

## ANGER

Failure gives you a lot to be angry about.

Sometimes your anger is justified; sometimes it is not. Much of the time you aren't sure, so your anger becomes another source of self-doubt.

Anger is a curious emotion. It is decidedly unpleasant, and studies correlate anger with a host of negative health outcomes like headaches, indigestion, insomnia, depression, high blood pressure, and even heart attacks and strokes. Anger swamps the soul and makes it impossible to feel positive emotions like peace, joy, or love.

Even so, we crave anger like a drug. On a clear sunny day, we can summon it out of nowhere like dark magic and whip it into a frenzied storm. Once summoned, it feeds on itself, calling us to ever-greater depths of rage. We *want* to feel angry. Like lust, anger makes vain promises of ever-greater satisfaction.

We know it's a lie, and yet we want to believe it.

In our clear-minded moments, we know anger will destroy us if we let it. We have all met old, hardened, wounded people who have spent a lifetime internalizing their contempt. It literally becomes etched into the lines of their faces.

We want to rise above that, but it is so hard to let go.

One source of anger is other people.

Failure usually results from innumerable human decisions. As you mentally replay your journey, you note a hundred points where things might have gone differently. You find so many people to blame. Cofounders who made disastrous decisions. Your stubborn and uncompromising spouse. Your troubled teenager. The investor who turns you down at a critical moment. Customers who hate your product. Regulators who shut you down.

Having someone to blame conveniently alleviates us of responsibility. In the most extreme cases, a hapless bystander to our derailment can become the target of our rage. We have a special word for people who project anger this way: *assholes*. Think of the first-class businessman berating an airline agent because he missed his flight. Amplify the stakes and time horizons and you will find elite ranks of assholes who destroy companies or lead generations of young men to violent deaths in foreign lands.

In *The Great Divorce*, C.S. Lewis' fictional interpretation of heaven and hell, two travelers witness a damned Napoleon pacing up and down the halls of his house for eternity, muttering, "It was Sout's fault. It was Ney's fault. It was Josephine's fault. It was the fault of the Russians. It was the fault of the English."<sup>18</sup> Napoleon is imprisoned within a hell of his own making.

Rage's impotence is most obvious when there is no one to blame.

Often times, failure results from bad luck.

In 2013 a leased Naval hangar collapsed in Tustin, California, destroying the \$65 million airship prototype belonging to Aeroscraft Aeronautical Systems and derailing a \$3 billion funding round.<sup>19</sup> That is bad luck.

History can hinge on rolls of the dice. Wars are won and lost because of mud; a few inches can impede artillery or armor and leave infantry exposed to slaughter. Soldiers quickly learn that war

is careless, random, and indifferent.

Bad luck provokes rage, but it is helpless rage. After the Persian emperor Xerxes completed an immense project to bridge the Hellespont, a storm destroyed everything. Xerxes flew into a rage and ordered his troops to whip the ocean with chains while uttering hateful curses.<sup>20</sup>

It is amusing, reading about the greatest of kings reduced to such pathetic fury. Yet we have all been there.

When bad luck destroys our fortune, we whip the metaphorical sea with our own chains. In high school, a basketball-playing friend of mine punched a wall after missing a critical basket. He broke his hand and was down for months.

I am no better. When my back injury flares up, I sulk and pout and can snap at my wife and children. I am embarrassed to say I did it this morning. I flush at my own hypocrisy as I write, squirming in my desk chair, cursing the pain rippling wavelike through my lower back.

Given that Lake Lagunita is a tinderbox and drone batteries are so flammable, I still wonder why it was my team that started the fire—we with our meticulous preparations, detailed checklists, rigorous design practices, and a total commitment to flight safety.

A couple months after the fire, after the Stanford drone club quietly eased us out, I watched some students aggressively maneuver a cobbled-together quadcopter through the air. The highly flammable battery, which they had sloppily attached with Velcro, was hurled free, sailed overboard, and plummeted to a crash landing in the dry tinder a hundred feet below. The students hooted at their silly recklessness. Of course *that* battery didn't catch fire.

If we can make it past those ego-protecting defenses of blame and deflection, we come to an even deeper source of anger:

ourselves. At the end of the day, we were in the captain's chair, and we made plenty of mistakes of our own.

Once we can admit that, our shortcomings become glaring. We did not spot the fatal flaw. We did not intervene at the crucial moment. We did not fire that obviously toxic employee who would soon destroy everything. We were cruel and ungrateful to our girlfriend, or provoked our teenager and drove her away. We got behind the wheel when we were just *a little* buzzed.

So we rage. We whip ourselves with Xerxes' chains.

Like the other emotions associated with failure, we cannot rush anger. It must, in some sense, run its course. And yet we cannot afford to let it rule us—not if we want to get on with our lives and become good, generous, joyful people again. We must feel the anger, observe it, and listen to what it can teach us, but commit to move past it.

Self-reflection is essential. We must assess the degree to which our anger is actually justified. We must have the presence of mind to recognize blame and deflection, and admit when our anger is misguided. We must take an honest inventory of our own contributions to failure.

In some cases, we suffered real wrongs and need to seek justice or restitution. The call to tame anger is not a call to be a pushover. Some measure of anger can fuel our pursuit of justice, but we must recognize that we are playing with fire. Humanity's greatest and most inspiring leaders—Jesus, Gandhi, Martin Luther King Jr., Nelson Mandela—found ways to advance justice while refusing to succumb to bitterness.

I wish I could tell you how to get there, but I am still learning myself. I can only tell you that we need to try. Our lives depend on it.

# EATING GLASS



*The Inner Journey  
Through Failure and Renewal*

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