CHAPTER 5

You Are Always Choosing

Imagine that somebody puts a gun to your head and tells you that you have to run 26.2 miles in under five hours, or else he'll kill you and your entire family.

That would suck.

Now imagine that you bought nice shoes and running gear, trained religiously for months, and completed your first marathon with all of your closest family and friends cheering you on at the finish line.

That could potentially be one of the proudest moments of your life.

Exact same 26.2 miles. Exact same person running them. Exact same pain coursing through your exact same legs. But when you chose it freely and prepared for it, it was a glorious and important milestone in your life. When it

was forced upon you against your will, it was one of the most terrifying and painful experiences of your life.

Often the only difference between a problem being painful or being powerful is a sense that we *chose* it, and that we are responsible for it.

If you're miserable in your current situation, chances are it's because you feel like some part of it is outside your control—that there's a problem you have no ability to solve, a problem that was somehow thrust upon you without your choosing.

When we feel that we're choosing our problems, we feel empowered. When we feel that our problems are being forced upon us against our will, we feel victimized and miserable.

The Choice

William James had problems. Really bad problems.

Although born into a wealthy and prominent family, from birth James suffered life-threatening health issues: an eye problem that left him temporarily blinded as a child; a terrible stomach condition that caused excessive vomiting and forced him to adopt an obscure and highly sensitive diet; trouble with his hearing; back spasms so bad that for days at a time he often couldn't sit or stand upright.

Due to his health problems, James spent most of his time at home. He didn't have many friends, and he wasn't particularly good at school. Instead, he passed the days painting. That was the only thing he liked and the only thing he felt particularly good at.

Unfortunately, nobody else thought he was good at it. When he grew to adulthood, nobody bought his work. And as the years dragged on, his father (a wealthy businessman) began ridiculing him for his laziness and his lack of talent.

Meanwhile, his younger brother, Henry James, went on to become a world-renowned novelist; his sister, Alice James, made a good living as a writer as well. William was the family oddball, the black sheep.

In a desperate attempt to salvage the young man's future, James's father used his business connections to get him admitted into Harvard Medical School. It was his last chance, his father told him. If he screwed this up, there was no hope for him.

But James never felt at home or at peace at Harvard. Medicine never appealed to him. He spent the whole time feeling like a fake and a fraud. After all, if he couldn't overcome his own problems, how could he ever hope to have the energy to help others with theirs? After touring a psychiatric facility one day, James mused in his diary that he felt he had more in common with the patients than with the doctors.

A few years went by and, again to his father's disapproval, James dropped out of medical school. But rather than deal with the brunt of his father's wrath, he decided to get away: he signed up to join an anthropological expedition to the Amazon rain forest.

This was in the 1860s, so transcontinental travel was difficult and dangerous. If you ever played the computer game *Oregon Trail* when you were a kid, it was kind of like that, with the dysentery and drowning oxen and everything.

Anyway, James made it all the way to the Amazon, where the real adventure was to begin. Surprisingly, his fragile health held up that whole way. But once he finally made it, on the first day of the expedition, he promptly contracted smallpox and nearly died in the jungle.

Then his back spasms returned, painful to the point of making James unable to walk. By this time, he was emaciated and starved from the smallpox, immobilized by his bad back, and left alone in the middle of South America (the rest of the expedition having gone on without him) with no clear way to get home—a journey that would take months and likely kill him anyway.

But somehow he eventually made it back to New England, where he was greeted by an (even more) disappointed father. By this point the young man wasn't so young anymore—nearly thirty years old, still unemployed, a failure at everything he had attempted, with a body that routinely betrayed him and wasn't likely to ever get better. Despite all the advantages and opportunities he'd been given in life, everything had fallen apart. The only constants in his life seemed to be suffering and disappointment. James fell into a deep depression and began making plans to take his own life.

But one night, while reading lectures by the philosopher Charles Peirce, James decided to conduct a little experiment. In his diary, he wrote that he would spend one year believing that he was 100 percent responsible for everything that occurred in his life, no matter what. During this period, he would do everything in his power

to change his circumstances, no matter the likelihood of failure. If nothing improved in that year, then it would be apparent that he was truly powerless to the circumstances around him, and then he would take his own life.

The punch line? William James went on to become the father of American psychology. His work has been translated into a bazillion languages, and he's regarded as one of the most influential intellectuals/philosophers/psychologists of his generation. He would go on to teach at Harvard and would tour much of the United States and Europe giving lectures. He would marry and have five children (one of whom, Henry, would become a famous biographer and win a Pulitzer Prize). James would later refer to his little experiment as his "rebirth," and would credit it with *everything* that he later accomplished in his life.

There is a simple realization from which all personal improvement and growth emerges. This is the realization that we, individually, are responsible for everything in our lives, no matter the external circumstances.

We don't always control what happens to us. But we *always* control how we interpret what happens to us, as well as how we respond.

Whether we consciously recognize it or not, we are always responsible for our experiences. It's impossible not to be. Choosing to *not* consciously interpret events in our lives is still an interpretation of the events of our lives. Choosing to *not* respond to the events in our lives is still a response to the events in our lives. Even if you get run over by a clown car and pissed on by a busload of schoolchildren, it's still

your responsibility to interpret the meaning of the event and choose a response.

Whether we like it or not, we are *always* taking an active role in what's occurring to and within us. We are always interpreting the meaning of every moment and every occurrence. We are always choosing the values by which we live and the metrics by which we measure everything that happens to us. Often the same event can be good or bad, depending on the metric we choose to use.

The point is, we are *always* choosing, whether we recognize it or not. Always.

It comes back to how, in reality, there is no such thing as not giving a single fuck. It's impossible. We must all give a fuck about something. To not give a fuck about *anything* is still to give a fuck about *something.*

The real question is, What are we choosing to give a fuck about? What values are we choosing to base our actions on? What metrics are we choosing to use to measure our life? And are those *good* choices—good values and good metrics?

The Responsibility/Fault Fallacy

Years ago, when I was much younger and stupider, I wrote a blog post, and at the end of it I said something like, "And as a great philosopher once said: 'With great power comes great responsibility.'" It sounded nice and authoritative. I couldn't remember who had said it, and my Google search had turned up nothing, but I stuck it in there anyway. It fit the post nicely.

About ten minutes later, the first comment came in: "I think the 'great philosopher' you're referring to is Uncle Ben from the movie *Spider-Man.*"

As another great philosopher once said, "Doh!"

"With great power comes great responsibility." The last words of Uncle Ben before a thief whom Peter Parker let get away murders him on a sidewalk full of people for absolutely no explicable reason. *That* great philosopher.

Still, we've all heard the quote. It gets repeated a lot—usually ironically and after about seven beers. It's one of those perfect quotes that sound really intelligent, and yet it's basically just telling you what you already know, even if you've never quite thought about the matter before.

"With great power comes great responsibility."

It is true. But there's a better version of this quote, a version that actually *is* profound, and all you have to do is switch the nouns around: "With great responsibility comes great power."

The more we choose to accept responsibility in our lives, the more power we will exercise over our lives. Accepting responsibility for our problems is thus the first step to solving them.

I once knew a man who was convinced that the reason no woman would date him was because he was too short. He was educated, interesting, and good-looking—a good catch, in principle—but he was absolutely convinced that women found him too short to date.

And because *he* felt that he was too short, he didn't often go out and try to meet women. The few times he

did, he would home in on the smallest behaviors from any woman he talked with that could possibly indicate he wasn't attractive enough for her and then convince himself that she didn't like him, even if she really did. As you can imagine, his dating life sucked.

What he didn't realize was that *he* had chosen the value that was hurting him: height. Women, he assumed, are attracted only to height. He was screwed, no matter what he did.

This choice of value was disempowering. It gave this man a really crappy problem: not being tall enough in a world meant (in his view) for tall people. There are far better values that he could have adopted in his dating life. "I want to date only women who like me for who I am" might have been a nice place to start—a metric that assesses the values of honesty and acceptance. But he did not choose these values. He likely wasn't even aware that he *was* choosing his value (or *could* do so). Even though he didn't realize it, he was responsible for his own problems.

Despite that responsibility, he went on complaining: "But I don't have a choice," he would tell the bartender. "There's nothing I can do! Women are superficial and vain and will never like me!" Yes, it's *every single woman's fault* for not liking a self-pitying, shallow guy with shitty values. Obviously.

A lot of people hesitate to take responsibility for their problems because they believe that to be *responsible* for your problems is to also be *at fault* for your problems.

Responsibility and fault often appear together in our

culture. But they're not the same thing. If I hit you with my car, I am both at fault and likely legally responsible to compensate you in some way. Even if hitting you with my car was an accident, I am still responsible. This is the way fault works in our society: if you fuck up, you're on the hook for making it right. And it should be that way.

But there are also problems that we *aren't* at fault for, yet we are still responsible for them.

For example, if you woke up one day and there was a newborn baby on your doorstep, it would not be your *fault* that the baby had been put there, but the baby would now be your *responsibility*. You would have to choose what to do. And whatever you ended up choosing (keeping it, getting rid of it, ignoring it, feeding it to a pit bull), there would be problems associated with your choice—and you would be responsible for those as well.

Judges don't get to choose their cases. When a case goes to court, the judge assigned to it did not commit the crime, was not a witness to the crime, and was not affected by the crime, but he or she is still *responsible* for the crime. The judge must then choose the consequences; he or she must identify the metric against which the crime will be measured and make sure that the chosen metric is carried out.

We are responsible for experiences that aren't our fault all the time. This is part of life.

Here's one way to think about the distinction between the two concepts. Fault is past tense. Responsibility is present tense. Fault results from choices that have already been made. Responsibility results from the choices you're

currently making, every second of every day. You are choosing to read this. You are choosing to think about the concepts. You are choosing to accept or reject the concepts. It may be *my* fault that you think my ideas are lame, but *you* are responsible for coming to your own conclusions. It's not *your* fault that I chose to write this sentence, but you are still responsible for choosing to read it (or not).

There's a difference between blaming someone else for your situation and that person's actually being responsible for your situation. Nobody else is ever responsible for your situation but you. Many people may be to blame for your unhappiness, but nobody is ever *responsible* for your unhappiness but you. This is because *you* always get to choose how you see things, how you react to things, how you value things. You always get to choose the metric by which to measure your experiences.

My first girlfriend dumped me in spectacular fashion. She was cheating on me with her teacher. It was awesome. And by awesome, I mean it felt like getting punched in the stomach about 253 times. To make things worse, when I confronted her about it, she promptly left me for him. Three years together, down the toilet just like that.

I was miserable for months afterward. That was to be expected. But I also held her responsible for my misery. Which, take it from me, didn't get me very far. It just made the misery worse.

See, I couldn't control her. No matter how many times I called her, or screamed at her, or begged her to take me back, or made surprise visits to her place, or did other

creepy and irrational ex-boyfriend things, I could never control her emotions or her actions. Ultimately, while she was *to blame* for how I felt, she was never *responsible* for how I felt. I was.

At some point, after enough tears and alcohol, my thinking began to shift and I began to understand that although she had done something horrible to me and she could be blamed for that, it was now my own responsibility to make myself happy again. She was never going to pop up and fix things for me. I had to fix them for myself.

When I took that approach, a few things happened. First, I began to improve myself. I started exercising and spending more time with my friends (whom I had been neglecting). I started deliberately meeting new people. I took a big study-abroad trip and did some volunteer work. And slowly, I started to feel better.

I still resented my ex for what she had done. But at least now I was taking responsibility for my own emotions. And by doing so, I was choosing better values—values aimed at taking care of myself, learning to feel better about myself, rather than aimed at getting her to fix what she'd broken.

(By the way, this whole "holding her responsible for my emotions" thing is probably part of why she left in the first place. More on that in a couple chapters.)

Then, about a year later, something funny began to happen. As I looked back on our relationship, I started to notice problems I had never noticed before, problems that *I* was to blame for and that *I* could have done something to solve. I realized that it was likely that I hadn't been a great

boyfriend, and that people don't just magically cheat on somebody they've been with unless they are unhappy for some reason.

I'm not saying that this excused what my ex did—not at all. But recognizing my mistakes helped me to realize that I perhaps hadn't been the innocent victim I'd believed myself to be. That I had a role to play in enabling the shitty relationship to continue for as long as it did. After all, people who date each other tend to have similar values. And if I dated someone with shitty values for that long, what did that say about me and my values? I learned the hard way that if the people in your relationships are selfish and doing hurtful things, it's likely you are too, you just don't realize it.

In hindsight, I was able to look back and see warning signs of my ex-girlfriend's character, signs I had chosen to ignore or brush off when I was with her. *That* was my fault. I could look back and see that I hadn't exactly been the Boyfriend of the Year to her either. In fact, I had often been cold and arrogant toward her; other times I took her for granted and blew her off and hurt her. *These* things were my fault too.

Did my mistakes justify her mistake? No. But still, I took on the responsibility of never making those same mistakes again, and never overlooking the same signs again, to help guarantee that I will never suffer the same consequences again. I took on the responsibility of striving to make my future relationships with women that much better. And I'm happy to report that I have. No more cheating girlfriends leaving me, no more 253 stomach punches. I took

responsibility for my problems and improved upon them. I took responsibility for my role in that unhealthy relationship and improved upon it with later relationships.

And you know what? My ex leaving me, while one of the most painful experiences I've ever had, was also one of the most important and influential experiences of my life. I credit it with inspiring a significant amount of personal growth. I learned more from that single problem than dozens of my successes combined.

We all love to take responsibility for success and happiness. Hell, we often *fight over* who gets to be responsible for success and happiness. But taking responsibility for our problems is far more important, because that's where the real learning comes from. That's where the real-life improvement comes from. To simply blame others is only to hurt yourself.

Responding to Tragedy

But what about really awful events? A lot of people can get on board with taking responsibility for work-related problems and maybe watching too much TV when they should really be playing with their kids or being productive. But when it comes to horrible tragedies, they pull the emergency cord on the responsibility train and get off when it stops. Some things just feel too painful for them to own up to.

But think about it: the intensity of the event doesn't change the underlying truth. If you get robbed, say, you're obviously not at fault for being robbed. No one would ever

choose to go through that. But as with the baby on your doorstep, you are immediately thrust into responsibility for a life-and-death situation. Do you fight back? Do you panic? Do you freeze up? Do you tell the police? Do you try to forget it and pretend it never happened? These are all choices and reactions you're responsible for making or rejecting. You didn't choose the robbery, but it's still your responsibility to manage the emotional and psychological (and legal) fallout of the experience.

In 2008, the Taliban took control of the Swat Valley, a remote part of northeastern Pakistan. They quickly implemented their Muslim extremist agenda. No television. No films. No women outside the house without a male escort. No girls attending school.

By 2009, an eleven-year-old Pakistani girl named Malala Yousafzai had begun to speak out against the school ban. She continued to attend her local school, risking both her and her father's lives; she also attended conferences in nearby cities. She wrote online, "How dare the Taliban take away my right for education?"

In 2012, at the age of fourteen, she was shot in the face as she rode the bus home from school one day. A masked Taliban soldier armed with a rifle boarded the bus and asked, "Who is Malala? Tell me, or I will shoot everyone here." Malala identified herself (an amazing choice in and of itself), and the man shot her in the head in front of all the other passengers.

Malala went into a coma and almost died. The Taliban

stated publicly that if she somehow survived the attempt, they would kill both her and her father.

Today, Malala is still alive. She still speaks out against violence and oppression toward women in Muslim countries, now as a best-selling author. In 2014 she received the Nobel Peace Prize for her efforts. It would seem that being shot in the face only gave her a larger audience and more courage than before. It would have been easy for her to lie down and say, "I can't do anything," or "I have no choice." That, ironically, would still have been her choice. But she chose the opposite.

A few years ago, I had written about some of the ideas in this chapter on my blog, and a man left a comment. He said that I was shallow and superficial, adding that I had no real understanding of life's problems or human responsibility. He said that his son had recently died in a car accident. He accused me of not knowing what true pain was and said that I was an asshole for suggesting that he himself was responsible for the pain he felt over his son's death.

This man had obviously suffered pain much greater than most people ever have to confront in their lives. He didn't choose for his son to die, nor was it his fault that his son died. The responsibility for coping with that loss was given to him even though it was clearly and understandably unwanted. But despite all that, he was still responsible for his own emotions, beliefs, and actions. How he reacted to his son's death was his own choice. Pain of one sort or another is inevitable for all of us, but we get to choose what it

means to and for us. Even in claiming that he had *no* choice in the matter and simply wanted his son back, he was making a choice—one of many ways he could have chosen to use that pain.

Of course, I didn't say any of this to him. I was too busy being horrified and thinking that yes, perhaps I was way in over my head and had no idea what the fuck I was talking about. That's a hazard that comes with my line of work. A problem that I chose. And a problem that I was responsible for dealing with.

At first, I felt awful. But then, after a few minutes, I began to get angry. His objections had little to do with what I was actually saying, I told myself. And what the hell? Just because I don't have a kid who died doesn't mean I haven't experienced terrible pain myself.

But then I actually applied my own advice. I chose my problem. I could get mad at this man and argue with him, try to "outpain" him with my own pain, which would just make us both look stupid and insensitive. Or I could choose a better problem, working on practicing patience, understanding my readers better, and keeping that man in mind every time I wrote about pain and trauma from then on. And that's what I've tried to do.

I replied simply that I was sorry for his loss and left it at that. What else can you say?

Genetics and the Hand We're Dealt

In 2013, the BBC rounded up half a dozen teenagers with obsessive-compulsive disorder (OCD) and followed them

as they attended intensive therapies to help them overcome their unwanted thoughts and repetitive behaviors.

There was Imogen, a seventeen-year-old girl who had a compulsive need to tap every surface she walked past; if she failed to do so, she was flooded with horrible thoughts of her family dying. There was Josh, who needed to do everything with both sides of his body—shake a person's hand with both his right and his left hand, eat his food with each hand, step through a doorway with both feet, and so on. If he didn't "equalize" his two sides, he suffered from severe panic attacks. And then there was Jack, a classic germophobe who refused to leave his house without wearing gloves, boiled all his water before drinking it, and refused to eat food not cleaned and prepared himself.

OCD is a terrible neurological and genetic disorder that cannot be cured. At best, it can be managed. And, as we'll see, managing the disorder comes down to managing one's values.

The first thing the psychiatrists on this project do is tell the kids that they're to accept the imperfections of their compulsive desires. What that means, as one example, is that when Imogen becomes flooded with horrible thoughts of her family dying, she is to accept that her family may actually die and that there's nothing she can do about it; simply put, she is told that what happens to her is not her fault. Josh is forced to accept that over the long term, "equalizing" all of his behaviors to make them symmetrical is actually destroying his life more than occasional panic attacks would. And Jack is reminded that no

matter what he does, germs are always present and always infecting him.

The goal is to get the kids to recognize that their values are not rational—that in fact their values are not even theirs, but rather are the disorder's—and that by fulfilling these irrational values they are actually harming their ability to function in life.

The next step is to encourage the kids to choose a value that is more important than their OCD value and to focus on that. For Josh, it's the possibility of not having to hide his disorder from his friends and family all the time, the prospect of having a normal, functioning social life. For Imogen, it's the idea of taking control over her own thoughts and feelings and being happy again. And for Jack, it's the ability to leave his house for long periods of time without suffering traumatic episodes.

With these new values held front and center in their minds, the teenagers set out on intensive desensitization exercises that force them to live out their new values. Panic attacks ensue; tears are shed; Jack punches an array of inanimate objects and then immediately washes his hands. But by the end of the documentary, major progress has been made. Imogen no longer needs to tap every surface she comes across. She says, "There are still monsters in the back of my mind, and there probably always will be, but they're getting quieter now." Josh is able to go periods of twenty-five to thirty minutes without "equalizing" his behaviors between both sides of his body. And Jack, who makes perhaps the most improvement, is actually able to go out to

restaurants and drink out of bottles and glasses without washing them first. Jack sums up well what he learned: "I didn't choose this life; I didn't choose this horrible, horrible condition. But I get to choose how to live with it; I *have to* choose how to live with it."

A lot of people treat being born with a disadvantage, whether OCD or small stature or something very different, as though they were screwed out of something highly valuable. They feel that there's nothing they can do about it, so they avoid responsibility for their situation. They figure, "I didn't choose my crappy genetics, so it's not my fault if things go wrong."

And it's true, it's not their fault.

But it's still their responsibility.

Back in college, I had a bit of a delusional fantasy of becoming a professional poker player. I won money and everything, and it was fun, but after almost a year of serious play, I quit. The lifestyle of staying up all night staring at a computer screen, winning thousands of dollars one day and then losing most of it the next, wasn't for me, and it wasn't exactly the most healthy or emotionally stable means of earning a living. But my time playing poker had a surprisingly profound influence on the way I see life.

The beauty of poker is that while luck is always involved, luck doesn't dictate the long-term results of the game. A person can get dealt terrible cards and beat someone who was dealt great cards. Sure, the person who gets dealt great cards has a higher likelihood of winning the hand, but ultimately the winner is determined by—yup,

you guessed it—the *choices* each player makes throughout play.

I see life in the same terms. We all get dealt cards. Some of us get better cards than others. And while it's easy to get hung up on our cards, and feel we got screwed over, the real game lies in the choices we make with those cards, the risks we decide to take, and the consequences we choose to live with. People who consistently make the best choices in the situations they're given are the ones who eventually come out ahead in poker, just as in life. And it's not necessarily the people with the best cards.

There are those who suffer psychologically and emotionally from neurological and/or genetic deficiencies. But this changes nothing. Sure, they inherited a bad hand and are not to blame. No more than the short guy wanting to get a date is to blame for being short. Or the person who got robbed is to blame for being robbed. But it's still their responsibility. Whether they choose to seek psychiatric treatment, undergo therapy, or do nothing, the choice is ultimately theirs to make. There are those who suffer through bad childhoods. There are those who are abused and violated and screwed over, physically, emotionally, financially. They are not to blame for their problems and their hindrances, but they are still responsible—*always* responsible—to move on despite their problems and to make the best choices they can, given their circumstances.

And let's be honest here. If you were to add up *all* of the people who have some psychiatric disorder, struggle with depression or suicidal thoughts, have been subjected

to neglect or abuse, have dealt with tragedy or the death of a loved one, and have survived serious health issues, accidents, or trauma—if you were to round up *all of those people* and put them in the room, well, you'd probably have to round up everyone, because nobody makes it through life without collecting a few scars on the way out.

Sure, some people get saddled with worse problems than others. And some people are legitimately victimized in horrible ways. But as much as this may upset us or disturb us, it ultimately changes nothing about the responsibility equation of our individual situation.

Victimhood Chic

The responsibility/fault fallacy allows people to pass off the responsibility for solving their problems to others. This ability to alleviate responsibility through blame gives people a temporary high and a feeling of moral righteousness.

Unfortunately, one side effect of the Internet and social media is that it's become easier than ever to push responsibility—for even the tiniest of infractions—onto some other group or person. In fact, this kind of public blame/shame game has become popular; in certain crowds it's even seen as "cool." The public sharing of "injustices" garners far more attention and emotional outpouring than most other events on social media, rewarding people who are able to perpetually feel victimized with ever-growing amounts of attention and sympathy.

"Victimhood chic" is in style on both the right and the left today, among both the rich and the poor. In fact, this

may be the first time in human history that every single demographic group has felt unfairly victimized simultaneously. And they're all riding the highs of the moral indignation that comes along with it.

Right now, *anyone* who is offended about *anything*—whether it's the fact that a book about racism was assigned in a university class, or that Christmas trees were banned at the local mall, or the fact that taxes were raised half a percent on investment funds—feels as though they're being oppressed in some way and therefore deserve to be outraged and to have a certain amount of attention.

The current media environment both encourages and perpetuates these reactions because, after all, it's good for business. The writer and media commentator Ryan Holiday refers to this as "outrage porn": rather than report on real stories and real issues, the media find it much easier (and more profitable) to find something mildly offensive, broadcast it to a wide audience, generate outrage, and then broadcast that outrage back across the population in a way that outrages yet another part of the population. This triggers a kind of echo of bullshit pinging back and forth between two imaginary sides, meanwhile distracting everyone from real societal problems. It's no wonder we're more politically polarized than ever before.

The biggest problem with victimhood chic is that it sucks attention away from *actual* victims. It's like the boy who cried wolf. The more people there are who proclaim themselves victims over tiny infractions, the harder it becomes to see who the real victims actually are.

People get addicted to feeling offended all the time because it gives them a high; being self-righteous and morally superior feels *good*. As political cartoonist Tim Kreider put it in a *New York Times* op-ed: "Outrage is like a lot of other things that feel good but over time devour us from the inside out. And it's even more insidious than most vices because we don't even consciously acknowledge that it's a pleasure."

But part of living in a democracy and a free society is that we all have to deal with views and people we don't necessarily like. That's simply the price we pay—you could even say it's the whole point of the system. And it seems more and more people are forgetting that.

We should pick our battles carefully, while simultaneously attempting to empathize a bit with the so-called enemy. We should approach the news and media with a healthy dose of skepticism and avoid painting those who disagree with us with a broad brush. We should prioritize values of being honest, fostering transparency, and welcoming doubt over the values of being right, feeling good, and getting revenge. These "democratic" values are harder to maintain amidst the constant noise of a networked world. But we must accept the responsibility and nurture them regardless. The future stability of our political systems may depend on it.

There Is No "How"

A lot of people might hear all of this and then say something like, "Okay, but how? I get that my values suck and

that I avoid responsibility for all of my problems and that I'm an entitled little shit who thinks the world should revolve around me and every inconvenience I experience—but *how* do I change?"

And to this I say, in my best Yoda impersonation: "Do, or do not; there is no 'how.'"

You are *already choosing,* in every moment of every day, what to give a fuck about, so change is as simple as choosing to give a fuck about something else.

It really *is* that simple. It's just not easy.

It's not easy because you're going to feel like a loser, a fraud, a dumbass at first. You're going to be nervous. You're going to freak out. You may get pissed off at your wife or your friends or your father in the process. These are all side effects of changing your values, of changing the fucks you're giving. But they are inevitable.

It's simple but really, really hard.

Let's look at some of these side effects. You're going to feel uncertain; I guarantee it. "Should I really give this up? Is this the right thing to do?" Giving up a value you've depended on for years is going to feel disorienting, as if you don't really know right from wrong anymore. This is hard, but it's normal.

Next, you'll feel like a failure. You've spent half your life measuring yourself by that old value, so when you change your priorities, change your metrics, and stop behaving in the same way, you'll fail to meet that old, trusted metric and thus immediately feel like some sort of fraud or nobody. This is also normal and also uncomfortable.

And certainly you will weather rejections. Many of the relationships in your life were built around the values you've been keeping, so the moment you change those values—the moment you decide that studying is more important than partying, that getting married and having a family is more important than rampant sex, that working a job you believe in is more important than money—your turnaround will reverberate out through your relationships, and many of them will blow up in your face. This too is normal and this too will be uncomfortable.

These are necessary, though painful, side effects of choosing to place your fucks elsewhere, in a place far more important and more worthy of your energies. As you reassess your values, you will be met with internal and external resistance along the way. More than anything, you will feel uncertain; you will wonder if what you're doing is wrong.

But as we'll see, this is a good thing.

CHAPTER 6

You're Wrong About Everything (But So Am I)

Five hundred years ago cartographers believed that California was an island. Doctors believed that slicing a person's arm open (or causing bleeding anywhere) could cure disease. Scientists believed that fire was made out of something called phlogiston. Women believed that rubbing dog urine on their face had anti-aging benefits. Astronomers believed that the sun revolved around the earth.

When I was a little boy, I used to think "mediocre" was a kind of vegetable that I didn't want to eat. I thought my brother had found a secret passageway in my grandmother's house because he could get outside without having to leave the bathroom (spoiler alert: there was a window). I also thought that when my friend and his family visited