.

All the key ingredients of civilization are concentrated in the worst of times. The day before the Big One (that’s what people on the West Coast call the next devastating earthquake) I might berate a neighbor for stealing a parking space I had my eye on but the day after, I’m right next to him digging loved ones out of the wreckage.

>>> \* <<<

**Rule 3: We all have the potential for Greatness.**

You already have everything you need: courage, compassion, empathy, and generosity. The trick is in digging it up and forming it into the tools you need to conquer your Greatest metaphor.

## **Chapter 4. The structure of the Pursuit of Greatness**

In his book, *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*, Joseph Campbell ([www.jcf.com](http://www.jcf.com)) demonstrates the universal qualities of human endeavor. He calls it the Hero's Journey. It boils down to this:

**Rule 4: Every challenge we face and every endeavor we attempt has the same essential structure as life itself.**

My background as a physicist seems to give me a somewhat different take on things. People tend to think my insights are either ridiculous or insightful. I hope to achieve both and by so doing to offer a perspective you might not have otherwise derived.

I think that the Pursuit of Greatness is a fractal.

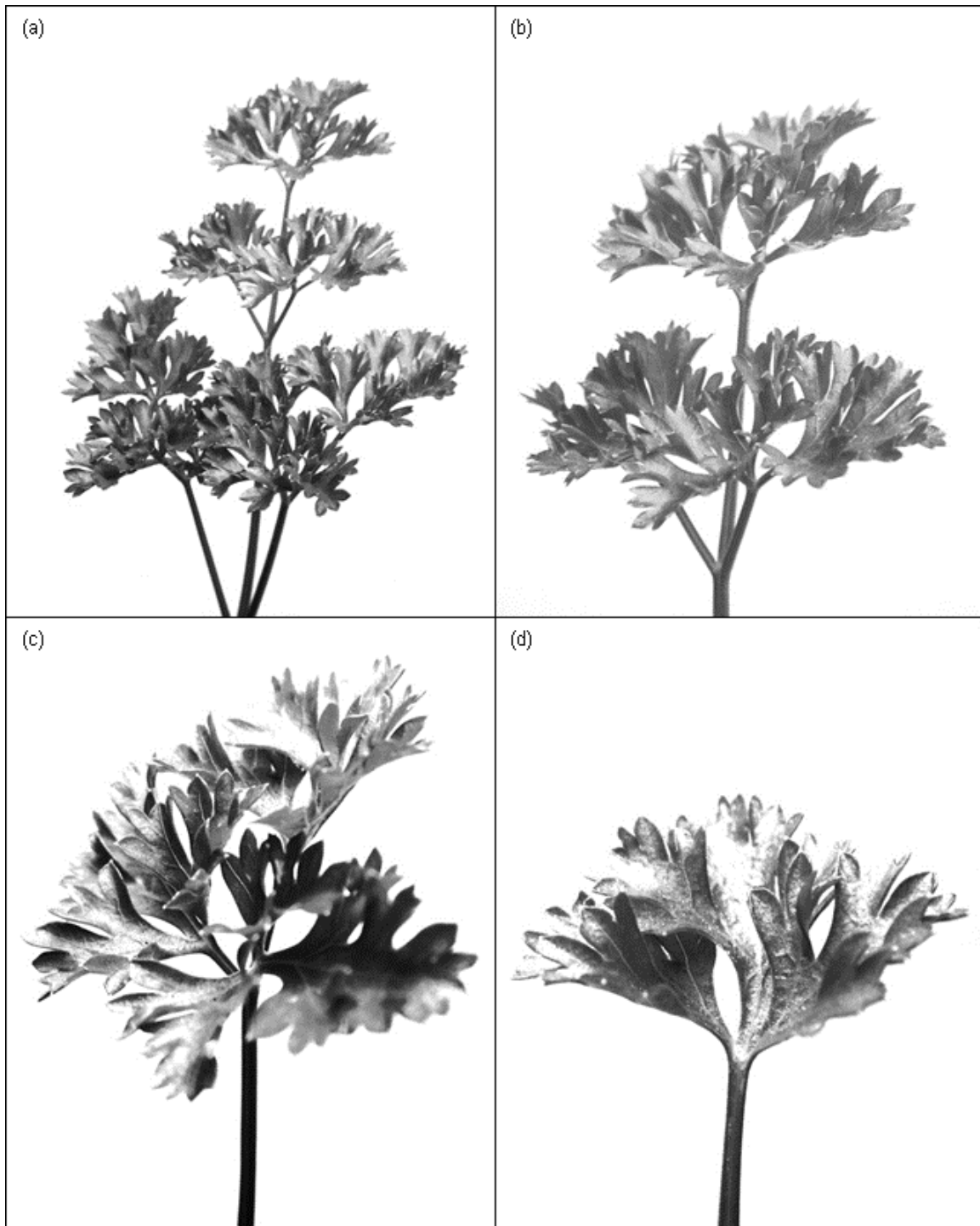
A fractal is a thing that looks the same at different scales. Figure 1.1(a) is a photo of a parsley plant, (b) is a branch, (c) a sprig, and (d) a single leaf. At each scale they look quite similar; self-similar. The same can be said for cedar, broccoli, and ferns. Coastlines have the same essential structure whether viewed from a satellite photo, an airplane, a cliff, or when you're building a sand castle. This is called self-similar behavior and it is a defining property of a fractal.

I propose that life itself also demonstrates self-similar behavior. The process birth-child-teen-adult-elder-death is repeated on smaller timescales over and over again. The first challenge was birth. Leaving the womb, though I don't remember it, was no trivial feat. Delivery has a set of milestones that can't be demeaned: the first breath, the first vision, the first taste, the first touch – each one of these must be at least as great a shock as a job interview, a breakup, a touchdown, a graduation. Now, as you embark on your Pursuit of Greatness, whether for the first time or the Nth time, is no different.

Rule 4 is an axiom. It stands on the vast accumulation of evidence rather than a philosophical principle or proof. I envision a system of gears turning a wheel. Each day we're turning one with a large gear ratio that turns another one, with a smaller gear ratio, that turns another with a yet smaller gear ratio, and so on. Each of our smaller goals, our microgoals, moves us closer to Greatness.

There is no step-by-step map showing how to slay your dragon, how to climb your mountain, how to compose your metaphor, but you have slain bugs, climbed hills, and thought of analogies. When you combine your experience with the collective experience of 40,000+ years of human culture you get an outline of how it works; a format, a great spreadsheet with cells that must be filled by milestones along the path. This outline is what Joseph Campbell determined through his research in mythology. He called his result *The Hero's Journey*.

Campbell showed how the myths and fairy tales of every culture provide a standard format for the Pursuit of Greatness. In every epic tale, from slaying a dragon to rescuing a damsel to becoming a Jedi Knight and defeating the Empire, the structure of the journey is repeated.



**Figure 1.1: The self-similar structure of Parsley as an example of a fractal.**

The first common element of The Hero's Journey is:

**Cliché 1: It ain't easy.**

All of the easy stuff has already been accomplished and it has always been thus. Cave people had it made.

## ***Chapter 5. The ingredients of Greatness***

**Rule 5: You can't do everything you set your mind to, but you won't set your mind to something you can't do.**

We aren't wired to convince ourselves that we're capable of something impossible. Of course it happens now and then, someone tries to fly off a building or, under tremendous pressure like grief, people convince themselves that they're capable of the impossible, but if you're a sane, rational human being Rule 5 holds. It's a necessary result of natural selection.

So, wherever you're headed, it is possible to get there. Just delete that doubt right now.

However, Rule 5 is also related to "the torture problem." When a spy is captured, how much torture can she take before she talks? If she can just hold out one more second then she can hold out an additional second and then another. In principle she can hold out forever, right?

This is also the core of the success-failure problem. When you launch into a Great challenge it is necessary to believe that you can succeed where others have failed. The reason others failed is probably not due to a lack of talent. The reason for failure is that, for whatever reason, they have run out of resilience, hit the wall of perseverance. Like the tortured spy who spills, they gave up too soon.

*To make it across the desert, no matter how far you have already traveled, you must believe that there is an oasis just beyond the next dune, or perhaps the next.  
The great tragedy of failure is when you stop one dune short of the oasis.<sup>†</sup>*

### ***Enlightening Blurb 4.***

In order to accomplish Greatness, we have to dedicate a full decade to the Pursuit; a decade of determination, perseverance, and resilience is hard to beat. If you can spend each day attempting to move toward your goal and are willing to withstand whatever the world offers through the course of ten years, you will succeed. (Or die trying. I didn't really want to mention this but full disclosure and all.)

In a decade or more, when you look back on this experience, it will seem as if everything was destined. During the process, on the other hand, it will seem as though you don't have a snowball's chance in the Mojave Desert, but you'll keep pushing because you're also aware that sometimes it snows in the Mojave. Why shouldn't it snow on you?

---

<sup>†</sup> Any non-attributed blurb is, as far as I know, the original para-(pseudo-?)-wisdom of the author.

## Chapter 6. The pros and cons of mortality

*The great questions for a man are:*

*what to do about his time and his passion*

*and where to find friends and the money to be with them.*

*When he's found the right answers, he's got all four legs a man needs to walk on.*

- John Myers Myers, from his book, *Silverlock*, 1941.

### **Enlightening Blurb 5.**

>>> \* <<<

Gerianne is driving home. Like every other Tuesday, she's just dropped her son along with three other kids from the neighborhood at soccer practice. She takes the same route and stops at the same intersection. She is a bit preoccupied with a proposal that's due tomorrow and kind of annoyed that Ron can't, or won't, take Friday off so they can go to the coast for the weekend. She makes the same left turn that she makes every Tuesday. But today is different.

At this very instant, another car driven by another person who is also preoccupied with a deadline is driving well over the speed limit and doesn't see the stop sign. Had Gerianne taken half a second longer dropping the kids off, or driven just a bit faster, she wouldn't have been in that intersection in that instant. But such is life and death.

>>> \* <<<

### **Great Question 2: How would you spend today if you knew it would be your last?**

I hate this question. From its high horse, it denies the balance we need to survive.

**Here's the deal:** In the back of our minds we know that death could come at any instant. Therefore, we have no other way to live than as if it is our last day. Of course we hedge our bet that there might be another. So the answer to Great Question 2 is that we'd do what we're doing anyway. If we could see into the future we'd make small alterations like picking the right lottery numbers. But other than that sort of thing we're pretty much in control of the show here.

>>> \* <<<

Joe rides his bike three days a week. At 45 years old, his rest pulse rate is 55, though right now, as he ascends Mountain View Terrace, it's 163. He's got all the good numbers: blood pressure of 110/78, cholesterol at 180, LDL/HDL of 70/40 and he's stashing the maximum allowances in both his 401K and his IRA. He even flosses every day.

Joe started riding after his dad's second heart attack. He decided that it was easier to get up a little early three mornings a week than to have his rib cage cut open with a chainsaw. He's got the numbers now but chuckles to himself every time a car zips past; the odds of being killed by a car on this narrow, winding road are worse than from heart disease.

When he gets to the top, he'll be able to see for hundreds of miles – the ideal way to start a day. As he approaches the summit, his heart rate climbs toward his maximum, around 177. But today it will only reach 160 and then drop to zero. Today, a chunk of plaque will dislodge from an arterial lining in his thigh and zip straight to his heart where it will block an aorta. If Joe preferred riding around the neighborhood, someone probably would see him go down, would dial 911, and save his life. But Joe wanted to see the view from the summit and if Joe had to do it over again, he'd still want to see that view; he just wouldn't want to die in the process.

>>> \* <<<

A long time ago my friend Michael Vinson resigned a faculty position at a nice liberal arts college. On his resignation letter he wrote:

**Rule 6: The world is a big place and life is short.**

It resonates, doesn't it? Kind of shoots a burst of "better get cracking!" up your spine, huh? And it does so without denying us balance.

**Aside: For teenagers only**

If you're not a teenager, just drop back in time right now and fake it.

I'm not accusing you of being unaware of your mortality. Of course you know that you're going to die. But even as you read that sentence, something deep inside encourages you to believe that the inevitable is far off. I'm right, huh? This assumption of your immortality is an ironic necessity to the perpetuation of our species. It wouldn't make any difference if I wrote an anecdote featuring people your age, you're immune to the twinge your parents' experience from the stories of Gerianne and Joe.

Schools house large numbers of people at roughly the same age. Next time you're at an assembly, or even during lunch break, look around and ponder this: which of your classmates will die first and how old will they be? You don't know who, but you can guess the number and age. Every class loses a few. It's kind of arrogant to assume you won't be one of them.

Be glad you're not clairvoyant.

One other thing, while we're here in our teens. Ever notice how some people who are extremely busy never actually *do* anything? Does it make you wonder if the whole concept of "busy-ness" exists so that people can avoid pondering their own deaths?

## **Chapter 7. The call to adventure**

Whether from divine inspiration or forces beyond your control, you will be challenged. That is, whether it comes on a pink slip, a Dear John letter, a revelation on a foggy beach, a choice made in a fit of passion, across the desk from a doctor, or across a gun from a criminal – whatever your situation, it will end.

As we meander along the path, caught up in the demands of the day and the month, it is very difficult to realize just how wonderful we have it until *it* ends.

Paradise is easier to find than it is to recognize.

***Enlightening Blurb 6.***

**Thank you for checking out this free preview!**

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