



The Knowledge Project presents
Ryan Holiday

PODCAST TRANSCRIPT

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Welcome to the Knowledge Project, I'm your host Shane Parrish, curator behind Farnam Street an online intellectual hub of interestingness that covers topics like human misjudgment, decision making, strategy and philosophy. The Knowledge Project allows me to interview amazing people from around the world to deconstruct why they are good at what they do. It's more conversation than prescription. On this episode I have Ryan Holiday. Since dropping out of college at nineteen to apprentice under strategist Robert Greene, the author of *The 48 Laws of Power*, Ryan has advised many New York Times bestselling authors and musicians.

He's a master, and some would say, manipulator, of the media, as his first book *Trust Me, I'm Lying* outlines. His latest book *The Obstacle Is The Way* reached bestseller status. We explore how he reads, what it means to be a Stoic and his infamous Notecard System. The conversation is actually cut short, we originally had ninety minutes booked for this interview but I forgot to turn on the recorder. We had to re-record the entire interview. Ryan got to practice some of that famous Stoicism. With that said I hope you enjoy the conversation as much as I did. Before I get started, here is a quick word from our sponsor.

Where do you want to start?

Let's start with what is Stoicism again. We'll go quicker, this just...we were just talking for about twenty minutes and we just realized that the microphone wasn't on.

Wouldn't it be funny if I freaked out and knocked over all the mics and I was just very un Stoic about it? Stoicism is a practical philosophy, most people when they think philosophy they think college professor lecturing them. Stoicism...it's favored by statesmen, politicians, soldiers, artists et cetera because it's really at its core I think a series of maxims and exercises for how to live what they would call the good life or to live virtuously or with excellence.

If I was to sum up the central maxim there would be you don't control the world around you, you control your thoughts, you control how you respond to the world around you. The Stoics are focused exclusively on that stuff and that's not just a competitive edge but it's a recipe for I think contentment and fulfillment and stuff like that.

What really pulled you into that was I think the book recommendation by Doctor Drew.

I was at a conference, I found him afterwards and said, "Hey, I really love to read, I know you read, what would you recommend that I read?" He told me about Epictetus, I looked up Epictetus on Amazon, Marcus Aurelius was there who I'd always like the movie Gladiator. I was like, "Oh, I'll get that too." I read Marcus Aurelius and Marcus Aurelius it's just this totally unique historical document in the sense that it is the most powerful, successful man on earth at that time. Literally worshiped as a god, he's deified, writing notes to himself about how to be a better person that was never intended for publication and that survives to us. When I picked that up at nineteen it was radically different than what I learned in school, radically different than any self help book I'd ever read. It was radically different than any of the crap my parents had ever told me. I was just like, "Wow this is what I want, this is what I want to be, this is how I want to live my life."

Was that the Hays translation?

Yeah. The Gregory Hays translation. One of the mistakes I see people do when they read philosophies, they cheap out like, "Oh, this is free on Project Gutenberg." First off it's free because according to the Copyright System it's not worth anything right?

Yeah.

That's why it's free. Every generation needs its own translation because a book like Marcus Aurelius, he's writing to himself in colloquial, personal language. When you see like, "Thou shall not." He didn't say that, that's what someone in the 17th century would have said. I think you want to read the best translation you can and right now that's Gregory Hays.

I first came across that I think in University and it wasn't the Hays translation. I read this and I was like, "What the fuck is this?"

"Every generation needs its own translation ..."

“One of Seneca’s lines from his plays is actually a graffitied line on a wall at Pompeii ...”

Sure, it’s very dense.

Then I found the Hays Translation just randomly in an airport one day and I started reading it going, “Why didn’t I read this before?” Like, “What was I thinking?”

Totally like, “Who was hiding this from me? This is crazy.”

So who are your favorites then in terms of the Stoics I guess?

Marcus Aurelius is my favorite, probably Seneca is my second favorite. Seneca was a high profile political advisor, he was also a very famous playwright at the time. Famous enough that one of his ... As I was saying earlier, I’m trying to remember what I said and didn’t say ... One of Seneca’s lines from his plays is actually a graffitied line on a wall at Pompeii, it’s just been preserved for us. He’s one of the most famous writers of his time and his plays are actually great but I like Seneca a lot. I like Epictetus, Epictetus is a bit preachy for me but those are the big three. I’ve read the others, the others are much harder to understand ...

Like Chrysippus or?

Yeah. If you want to read the others the best thing to do is Diogenes Laertes wrote this book that’s sort of a biography of all philosophers. It’s like a multi-volume series but one of the volumes is about the Stoics. It’s like he’s giving a biography but then also quoting all their best lines. The reason Seneca, Marcus Aurelius and Epictetus are also the most famous is because their works survive the most completely. All you really get from the other people are fragments anyway.

Seneca is fascinating to me in that he led this life that’s been betrayed in multiple ways. We already had this conversation but maybe you can give me a ...

Sure, yeah. Seneca’s one of his most famous letters is to his mother after he had been exiled. We don’t know whether he deserved to be exiled or not, supposedly he had an affair with Caligula’s like sister in law. He had an affair with a famous woman and was exiled from Rome. His mother was of course devastated, he as a political insider and a powerful person was of course devastated, this is the end of his professional life and he’s sent away ...

He lost all power, all influence, everything.

Lost everything. He's not just writing about philosophy in theory, he's writing about it as someone who lost everything. It'd be like going bankrupt tomorrow or being impeached from office or something. Then he's recalled to Rome on the condition that he become Nero's tutor and he accepts. Nero at the time was just a child, no one knew whether he was really good or bad or anything but it became increasingly clear that this was a deranged, pathological individual, a true psychopath. Not only is Seneca his mentor trying to curb these things but he's also becoming immensely rich. He was one of the richest men in Rome because he's almost more powerful than the Emperor.

There's that then he's an artist which I imagine was stressful and interesting. Even in his own time a lot of people thought he was hypocritical but at the same time they loved his writing and they loved his essays and he was one of the most prominent ... Considered to be one of the wisest men at the same time. He's complicated like everyone else and as someone who's worked for complicated people and I have a bit of a complicated reputation myself, I very much related to this idea that there's just a lot more than people see when they hear like, "Rich guy, Nero's tutor, famous writer, Stoic." It's almost impossible to comprehend what this individual must have been like.

I think we're like that with almost everybody, we paint them with some brush or label based on a sound bite, a tweet, a headline in a newspaper and we don't think about that person or what's going on in their life or why they make these choices.

In the ERIC Rome book which I know you've recommended, he says that Seneca's critics and I won't try to pronounce the Greek word, what they called them was Tyrant Teacher. There is actually a Greek word for that and that was considered an epithet. As someone who has represented individuals many of which are very hated, myself I've been accused of enabling these people or encouraging these people or being worse than these people. My opinion of some of the people that I've worked for has changed over time. I read that book about Seneca around the time that American Apparel was collapsing and Dov Charney who is the CEO did some things I very much disagree with.

“Crimes often return upon their teacher.”

There's this great line in one of Seneca's plays where he says, "Crimes often return upon their teacher." That's what happened to Seneca. Seneca is ultimately forced to commit suicide by Nero. It's a very prescient remark that he would write in one of his plays something that basically describes the fate that would befall him.

As that was sort of happening to me and I read that book, I thought I relate on a very small scale to what that person must have been like and what they must have gone through.

You stopped going to school when you were nineteen?

Yeah.

Can you walk me through that decision and what you did right after that?

One of the first things I like to do, if only for my own sake is ... I wrote my biography so I'm responsible for the people who say like, "Hey, you dropped out of college at nineteen." It's interesting how things can become in retrospect more significant than they are.

"You tell yourself a story about your life."

Nassim Taleb calls this the Narrative Fallacy, you tell yourself a story about your life. It's like my Sophomore year of college ended two weeks before my twentieth birthday and that's when I stopped going to school. Did I drop out when I was nineteen? Or did I drop out when I was twenty? Is that semantic? That's a very significant ...

It's five percent of your life.

Right it's big. Anyways I left when I was nineteen or twenty at that time I was sort of a marketing manager for Tucker Max who had written these bestselling books and had sort of a media empire. I was working at a talent agency in Hollywood, I signed some of the first YouTube clients to ever become professional actors and content creators. Then I got a try out to be a research assistant for the author Robert Greene who wrote *The 48 Laws Of Power*. It was three things that if you told me when I was graduating that I could choose one of them, I would have said college was worth it. To me it was, "Should I turn down these things, stay in school because that's what you're supposed to do then hope to get this lucky again?" I tried it.

We were talking earlier about being busy and saying no to things and doing three things at once sounds like it's a lot. You're always doing multiple things at once, you're always trying to do a lot, how do you juggle that?

It was a lot but it was also very formative. You could argue that what I do now is a combination of all those three things. I have my own marketing company, I write books and I advise clients and people on strategy. It's a combination of those three things.

Instead of developing them consecutively which would have taken a long time I did them concurrently. It compressed, you want to say your ten thousand hours, if I'm close to that it compressed it in three years instead of ten. I'm probably closer to four.

I was very overwhelmed and very busy but by not doing it at a leisurely pace I got to skip ahead in line so to speak but it's also been a tendency in my life that I just commit to a lot of stuff. Not only was I working for all those people but I never stopped working for those people, I would just start doing more things. I probably worked for Robert for five or six years and if he called me today I'd, "Oh, what do you need me to do?" It could be very exhausting but it's also a bit of a compulsion for me, it's hard for me to say no to things ...

You kind of reached a tipping point recently on that didn't you?

Yeah. Around the time of the collapse of American Apparel I was just very overworked. I'd built this life for myself here in Austin where I live and yet I was in LA, I had to show up in an office every day. I was dealing with all sorts of stuff I tried to cut out of my life because someone called me and said, "Hey, we need you can you come?" I said, "I'll be on the next plane." The idea of stopping and going, "What's the opportunity cost of this? Or should I say yes? Is this what I want? What's going to be the problem here?" I didn't ask that until ... sometimes you've got to touch the stove to get burned and I really got burned and overwhelmed. I've tried to get better at saying no but I would say it's a very first world thing and I get that but one of the hardest things in the world for people to do is to say no to money, it's extraordinarily difficult ...

“Somehow I just couldn't turn off that part of my brain the idea of ...”

It almost doesn't matter how much right?

Totally.

If somebody offers you twenty bucks to do something in the next ten minutes or something ...

My wife makes fun of me because a couple of years ago we were walking into a Home Depot or something and I was like, "Oh, they're hiring." She was like, "Are you looking for a job?" It was like somehow I just couldn't turn off that part of my brain the idea of, "There's an opportunity should I consider that?" This is ...

I have twenty minutes right now ...

My wife's the same way, it was like when we see stuff we think about, "Why shouldn't we do it?" We don't think like, "What is the opportunity cost?" We don't think, "Do we need this?" We think, "Well they're paying us for it." That's not a great attitude if you're trying to produce lasting work or to be the ultimate best at what you do.

So how has your framing changed now? In terms of these costs ... You must be bombarded all the time with it.

Not as much as you think. I don't want to make it sound like I'm just drowning in opportunities, I'm certainly not there but one of the things that was formative for me is I said yes to working on this one book then for some personal reasons I backed out of it and then a week later Tony Robbins called me and wanted me to work on his book for double the amount. That book has sold a million copies since. It was a huge, big life changing opportunity for me but I just committed to this other thing not thinking about ... You need to have the confidence to be able to go like, "Things are going to be okay in the future." What's that ...

"You've got to think about what's important to you and if you don't know and you don't make those decisions one by one you will end up very far from where you need to be to be happy."

You're not driven by that immediate kind of ...

There's that fable about the ant and the cricket about the ant's always preparing for winter while the cricket's playing then the ants ... If you actually read about that story some of the interpretations ... The interpretation of that allegory has changed in different eras. If the ant is over preparing at certain point it's missing out on life that the cricket is experiencing. I think for me it's this idea of, "Okay this is what enough is." Or, "This is what my baseline is." I have to be able to say, "No sorry, that's not enough."

It's also understanding what makes you happy right?

Totally. It was like, "Okay I'm making great money doing this thing." I had to show up in an office and my whole life was about not having to show up for an office right?

There's that thrill line like, "Be wary of any enterprise that requires new clothes." If you don't like having to dress up for work, it doesn't matter how good the opportunity is, if they make you dress up for it ... You've got to think about what's important to you and if you don't know and you don't make those decisions one by one you will end up very far from where you need to be to be happy.

“In a weird way it was like a college-esqu experience in that I have an instructor who’s assigning me to explore certain things.”

I want to come back to working with Robert Greene. What did you learn from that?

I learned everything. I would not be a writer if it wasn’t for Robert Greene. I would not be able to think the way that I think if it wasn’t for Robert Greene. I’d be a much worse person if I’d never met Robert Greene which I know is probably funny to people who hear that he’s the author of The 48 Laws of Power. Robert is one of the most generous, patient, wisest people that I have ever met. I was transcribing interviews for a book that he was writing with 50 Cent then he would start to let me read books that he didn’t want to read that he thought there might ...

remote possibility ...

He’s like, “Look there’s a one percent chance this book has some material in it that I might be able to use. Please read it.” Most of the time my answer was like, “Yeah, you’re right. There’s nothing here.” I remember when the 50 Cent book...he was like, “I’d like to include some stories of the great black boxers.” He’s like, “I’ve already written about Muhammad Ali in my other books, let’s see what you can find.” I read biographies of Joe Louis and Jack Johnson and all these other people. That was one of my first contributions to one of his books. I was like, “There’s something there about Joe Louis, here’s what I would suggest you...” That’s how that worked. “Hey, I read this biography of Joe Louis, this is something I think you should check out. There might be something there.”

Then he goes and finds it. I’m not contributing in any way there, I’m just, “Hey, I’ve eliminated this for you. Check this.” I never would have read those books if he hadn’t assigned me to read them. In a weird way it was like a college-esqu experience in that I have an instructor who’s assigning me to explore certain things. It was like a work study program kind of thing ...

I think you referred to it as almost an apprenticeship.

It’s not an official apprenticeship and we didn’t sign a contract but yeah. At a certain point after I’d gotten a little better he was like, “What do you want to do?” “If you could tell me how I can help you with what you want to do with your life.” This is a conversation I have with people I work with now. He’s like, “I’m not going to pay you a ton of money but if you can tell me what you want to do with your life I can make sure this is very rewarding for you.” It was.

My Notecard System, how I research books now is a direct result of the system that he taught me. How I think about books is a result of...he'd be like, "I want you to do this, can you do this?" Then I'd be like, "Okay but I have one question." I remember one time I was like, "Robert who makes the indexes for books? How does that happen?" Because one of the things that was intimidating to me about writing a book was like, "Do I have to do that?" He was like, "Oh, no that just happens. The publisher just does that." I was like, "Oh okay." It was just little things then when I decided to write my first book he was ...

He walked you through the process.

He walked me through it.

That's awesome. Let's geek out for a second because the number one question I got when I told people I was interviewing you is they want to know about this Notecard System. Can you walk me through Robert's system then how you've adapted that to your system now?

He's not quite Robert Caro who writes everything long hand but Robert I would say probably eighty percent of his work is the research and twenty percent is in the writing. All the writing is done on these note cards. He would read a book, go through it and take notes, mark things that he liked then he would transfer that knowledge onto note cards. The 48 Law of Power might be forty eight sections then each law is supported by note cards. The way that works with a research assistant is like my job is to find the materials to go in the note cards so then when he's writing law six and the fiftieth law or whatever, there's stuff for him to rely on.

“All the writing is done on these note cards ...”

I started using note cards myself and really I just started...I would write stuff. I would see a quote that I would like or a word I would like or a story I would like, I would just write it down on this note card. I just had a collection of note cards until I had enough note cards that I started organizing them by theme. then when I wrote my first book Trust Me, I'm Lying, I spent a year before I left American Apparel writing note cards around media, "Hey, this is good." I'd read this book then I would all these stuff. It became hundreds of note cards then what that allows you to do like my book The Obstacle Is The Way is three parts, ten chapters in each part.

That would be thirty parts plus an intro and a conclusion. That's thirty two sections. I'm just filling that up but let's say I'm writing part two, chapter six that's all I have to carry with me if I'm going to the library or I'm on the road. You're not carrying the whole book around in your head, you're not sitting down and writing where it leads you, you're focused on that individual section which makes it all much more manageable.

How did you pick the themes that you came up with originally?

For what?

For your Notecard System.

It's really just a function of the material. You're not like ...

It's a personal categorization of ...

It's like look I read a lot of books about Stoicism I have a huge section of note cards that are on Stoicism but The Obstacle Is The Way, I was writing, I read this section in Pierre Hadot's The Inner Citadel where he talks about the Stoic idea of turning the obstacle upside down which is how you take a negative thing and turn it into a positive thing. I wrote that down then I would read other examples of people doing that and I'd write that down and I'd write in the corner, turning the obstacle upside down. I got to twenty note cards about that topic. When I was thinking about what I wanted to do for my next book, I was like, "I think there's something there." I wrote a proposal, I sold it then I said, "Okay, I've got twenty note cards, I need a thousand to write a book." Now I have to go read and explore and find things to build up this database of knowledge essentially then ...

“My house got broken into a couple of years ago and I was really scared ...”

How do you store these? There must be thousands of them.

There's thousands of note cards. I use this thing it's called the Cropper Hopper which is just a weird thing they use to make to store like ...

Photos?

Photos because a four by six photo is the same size as a note card. I used to buy one at a time then they stopped making them, I got my garage full of them. Each one of my books is one of those boxes. I used to have just one box of general note cards in different categories that have not become books or anything yet and now that's split into two.

Do you store these electronically? What is your ...

I store them at my office. My house got broken into a couple of years ago and I was really scared that someone stole them not knowing what they were. They didn't thankfully and then ...

“The idea of just quickly being able to copy and paste stuff is antithetical to what I’m doing.”

It would all have been gone? All of that research ...

I would have lost years of knowledge then ironically I came home and knocked the box over and dis-organized everything. Robert a couple of years ago found a scanner that can scan note cards, every couple of weeks I have an assistant go through, we scan all of them then I back them up to Dropbox.

You don’t use Evernote or anything like that?

I don’t even know how to use Evernote and a lot of people go like, “Oh your system it sounds just like Evernote.” It’s not Evernote, it’s physical note cards for a reason. Raymond Chandler has a line, “If you take the pain to write it down you’re more likely to remember it and use it.” The idea of just quickly being able to copy and paste stuff is antithetical to what I’m doing. It’s the ritual that’s important and the act of taking it long hand is very important. Obviously if it’s a huge paragraph I’m going to type it out but it’s still no copying and pasting. That’s the law.

The rule.

The rule because it’s about taking the knowledge from the book, running it through your body then putting it in a thing that you can manipulate but still have tangibly in front of you. I could lay out the box for Obstacle Is The Way and it would be right there and you could see it and while it was there I could move stuff around. I could say, “Actually this chapter is going to be moved into part three.” Or, “I thought this note card would work for somewhere in section two but it didn’t. I’m going to rework it into section one.” I can move stuff around. I have a physical ...

Physically and visually?

Yes. I think that’s very important, I don’t want it to be a black hole in my computer.

It’s not searchable right? How hard is it for you to find stuff?

If I ever couldn’t find something I could have someone go through them for me or I could go through them which I do all the time. My memory works as such I could tell you what different passages look like in books on my shelf, where that shelf is. I’m a bit, I don’t know, Aspergy like that I guess. I think people overestimate they’re like, “Oh, I need it to be searchable.” It’s like, “What have you ever done with it?” I think a lot of people get very nerded out about this system and about having the perfect optimized thing.

If you told me they'd written thirty books, I'd be like, "Okay, your system's better than mine." It's certainly not ... I've written four books ...

It's like optimizing for what?

I've written four books in four years. Not having it searchable has not held me back in any way that I can currently tell.

You don't envision doing things differently in the future?

No I don't think so.

What's your workflow like for writing a book? Maybe walk me through ...

What do you mean?

Kind of, "Okay I have an idea." Not from a publishing perspective but from a writing perspective. So you go from an idea, what is the structure and the tools that you're using to put that together? You have an idea, you do the research, you get the note cards, you arrange them, are you writing? How are you ...

I think when you write your book you will not ask that question because it's just different. People go like, "How long did it take you to write it?" It's like, "I don't know because when did it start? Did it start when I was born, did it start when I first had the idea, did it start when you sold it?" My book that's coming out in June, I started writing it January 1st of 2015.

My first book, I started June 17th, 2011. I know the exact day that I started but I've been researching them for years. It's a little weird but when you have the idea, you're researching it's like you have this general sense of what you're trying to say and what you believe. Then you let the confirmation bias do its work because you're only thinking about this thing, you weirdly just attract all things that could support that idea or would be interesting in discussing that idea. One of the downsides of that is you're paranoid someone's going to steal your idea all the time but they're not you're just thinking about your idea all the time.

You feel almost a pressure to get it out there really quickly so nobody ...

Totally. What I do is when I sit down to write let's say I've broken it up into pieces, that's part of what the Notecard System does. It's like, "Today I'm writing the intro." When I say ...

“Not having it searchable has not held me back in any way that I can currently tell.”

You've chunked it.

In January 1st I started I was writing the intro. That intro is radically different now than it was but I was writing that. Then I got to a point where I could say like, "The rough draft of the intro is done." Then now I'm writing part one, chapter one and I'm writing these discrete pieces because writing a book is very demoralizing. Think about it let's say a book is sixty thousand words and you're writing five hundred usable words a day let's say. People write two or three thousand but getting rid of them. You could work for eight hours on something or three hours, you could work a day's work of writing and make no visible, perceivable progress towards your goal. You only get to the light at the end of the tunnel, three or four months in.

Think about someone like Robert Caro, he's been writing about Lyndon Johnson for forty years. Lyndon Johnson is like sixty in the book and that's only to getting him into volume four. You have to break it up into discrete tasks. When you break it into discrete tasks even Robert Caro he knows the last sentence and the first sentence of the book then everything else is filling it in. What you don't do what I think is the most dangerous thing for writers to do is to just ... Maybe it works when you're writing fiction, I don't know but sitting down and just writing. You can't hit a target that you didn't aim for ...

That's the whole notion that people sell us about being an author.

Totally.

You just go to the coffee shop, you sit down and the words magically spew out of your mouth and ...

There's this Hemingway quote where it says, "Writing is easy, it's just sitting down at a typewriter and opening a vein." Or something. That would be great except for he didn't write that way. If you look at A Farewell To Arms there are twenty seven handwritten different endings to that book. He was not sitting down and bleeding unless he was bleeding to death. He was meticulously editing and rewriting and getting closer to something. Writing I think when you break it up into tasks you're like, "Okay all I have to do is get these two thousand words right." That's much easier to wrap my head around then later you're linking all these pieces together. This is another weird thing with that. I write those chunks in Google Docs in separate Google documents, I'm not doing a day to day word count.

“I don’t know how someone writes for an entire day.”

It’s like, “Hey, today I’m writing part two, chapter four.” Then only when I’ve gotten to the end do I then combine all the things then begin to look at the book as a whole. This is all personal then I switch to Microsoft Word. I’m taking it off the internet and now it’s a distinct manuscript and now I’m thinking about the project as a whole. I think editing while you write the whole thing is hard but if you’re just doing these pieces then I’m able to be a bit recursive about these smaller sections.

Do you map it out in that like, “Today I’m going to do this section, tomorrow I’m going to do this section.” Or are you doing anything else while you’re doing this?

It’s not scheduled like, “On Tuesday I’m doing this, on Wednesday I’m doing this.” It’s more you have to go from A to Z and so you’re starting in A then when you’re done with A you move on to B but I don’t write full time. I could but I have a company and I try to write one or two articles a week, I have my own site, I do a lot of consulting, for the first three books I was also working in American Apparel. I don’t know how someone writes for an entire day. I usually get up early, I love your stuff about, “If you want to be more productive, wake up early.” I wake up around seven, I try to start writing by 8:00, usually 11:00, 11:30 I’m done. It’s hard for me to ...

It’s draining?

It’s very draining and you just hit diminishing returns then I stop then I don’t give myself a break for the rest of the day, I’m not going to work for three hours, I work on my other stuff. I just schedule everything after I start writing.

But you’re matching your energy and intensity to the work in some way right?

Yeah. Like you’re writing till you stop then you’re moving on to these other things. Then usually throughout the course of the day other things occur to you that would be valuable to the writing and you’re either taking notes and doing them tomorrow or you’re, “I’m sending an email to myself.” For instance I like to exercise in the mid afternoon. Let’s say hypothetical schedules, I write until 11:00, from 11:00 to 3:00 I am doing calls or working on client stuff or I’m editing stuff for other people whatever I’m doing.

Then at 3:00 I’m going to go for an hour run and on that run wherever I was stuck in the writing some of that’s going to come loose in my head and I’m going to be like, “Oh, that’s a great phrase.”

I'll email it to myself or I'll, "Got to remember this when I come home." The amount of times I've burst into my house and said to my wife like, "Don't say anything to me until I get this down on paper." Then I'm just writing in short hand little notes then I can go back to being a normal person. I either run or swim but that breaks it up for me.

What's your night like?

I usually am done by 5:00 or 6:00 then I just dick around. We eat dinner, we watch TV, we play with our animals. I'm checking emails throughout this time, I'm not not working at all but ...

You're one of the quickest responders that I know for a busy person on email, how do you do that?

I don't do much phone. I'm sitting there working on stuff and part of what I'm working on is email. Part of my ...

I'm amazed, I get responses from you sometimes I've barely hit send and gone to a new message and it's a response ...

I'm like inbox zero, I pride myself on having gotten to a point that I can deal with new stuff as they come in. One of my tricks is if you send me something and it's worth responding to, I'm responding. If someone is sending me something like I'll get a letter from someone who read one of my books, it's really nice but you may have written about this the Eisenhower stuff, Urgent, Not Important or whatever. Maybe this doesn't work but to you I'm responding within two minutes but then I have people I owe emails to from three weeks ago that I probably won't do until the next time I'm on a flight or I'm stuck without WiFi and I'm just getting caught up on old stuff.

I'm notoriously bad for email and I struggle with something that maybe you struggle with as well which is I get a lot of unsolicited email that I feel in some ways that people are burdening my time and they're not necessarily thinking about it ...

Like what?

Like the request, "Can you read this twenty page document?" I got one last week. It's well worded but it was basically like, "Can you do my homework assignment for me?"

Ramit Sethi talks about this a lot where it's like, "You can just not respond, just pretend you didn't get it."

"One of my tricks is if you send me something and it's worth responding to, I'm responding."

“Responding is what they want. You don’t actually have to do the request.”

Personally I struggle. I’ve adapted over the last year, I would say I’ve come leaps and bounds but at first I had to respond to everything.

I find on stuff like that responding is what they want. You don’t actually have to do the request. You can say, “Hey, I can’t read this but here’s a thought.” Or like, “I’ll go like hey.” One of the things I think about from the articles I read is, “What do I get the most email about?” “Can I write an article about that?” Because now first I know at least one person is interested in this idea.

That’s a really good option.

Then now in the future all emails I get about this thing, “How do I find a book agent?” I don’t even link them to the post, I just go like, “I wrote an article about this. Google my name and book agent.” Then it’ll come up. I’m treating it like a frequently asked questions thing.

That’s a good idea.

What does a politician go like, “One call is a thousand constituents.” Or whatever, it’s probably similar on email, most people don’t email.

I’ve started adding a little bit of friction to it, I like your idea of you always have some sort of caveat. If you email me, you think about it beforehand and ...

In my Reading Newsletter where I recommend books I was just tired of people going like ... They would just email me their thoughts which is great but it’s like, “What do you want me to do with this?” The reality is I don’t think it actually deters anyone ...

One thing I’ve done that I find interesting and I don’t know where I got this, I didn’t come up with it myself which was when people are sending me twenty page, thirty page documents proposals I’ll just reply saying, “Hey mate, can you print this out and mail it to me.” If they do and they mail it to me I will read it but if it’s not worth their time to print it out and mail ... Because it’s so easy to send emails, I don’t want to say form emails but it’s very easy to switch Ryan and Shane and send the exact same email.

One of the things that I realized with my company which is like a consulting and strategy ... We call it creative advisory but I realized that I was spending a lot of time talking to people who may or may not have become my clients and that was very inefficient for me. First I'd go meet with someone which meant I couldn't be writing then we would talk and I had to give them a ton of ideas on the spot. Then they'd be like, "Send me a proposal." Then I'd have them make a proposal then we'd have to negotiate a rate and blah.

Totally sub-optimal.

Especially because I'm trying to run a lifestyle business not trying to create a scaled major company. That's why you hire people but I was trying not to do that. One of the things that I realized and this has been a huge not only source of growth for my company but it's been a huge relief. Unless it's a kid asking me for advice about life, my job is to give companies advice on how to grow, authors how to write books, people how to think about stuff, how to market things. If you'd ask me that I'm not going to respond to that email and I'm not going to get together to pitch you on why you should pay me to tell you how to do that. What I've come up with is ...

By giving you the answers that you're looking for to begin with.

I'm not going to give you some of my answers then try to hold some stuff back, it's just ridiculous. What I came up with is all my clients even ones that I know I want to work with I start with a paid strategy session. I charge fifteen hundred bucks an hour and we get on the phone, you can send me a little bit of stuff but almost no prep and we get on the phone then I will not shoot the shit with you, I will give you my best work for an hour about that idea, what you need to know, what I would think, what I would do if you hired me. I'll give all my ideas away because people think the execution is the hard part but to me the thinking is the hard part. I'm not going to think for free then get paid to execute.

I would rather get paid to think then maybe get paid a little bit more to execute or if you want to hire someone else to execute that's fine. Then I do these sessions which is on the one hand, it qualifies all leads because the people who are never going to hire me or are just milking me for free advice, they go away right away. The people who can afford whatever I am going to charge or they don't balk at the fee then we map out exactly what they should do. Then if they hire me or they hire my company which is called Brass Check that fee just counts again ... Let's say ...

“What sometimes happens with conductors is that it's like those dating sites.”

It counts against your....

We keep working for twenty or thirty thousand dollars it's like they paid a deposit essentially.

That's a brilliant idea because I'm overwhelmed with these people asking for advice which I love because it's a sign that you're doing something and people are valuing what you're doing but on the same token you're trying to make a living and you can't just give away ninety percent of your day.

“I hate the phrase pick your brain, my brain is how I make my living and I say that to people. ... We sell our time for money, that's what we do, don't give it away.”

A couple of things, one I hate the phrase pick your brain, my brain is how I make my living and I say that to people. I go like, “Look if I could I would do all of this for free because I love it but my wife would kill me, I wouldn't be able to eat and more importantly I have other clients who have paid me and it's not fair for me to do for free for you what they pay me for. I can't do it for free I'm sorry. I totally understand if that pisses you off and let's not work together.” There's that then the other thing is you have to value your time. Neil Strauss, he has a thing that is like, “Look I can buy my own coffee, you taking me out to coffee...”

If a consulting session for me for an hour is worth fifteen hundred dollars and you might think that that's too high but plenty of people pay for it and almost all of them say it was worth it or worth many times that. There's not a dinner in the world that you could pick up the tab for that would cost fifteen hundred dollars. That means I have to drive somewhere. For this what I do not only the other hackers ... I go for a walk when I do these calls. I get an hour walk in and I talk to people and I'm stimulated and it challenges me and it works out my chops then they leave with either in most cases a plan they can totally execute themselves at a fraction of what it would have cost to have me do it for them or it's the start of a really good relationship.

That obviously worked out only by trial and error but it's been a huge relief for me because I can just pass these things to a coordinator, he negotiates it then I either get to talk to someone and we do awesome work together or I don't feel like I'm giving a piece of my life away. There's a quote from Seneca where he's like, “Let no man take a day of my life without giving me something worthwhile in return.” We sell our time for money, that's what we do, don't give it away. That's just how I think about it.

I think that's the perfect way to end this. Listen this has been a fascinating conversation even the second take but I really appreciate you taking the time.

Thanks man.

We'll have to do this again sometime.

For sure.

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