

Hard Times, or The Power of Negative Thinking

All right—so you’ve found out what you want. To be perfectly honest, you want to own the world . . . or at least a nice big slice of it. Now let’s be realistic. Can you get your house cleaned tomorrow?

Up to now we’ve been having nothing but fun. But now it’s time to take a look at your Problems List. I invited you to postpone all the real-world difficulties so that you’d feel free to aim high; the only trouble with soaring in fantasy is that it’s an awfully long way down to earth. Of course, you saw it coming. You’re no dummy; you know there’s a real world out there, and that high hopes and a great idea aren’t enough. You need a track record, connections, know-how, money, guts—all kinds of things you may not have at all in the field you’ve chosen. To design your goal without taking this into account may have seemed to you a little like shoving everything under the bed to make your room look clean when you were a kid: the moment had to come when you (or your mother) lifted the bedspread, peered underneath, and groaned because the mess was still there.

OK. Let’s take a good look at the mess. “I’ll never get the money.” “My husband won’t like it.” “I’ve got a wife and four kids to support.” “I was always a lousy student.” “I have absolutely no self discipline.” “I’ve never picked up a camera in my life.” “Women don’t advance in my company.” “My children need me.”

Whatever the problems on your list are, they're very real—and looking them in the eye can be overwhelming. This is the moment when you may crash. You may get depressed. And you may start to hate me for conning you into believing your most extravagant dreams could happen. That's OK. In fact, if you're down, I'm glad to hear about it. Not because I'm a sadist—but because if you aren't having some of those feelings *now*, I promise you they are going to hit you a day or a week after you close this book. And that would be worse, because then you'd have to cope with them alone. So this is the moment to confront “hard reality” and find out just what's making it so hard.

Glance through your Problems List once more. I can tell you without looking that some of them are real and perplexing problems that will take some energetic thinking to solve. And now I'm going to tell you something that will surprise you. *Those are the easy ones!* Those are the fun ones. They're purely a matter of strategy and game plans.

Suppose you want to get from point A to point B, and there's a river in between. What do you do? Well, you get a boat. You can't afford to buy one? You borrow one. You don't know how to row? You get a friend to row it for you. OK? OK. You've got a solution. It's as simple as that.

That is a *strategic problem*—the kind where you're asking, “How can I do it?” and you really want an answer. Strategic problems are hardly any trouble at all. They're discouraging right now only because you don't know how to find the answers. But there are answers. *There is no strategic problem that cannot be solved*, as you'll begin to find out in the next chapter. In fact, the whole second half of this book is designed to give you techniques and resources for solving strategic problems of every conceivable kind: time, money, know-how, contacts, credentials, space, equipment, and how to balance family responsibilities with your right to your own goals.

But there's another kind of problem hiding in your list that *can't* be solved by all the strategies and good ideas in the world. And unless we find out what that is right now, you won't even be able to tell what the real problems are, much less do any constructive thinking about them. Because this other kind of problem disguises itself as a strategic problem—and then that strategic problem mysteriously refuses to be solved.

Like this:

You want to get across a river, and you're brainstorming on it. You say, "Well, I could take a boat."

Then you say to yourself (or to anyone else who's trying to be helpful), "Yes, but I don't have a boat."

And then you say, "Mary has one. I'll borrow hers."

And then you say, "Yes, but I don't know how to row."

And then you say, "Well, I'll ask Mary to row it for me."

And then you say, "Yes, but Mary's very busy, and anyway I don't like to ask for favors."

And then you say, "I know Bill would do it. I drove him to the tree nursery last week, and anyway, he's in love with me. He'd help."

And then you say, "Yes, but I get seasick. I don't want Bill to see me that way."

I call this the "Yes-but" game. It is a sure-fire sign that what's really going on is not a simple attempt to solve a problem. You will reject every useful idea you or anyone else comes up with, "yes-butting" until you are purple with frustration and furious at whoever's trying to help you—and they'll be furious with you because you won't let them help!

The truth is, you are not looking for an answer at all.

And that's because the real problem isn't how to get across a river. You're no idiot; you can figure that one out as well as anybody. You just keep on saying, "Yes, but it's not that simple!" And you're right. It isn't. The real problem is very deep and painful and complex, and it has nothing to do with boats or rowing or seasickness. What it does have to do with is the *negative feelings* that come up every time you start thinking about going for your dreams.

That's where the hard part of "hard reality" really is. It's not in "reality." It's in your feelings. Half the time, when you say "I can't," or "It's impossible," or "I don't have this or that," all you're really trying to do is something very natural and healthy that has been forbidden by our culture.

You're trying to *complain*.

THE POWER OF NEGATIVE THINKING

Complaining—bitching, moaning, *kvetching*, griping, and carrying on—is a terrific and constructive thing to do. You’ve just got to learn how to do it *right*.

That sounds funny, doesn't it? You were brought up to believe that complaining is not nice and you should never do it. Of course, you do it anyway, but you don't like yourself when you do. Every one of us would like to be able to say, “I’m not a complainer.” We’re supposed to be able to pull in our belts, put off our pleasures, bear our disappointments, and face our fears without a squeak of pain or protest.

Hemingway called that kind of behavior “grace under pressure.” I happen to consider it mildly psychotic.

The truth is that it just isn't human nature to feel good all the time. And when you're felling bad or hurt or angry or frightened, you should be allowed to make a fuss and your body knows it!

I happen to believe in the efficacy of complaining the way some people believe in the efficacy of prayer. It's good for you. There are lots of times when you need it. And one of the times may be right now. Because the first half of this book has done something that's almost guaranteed to make you hurt and mad and scared—it's gotten your hopes up. Again. And now, you're feeling pain for all the times you tried and it didn't work. For how hard it's been. For the lack of support. For all that lost time. You're feeling fear that you're going to get duped or disappointed again—that this book is just another hype and it won't work for you either. And pain and fear can make you fighting mad—at the forces that made you give up your dreams in the first place, and at me for reviving the hurt along with the hope. Who the hell do I think I am, to tell you that you can have what you want?

Uncomfortable as they are, these are healthy feelings. I'd worry about you if you said meekly, “Thank you for turning me on to my fantasies.” You'd have been turned on to them all along if you hadn't gotten slugged in the jaw a hundred times. The pain and anger you feel about that memory is a sign of life! After all, what you gave up was everything you loved best. And if *that* doesn't hurt, it's only because you're numb! The reawakening of hope is never painless. It's like running warm water over a frozen hand: your fingers

hurt as feeling comes back to them. But do you say, “The hell with this. It felt better when they were numb. Let frostbite set in. Let them amputate.”? Of course not! What you do is, you stomp around and cry and curse and swear. You start out in tears and end up laughing. And it *helps!*

Your dreams are just as important a part of you as your fingers. And you shouldn't have to put them back on ice just because it hurts to thaw them out. You ought to be allowed to stomp and holler and cry and swear—and have a good time doing it. That's what I call *Hard Times*.

But the hurt of old disappointments and the fear of new ones isn't necessarily the only kind of negative feeling lurking in your Problems List. There's another kind that comes up not because you're afraid to believe me, but because you're afraid you *do!* It's beginning to look like maybe this time you're really going to get your bluff called. And that means you're going to have to get out there and start doing some things that will make you very nervous. Like making phone calls to intimidating people. Like sticking a blank sheet of paper in the typewriter, or a blank canvas on the easel. Like walking in and asking politely but firmly for that raise. Like—maybe even—winning.

If you think you're nervous *now*, just wait till the next chapter, when you find out that you can—and should—start working toward your goal, not next week, not next month, not “someday,” but *tomorrow*. Wait till all those too, too solid obstacles—the million bucks you'll never have, the family who will surely throw you out or die of malnutrition—start melting away, and you realize, too late, how safe you felt hiding behind them. A lot of times when you start reciting all the reasons why you can't get your goal, it's not because you really think you can't. It's because you'd really just as soon not. It's because you sort of hope you won't have to.

What you really are is *scared*. You're probably embarrassed to admit it, even to yourself, because you're a grown-up and you're not supposed to be afraid of anything. But there are a few thousand reasons to be scared when you start going for what you want. Some of them are part of the high cost of success in our society, especially for women. We got a look at those when we talked about the environment that creates winners—and the environment that doesn't: negative tapes . . . ignorance of ways and means . . . lack of support . . . guilt at leaving people in the lurch . . . fear of being left alone. It's murder trying to achieve your goals while you're carrying all those fears

on your back, and with the help of this book, you won't have to. You're going to learn how to prepare for difficult situations like interviews. You'll find out that it's OK to fall on your behind and get back up again just as often as you need to. You'll learn to provide yourself with all the support you need: a team of real and imaginary winners who will help you out and cheer you on. And you know what?

You'll still be scared.

There is nothing in this world that's worth doing that isn't going to scare you. The moment you make the commitment to going for your dreams, you've begun to venture into the unknown. And the human organism's natural response to novelty and risk is adrenalin. Butterflies in the stomach. Wobbly knees. Pounding heart. It's commonly called stage fright, and it's just nerves, but it feels like a heart attack. Comfort is one of the things you can forget about right now. You're not going to have it any more. Excitement, company, help, and support, yes. Comfort, no.

So what do you do?

You do what every actress worth her salt does before she goes out on stage on opening night: you have a fit. You kick, stamp, and cry, "The lights are ghastly; the lines are awful, the playwright should be shot, the director's an idiot—I'm not ready, I *cannot* go on, I *will* not go on, I'm *leaving!*" And then you walk onstage under those lights . . . and you're fine.

That's Hard Times, too.

Hard Times is nothing but a good old-fashioned gripe session raised to the dignity and status of a ritual. Other cultures have made an art form of complaining. Look at the Flamenco gypsy's howl. Listen to the blues! The universal peasant poem is a string of curses directed at heaven . . . and what do you think the Bible means by "lamentation," anyway? A fancy word for bitching and moaning, in my book. All those people obviously knew something we don't. But we can learn to recognize and honor the need to complain—and then to be as openly, vividly, and *creatively* obnoxious as we can. It takes a little practice, because we've all been conditioned to be sweet and polite even when we're feeling like an alligator with a hangover. But you'll be surprised at how quickly your inhibitions vanish.

You can try it right now, in the privacy of your own mind. Take any item on your Problems List—it can be a perfectly serious obstacle to getting your goal, like a lack of money or schooling or too many family responsibilities. Sit down and really think about why that problem makes the whole idea totally impossible. You can take a sheet of paper and write down your thoughts if you like; title it “It Can’t Be Done.” It’s a good idea to start out earnest, depressed, and a little whiny: “Even if I did get into school, I’d probably flunk out the first semester. I’ve always been a lousy student, I get headaches at the thought of sitting down to study.”

Now, little by little, if you can—and you almost always can—start having fun with your negative feelings. Exaggeration, self-parody, melodrama, defiance, and obscenity are all useful weapons, and anything is a fair target: yourself, me, your goal, mother, flag, and country. “The truth is, I hate studying. It bores me and I can’t concentrate and I hate *you* for suggesting it. I like things fine just the way they are. I’m too lazy to bother with all this. I think I’ll eat a lot of chocolate and get fat.” Say anything, as long as it’s a mean, miserable complaint with some punch to it.

Did you notice that your energy level went up? Does your goal suddenly look a little less impossible? You haven’t solved anything yet. The strategic problem is still there. Your doubts are still there. So why are you laughing?

Because you’ve dug down through all those heavy layers of “I can’t,” and struck a defiant gusher of “I don’t want to and I *won’t*.” Depression is an energy crisis, and *negativity is energy*—pure, ornery, high-octane energy. It’s just been so repressed and tabooed that we’ve forgotten something every 2-year-old knows: how good it is for us to throw a tantrum. We’re all such good little girls, such brave, stalwart little boys, such polite little children—and inside every one of us is an obnoxious, exuberant little brat, just squirming to be let out. I’ve got one. So do you. That brat is your baby, and you’d better love her, because you ignore her at your peril.

If you had a child who was bursting with energy, and you dressed that child up in white and took her to church and tried to make her (or him) sit still and be quiet, that child would wreck the whole service. But if you put him (or her) in a pair of old Levis and let him run amok in the fields, roll in the mud, tease the dog, kick the cow, scream and holler, and take a nap, when he got up he might just go to church and behave himself.

Somewhere along the line our culture has sold us the absurd idea that we've got to have a positive attitude to succeed. We're afraid to be negative because we think it means we won't *do* anything. And yet the evidence to the contrary is overwhelming. A quick look at your own experience will show you how powerless positive thinking really is. Oh, it feels good—while it lasts. The first morning you get out of bed saying, "I know I can do it, I know I can do it," it makes a whole new day for you. You walk around whistling to yourself, thinking, "God, I could run the world with this idea!"

The second morning you know you're lying. You not only can't do it, you can't even get out of bed.

Trying to force a positive attitude is the surest way in the world not to get something done. A negative attitude, on the other hand, will get you to do it.

I call this The Power of Negative Thinking.

You can demonstrate it very easily if you have kids who hate to do their homework. (I've never met a normal, healthy child who loved it.) If you say "You've got to do it! Long division is good for you. Look, if you don't do your long division you're not going to get good grades, and then you won't get into college, and then what will happen to you?" I guarantee that your kids will lock themselves in the bedroom and read comic books. So next time, try saying this instead: "You're so right. Long division is repulsive. It's awful. So why don't you put your home work on the floor and jump on it? Hate it. Kick it around the room. Curse and swear at it. Use the dirtiest word you know. I'll go in the next room. And when you're all through, put it back on the table and do it." You'll find your kids will be laughing—and their long division will get done.

Of course they have to do it. They know they have to do it. *But they don't have to like it.* And neither do you.

The operative principle of Hard Times is, "Get it off . . . and then get on with it." *You've got to let negative attitudes and feelings happen.* Only then will you be ready for positive problem-solving, planning, and action.

Of course, there's only one little hitch I haven't mentioned yet. Throwing a tantrum isn't nice. Complaining isn't socially acceptable. Indulging in your grouches and fears may make *you* feel better, but what about the innocent

bystanders around you? Their feelings may be hurt if they happen to get in the way of a stray expletive. “I hate this thesis, and I hate the goddam typewriter, and I hate you too!” They may worry that you really are going to have a nervous breakdown, or leave for Bermuda, or whatever threats you happen to fire off in the heat of the moment. They may think you’re a little odd, if not certifiably crazy. What should you do about them?

Simple. Tell them exactly what you're doing—and invite them to be your audience and cheering section. Say, “This is Hard Times. I’m mad, nervous, fed up, and for the next five minutes I’m going to go totally bananas. Don’t pay any attention to anything I say. You can stick your fingers in your ears if you like. It will all be over in five minutes.” And then you run amok—and instead of ending in emotional wreckage, apologies, and tears, everybody ends up laughing. Once you learn this, you’ll never forget it, and as soon as the people around you catch on, they’ll start doing it too.

When you feel a Hard Times session coming on, you can tell your audience that there are three possible responses that will help you:

1. **APPLAUSE.** We should all develop artistic appreciation for each other’s brats. Every really inventive complaint deserves cheers, laughter, and such comments as, “That’s a beaut,” or “That’s a stinker.” If several people get going together, a spirit of competition can develop. It’s fun to see who can come up with the nastiest gripes, and such contests invariably end in laughter and really clear the air.

2. **PARTICIPATION.** The last thing anyone should do is argue with you or try to help you look at the sunny side. You don’t need to be talked out of your negative feelings—if anything, you need urging on! Tell your audience if they want to say anything at all, for God’s sake don’t make it constructive. If they can pitch in and say something destructive, they’re more than welcome. It’s nice to hear yourself backed up by a friendly chorus of snarls and moans. Makes you feel less alone.

3. **ADMIRATION.** There’s another reason why we sometimes complain that’s a really subtle one. I used to do it, and it took me quite a while to understand why.

When my sons were small, it seemed like I spent half my life working my brains out and the other half griping about it. I’d march up to my kids and

say, “Look at all the work I did. I got up at six, I made the beds, I did the dishes, I vacuumed and dusted the whole house . . . I’m exhausted!” And they’d feel terrible. They’d say, “Look, do you want us to do the dishes?” And I’d say, “No! I’m not mad! I just want . . . I don’t know what I want!” I didn’t mean to make them feel guilty and miserable. None of us knew what was going on.

And then one day it hit me. I didn't want them to do a thing. All I wanted was for them to say, “You know, you’re really fabulous. How did you do all that?” And then I’d beam and say, “Oh, it was nothing.”

The truth is, I was very proud of myself. But I didn’t dare come right out and say so, because I was afraid I’d get shot down for being so conceited. None of us knows how to say, “Sit down. I want to tell you what I did all by myself against very tough odds. I want you to know I was Herculean.” We’re not allowed to brag, so we whine instead.

This kind of complaining is an appeal for admiring recognition. When you’ve had a hard row to hoe and you’ve hoed it, you deserve sympathy and praise. If this were the American frontier and you were Paul Bunyan or Wild Bill Hickok, you could boast about your heroic deeds and make a poem of it. But a Hard Times session will serve just as well. And if you tell your audience what you’re after, they’ll probably say, “Is that all? Why didn’t you ask? I’ve been secretly admiring you all along—I just thought you were so strong you didn’t need to hear it!”

So much of what we need just boils down to *permission*. Permission to feel what we feel—and say it. To let each other know. And to find out that what we feel isn’t freakish, or destructive, or wrong. It’s just human—and shared.

THE PRIVATE GRIPE

There will be times and places, however, when you won’t be able to complain out loud. I don’t recommend doing it with your boss, for instance—unless he or she is also a close personal friend. Many professional and business situations are what I call “on stage” situations, the kind where you have to keep up appearances even when you’re quaking inside. You’ll find some handy First Aid for those in Chapters 9 and 10. But meanwhile, you should know that the fact that you sometimes have to act like a Spartan

doesn't mean you have to *feel* like one. If you can't bitch out loud, or there's nobody listening, or you've just got an incurable case of good manners, you can still let your brat out in private—and provide a sympathetic audience for yourself.

You can keep a Hard Times Notebook.

A small spiral notebook of the type secretaries use is ideal, because you can carry it in your pocket or purse. To set the tone, you might want to draw a nice negative face on the cover. Or find a picture of a lugubrious basset hound or somebody with a bad hangover, and paste that on. But this is optional. What really counts are the words you write inside.

As you proceed with the problem-solving and planning sections of this book, there will be many times when you feel like giving up the whole thing. Whenever that happens, get out your Hard Times Notebook and write down all the nastiest complaints you can think of. Let the brat, rebel, and cop-out in yourself have a field day. Record curses, confess fears, revel in all your own worst qualities, and plot fantasy escapes. The same rules apply as for complaining out loud—and for listening. Accept your own complaints with sympathy and relish. Have a good time, if you possibly can. Don't rationalize, apologize, explain, or argue with yourself. Above all, *never try to solve problems in your Hard Times Notebook*. This is the place for 100 percent unadulterated negativity. It will make entertaining reading when the fit is past and you're feeling good again—or the next time you're feeling rotten and need inspiration.

WHEN IT HURTS TOO MUCH TO LAUGH

But what about the times when you're hurting so bad you can't be funny? In some moods, past defeats and present problems seem overwhelming. It's no joke. And there are some life situations, like the loss of a job or a love, that are so hard that you can't be a brat about them. You'll laugh again later. Right now your only concern is to get through the rough time in one piece.

When you're in that state, suffering in silence is the worst thing you can do. You need the relief of complaining now most of all. And there's only one thing you need from whomever is listening to you: to be heard.

Real listening—quiet, sympathetic, and totally attentive—is one of the rarest commodities in our society. None of us knows how to ask for it, and very few of us know how to give it. You know there are plenty of times when all you need is to tell somebody how hard it’s been, how you felt when s/he left you, when the kids were sick, when there was no heat. You don’t want your problems solved. All you want is to see that click of recognition in another person’s eyes that says your pain is valid and what you’ve lived through is real. Then you know you could go on. But for that to happen, someone has to listen with ears and feelings open—and mouth closed. How often have you really gotten that? More often, you either get well-meaning good advice—which you angrily and guiltily reject without knowing why (“If George is such a bastard, why don’t you leave him?” “No, no, you don’t understand!”)—or, if the other person can’t think of any way to help you, her attention wanders out the window, up to the ceiling, anyplace but on you. I say “her attention” because most women are like this: if we can’t cure another person’s ills, we don’t want to hear about them. And that’s because we don’t know that *listening is enough*.

Funny thing: men are better at it. They’ve always known about the healing power of that most ancient of psychotherapists, the bartender. He doesn’t do anything but polish glasses and given an occasional grunt while his customer works his way deeper into his second double Scotch and his tale of woe. So when one man walks up to another and says, “Sam, I’m an alcoholic, my wife is leaving me, I’ve lost my job,” Sam says sincerely, “Geez, Joe, that’s rough”—which is precisely what Joe needs to hear. But I know perfectly well that if Joe walked up to me and began, “Barbara, I’m an alcoholic . . .” I’d go, “Oh my God. What do I do now? Let me talk to your wife. You can live in my house. I’ll take you to the steam bath. I’ll find you a job.” Women are *fixers*. I’ve got to fix. Most of you have got to fix. We do it in the name of compassion—and it’s heartless. What’s more, it makes us feel, “Oh no, another person on my back!” And then we make the other person pay in subtle ways for help that she or he never asked for in the first place.

So when someone tells you a Hard Times Story, it’s much kinder not to say or do anything at all except show that person with your eyes that you are reliving the rough times with him or her, using all the resources of your imagination and feelings. If you have to say anything at all, you can say, “That sounds awful,” or “Ouch.” That’s all. Otherwise, don’t interrupt. She or he will be finished, really finished, in five or ten or at the most fifteen minutes. Real listening is the cure for chronic complaining. You know from

your own experience that when you see in someone's face that your words have registered, you don't need to go on and on.

So make it a point to ask for this kind of healing attention when you need it. There are three little words that have been missing from our vocabulary: "Please just listen." (Note: tell your listener not to fake it, because then it won't work. If s/he is distracted, or just not in the mood, s/he should simply be honest about it: "Sorry, I just can't listen today." And the same goes for you when you're the listener.)

Can you use your Hard Times notebook for this kind of serious complaining if there's no one around to listen? Definitely—but you still need somebody to talk to. And sometimes the very best listeners are the ones you talk to just in your mind.

Some people still feel comfortable—and comforted—talking to God, Jesus, or a saint for whom they feel a special personal affection. But since religion has lost its central place in our lives, many of us don't have this source of comfort any more. It's too bad, because it was such a good one. I'm not suggesting that you do your complaining to a Supreme Being unless that really comes naturally to you. But I think those of us who aren't religious ought to have our "saints," too: kindly figures who loved and battled life, who lived through hard times of their own, who can give us their wisdom, humor, and understanding. Children often have imaginary friends they talk to, sharing their secrets and their sorrows. I know a painter who used to pray to Cézanne and Matisse when she was a girl! I think that's a skill we grown-ups ought to recover.

Is there one member of the "ideal family" you selected for yourself in Chapter 4 who is your favorite, or who lived through and triumphed over troubles not so different from yours? That person can be your personal "saint." You can probably guess who mine is, since I've already told you that Albert Einstein reminds me of my grandfather! If you don't already have pictures of your "family" members, at least get one of your "saint." Put it up on the wall above your desk, or wherever you'll be working on your goals. (If you don't already have a work space of your own, you should start thinking about finding one.) If your "saint" is an imaginary character from literature, find a photo or painting that looks the way you imagine he or she would look.

Now, when you're low and alone and need somebody to talk to, you can tell your troubles to Marlene Dietrich or Henry Thoreau. You'll be amazed at how much good it does. That's because your own private "saint" will never try to fix your problems, stare out the window in embarrassment, or tell you to cheer up. She or he will just listen, like God or a good bartender, looking back at you with that steady, warm, sad—merry gaze that says, "I know. I've been there. It's rough."

UP, DOWN—AND FORWARD

If your personal "saint" is a real or historical person, there's one more thing you can do that will help you over any rough spots on the journey to your goal. Read his or her biography—or even better, letters and journals, if they are available. You'll learn a fact that will surprise you—and encourage you. Famous people have suffered the same ups and downs as the rest of us. The only way they are at all different from you and me is that they didn't take the low moods as signals to give up. They sometimes felt like giving up, of course. And do you know what they did then? They complained. The private writings of accomplished people reveal that they did one hell of a lot of complaining. And I think it's one of the ways they got where they did. Because they kept going. And so they made the great discovery that you are also going to make: *success does not depend on how you feel*. Human moods have remarkably little to do with effective action—it's a good thing, or we'd still be living in caves.

This is terribly important to realize, because deeply ingrained in our culture and our past experience is *the mistaken notion that you can only do well when you're feeling good*. You've had highs—those periods in your life when you just couldn't roll the dice wrong. You felt unafraid, self-confident, articulate, creative, and you knew you could do anything—for a day, a week, or even a month. Right? Well, that was just about the worst thing that has ever happened to you. Because then, as sure as night follows day, a low rolled in and wiped out your sense of progress, leaving you feeling like you were right back at zero. And ever since, you've been sitting waiting for that high to come back so you could do it again. You probably assumed that famous people feel that way all the time—otherwise how could they have done what they did?—and that there's just something wrong with *you*. And publicly at least, famous people aren't telling, because they're afraid people will find out that there's something secretly wrong with them!

A peek into their private lives and feelings explodes the myth. If anything, the great souls and high achievers have had more emotional highs and lows than the rest of us. That's not because they were born with extra helpings of passion and drive (another myth)—it's because they're committed to realizing their life designs. That means they're out there in that high-risk area you're heading for. When you get there, you will not need antidepressant pills, bottled courage, or Norman Vincent Peale. You'll just need *structure* and *support*. That's what all true winners have had in one form or another, and it, not elation, is what keeps them moving forward. It's only because you haven't had that external support system that your low moods have been able to stop you before. And so we're going to spend the rest of this book constructing it for you.

But before we start, I'm going to equip you with one more useful tool for your success survival kit. It's a brief, simple notation you will put down at the end of each day, called an *Actions & Feelings Journal*. In it, you will trace the line of your own forward progress through all your ups and downs, and accumulate unshakable proof in your own handwriting that your progress does not depend on your moods.

You can keep this journal in another spiral notebook like the one you use for Hard Times, but a plain pad of paper will do. At the top of each page, write the following column headings:

DATE	WHAT I DID	HOW I FELT
------	------------	------------

Starting today, as you work with this book, make a brief note each evening of what you've done that day—no matter how small or unimportant it may seem to you. You might start with "Decided on my goal," or "Started Hard Times Notebook." As you draw up your game plan and start moving toward your goal, you'll be recording things like phone calls you made, letters you've written, visits to the library or employment agency, a helpful conversation with a friend, a page or a paragraph or even just a sentence toward the article or thesis you have to write. Just buying a pad of paper, some stamps, or a pair of new shoes for an interview is enough.

If you think you haven't done anything that led toward your goal, put down whatever you did do that day. Never write "Nothing." Write "Paid bills" or

“Cleaned house” or “Went to the movies” or “Stayed in bed and ate a whole pizza all by myself.” You need to begin to realize that *now that you have a goal, your whole life is heading toward it*. Even what looks to you like backward steps are positive actions of another kind. They express some real and valid part of you, and they serve a purpose. Maybe you were pushing yourself too hard and needed a rest. Maybe you were feeling scared. Maybe your brat needed a whole day to him- or herself. Maybe you needed to give yourself a reward. That’s OK. Just write down what you did. Don’t judge it.

Under “How I felt,” you might put “Great,” or “Hopeless,” or “I feel like I’m getting somewhere,” or “Scared,” or “Bored,” or “Angry at all the time I wasted before,” or even “Fed up with the whole thing.” Again, don’t judge your feelings. Just record them as honestly as you can.

Even if you’ve never kept a journal before, this one is a cinch to keep—it just takes a few minutes and a few words each night. But try to make it a regular habit. The more faithfully you keep it, the more revealing it will be.

One purpose of your Actions & Feelings Journal is to keep a simple record of what you accomplish day by day. You can’t imagine how important this is. Most of us have a very distorted notion of how things actually get done in the world. *We think that accomplishment only comes from great deeds*. We imagine our heroes striding toward their goals in seven-league boots—writing best-selling novels in three months, building business empires overnight, soaring to stardom out of nowhere—and this gives rise to painfully unrealistic expectations of ourselves. And yet nothing could be further from the truth. *Great deeds are made up of small, steady actions, and it is these that you must learn to value and sustain*.

Often you feel you’ve done nothing when you’ve actually done a lot. That’s because what you did do seemed beneath notice—it was so small that it didn’t “count.” But it did—just as each stitch counts toward a finished dress, each brick or nail toward a house you can live in, each mistake toward knowing how to do things right. Directed action, no matter how small, moves toward its point. When you write down what you’ve done, you will have to realize you’ve done it—and you’ll begin to see how small steps add up.

The second purpose of the Actions & Feelings Journal is to let you discover for yourself how your feelings and actions are related—or unrelated. You

will find that they don't match up in any consistent, predictable, cause-and-effect way. You can often do as much when you're feeling negative as when you're sparkling. When I started keeping my Journal, I discovered that I often make the least substantial progress on my high days—I'm too busy celebrating, knocking on wood, wondering how long it will last, and so on. I also found that a really abysmal low often precedes a burst of growth or inspiration. When you *are* low, it's harder to appreciate what you've done. You may not have the jubilant sensation of progress even when you have the fact of it. That's why an objective record of your actions is so important. The daily entries in your Actions & Feelings Journal will represent *gained ground*: real progress you can see and savor, whatever your mood of the moment may be.

Being human, you can't always have a positive attitude—and you don't have to. You cannot be consistently self-disciplined—and you don't have to. You can get where you're going anyway, and have fun doing it. Are you feeling scared or mad? Get scared. Get mad. Is your self-esteem nonexistent today? Don't worry about it. It's irrelevant. Look in the mirror and say, "I'm horrible, I'm a failure, I'm ugly. I'll never make anything out of myself." Applaud yourself. Enjoy your negative attitude. And then roll up your sleeves and get down to business.