

to discover is that I didn't like to climb much. I just liked to imagine the summit.

The common cultural narratives would tell me that I somehow failed myself, that I'm a quitter or a loser, that I just didn't "have it," that I gave up on my dream and that maybe I let myself succumb to the pressures of society.

But the truth is far less interesting than any of these explanations. The truth is, I thought I wanted something, but it turns out I didn't. End of story.

I wanted the reward and not the struggle. I wanted the result and not the process. I was in love with not the fight but only the victory.

And life doesn't work that way.

Who you are is defined by what you're willing to struggle for. People who *enjoy* the struggles of a gym are the ones who run triathlons and have chiseled abs and can bench-press a small house. People who *enjoy* long workweeks and the politics of the corporate ladder are the ones who fly to the top of it. People who *enjoy* the stresses and uncertainties of the starving artist lifestyle are ultimately the ones who live it and make it.

This is not about willpower or grit. This is not another admonishment of "no pain, no gain." This is the most simple and basic component of life: our struggles determine our successes. Our problems birth our happiness, along with slightly better, slightly upgraded problems.

See: it's a never-ending upward spiral. And if you think at any point you're allowed to stop climbing, I'm afraid you're missing the point. Because the joy is in the climb itself.

CHAPTER

3

You Are Not Special

once knew a guy; we'll call him Jimmy.

Jimmy always had various business ventures going. On any given day, if you asked him what he was doing, he'd rattle off the name of some firm he was consulting with, or he'd describe a promising medical app he was looking for angel investors to fund, or he'd talk about some charity event he was supposed to be the keynote speaker for, or how he had an idea for a more efficient type of gas pump that was going to make him billions. The guy was always rolling, always on, and if you gave him an inch of conversational daylight, he'd pulverize you about how world-spinning his work was, how brilliant his latest ideas were, and he'd name-drop so much it felt like you were talking to a tabloid reporter.

Jimmy was all positivity all the time. Always pushing

himself, always working an angle—a real go-getter, whatever the fuck that means.

The catch was that Jimmy was also a total deadbeat—all talk and no walk. Stoned a majority of the time, and spending as much money in bars and fine restaurants as he did on his “business ideas,” Jimmy was a professional leech, living off his family’s hard-won money by spinning them as well as everybody else in the city on false ideas of future tech glory. Sure, sometimes he’d put in some token effort, or pick up the phone and cold-call some bigwig and name-drop until he ran out of names, but nothing ever actually happened. None of these “ventures” ever blossomed into anything.

Yet the guy kept this up for years, living off girlfriends and more and more distant relatives well into his late twenties. And the most screwed-up part was that Jimmy *felt good about it*. He had a delusional level of self-confidence. People who laughed at him or hung up on him were, in his mind, “missing the opportunity of their lives.” People who called him out on his bogus business ideas were “too ignorant and inexperienced” to understand his genius. People who pointed out his deadbeat lifestyle were “jealous”; they were “haters” who envied his success.

Jimmy did make some money, although it was usually through the sketchiest of means, like selling another person’s business idea as his own, or flogging a loan from someone, or worse, talking someone into giving him equity in their start-up. He actually occasionally talked people into paying him to do some public speaking. (About what, I can’t even imagine.)

The worst part was that Jimmy *believed* his own bullshit. His delusion was so bulletproof, it was honestly hard to get mad at him, it was actually kind of amazing.

Sometime in the 1960s, developing “high self-esteem”—having positive thoughts and feelings about oneself—became all the rage in psychology. Research found that people who *thought* highly about themselves generally performed better and caused fewer problems. Many researchers and policymakers at the time came to believe that raising a population’s self-esteem could lead to some tangible social benefits: lower crime, better academic records, greater employment, lower budget deficits. As a result, beginning in the next decade, the 1970s, self-esteem practices began to be taught to parents, emphasized by therapists, politicians, and teachers, and instituted into educational policy. Grade inflation, for example, was implemented to make low-achieving kids feel better about their lack of achievement. Participation awards and bogus trophies were invented for any number of mundane and expected activities. Kids were given inane homework assignments, like writing down all the reasons why they thought they were special, or the five things they liked most about themselves. Pastors and ministers told their congregations that they were each uniquely special in God’s eyes, and were destined to excel and not be average. Business and motivational seminars cropped up chanting the same paradoxical mantra: every single one of us can be exceptional and massively successful.

But it’s a generation later and the data is in: we’re *not* all exceptional. It turns out that merely feeling good about

yourself doesn't really mean anything unless you have a *good reason* to feel good about yourself. It turns out that adversity and failure are actually useful and even necessary for developing strong-minded and successful adults. It turns out that teaching people to believe they're exceptional and to feel good about themselves no matter what doesn't lead to a population full of Bill Gateses and Martin Luther Kings. It leads to a population full of Jimmys.

Jimmy, the delusional start-up founder. Jimmy, who smoked pot every day and had no real marketable skills other than talking himself up and believing it. Jimmy, the type of guy who yelled at his business partner for being "immature," and then maxed out the company credit card at Le Bernardin trying to impress some Russian model. Jimmy, who was quickly running out of aunts and uncles who could loan him more money.

Yes, that confident, high-self-esteem Jimmy. The Jimmy who spent so much time talking about how good he was that he forgot to, you know, actually do something.

The problem with the self-esteem movement is that it measured self-esteem by how positively people felt about themselves. But a true and accurate measurement of one's self-worth is how people feel about the *negative* aspects of themselves. If a person like Jimmy feels absolutely fucking great 99.9 percent of the time, despite his life falling apart around him, then how can that be a valid metric for a successful and happy life?

Jimmy is entitled. That is, he feels as though he deserves good things without actually earning them. He believes he

should be able to be rich without actually working for it. He believes he should be liked and well-connected without actually helping anyone. He believes he should have an amazing lifestyle without actually sacrificing anything.

People like Jimmy become so fixated on feeling good about themselves that they manage to delude themselves into believing that they *are* accomplishing great things even when they're not. They believe they're the brilliant presenter on stage when actually they're making a fool of themselves. They believe they're the successful start-up founder when, in fact, they've never had a successful venture. They call themselves life coaches and charge money to help others, even though they're only twenty-five years old and haven't actually accomplished anything substantial in their lives.

Entitled people exude a delusional degree of self-confidence. This confidence can be alluring to others, at least for a little while. In some instances, the entitled person's delusional level of confidence can become contagious and help the people around the entitled person feel more confident in themselves too. Despite all of Jimmy's shenanigans, I have to admit that it *was* fun hanging out with him sometimes. You felt indestructible around him.

But the problem with entitlement is that it makes people *need* to feel good about themselves all the time, even at the expense of those around them. And because entitled people always need to feel good about themselves, they end up spending most of their time thinking about themselves. After all, it takes a lot of energy and work to convince

yourself that your shit doesn't stink, especially when you've actually been living in a toilet.

Once people have developed the thought pattern to constantly construe what happens around them as self-aggrandizing, it's extremely hard to break them out of it. Any attempt to reason with them is seen as simply another "threat" to their superiority by another person who "can't handle" how smart/talented/good-looking/successful they are.

Entitlement closes in upon itself in a kind of narcissistic bubble, distorting anything and everything in such a way as to reinforce itself. People who feel entitled view every occurrence in their life as either an affirmation of, or a threat to, their own greatness. If something good happens to them, it's because of some amazing feat they accomplished. If something bad happens to them, it's because somebody is jealous and trying to bring them down a notch. Entitlement is impervious. People who are entitled delude themselves into whatever feeds their sense of superiority. They keep their mental facade standing at all costs, even if it sometimes requires being physically or emotionally abusive to those around them.

But entitlement is a failed strategy. It's just another high. It's *not* happiness.

The true measurement of self-worth is not how a person feels about her *positive* experiences, but rather how she feels about her *negative* experiences. A person like Jimmy hides from his problems by making up imagined successes

for himself at every turn. And because he can't face his problems, no matter how good he feels about himself, he is weak.

A person who actually has a high self-worth is able to look at the negative parts of his character frankly—"Yes, sometimes I'm irresponsible with money," "Yes, sometimes I exaggerate my own successes," "Yes, I rely too much on others to support me and should be more self-reliant"—and then acts to improve upon them. But entitled people, because they are incapable of acknowledging their own problems openly and honestly, are incapable of improving their lives in any lasting or meaningful way. They are left chasing high after high and accumulate greater and greater levels of denial.

But eventually reality must hit, and the underlying problems will once again make themselves clear. It's just a question of when, and how painful it will be.

Things Fall Apart

I sat in my 9:00 A.M. biology class, arms cradling my head on my desk as I stared at the clock's second hand making laps, each tick syncopated with the teacher's dronings-on about chromosomes and mitosis. Like most thirteen-year-olds stuck in a stuffy, fluorescent classroom, I was bored.

A knock came on the door. Mr. Price, the school's assistant principal, stuck his head in. "Excuse me for interrupting. Mark, can you step outside with me for a moment? Oh, and bring your things with you."

Strange, I thought. Kids get sent to the principal, but the principal rarely gets sent to them. I gathered my things and stepped out.

The hallway was empty. Hundreds of beige lockers converged on the horizon. "Mark, can you take me to your locker, please?"

"Sure," I say, and slug myself down the hall, baggy jeans and mopy hair and oversized Pantera T-shirt and all.

We get to my locker. "Open it, please," Mr. Price says, so I do. He steps in front of me and gathers my coat, my gym bag, my backpack—all of the locker's contents, minus a few notebooks and pencils. He starts walking away. "Come with me, please," he says, without looking back. I start to get an uneasy feeling.

I follow him to his office, where he asks me to sit down. He closes the door and locks it. He goes over to the window and adjusts the blinds to block the view from outside. My palms begin to sweat. This is *not* a normal principal visit.

Mr. Price sits down and quietly rummages through my things, checking pockets, unzipping zippers, shaking out my gym clothes and placing them on the floor.

Without looking up at me, Mr. Price asks, "Do you know what I'm looking for, Mark?"

"No," I say.

"Drugs."

The word shocks me into nervous attention.

"D-d-drugs?" I stammer. "What kind?"

He looks at me sternly. "I don't know; what kind do you

have?" He opens one of my binders and checks the small pockets meant for pens.

My sweat blossoms like a fungal growth. It spreads from my palms to my arms and now my neck. My temples pulsate as blood floods my brain and face. Like most thirteen-year-olds freshly accused of possessing narcotics and bringing them to school, I want to run away and hide.

"I don't know what you're talking about," I protest, the words sounding far meeker than I'd like. I feel as if I should be sounding confident in myself right now. Or maybe not. Maybe I should be scared. Do liars sound more scared or confident? Because however they sound, I want to sound the opposite. Instead, my lack of confidence compounds, unconfidence about my sounding unconfident making me more unconfident. That fucking Feedback Loop from Hell.

"We'll see about that," he says, turning his attention to my backpack, which seemingly has one hundred pockets. Each is loaded with its own silly teen desiderata—colored pens, old notes passed in class, early-nineties CDs with cracked cases, dried-up markers, an old sketchpad with half its pages missing, dust and lint and crap accumulated during a maddeningly circuitous middle school existence.

My sweat must be pumping at the speed of light, because time extends itself and dilates such that what is mere seconds on that 9:00 A.M. second-period biology clock now feels like Paleolithic eons, and I'm growing up and dying every minute. Just me and Mr. Price and my bottomless backpack.

Somewhere around the Mesolithic Age, Mr. Price

finishes searching the backpack. Having found nothing, he seems flustered. He turns the pack upside down and lets all of my crap crash onto his office floor. He's now sweating as profusely as I am, except in place of my terror, there is his anger.

"No drugs today, eh?" He tries to sound casual.

"Nope." So do I.

He spreads my stuff out, separating each item and coagulating them into little piles beside my gym gear. My coat and backpack now lie empty and lifeless on his lap. He sighs and stares at the wall. Like most thirteen-year-olds locked in an office with a man angrily throwing their shit all over the floor, I want to cry.

Mr. Price scans the contents organized on the floor. Nothing illicit or illegal, no narcotics, not even anything against school policy. He sighs and then throws the coat and backpack on the floor too. He bends over and puts his elbows on his knees, making his face level with mine.

"Mark, I'm going to give you one last chance to be honest with me. If you are honest, this will turn out much better for you. If it turns out you're lying, then it's going to be much worse."

As if on cue, I gulp.

"Now tell me the truth," Mr. Price demands. "Did you bring drugs to school today?"

Fighting back tears, screams clawing at my throat, I stare my tormentor in the face and, in a pleading voice, dying to be relieved of its adolescent horrors, I say, "No, I don't have any drugs. I have no idea what you're talking about."

"Okay," he says, signaling surrender. "I guess you can collect your things and go."

He takes one last, longing gaze at my deflated backpack, lying like a broken promise there on his office floor. He casually puts one foot down on the pack, stomping lightly, a last-ditch effort. I anxiously wait for him to get up and leave so I can get on with my life and forget this whole nightmare.

But his foot stops on something. "What is this?" he asks, tapping with his foot.

"What is what?" I say.

"There's still something in here." He picks up the bag and starts feeling around the bottom of it. For me the room gets fuzzy; everything goes wobbly.

When I was young, I was smart. I was friendly. But I was also a shithhead. I mean that in the most loving way possible. I was a rebellious, lying little shithhead. Angry and full of resentment. When I was twelve, I hacked my house's security system with refrigerator magnets so I could sneak out undetected in the middle of the night. My friend and I would put his mom's car in neutral and push it into the street so we could drive around without waking her up. I would write papers about abortion because I knew my English teacher was a hardcore conservative Christian. Another friend and I stole cigarettes from his mom and sold them to kids out behind the school.

And I also cut a secret compartment into the bottom of my backpack to hide my marijuana.

That was the same hidden compartment Mr. Price found after stepping on the drugs I was hiding. I had been

lying. And, as promised, Mr. Price didn't go easy on me. A few hours later, like most thirteen-year-olds handcuffed in the back of a police car, I thought my life was over.

And I was kind of right, in a way. My parents quarantined me at home. I was to have no friends for the foreseeable future. Having been expelled from school, I was to be homeschooled for the rest of the year. My mom made me get a haircut and threw out all of my Marilyn Manson and Metallica shirts (which, for an adolescent in 1998, was tantamount to being sentenced to death by lameness). My dad dragged me to his office with him in the mornings and made me file papers for hours on end. Once homeschooling was over, I was enrolled in a small, private Christian school, where—and this may not surprise you—I didn't exactly fit in.

And just when I had finally cleaned up my act and turned in my assignments and learned the value of good clerical responsibility, my parents decided to get divorced.

I tell you all of this only to point out that my adolescence sucked donkey balls. I lost all of my friends, my community, my legal rights, and my family within the span of about nine months. My therapist in my twenties would later call this “some real traumatic shit,” and I would spend the next decade-and-change working on unraveling it and becoming less of a self-absorbed, entitled little prick.

The problem with my home life back then was not all of the horrible things that were said or done; rather, it was all of the horrible things that needed to be said and done but weren't. My family stonewalls the way Warren Buffett

makes money or Jenna Jameson fucks: we're champions at it. The house could have been burning down around us and it would have been met with, “Oh no, everything's fine. A tad warm in here, perhaps—but really, everything's fine.”

When my parents got divorced, there were no broken dishes, no slammed doors, no screaming arguments about who fucked whom. Once they had reassured my brother and me that it wasn't our fault, we had a Q&A session—yes, you read that right—about the logistics of the new living arrangements. Not a tear was shed. Not a voice was raised. The closest peek my brother and I got into our parents' unraveling emotional lives was hearing, “Nobody cheated on anybody.” Oh, that's nice. It was a tad warm in the room, but really, everything was fine.

My parents are good people. I don't blame them for any of this (not anymore, at least). And I love them very much. They have their own stories and their own journeys and their own problems, just as all parents do. And just as all of *their* parents do, and so on. And like all parents, my parents, with the best of intentions, imparted some of their problems to me, as I probably will to my kids.

When “real traumatic shit” like this happens in our lives, we begin to unconsciously feel as though we have problems that we're incapable of ever solving. And this assumed inability to solve our problems causes us to feel miserable and helpless.

But it also causes something else to happen. If we have problems that are unsolvable, our unconscious figures that we're either uniquely special or uniquely defective in some

way. That we're somehow unlike everyone else and that the rules must be different for us.

Put simply: we become entitled.

The pain from my adolescence led me down a road of entitlement that lasted through much of my early adulthood. Whereas Jimmy's entitlement played out in the business world, where he pretended to be a huge success, my entitlement played out in my relationships, particularly with women. My trauma had revolved around intimacy and acceptance, so I felt a constant need to overcompensate, to prove to myself that I was loved and accepted at all times. And as a result, I soon took to chasing women the same way a cocaine addict takes to a snowman made out of cocaine: I made sweet love to it, and then promptly suffocated myself in it.

I became a player—an immature, selfish, albeit sometimes charming player. And I strung up a long series of superficial and unhealthy relationships for the better part of a decade.

It wasn't so much the sex I craved, although the sex was fun. It was the validation. I was wanted; I was loved; for the first time since I could remember, I was *worthy*. My craving for validation quickly fed into a mental habit of self-aggrandizing and overindulgence. I felt entitled to say or do whatever I wanted, to break people's trust, to ignore people's feelings, and then justify it later with shitty, half-assed apologies.

While this period certainly had its moments of fun and excitement, and I met some wonderful women, my life was

more or less a wreck the whole time. I was often unemployed, living on friends' couches or with my mom, drinking way more than I should have been, alienating a number of friends—and when I did meet a woman I really liked, my self-absorption quickly torpedoed everything.

The deeper the pain, the more helpless we feel against our problems, and the more entitlement we adopt to compensate for those problems. This entitlement plays out in one of two ways:

1. I'm awesome and the rest of you all suck, so I deserve special treatment.
2. I suck and the rest of you are all awesome, so I deserve special treatment.

Opposite mindset on the outside, but the same selfish creamy core in the middle. In fact, you will often see entitled people flip back and forth between the two. Either they're on top of the world or the world is on top of them, depending on the day of the week, or how well they're doing with their particular addiction at that moment.

Most people correctly identify a person like Jimmy as a raging narcissistic ass-hat. That's because he's pretty blatant in his delusionally high self-regard. What most people don't correctly identify as entitlement are those people who perpetually feel as though they're inferior and unworthy of the world.

Because construing everything in life so as to make yourself out to be constantly victimized requires just as much

selfishness as the opposite. It takes just as much energy and delusional self-aggrandizement to maintain the belief that one has insurmountable problems as that one has no problems at all.

The truth is that there's no such thing as a personal problem. If you've got a problem, chances are millions of other people have had it in the past, have it now, and are going to have it in the future. Likely people you know too. That doesn't minimize the problem or mean that it shouldn't hurt. It doesn't mean you aren't legitimately a victim in some circumstances.

It just means that you're not special.

Often, it's this realization—that you and your problems are actually *not* privileged in their severity or pain—that is the first and most important step toward solving them.

But for some reason, it appears that more and more people, particularly young people, are forgetting this. Numerous professors and educators have noted a lack of emotional resilience and an excess of selfish demands in today's young people. It's not uncommon now for books to be removed from a class's curriculum for no other reason than that they made someone feel bad. Speakers and professors are shouted down and banned from campuses for infractions as simple as suggesting that maybe some Halloween costumes really aren't that offensive. School counselors note that more students than ever are exhibiting severe signs of emotional distress over what are otherwise run-of-the-mill daily college experiences, such as an argument with a roommate, or getting a low grade in a class.

It's strange that in an age when we are more connected than ever, entitlement seems to be at an all-time high. Something about recent technology seems to allow our insecurities to run amok like never before. The more freedom we're given to express ourselves, the more we want to be free of having to deal with anyone who may disagree with us or upset us. The more exposed we are to opposing viewpoints, the more we seem to get upset that those other viewpoints exist. The easier and more problem-free our lives become, the more we seem to feel entitled for them to get even better.

The benefits of the Internet and social media are unquestionably fantastic. In many ways, this is the best time in history to be alive. But perhaps these technologies are having some unintended social side effects. Perhaps these same technologies that have liberated and educated so many are simultaneously enabling people's sense of entitlement more than ever before.

The Tyranny of Exceptionalism

Most of us are pretty average at most things we do. Even if you're exceptional at one thing, chances are you're average or below average at most other things. That's just the nature of life. To become truly great at something, you have to dedicate shi-tons of time and energy to it. And because we all have limited time and energy, few of us ever become truly exceptional at more than one thing, if anything at all.

We can then say that it's a statistical improbability that any single person will be an extraordinary performer in all areas of life, or even in many areas of their life. Brilliant

businesspeople are often fuckups in their personal lives. Extraordinary athletes are often shallow and as dumb as a lobotomized rock. Many celebrities are probably just as clueless about life as the people who gawk at them and follow their every move.

We're all, for the most part, pretty average people. But it's the extremes that get all of the publicity. We kind of know this already, but we rarely think and/or talk about it, and we certainly never discuss why this could be a problem.

Having the Internet, Google, Facebook, YouTube, and access to five hundred-plus channels of television is amazing. But our attention is limited. There's no way we can process the tidal waves of information flowing past us constantly. Therefore, the only zeroes and ones that break through and catch our attention are the truly exceptional pieces of information—those in the 99.999th percentile.

All day, every day, we are flooded with the truly extraordinary. The best of the best. The worst of the worst. The greatest physical feats. The funniest jokes. The most upsetting news. The scariest threats. Nonstop.

Our lives today are filled with information from the extremes of the bell curve of human experience, because in the media business that's what gets eyeballs, and eyeballs bring dollars. That's the bottom line. Yet the vast majority of life resides in the humdrum middle. The vast majority of life is *unextraordinary*, indeed quite average.

This flood of extreme information has conditioned us to believe that exceptionalism is the new normal. And because we're all quite average most of the time, the deluge

of exceptional information drives us to feel pretty damn insecure and desperate, because clearly we are somehow not good enough. So more and more we feel the need to compensate through entitlement and addiction. We cope the only way we know how: either through self-aggrandizing or through other-aggrandizing.

Some of us do this by cooking up get-rich-quick schemes. Others do it by taking off across the world to save starving babies in Africa. Others do it by excelling in school and winning every award. Others do it by shooting up a school. Others do it by trying to have sex with anything that talks and breathes.

This ties in to the growing culture of entitlement that I talked about earlier. Millennials often get blamed for this cultural shift, but that's likely because millennials are the most plugged-in and visible generation. In fact, the tendency toward entitlement is apparent across all of society. And I believe it's linked to mass-media-driven exceptionalism.

The problem is that the pervasiveness of technology and mass marketing is screwing up a lot of people's expectations for themselves. The inundation of the exceptional makes people feel worse about themselves, makes them feel that they need to be more extreme, more radical, and more self-assured to get noticed or even matter.

When I was a young man, my insecurities around intimacy were exacerbated by all the ridiculous narratives of masculinity circulating throughout pop culture. And those same narratives are *still* circulating: to be a cool guy, you have to party like a rock star; to be respected, you have to

be admired by women; sex is the most valuable thing a man can attain, and it's worth sacrificing anything (including your own dignity) to get it.

This constant stream of unrealistic media dogpiles onto our existing feelings of insecurity, by overexposing us to the unrealistic standards we fail to live up to. Not only do we feel subjected to unsolvable problems, but we feel like losers because a simple Google search shows us thousands of people without those same problems.

Technology has solved old economic problems by giving us new psychological problems. The Internet has not just open-sourced information; it has also open-sourced insecurity, self-doubt, and shame.

B-b-b-but, If I'm Not Going to Be Special or Extraordinary, What's the Point?

It has become an accepted part of our culture today to believe that we are *all* destined to do something truly extraordinary. Celebrities say it. Business tycoons say it. Politicians say it. Even Oprah says it (so it must be true). Each and every one of us can be extraordinary. We all *deserve* greatness.

The fact that this statement is inherently contradictory—after all, if *everyone* were extraordinary, then by definition *no one* would be extraordinary—is missed by most people. And instead of questioning what we actually deserve or don't deserve, we eat the message up and ask for more.

Being “average” has become the new standard of failure. The worst thing you can be is in the middle of the pack, the middle of the bell curve. When a culture's standard of

success is to “be extraordinary,” it then becomes better to be at the extreme low end of the bell curve than to be in the middle, because at least there you're still special and deserve attention. Many people choose this strategy: to prove to everyone that they are the most miserable, or the most oppressed, or the most victimized.

A lot of people are afraid to accept mediocrity because they believe that if they accept it, they'll never achieve anything, never improve, and that their life won't matter.

This sort of thinking is dangerous. Once you accept the premise that a life is worthwhile only if it is truly notable and great, then you basically accept the fact that most of the human population (including yourself) sucks and is worthless. And this mindset can quickly turn dangerous, to both yourself and others.

The rare people who do become truly exceptional at something do so not because they believe they're exceptional. On the contrary, they become amazing because they're obsessed with improvement. And that obsession with improvement stems from an unerring belief that they are, in fact, not that great at all. It's *anti*-entitlement. People who become great at something become great because they understand that they're not already great—they are mediocre, they are average—and that they could be so much better.

All of this “every person can be extraordinary and achieve greatness” stuff is basically just jerking off your ego. It's a message that tastes good going down, but in reality is nothing more than empty calories that make you

emotionally fat and bloated, the proverbial Big Mac for your heart and your brain.

The ticket to emotional health, like that to physical health, comes from eating your veggies—that is, accepting the bland and mundane truths of life: truths such as “Your actions actually don’t matter *that much* in the grand scheme of things” and “The vast majority of your life will be boring and not noteworthy, and that’s okay.” This vegetable course will taste bad at first. Very bad. You will avoid accepting it.

But once ingested, your body will wake up feeling more potent and more alive. After all, that constant pressure to be something amazing, to be the next big thing, will be lifted off your back. The stress and anxiety of always feeling inadequate and constantly needing to prove yourself will dissipate. And the knowledge and acceptance of your own mundane existence will actually free you to accomplish what you truly wish to accomplish, without judgment or lofty expectations.

You will have a growing appreciation for life’s basic experiences: the pleasures of simple friendship, creating something, helping a person in need, reading a good book, laughing with someone you care about.

Sounds boring, doesn’t it? That’s because these things are ordinary. But maybe they’re ordinary for a reason: because they are what *actually* matters.

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The Value of Suffering

In the closing months of 1944, after almost a decade of war, the tide was turning against Japan. Their economy was floundering, their military overstretched across half of Asia, and the territories they had won throughout the Pacific were now toppling like dominoes to U.S. forces. Defeat seemed inevitable.

On December 26, 1944, Second Lieutenant Hiroo Onoda of the Japanese Imperial Army was deployed to the small island of Lubang in the Philippines. His orders were to slow the United States’ progress as much as possible, to stand and fight at all costs, and to never surrender. Both he and his commander knew it was essentially a suicide mission.

In February 1945, the Americans arrived on Lubang and took the island with overwhelming force. Within days, most