Resilience
Hard-Won Wisdom for Living a Better Life
BY ERIC GREITENS · HOUGHTON MIFFLIN HARCOURT © 2015 · 301 PAGES

“For a few years I’d had a bunch of thoughts—based on my humanitarian work overseas, my time in the military, and my work with veterans—about how people move through hardship to happiness, through pain to wisdom, through suffering to strength. Our phone call brought them to the surface.

It was late when I got home, but when I did, I put some of those thoughts in a letter to Walker. He wrote back. One letter followed another. We talked a lot. We kept writing.

This book is an edited set of those letters. They are letters to my friend. But while his story is unique, what he’s up against—loss, fear, a search for purpose—is not. In fact, what he’s up against is universal. So, with my friend’s blessing—but with his name changed to protect his privacy—I’ve collected these letters on resilience in the hope that they might benefit you too.”

~ Eric Greitens from Resilience

Eric Greitens is an extraordinary human being.

He’s a former Navy SEAL, Rhodes scholar (with a Ph.D. from Oxford), and boxing champion. Eric’s also a humanitarian who Time magazine recognizes as one of the 100 most influential Americans. Fortune puts him on their list of the 50 greatest leaders in the world.

Eric writes with the same simple, direct, and disciplined language he admires in Hemingway and reminds me of a modern-day cross of Marcus Aurelius and Seneca. Aurelius wrote private notes to himself—never intending to publish his thoughts into what became his classic book Meditations. Seneca’s most famous work is the compilation of his letters to a young friend.

This book is a collection of letters Eric wrote to his Navy SEAL buddy who had fallen on hard times—struggling with alcohol and finding purpose after his active duty. The book is so well written it commands a certain quiet, calm reverence as you read it. At least it did for me.

In addition to giving us wisdom on how to cultivate our resilience, this book is really a field manual for virtuous living and flourishing. It’s one of the best books I’ve ever read. I highly recommend it. Get it here.

I’m excited to share some of my favorite Big Ideas and I hope you enjoy. Let’s jump in!

WHAT IS RESILIENCE?

“If we limit our understanding of resilience to this idea of bouncing back, we miss much of what hardship, pain, and suffering offer us. We also misunderstand our basic human capacity to change and improve.

Life’s reality is that we cannot bounce back. We cannot bounce back because we cannot go back in time to the people we used to be. The parent who loses a child never bounces back. The
nine-year-old marine who sails for war is gone forever, even if he returns. “What’s done
cannot be undone,” and some of what life does to us is harsh...

You know that there is no bouncing back. There is only moving through.

Fortunately, to be resilient we don’t need to go back in time.

What happens to us becomes part of us. Resilient people do not bounce back from hard
experiences; they find healthy ways to integrate them into their lives.

In time, people find that great calamity met with great spirit can create great strength.”

After walking us through a mini-Physics lesson, Eric tells us that there’s no bouncing back.
There’s only moving through.

We can never return to who we were before a challenging experience. What we—as resilient
people—must do is integrate the experience into our lives and use the challenges as fuel for our
own growth.

As Eric advises, “great calamity met with great spirit can create great strength.”

The book is all about showing us how to do that. Let’s explore some ways to make that happen.

YOU WILL FAIL

“You will fail. Especially in the beginning. You will fail. And that’s not just OK, it’s essential.
Without resilience, the first failure is also the last—because it’s final.

Those who are excellent at their work have learned to comfortably coexist with failure. The
excellent fail more often than the mediocre.

They begin more. They attempt more. They attack more. Mastery lives quietly atop a mountain
of mistakes.

The exceptional artist throws away hundreds of photographs. The exceptional writer wears
out the eraser. The exceptional investor puts money into losing ventures. If every risk you take
pays off, then you probably aren’t actually taking risks. We don’t want to excuse recklessness
and foolishness as “just taking risks,” but we should understand that those who have built true
excellence in their lives are always fighting at the edges of their ability.

What distinguishes the exceptional from the unexceptional? A willingness to fail, and an
exceptional ability to learn from every failure.”

Where to begin with that?! So much goodness in there.

(The book is a mix of brilliant, hard-hitting aphorisms and friendly story-telling.)

First: You will fail. Period.

The greatest risk to our actualization is the fear-driven, fixed mindset that prevents us from
playing at the edges of our abilities.

As Eric advises, without resilience, our first failure is our last—because it’s final. I’d go even
further and say that, without the courage to risk failing and the confidence in our ability to
respond with resilience, we’ll be so tightly locked into our comfort zones that even the thought of
failure is enough to stop us from taking a risk.

We MUST learn to coexist with failure.

As Tal Ben-Shahar tells us in The Pursuit of Perfect (see Notes), “One of the wishes that I always
have for my students is that they should fail more often (although they are understandably
not thrilled to hear me tell them so). If they fail frequently, it means that they try frequently,
that they put themselves on the line and challenge themselves. It is only from the experience of

* The naïve mind imagines effortless success. The cowardly mind imagines hardship and freezes. The resilient mind imagines hardship and prepares.”
—Eric Greitens

“Resilience isn’t any different. Aristotle taught that we aren’t born with virtue; we’re born with the ability to practice virtue. Practice builds habits. Our habits are our character. When it comes to virtue, practice ‘makes a very great difference—or rather, all the difference.’”
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challenging ourselves that we learn and grow, and we often develop and mature much more from our failures than from our successes. Moreover, when we put ourselves on the line, when we fall down and get up again, we become stronger and more resilient.”

Remember: You will fail.

It’s never going to be particularly pleasant, but the simple recognition of this “fact” is incredibly liberating.

How’s your relationship to failure? How can you optimize it?

P.S. Earlier this week, I created a Note on Dilbert creator Scott Adams’s book: How to Fail at Almost Everything and Still Win Big: Kind of the Story of My Life. Only a resilient, confident creator can write a book like that—baking failure into his strategy as a key to success.

**WANT TO FEEL DIFFERENTLY? ACT DIFFERENTLY.**

“I told you that I was less interested in how you feel and more interested in who you want to be... I asked you to write down those same three words in the opposite direction. It’s the direction that holds the most promise for your life:

**IDENTITY**

**ACTION**

**FEELINGS**

You begin by asking, “Who am I going to be?” You decided to be courageous again.

So what’s next? Act that way. Act with courage. And here comes the part that’s so simple it’s easy to miss: the way you act will shape the way you feel. You act with courage and immediately your fears start to shrink and you begin to grow.

If you want to feel differently, act differently.

This ain’t complicated, my friend. But it’s amazing how many people get it so wrong for so long.”

This is big. Eric articulates it more powerfully than I’ve ever seen.

**IDENTITY**

**ACTIONS**

**FEELINGS**

vs.

**FEELINGS**

**ACTION**

**IDENTITY**

Three simple words. The order in which we line them up will shape our destiny.

Too often, we put them in this order: **FEELINGS** —> **ACTION** —> **IDENTITY**.

Our feelings drive the show. We’re always asking ourselves (and everyone is asking us): “How are you feeling?” as if that is the most important question. We feel tired or depressed or fearful and we take action consistent with those feelings and have an identity that matches our behavior. Not a winning equation.

The far better path: We need to decide (!) who we are committed to being (our **IDENTITY**) and then choose **ACTIONS** that are in integrity with that identity and then experience the positive **FEELINGS** that are generated from those choices and behaviors.

**IDENTITY** —> **ACTIONS** —> **FEELINGS**.
That's the winning formula.

It’s what David Reynolds talks about in his classic *Constructive Living* (see Notes) where he tells us: “The mature human being goes about doing what needs to be done regardless of whether that person feels great or terrible. Knowing that you are the kind of person with that kind of self-control brings all the satisfaction and confidence you will ever need. Even on days when the satisfaction and confidence just aren’t there, you can get the job done anyway.”

We need to discipline ourselves to be less interested in *how we feel* in any given moment and more interested in (and committed to) *who we want to be!*

Then, act that way.

Again and again and again.

So, important question: Who do you want to be?

Is now a good time to start acting like that best version of yourself? :)

**HOW TO MASTER THE DEVIL**

“*Diablos* is the ancient Greek word for devil. The literal translation is “one who throws an obstacle in the path.”

It’s often easier to imagine that a guy with horns and a pitchfork has harmed us than to realize how we have harmed ourselves. Yet we are usually our own worst enemy. We throw obstacles in our own path.

If we had an external enemy who consistently forced us to make bad choices, to engage in self-destructive behavior, to be less than we are capable of, we’d declare war. Why should we act any differently when the enemy is inside?

You have to master the one who throws obstacles in your way. Master yourself.

Over the long run, you are responsible for your happiness. I don’t say this to blame you for how you feel. I say it because in taking responsibility you will find freedom and power.”

First, how awesome is that definition of devil?!

“One who throws obstacles in the path.”

*Diablos.*

And, guess what?

The devil we need to be worried about is not dancing around with the horns and pitchfork. It’s us. We tend to be our own worst enemies. We’re the ones throwing obstacles in our own path.

Begs the question(s): What obstacles are YOU throwing into your path these days?

What little (or big) addictions are you letting drive the show way too often?

Who do you want to be?

How would that person act?

Let’s act like that and win the battle of self-mastery, my friend!!!

P.S. Socrates’s battle cry comes to mind: “I desire only to know the truth, and to live as well as I can... And, to the utmost of my power, I exhort all other men to do the same... I exhort you also to take part in the great combat, which is the combat of life, and greater than every other earthly conflict.”

P.P.S. Let’s do this! :)
WANT TO CONTROL YOUR LIFE? START WITH YOUR BREATH.

“Becoming aware of our breathing and taking control of it when we need to is one of the most powerful ways to take control of ourselves, especially when we’re afraid...

Of course, people who will not make the effort to control how they breathe have little hope of taking control of larger things. If you won’t exercise enough discipline to slightly alter just once in a while the thing that you do thousands of times a day, then you will not have the discipline to change the course of your life.

But if you do learn to control your breathing, you will have gained experience in how to control what you can control. If you do learn to bring awareness to how you breathe, you are likely to bring awareness to how you live.”

Another wow.

First: Here’s another great teacher reminding us of the power of our breath.

Are you breathing deeply throughout the day? And particularly when you feel fear? We’ve gotta KNOW that controlling our breath is *the* most efficient way to control ourselves. Period.

Eric encourages us to try this: “inhale through your nose while slow-counting to four, hold your breath, then exhale through your mouth while slow-counting to four. Try this for just four minutes...”

(Try it!)

That’s Part 1.

Part 2? As Eric states directly, if we won’t exercise a tiny amount of discipline to control something as fundamental as our breathing, how in the world do we expect to have the discipline to change the course of our lives? Short answer: We won’t.

So, here’s to a deep inhale. Hold. Deep exhale. Let’s master ourselves. And start with our breath.

YOU WILL NEVER FIND YOUR PURPOSE. YOU MUST CREATE IT.

“You will never find your purpose. You will never find your purpose for the simple reason that your purpose is not lost.

If you want to live a purposeful life, you will have to create your purpose.

How do you create your purpose? You take action. You try things. You fail. You pursue excellence in your endeavors and you endure pain. The pursuit of excellence forces you beyond what you already know, and in this way you come to better understand the world.

You do this not once, not twice, not three times, but three thousand times. You make it a habit.

Through action, you learn what you are capable of doing and you sense what you are capable of becoming.”

That kicks off the chapter on “Vocation.” If you’re looking to create more purpose in your life, the book is worth it just for this section.

First, important distinction: You will not FIND your purpose. You will CREATE it. Eric tells us that our purpose is not found, it’s FORGED.

Forged! My Apple dictionary tells me that the verb forge means “make or shape (a metal object) by heating it in a fire or furnace and beating or hammering it.”

Not once or twice or three times. Three THOUSAND times. (Love that.)

As James Allen tells us in As a Man Thinketh (see Notes): “Only by much searching and mining are gold and diamonds obtained, and man can find every truth connected with his being if he will dig deep into the mine of his soul.”

Don’t be like Zoolander who heads into a mine and thinks he got black lung after 1/2 a day. (Laughing.)

DO THE WORK.

Turn off your TV. And your smartphone. Unplug your internet connection.

Think.

Who are you? What gives you great joy? What are you good at? Where do those intersect?

And act.

What can you do NOW to start serving more and learning more about who you are and how you’ll best give your gifts to the world? Get on that!

...

Well, there’s a quick look at this truly remarkable book. I hope you enjoyed the Note and I hope you get the book. (Here.)

Here's to your resilience!

Brian Johnson,
Chief Philosopher

If you liked this Note, you'll probably like...
- Meditations
- Letters from a Stoic
- The Enchiridion
- The Obstacle Is the Way
- Constructive Living

About the Author of “Resilience”
ERIC GREITENS

Eric Greitens was born and raised in Missouri. A Navy SEAL, Rhodes Scholar, boxing champion, and humanitarian leader, Eric earned his Ph.D. from Oxford University. He did research and documentary photography work with children and families in Rwanda, Albania, Mexico, India, Croatia, Bolivia, and Cambodia. The founder of The Mission Continues and the author of the New York Times best-seller The Heart and the Fist, Eric was named by Time magazine as one of the 100 most influential people. Fortune magazine named him one of the 50 greatest leaders in the world. Eric lives in Missouri with his wife, Sheena and son, Joshua. Connect with Eric: ericgreitens.com.

About the Author of This Note
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Brian Johnson loves helping people optimize their lives as he studies, embodies and teaches the fundamentals of optimal living—integrating ancient wisdom + modern science + common sense + virtue + mastery + fun. Learn more and optimize your life at brianjohnson.me.