



ROBERT B. O'CONNOR

Dear Reader,

Thank you for looking at a sample of *Gumptionade - The Booster For Your Self-Improvement Plan*. Chapter 6, “Know What Courage Is For”, is one of my favorites.

Onward,

Robert B. O'Connor
"The Gumptionader"

GUMPTIONADESM

The Booster for Your Self-Improvement Plan

Robert B. O'Connor

Copyright ©2016 by Robert B. O'Connor

Published in the United States by OKPI, P.O. Box 17344, Memphis, TN 38187

All rights reserved.

Publisher's Cataloging-in-Publication data

O'Connor, Robert Baitzell.

Gumptionade : the booster for your self-improvement plan / Robert B. O'Connor.

pages cm

ISBN 978-0-9908884-1-3

Includes index and bibliographical references.

1. Self-actualization (Psychology). 2. Success. 3. Conduct of life. 4. Weight loss. 5. Happiness. 6. Self-help techniques. I. Title.

BF637.S4 O362 2016

158.1 —dc23

2014958433

www.gumptionade.com

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9

Printed in the United States of America on acid-free paper

Interior design by Typeflow

FIRST EDITION

Chapter 6

KNOW WHAT COURAGE IS FOR

*“Everybody has a plan, until they
get punched in the mouth.”*

MIKE TYSON, BOXER

YOU DECIDE TO GET TO A BETTER PLACE, A place where you will be more than you are now. You have a new plan and new stuff. There’s a new you waiting just down the road. You’re so passionate. Finally, you’re on the right path.

Day One of the journey is fun. A warm sun beams down out of a blue sky, flowers perfume the air, the birds sing, and there’s a spring in your step. It’s all smiles to the people you meet on the road to self-improvement. This will be shooting fish in a barrel.

On Day Two, the fish in the barrel begin to shoot back. There’s a chill in the air. The flowers are drooping and it looks like rain. You walk on, though, still pretty chipper: You’re gonna do this!

On Day Three, the songbirds have given way to crows, your feet are sore, and you have a headache. You keep moving, though not as far as yesterday.

On Day Four you wake up in a dark and swampy place. Your diet book is in tatters, your new running shoes are filthy, your backpack smells like garbage, and you are nauseated and depressed.

The path is now watery mud festooned with litter, poison ivy, and abandoned tires. The crows have given way to flying monkeys and your fellow travelers look like zombies.

You approach a wobbly rope bridge slung above a deep canyon. This is the border between where you are and where you want to go—between dependence and freedom. You can't recall your Day One enthusiasm.

Looking back, you spot a friendly face. Your bad habit is waving to you from a limo. It has hot coffee, blankets, dry clothes, and a light. There's a cooler in the trunk.

You realize how unpleasant your life is without your bad habit. It takes your mind off your troubles. You two share pleasing rituals: the fire ceremony of lighting a cigarette, the sacred offering of the platinum card, sexual euphoria, fragrant incense from the barbeque pit, the whirling trance of chasing the big deal, ice cubes ringing in your drink like the bells of a mountain shrine.

On Day Four you experience the real meaning of passion: suffering. How much suffering depends on how much discomfort your bad habit helps you avoid. Day Four lasts a month.

You set out on Day One to be free of your bad habit, to become better. But you need what you need right now. You

COURAGE IS FOR DEALING WITH SNAKES

A Molly Ivins story about what surprise can do to courage: Two brothers were climbing in the family hen house when they came face-to-face with a large chicken snake. They were both injured breaking down the door as they ran away.

Their mother later reminded them that chicken snakes don't hurt people. The youngest replied: "Yes Ma'am, but there are some things'll scare you so bad you hurt yourself."

Got snakes in your henhouse? Harmless things that scare you so bad you hurt yourself? That's what courage is for.

want to choose better, but you don't want to give up what you have so long enjoyed.

Courage is for confronting these two irreconcilable desires — and doing what needs to be done.



On Day Four, we retreat from the emotional strain of being responsible for ourselves. We retreat from active to passive. We

retreat to our bad habit, our status quo, what doesn't require any effort. Becoming better is hard, and we are soft.

We speak of lacking willpower. What we lack is the courage to bear the suffering that comes with personal change and growth. Can we be afraid of the right things? Can we ever move on from what is comfortable?

Many people never get past Day Four. Many people never cross the border. Many people never grow up.

Unexplored places on the early maps of the world were noted with dragons and the words "There be monsters." Courage is for going *there*.



At their roots, bad habits are more similar than different. They are made from passive, avoidant behavior. The opposite of courage.

If your bad habit is overeating, for example, it takes courage to get to a healthy weight, and it takes courage to stay there. You have to be brave to go forward alone on Day Four, without the company of your bad habit. To bear your discomfort and see what can be done for it other than eating.

If you are obese, your body and your mind put up tremendous resistance to change. To lose weight, you have to fight:

1. Unrealistic goals that promote discouragement
(What's the point? Why torture myself? I will never be thin.)
2. Shadowy but strong psychological forces

caused by the relationship between food and feelings

3. Suspension of disbelief (“Raspberry Ketone: Fat-Burner in a Bottle!”)
4. Temptation
5. Human evolution (because Your Hairy Ancestor had to survive famine, your body responds to calorie reduction by increasing metabolic efficiency — you burn fewer calories today to do the same thing you did yesterday)

Whatever your bad habit, you have to show up for the fight every day if you are going to make lasting change. That’s what courage is for.



On his way to Damascus, Saul of Tarsus was knocked off his horse and temporarily blinded by a flash of light. Jesus addressed him: “Saul, why do you persecute me? I am Jesus.”

Has anyone ever had a better reason to change immediately? Yet he took three years to become St. Paul. Saul of Tarsus spent a long time in the desert, in the borderland between Pharisee and Apostle. He was building his courage.

Will you be faster than Paul? Real change requires suffering and it requires time. Real change requires experiencing discomfort. How much will depend on how much legitimate suffering your bad habit has helped you avoid. That’s what courage is for.

You may also suffer from other peoples’ discomfort.



Pope Urban VIII persecuted Galileo Galilei because the earth revolved around the sun.

This pope and all the popes before him accepted the conventional wisdom that the earth was at the center of the cosmos. There had been previous challenges — from Copernicus, Tycho Brahe, Bruno Giordano — but Galileo’s calculations carried great weight. He campaigned for his beliefs despite having been ordered by the Church not to publicly profess the ideas of “Copernicanism.”

Galileo’s new fact threatened the status quo: papal infallibility and the wealth and power it supported. His Holiness had a keen interest in maintaining the status quo. If the Church was wrong about this, what else could it be wrong about?

Pope Urban had Galileo arrested to avoid recognizing a fact so threatening to Church doctrine. It took three hundred and fifty years for the Church to admit that Galileo had been correct. Given that the Church is about two thousand years old, that’s equivalent to about fourteen years in the life of one person. Maybe you will be faster to admit your mistakes. I wasn’t.

You too have a governing system. The status quo will resist your attempts at change, your work to become more than you are now. You too will be persecuted.

“The earth revolves around the sun,” “germs cause disease,” “all men are created equal” were new facts at one time. As you start to become more than you are, new facts will arise that create disorder and discomfort in your life. If your status quo includes dependence on something, you will have a

fundamental resistance to independent behavior toward that thing. The fish in the barrel shoot back. That's what courage is for.



I never intended to run my own going out of business sale. As I was shutting down my advertising agency, however, my landlord demanded I clear out of his space (just because I had stopped paying rent!). I had no place to put the fifty leftover desks, chairs, computers, printers, filing cabinets, and wastebaskets. I also needed cash.

I called a secondhand office equipment dealer. He allowed that he could cart my property away for no charge. Best offer. I guess he thought I was desperate or stupid. I had just gotten over desperate. (Still working on stupid.)

I decided to sell the goods myself, piece by piece. I would have to advertise the closing of my business. I would have to advertise my failure. How humiliating. What would people think? (Turns out people don't think about me much at all, except the few who love me or hate me. None of them changed their minds because I failed at running an advertising agency.)

So I was brave and ran a three-week-long yard sale out of my eighth floor downtown office. Strictly forbidden by the terms of my lease. Put up ads in the elevators of nearby office towers. Put up more when building managers took them down. Feigned surprise and confusion when they called me to complain. Haggled, cajoled, and laughed with my customers. Sold everything down to the last three-ring binder (twenty cents).

It turned out to be profitable. It turned out to be therapeutic.

COURAGE IS FOR DEALING WITH INSULTS

A courageous way to deal with an insult is to grab the weapon your foe is wielding and turn it to your advantage. Cyrano de Bergerac is insulted at the theater about the size of his nose:

THE VISCOUNT: Sir, your nose is...very large!

CYRANO: Very!

THE VISCOUNT: Ha!

CYRANO: Is that all?

THE VISCOUNT: What do you mean?

CYRANO: Ah, no young man, that is not enough! You might have said, dear me, there are a thousand things...here you are:

Friendly: "It must be in your way while drinking; you ought to have a special beaker made!"

Descriptive: "It is a crag!...a peak!...a promontory!...A promontory did I say?...It is a peninsula!"

Off-hand: "Capital to hang one's hat upon!"...

Admiring: "What a sign for a perfumer's shop!"

Simple: "A monument! When is admission free?"...

Cyrano shows he is not ashamed. He makes the Viscount seem petty. And by making everyone laugh, he comes out on top.

A simple strategy. I didn't say easy. It does require courage. But if you have an unusual nose or other outward manifestation of differentness, you will get a lot of practice with insults. Make your answer sharp and funny, like Cyrano's. Make it like William Irvine's response to a fellow academic who said he was trying to decide whether Irvine was evil or merely misguided:

"Why can't I be both?"

It turned out to be fun. It turned out that I am more pleased with that ridiculous yard sale than with any of the glorious-looking things I did when the advertising business was great and I was on top of the world. My tree fell over, but I picked some apples before I walked away.

That's what courage is for.



I trust you don't mind examining my failures; perhaps you find them interesting. You may not find your own failures quite as entertaining. The more significant the failure — the more facts about you it reveals—the less you may care to examine it.

Watershed failures, such as divorce, arrest, and getting fired are especially rich in facts. And closely correlated with vigorous looking-away behaviors such as alcohol abuse. These golden facts are guarded by two fierce dragons, Regret and Shame. You have to be brave to pick those apples.

You won't get a lot of external reinforcement when you go searching for facts in the wreckage of your personal disaster. The world worships success and scorns failure.

The world sees no benefit in you paying attention to the facts behind your failure. The world prefers you buy the easy solutions it has to sell (Raspberry Ketones — Fat Burner in a Bottle!). But if you want to do what needs to be done, you will study your failure — and take away facts that give you better options moving forward. That's what courage is for.



Kusa Engine Company has decided to halt the development of a four-stroke lawn mower engine that runs on grass clippings. It is one brilliant engineer's baby, but the baby is over budget and behind schedule. Nevertheless, the engineer has no small amount of her self-esteem tied up in the project. She is sad and angry that the idiots who run the company see fit to close down this vital work and reassign her to Siberia (aka valve clearance specifications). She has failed.

If she is resilient, if she has courage, she will get over the setback without a career-damaging tantrum. She will move on to clean up the huge mess that valve clearance specifications has become — and perhaps put out some feelers for a new job.

Regret is an obstacle. As motorcycle maintenance author Robert Pirsig points out: "A mechanic who has a big ego to defend is at a terrific disadvantage."

You can't learn from failure if you can't get your ego down in front so you can see. Notice that Warren Buffett loudly accepts blame for his occasional investing failure. He's not afraid to admit that acquiring Dexter Shoes was a bad decision. Given his track record as the world's most successful investor, his burden of regret is light.

Ours is heavier. That's what courage is for.



Pirsig writes of a reservoir of good spirits, a savings account that can be tapped when psychic expenses are higher than expected. We call on this reserve to bounce back from adversity, or at least to keep putting one foot in front of the other. It's courage.

Some people became famous for heroic resilience: Beethoven — deaf; Helen Keller — deaf and blind; Bill Wilson — alcoholic; Franklin Roosevelt — infantile paralysis; Oprah Winfrey — abused in childhood. Heroic resilience includes anyone who transcends a childhood of deprivation and abuse — emotional, physical, or both — to become a productive adult. If that is you: well done.

But all of us have our challenges, and all of us need courage to grapple with them. To sweep things out from under the rug and name them. To let go of comfortable but outdated facts that hold us back (the earth is flat; you can't say that; I must please Dad).

Gumption is courage, resourcefulness and common sense. Courage is fundamental. It allows you to remain in possession of your common sense and resourcefulness when you really need them.

After you upset the status quo, the flying monkeys will be scary. Even so, you can laugh at their ridiculous haircuts. While you look around for an axe handle.

Everyone has a plan — until they get punched in the face. After that, everyone needs to hang in there. For ten rounds in a boxing match. For the weeks, months, and years to come in the life of any person trying to become better than they are now. That's what courage is for.

COURAGE *is* FOR

1. Right after you get punched in the mouth
2. Day Four
3. Snakes in the henhouse
4. Dealing with insults
5. Studying personal failure
6. Doing what needs to be done
7. Showing up every day

GUMPTIONWORK

It Takes Courage to Admit a Mistake

You can do this better online:
www.gumptionade.com/admit-a-mistake

*I shall keep watching myself continually,
and—a most useful habit—shall review each
day. For this is what makes us wicked: that
no one of us looks back over his own life. Our
thoughts are devoted only to what we are
about to do. And yet our plans for the future
always depend on the past.*

Seneca, Letter Number 83

The goal of this work sheet is to learn from a mistake.

On [date] _____ at [time] _____ ,

I made the following ☐ minor ☐ major mistake:

GUMPTIONWORK

I thought at the time it was the right thing to do because:

Now, however, it seems to me that a more effective course of action would have been to:

Next time a situation like this comes up, I will try to do better as follows:

Do You Want To...

- [Buy Gumptionade on Amazon](#)
-

- [Get Your Free Gumption Score](#)
-

- [See *How To Be Less Wrong* and other Gumptionade worksheets?](#)
-

- [Download a free poster PDF of the Thomas Huxley “The most valuable result of all education...” quote?](#)
-

- [Leave a comment for Bob?](#)
-

- [Go to Gumptionade.com](#)
-