

Chapter 4

Don't Beat Yourself Up

Times are tough. We're in a steep recession, and it's ugly out there. The job market is beating you up. Your employer's beating you up. If you're unemployed now, the bureaucracy is beating you up. Bills are beating you up. Health insurance is beating you up. Your creditors are beating you up. You have enough people beating you up, so don't beat yourself up

Times like these require an attitude uplift, and there's an army of inspirational/motivational writers ready to help:

- "If life hands you a lemon, make lemonade."
- "You can accomplish whatever you make up your mind to do."
- "God never gives you what you can't handle."
- "When one door closes, another one opens."
- "Follow your dreams, the money will come."
- "Imagine and it will happen."

- "Energy and persistence conquer all things"

Puh-lease! The preceding platitudes aren't helpful at all. Some are true, some are only part true, some are just plain false, but none comes close to lifting your mood in bad times. As a matter of fact, a lot of people needlessly beat themselves up when they can't make these platitudes work.

■ If Life Hands You a Lemon, Make Lemonade.

Good advice. Great advice! Use misfortune to your advantage. Just tell me how! The platitude doesn't say.

But this book does. The chapter on **Journals** (chapter 9) discusses how to make long term plans. It discusses the question "how can I use this to my advantage?" in order to turn an idea into a plan.

The **Exercise** chapter (chapter 21) describes how to use exercise time to do wide ranging thinking, asking questions such as "how can I use this to my advantage?"

Other lemonade-making chapters include **Manage Expectations** (chapter 11), **Convert Nervousness to Anticipation** (chapter 34), and **Ask These Valuable Questions** (chapter 35).

■ You Can Accomplish Whatever You Make up Your Mind to Do.

This is stupidly false, and incredibly damaging. You make up your mind to win the Olympic high jump. You practice every day. You do weight training. Your diet is perfect. You're getting excellent height.

Trouble is, there are hundreds of world class athletes around the world working just as hard as you. They want it just as badly as you do. They've read and heard the same motivational

material as you have. They're willing to sacrifice as much as you. Let's say you get into the Olympic high jump finals. The winner might depend more on who jumps last, or whether the weather favors you or another contestant, or who gets that tiny last minute injury, or any one of a myriad of factors.

Burnout is ugly. It's caused by the combination of overwork and disappointment. The person who sacrifices everything for the goal and then misses is likely to burn out.

You can learn a lot about burnout prevention in chapter 8, **Take Pride in Your Actions**. See **Manage Expectations** (chapter 11) to learn how to set doable goals, and how to set "plan B" goals so life is sweet even if you miss your goal by a little bit.

Note

I'm not saying it's impossible to be the Olympic high jump champion, or that you shouldn't try if you're a great high jumper, desire it above all else, and you're willing to pay the price of years of training. All I'm saying is to tell someone they can accomplish anything they want is false and hurtful. For example, if two people wanting to be the next Olympic high jump champion are both told they can accomplish it by making up their mind, least one of them will fail to reach that goal.

Once expectations are managed, you'll find this book helps you accomplish some remarkable things. Chapters 9 (**Use a Journal as Your Decision Engine**), 10 (**Evaluate and Adapt Your Mental State**), 26 (**Bust through Procrastination**), 34 (**Convert Nervousness to Anticipation, Disappointment to Understanding**), and 35 (**Ask These Six Valuable Questions**) all help you achieve your goals.

■ God Never Gives You What You Can't Handle.

This is particularly harmful in most contexts, because when things are darkest, the logical response to this platitude is "why

does God hate me so much?"

Worse yet, this platitude is often advice *from* someone having a comfortable life, *to* someone who just got fired, lost their health insurance, found out they have cancer, lost their house paying for treatment, and had to move to an apartment in the bad part of town where their children are assaulted daily on their way to school.

How dare anyone trivialize such misfortunes calling them God's will? Whether or not it's God's will, dealing with it requires much more than a platitude.

Certainly, religion can be a huge help in times of misfortune, if you pick the right house of worship. Pick the wrong one and you might be told this is punishment for your past sins. You don't need that kind of noise unless you're a bank robber or a murderer. This will be discussed in chapter **27**, titled **Get Religion — Your Way**.

Chapter **8**, **Take Pride In Your Actions**, is very helpful in getting through bad times, as is **Use a Journal as Your Decision Engine** (chapter **9**), and **Look Forward to Looking Back** (**20**). Chapter **21**, **Exercise** is another antidote to hard times, always assuming you're physically able to exercise.

■ When One Door Closes, Another One Opens.

Can a saying get more trite than this? We all know there are multiple doors; this platitude says nothing about how to find that next door.

But this book does. Thoughts while exercising and journal usage and asking the generic questions in chapter **35**, help find that door and help evaluate which of the many remaining doors you should go through.

■ Follow Your Dreams, the Money Will Come.

What an insult! Especially when trotted out during a recession, as hard-working people accept whatever work they can get in order to keep their house and health insurance, or just stay off public assistance.

The real hero is the person who gives up a dream in order to feed, cloth, shelter and educate his family. The choice is clear — make money right now and forgo the dream, or follow the dream and put the family in danger.

My dad, Walter Litt, wanted to be a cartoonist. He made cartoons for his high school paper. They were good — I saw them. But he graduated high school right into the worst of the Great Depression, when his family needed every dime from every family member to keep the apartment and keep food on the table. The job he dreamed of was cartoonist, but the job he could get was salesman. So that's what he did.

When the depression ended he served in World War II, and soon after that ended he had a wife and child who needed support. No time to work his way up in the world of cartooning.

My dad never got to become a cartoonist, but he'll always be my hero. He kept us housed, fed and comfortable. He came home every night at six and played catch with me. He taught me long division and he taught me to hit home runs. He was a great husband and a great father. He deserves better than to be insulted by this trite utterance.

Let's address the grain of truth in this platitude. Things *do* go better when you enjoy what you do for a living. I've known software developers who were in it just for the money — most didn't fare well. We're happier when we like our jobs. You can use this book's **Use a Journal** and **Take Pride** chapters to move toward work that both satisfies and pays well.

■ Imagine and It Will Happen

That's half the story. Imagining it is necessary but not sufficient. After imagining, you must plan, and then you must work the plan. Once again, the **Use a Journal** chapter answers.

■ Recognize the Platitude Mouthers for What They Are

Recognize the platitude mouthers for what they are: Bullies. From inside their safe little worlds, they try to minimize your problems with a phrase or two.

Even the ones who have overcome great odds are bullies. Remember, they've gotten through their challenge, you're still in the middle of yours. It's been a long time since they walked a mile in your shoes, and they've forgotten. If they remembered what it was like, they'd come up with something more useful than a platitude.

They're bullies, and they do what bullies do best — beat people up.

■ Don't Beat Yourself Up

Don't assist the platitude-mouthing bullies. Don't beat yourself up when your situation is too challenging to be overcome by their platitudes. You're doing your best in a tough, maybe a monstrous, situation.

Perhaps you were one of the millions to lose your job, and therefore your house and health insurance, and your family's living in a shelter. This doesn't reflect badly on you as a human being. Quite the opposite, the fact that you're still trying to figure out how to better your life instead of running away from the situation speaks volumes about your courage and dedication. Don't beat yourself up — celebrate your strength!

If you keep trying, and especially if you follow the advice in this book, the day will come when you'll master your situation.

Then you'll have sweet revenge on the bullies.

■ Summary

Things are tough enough out there. Your job, your health insurance, and your bank beat you up. Don't help them by beating yourself up. Understand the strength you exhibit plowing through the current situation.

There's a lot of oversimplified fluff that passes for inspirational and motivational advice:

- "If life hands you a lemon, make lemonade."
- "You can accomplish whatever you make up your mind to do."
- "God never gives you what you can't handle."
- "When one door closes, another one opens."
- "Follow your dreams, the money will come."
- "Imagine and it will happen."
- "Energy and persistence conquer all things"

Although many of the preceding are helpful when they come from within, they can be depressing when offered by others as advice to you. The reason they're depressing is they sound so good, but they offer no way to get from here to there. They're fluff.

When times are tough, the last thing you want to do is beat yourself up. Just because someone tells you "If life hands you a lemon, make lemonade" is no reason you should feel badly when you can't immediately find the way to make lemonade from the lemon that comprises your present circumstance. You don't have to live up to someone else's idea of overcoming problems. They're your problems, and you'll overcome them in your way.

Life's tough enough. Don't make it worse by blaming yourself for (probably temporary) inability to solve your current problems.