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Heenan/Bright Triumphs From Dark Hours

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INTRODUCTION

*Hope begins in the dark, the stubborn hope
that if you just show up and try to do the
right thing, the dawn will come. You wait and
watch and work: you don't give up.*

—ANNE LAMOTT

BY EVERY CONVENTIONAL MEASURE, J. K. Rowling was mired in her darkest hour. Her exceptionally short-lived marriage had imploded. She had been sacked and was as poor as it was possible to be in modern Britain without being homeless. “By every usual standard,” she admits, “I was the biggest failure I knew.”

Against all odds, the spunky single mother poured her energies into finishing the only work that mattered to her—a book about a boy wizard. However, the publishing world hadn’t caught up with her genius. Twelve publishers rejected her manuscript before a small London house picked up *Harry Potter and the Philosopher’s Stone*. And the rest is history.

How did Rowling defy life’s calamities and go on to greatness, while others pack it in? The billionaire author credits tenacity as the reason she weathered the storm. “Rock bottom became the solid foundation on which I rebuilt my life,” she told a recent Harvard University graduating class at commencement.

Like Rowling, we are all confronted with our own dark hours: equally traumatic, life-altering events. Some of us are unshakable in our belief that anything is possible if we find the courage to forge ahead. Others, however, can’t seem to escape the jaws of defeat.

Hero or zero? Both courses are available to you. As industrialist Henry Ford, who had more than his share of dark clouds, once put it: “Think you can, think you can’t; either way, you’ll be right.”

Bright Triumphs From Dark Hours affirms the conviction that *you can*. We challenge those who choose to cling to the dark side, and celebrate others like megaseller Rowling, who are able to face adversity—and transform near-defeat into a bright triumph.

For the past several years, I have been scrutinizing dozens of dark hours—precarious situations, as well as individual lives, spiraling out of control—and how talented men and women refused to be trapped by them. Because personal stories are a lively and effective way to illustrate important points, I chose to examine a wide range of extraordinary individuals from history and contemporary life who overcame seemingly insurmountable obstacles. From these portrayals of people under duress, you’ll discover the road maps for negotiating rugged terrain, guides for forging your own bright triumph.

These inspiring and dramatic stories are for people in all walks of life—people who want to be ready when their own lives are on the line and when their actions, large or small, will shape the future of others. As you’ll see, our heroes and their vivid portraits are as different as chalk and cheese. Chancellor Joel Klein took on the monumental challenge of trying to overhaul New York City’s long-embattled public schools. Coach Bill Snyder descended on another Manhattan—Kansas—to turn around college football’s losingest team. Spunky Joanne Boyle not only survived a life-threatening cerebral hemorrhage, but elevated her California women’s basketball team from oblivion to national prominence. Similarly, world-renowned scientist and trailblazer Shirley Ann Jackson broke down racial barriers as the first African-American woman to receive a doctorate from M.I.T. and to lead a major research university, Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute. Former Hewlett-Packard chair and cancer patient Pattie Dunn beat the odds to restore her reputation—and her health. Legendary Marine Gen. Chesty Puller, surrounded by overwhelming hordes of Red Chinese regulars, escaped the deadly fog of war at Korea’s Chosin Reservoir, so his troops could fight another day. Sacagawea was the lone Indian, the lone teenager, the lone mother

on the Lewis and Clark expedition, one of the most foreboding journeys ever undertaken. Equally adventurous, Gary Guller became the first one-armed man to scale Mount Everest, while also leading the largest cross-disability group to its base camp, at 17,500 feet. Retired Navy Commander Scott Waddle fought to remove the stain of the USS *Greeneville*, which accidentally sank the Japanese fishing vessel *Ehime Maru*, killing nine people. Tarnished Time Warner ex-chairman Steve Case plotted his own miraculous comeback through an eclectic array of New Age businesses. Others, though less prominent on the world stage, have demonstrated that a battered heart can still beat strongly.

Because each triumph is situational, I am leery about categorizing these winners. The social world isn't nearly as orderly as the physical world. People—unlike solids, liquids, and gases—are anything but uniform and predictable. But in the course of my research, I found that, however they differed, each had taken one of three paths to secure a bright triumph.

1. *Crusaders*, like Joel Klein and Bill Snyder, took on a seemingly impossible situation and achieved remarkable success.
2. *Combatants*, like Indian guide Sacagawea and the Marines at the Chosin Reservoir, overcame perilous, life-threatening conditions to forge a new tomorrow.
3. *Comeback kids*, like Pattie Dunn and Steve Case, bounced back from personal disgrace to restore their reputations.

Whatever their route to success, these courageous and inspiring men and women prove that taking on a truly hellish situation is not necessarily a death sentence. Within each of their personal stories, we'll examine how you can transcend the darkest hours. We'll also look at actions you can take to overcome potential career-killers. The answers call for very different strategies—all you need are the imagination and drive to aid the process, whether in a company or a community.

As you'll see in the following chart, I've identified six strategies to turn defeat into victory. We'll explore each of these actions in the next ten chapters and amplify them in Chapter 11.

Strategies for Forging a Bright Triumph

1. Learn from Adversity
2. Fashion a New Dream
3. Sell Your Vision
4. Share Your Dream
5. Focus, Focus, Focus
6. Start Now

Life isn't getting any easier. In a world often turned dark and cold, we are seeing more and more instances where talented people—quite often for reasons beyond their control—seem destined to fail. Yet caving in to the dark side is not an option; the costs are simply too high.

In the current Era of the Bailout, blame-mongering runs rampant. The wear and tear of contemporary life has made public lynchings commonplace. This year, for instance, one in seven of the world's largest companies will show their top guns the door. Not surprisingly, there is a significant decline in the ability or willingness of gifted men and women to tackle life's most difficult challenges.

Whether measured by foregone profit, employee turnover, or missed opportunities, dark hours and doomsayers can drain any enterprise of its strength and vitality. Organizational esteem suffers, and even the most confident managers become demoralized. Apparently, no one is immune. Virtually every person I encountered in writing this book had a tale of woe about one or more kamikaze situations. As important, they all agreed that to give up was not acceptable.

The notion that near-impossible challenges exist in can-do America—let alone that they may be on the rise—sounds alien, even heretical. Throughout our history, we have celebrated heroes and underdogs who conquer adversity. We cling to a stubborn belief in capturing the day. It's in our DNA.

The insightful young French nobleman Alexis de Tocqueville first spotted our nation's ebullient personality more than one hundred seventy years ago. "No natural boundary seems to be set to the effort of man," he wrote, describing the average American. "And in his eyes what is not yet done, is only what he has not yet attempted to do." Since then, we

have been raised on the ethic that “quitters never win, and winners never quit” and “when the going gets tough, the tough get going.” Our national disease, William James pointed out a century ago, was “the exclusive worship of the bitch-goddess SUCCESS.”

That optimism continues today despite the swirling vortex of the global economy and rising cynicism about our major institutions. Surveys show Americans are actually less upset than they were a few years ago. Under the new administration, roughly two-thirds of the country feels positive about the future. “Contemporary American culture advertises achievement and accomplishment as the route to ultimate happiness,” says Suniya Lothar, a professor of psychology and education at Columbia University. Americans hold out a ray of hope for even the toughest challenge, and see themselves as authors of their fate.

“America is an unlikely place—a country built on defiance of the odds: on the belief in overcoming the impossible,” says President Barack Obama. Recalling the lives of America’s founding fathers—Jefferson, Adams, Washington, and Hamilton—former Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice agrees, telling recent Boston College graduates that she was “struck by the overwhelming sense that there is no earthly reason that the United States should ever have come into being. But, not only did we come into being, we endured. So, remember, even when the horizon seems shrouded in darkness, the hope of a bright beginning is always in sight.”

Mind over matter. That’s the message issued by Norman Vincent Peale in his vintage best-seller, *The Power of Positive Thinking*. “You can think your way to success and happiness,” he wrote more than fifty years ago, adding that it was every American’s God-given duty to face down reality. This ethos of unbridled optimism has nurtured a rescue culture—the notion that any problem can be dispatched—in business, the arts, the military, sports, politics. That’s the American dream that still inspires tens of millions of our unshakably optimistic countrymen.

Americans harbor the belief that when confronted with harsh economic realities or an intractable assignment, we will somehow find the sources of superhuman strength to beat the odds. Coleridge’s pronouncement that “fear gives sudden instincts of skill” best describes this faith in our determination to rise to any occasion.

Throughout history, the world's greatest leaders have refused to let life's darkest hours prevent them from forging a bright triumph. Despite being imprisoned for twenty-seven years, Nelson Mandela turned around a country mired in the racial oppression of apartheid. Mikhail Gorbachev, as the Soviet agriculture boss, was condemned to seven years of hard labor, yet still managed to become leader of the Soviet Communist Party. Winston Churchill, arguably the greatest personality of the last century, overcame the stain of the Gallipoli disaster and political defeats to rally the Western world against Adolf Hitler's juggernaut. "The vistas of possibility are limited only by the shortness of life," he warned. "Success is going from failure to failure without the loss of enthusiasm." To Churchill, anything was possible: Victory was always at hand. "Never give in!" he told students at Harrow in 1941. "Never give in, never, never, never, never!"

It's worth noting that even the greatest of the greats have stumbled into an abyss. No one illustrates this better than George Catlett Marshall. As important to his country as George Washington, Marshall rebuilt the United States Army in World War II despite extraordinary initial resistance. Later in his career, however, Marshall suffered his darkest hour, failing to squash China's civil war.

In 1945, Mao Tse-tung's Soviet-backed Communists threatened the Nationalist forces of American ally Chiang Kai-shek. With Eastern Europe quickly becoming a laboratory for Marxist-Leninism, the free world could not tolerate the defection of Asia's strongest and most powerful nation to socialism. At President Harry Truman's urging, Marshall came out of retirement to negotiate with these two impassioned strongmen and put the Chinese civil war to rest.

Truman's choice of Marshall as his special emissary to China seemed a safe bet. A superb negotiator and brilliant public speaker, Marshall proved he could manipulate the most stubborn, difficult, and politically astute men of the time, including Roosevelt, Churchill, and Stalin. But Marshall knew full well the risks of this, his first diplomatic assignment. He had firsthand knowledge of China. From 1924 to 1927, he had commanded a garrison in Tientsin, where he acquired a working knowledge of Mandarin. Thereafter, he had made it a point to stay abreast of Chinese

affairs of state. Clearly, Marshall knew that the odds were stacked against him.

Readers of history know the unfortunate outcome of the general's first foray into international diplomacy. After arriving in China in late 1945, Marshall found the Nationalist armies engaging, but not defeating, the Communist forces. He soon realized that Mao's greatest weapon was Chiang Kai-shek's dismal record of corruption. In short order, Marshall recommended that all future U.S. aid to the Nationalists be limited and strictly supervised by American officials. This, of course, enraged the Generalissimo. The Communists, for their part, viewed any U.S. support for the Kuomintang as an assault on China's sovereignty. They, too, fell out with Marshall.

Civil war was inevitable. No outsider, however skilled, could have reconciled the monumental differences between the Chinese leaders and their millions of followers. As one commentator said of the assignment, "Talleyrand, Metternich, and Castlereagh could not have pulled it off." Marshall returned home from this impossible mission in January 1947.

From this dark hour, the resilient general quickly rebounded. The architect of the Marshall Plan for rebuilding post-war Europe, he became Truman's steady right hand as secretary of state and, later, secretary of defense. The first soldier to win the Nobel Peace Prize, he was also a hero to the captains of his era. Truman, Roosevelt, Eisenhower, and Churchill all said he was the greatest man they had ever known.

Why, then, does this special breed of bravehearts take on these seemingly impossible assignments? In Marshall's case, "duty, honor, and country" were overriding. When the presidential call came to serve the nation, Marshall had no choice. He would simply do his best—as he had always done. If that required taking on the near-impossible, so be it. Appropriately, Churchill called this American hero "the noblest Roman of them all."

Others possess an overarching belief that you have to seek out the toughest challenges because that's where the greatest opportunities lie. "Man cannot discover new oceans unless he has the courage to lose sight of the shore," wrote André Gide. Those confronting tough times are undaunted risk-takers. Rather than cling to safe havens, these intrepid

explorers want to stretch their limits. They are on a never-ending search for higher mountains to climb—literally.

On May 29, 1953, New Zealand adventurer Edmund Hillary and his Nepalese climbing companion, Tenzing Norgay, scaled the world's highest peak. During the ascent, Hillary, then thirty-three, recalled, "each night, when I went to bed, I'd let my mind dwell on likely things that might happen the next day, and think out carefully the sorts of decisions that it might be necessary to make." With proper planning and perseverance, Hillary said, "You can extend yourself far more than you ever believed. It's not the mountain we climb but ourselves." Since then, more than 2,400 mountaineers have reached Everest's summit; another 210 have died trying.

Adrenaline-pumping adventurers like Sir Edmund Hillary are attracted to the flame of risk. For them, risk-taking sits at the top of the hierarchy of needs. "It's the pinnacle," says sports psychologist Matt Grough. Whether braving the highest peaks, exploring unfathomed depths or assaulting treacherous day jobs, chance-taking is a critically important emotional need. But not every person is up to the task. "People need different levels of stimulation," explains clinical psychologist Robert Bailey. "Some need constant levels, some require little." The former represents an intoxicating cult of high rollers who believe that boldness rewards those who take risks.

Risk-it-all personalities expect some dark clouds. During his sophomore year, Michael Jordan was dropped from his high school basketball team; Henry Ford went bankrupt five times; Dr. Seuss was rejected twenty-seven times; and Elvis Presley got an F in music. But winners dare to stumble. They know that, without failure, there would be no bright triumphs—no discovery, no invention, no trip to the moon, no Everest ascents. The challenge, the reaching out, the exploration, lifts us out of our everyday, well-trodden paths into fresh fields of endeavor and fulfillment.

Those who go on to triumph don't equate mistakes with failure. Biographer Victor K. McElheny termed Edwin Land's try-try-again mentality "insisting on the impossible." The inventor of instant photography and founder of Polaroid, Land poured millions of dollars into research projects, rejecting the advice of his scientists that they were

all doomed to fail. In another triumph of persistence, Thomas Edison, the Wizard of Menlo Park and the most prolific inventor in American history, who holds the record for patents, came up with 1,600 versions of the incandescent bulb before he got one to work. “Nearly every man who develops an idea works at it up to the point where it looks impossible, and then gets discouraged,” he said. “That’s not the place to become discouraged.” Orville and Wilbur Wright, for their part, were hardly the first to try to build a flying machine, but they tinkered with their design for years, revising each element again and again. For the wings alone, they tested more than two hundred designs in a wind tunnel they built, and each attempt sparked new ideas that would lead to a machine that actually flew.

Where would we be without these dogged optimists? Their spunk transforms the darkest times into victory. Whereas some people are overcome by circumstances—the financial meltdown, Hurricane Katrina, tsunamis in the Indian Ocean—others quickly bounce back after being knocked down. They share a positive outlook when confronted with life’s many obstacles: a trait associated with greater resilience.

“Resilience is a reflex, a way of facing and understanding the world that is deeply etched in a person’s mind and soul,” explains Diane L. Coudu, senior editor of the *Harvard Business Review* and a 2008–2009 fellow at the American Psychiatric Institute. “Resilient people and companies face the reality of staunchness, make meaning of hardship instead of crying out in despair, and improvise solutions from the air.” These quintessential men and women reject the cynical smirk that smiles on the dark side.

Even the most da Vincian personalities recognize that failure is not defeat. “Failure is part of the learning process that leads to success,” says John O. Whitney, a turnaround specialist and professor emeritus at Columbia Business School. Land, Edison, and the Wright brothers were as stimulated by failure as they were by success. It never took them out of the game. In their minds, failure implied you’d taken a chance. The bigger the failure, the bigger the chance you had taken.

Other experts cite self-efficacy as the distinguishing trait between the stouthearted and those who surrender to adversity. According to Stanford psychology professor Albert Bandura, self-efficacy represents

unbridled determination. It represents a deep-seated belief that we really do have the power to achieve our goals. Some of us are born with it, he says. Others acquire it the old-fashioned way: They master a difficult task, mimic successful people, or seek out helpful advice from others. They realize that no one's life is a fairy tale. For them, it's an adventure, a journey through uncharted waters with countless stops and starts. They understand that nobody's perfect: Success is elusive; failure is always lurking. Indeed, fear of failure can be one of the most paralyzing forces than can seize the human spirit. It constricts people's visions of futures that are theirs for the taking.

"All of us have failed to reach our dream of perfection," Nobel Prize-winning author William Faulkner once explained of his fellow authors. "So I rate us on the basis of our splendid failure to do the impossible." Dark hours, when confronted directly, provide opportunities to excel. "Never confuse a single defeat with a final defeat," wrote F. Scott Fitzgerald, who received more than one hundred twenty rejection slips for short stories before his best-selling *This Side of Paradise* was published in 1920. "The anger of rejection motivated me to keep going," he recalled. Like J. K. Rowling, rejection to Fitzgerald was like grains of sand for oysters. By reacting positively, he often wrote sixteen hours a day, churning out up to 8,000 words.

Writers, artists, inventors, and leaders of every stripe are energized by volatile times. They expect some dry spells along the way. They know that it's the rare person who receives traction right away. These are "people who undertake the most characteristic of human endeavors: the pursuit of lost causes," claims *Atlantic's* Cullen Murphy. They pursue a cause even "when all evidence suggests that it is doomed."

These same miracle workers believe certain causes are worthy of extraordinary sacrifice—winning the war, putting a man on the moon, defeating communism, reforming public education, discovering cures for serious diseases. Marshall, Mandela, Gorbachev, and Churchill all felt that history beckoned them to confront a world turned dark and cold. Robert Oppenheimer worked so hard that he damaged his already precarious health in the course of leading the Manhattan Project, which, fortunately, accelerated the end of World War II.

“The first and last task of a leader is to keep hope alive,” wrote John Gardner, the distinguished educator, public servant, and founder of Common Cause. Inspirational types are not constrained by the darkest hours. They are experts at restoring people’s faith in the future, especially the faith of talented people who have run into brick walls. In the pages that follow, we’ll track ten exceptional men and women—people who turned adversity into bright triumphs.

Remember the U.S. Navy SEALs’ favorite saying: “The only easy day was yesterday.” Properly scripted, tomorrow *can* become better than yesterday.