

EPISODE 121

“RH: Well I think ego is the most dangerous actually when you’re starting out because that’s where it’s sort of kills you before you even get going. It’s what prevents the rock from even getting off the ground.”

[INTRODUCTION]

[00:00:22.3] AT: Welcome to The Portfolio Life Podcast with Jeff Goins. I’m your host, Andy Traub. Jeff believes that every creative should live a portfolio life, a life full of pursuing work that matters, making the difference with your art, and discovering your true voice. Jeff is committed to helping you find, develop and live out your unique world view so that you too can live a portfolio life.

How do we manage our ego? Is it the thing that gives us the strength to move forward or is it a blind spot that causes us to make poor decisions and give bad advice? Today’s guest is Ryan Holiday, author of *Ego Is The Enemy*, will help you understand the power of your ego.

Here is Ryan Holiday and Jeff Goins.

[INTERVIEW]

[00:01:11.8] JG: Well Ryan, here we are, welcome to the show again.

[00:01:14.9] RH: Thanks for having me.

[00:01:16.1] JG: Good to have you back. Last time we were talking about so which arm is it that has the tattoo, “The obstacle is the way”?

[00:01:24.6] RH: So on my left arm I have the obstacle is the way.

[00:01:27.1] JG: So now, today, we’re talking about your right arm?

[00:01:29.8] **RH:** Yes. Now on my right arm, I have “Ego is the Enemy” although they don’t match as well as I thought they would, which bothers me sometimes.

[00:01:39.5] **JG:** Like the typeface?

[00:01:41.4] **RH:** Yeah.

[00:01:41.7] **JG:** I actually noticed that too.

[00:01:43.4] **RH:** Yeah, people are like, “Why are they different?” and I’m like, “I don’t know either.”

[00:01:47.6] **JG:** You have them done at the same time?

[00:01:49.3] **RH:** No, they were about two years apart, a little less than two years apart. I got ego done before I wrote the book and I had obstacle done slightly after I wrote the book but it was not out yet.

[00:01:58.8] **JG:** Interesting. So was this a clever marketing thing for these books that you knew you were going to one day write or why did you get these tattoos that say these two things?

[00:02:09.0] **RH:** It was mostly about leverage with the publisher so they couldn’t make me change the title.

[00:02:14.1] **JG:** I love it.

[00:02:16.0] **RH:** *The Obstacle Is The Way* is sort of a mantra that I got from Stoicism that I try to live my life by and *Ego Is The Enemy* was sort of the second one that I came up with as I am struggling in my own life with that issue and started seeing it. When I needed that reminder and it just happened that it made sense to go on the opposite arm and since I was writing a book about it, it worked out very symmetrically.

[00:02:43.7] **JG:** So there is this line in your mystery some book, *Ego Is The Enemy*, and I love it. I’m paraphrasing here but it’s, “Ego is the voice that tells us we’re better than we really are.”

[00:02:56.0] **RH:** Yes.

[00:02:57.1] **JG:** Approximately. I think I got that right.

[00:02:59.1] **RH:** I think so.

[00:03:00.0] **JG:** Yeah, I love that. I mean to me, I don't know what your one sentence statement is for the book other than the title, which is a sentence, but to me, that encapsulates this message that why is ego the enemy? Because ego is this voice lying to you, telling you you're a bigger deal or more legit than you really are. I love that.

[00:03:19.0] **RH:** Yeah, I think that's right. Obviously, there's "the ego", which has sort of its' Freudian definition but I'm talking about ego in the sense that we mean when we criticize someone's ego, right? What we mean is, they have an unrealistic or unfair or self-absorbed opinion about themselves and we usually can see very clearly the ways in which it holds them back. We're never like, "Oh that ego is serving them so well." It's never that. In fact, it's always us being stuck with the consequences of their ego is almost more than anything else.

[00:03:59.1] **JG:** No, it is a helpful litmus test for me because like when is ego bad? Well, when I'm telling myself, when I'm assuming that I have a right to something that I don't necessarily have a right to or, I think I'm way better at something or I deserve something that I haven't gotten yet. These are all the feelings that I get when I'm being egotistical and when I first opened the book and I started reading through, I was like, "Okay. Yeah, but it's good to be ambitious and it's good to want things," and when I read that line, I got it. I was like, "Yeah, this makes sense. I don't ever want to think that I am better than I am."

[00:04:36.7] **RH:** Right. I think confidence is very important and I think ambition is great. I think trying to do things, provided you're trying to do them I guess we would say for the right reasons or hoping to accomplish things, all of these are great traits actually. And I think what's ironic is that ego tends to come along with them. So if you want to change the world, you're inherently in there, you have a somewhat — there's this crazy belief in there that you are capable of changing the world. And so it can be so easy to go from sort of healthy, trying to make an impact to unhealthy, "I'm the savior of the world," or, "I have superpowers."

[00:05:22.2] JG: So, when was the first time that you realized that your ego wasn't helping you maybe as much as you thought or we tend to think it is?

[00:05:29.7] RH: I believe I've sort of always known it. I think intuitively, we always know that ego is a problem and that we can't think that we're better than we are, right? Especially for me, I got successful pretty early. I dropped out of college, I was working with people who are much older than me. I was very aware of the fact that, hey if I don't keep a lid on this, if I don't keep my act together, I'm going to do something that's going to piss off someone who doesn't have any interest in being my parents and I'm going to get fired, right?

But being aware that ego is a problem and then actually doing anything about it is a different thing. Right? Even if you know that ego is bad, that does not automatically make you ego-less. So it's a constant process and so I think when we all look back on our lives, we see mistakes that we've made out of ego and we've seen how they've cost us. When we overestimated, as writers, maybe when we think that this is the most important thing in the world to us, it's incredibly important to other people. Or because we were successful on a previous project we're obviously going to be successful on this project.

Or we think we're supposed to work with someone or interact with someone and they don't treat us exactly how we want. All we think is, "They're not treating me with enough respect. I'm so mad. I'm not going to deal with them anymore." The distinction or the important difference is not knowing that ego is bad but it's catching yourself when you're trying to make decisions out of ego and I've obviously made plenty of them as all people have. I wanted to write the book as a way to spot when you're doing that as a reminder that it's a process you have to work constantly and a reminder of the cost of ego if you don't do that work.

[00:07:17.8] JG: Was there a time where you have to reign that in where you realized that your ego had gotten out of check and you were in trouble?

[00:07:24.0] RH: I mean I don't think there was some time or I was walking around thinking I was the king of the world or something but what happens is, as you become successful, you recognize your own success and then other people recognize that success and those two things

can combine. And now all of a sudden maybe because you're so busy and it's important to you, maybe you're not treating other people as well or maybe you're accepting.

For me, one of the ways that ego manifests itself is like I take on way more than I'm physically and emotionally capable of dealing with and I'm not aware of the way that that impacts both me personally and the other people around me, right? So in that sense, it's sort of an ego out of both overconfidence and insecurity at the same time. So I'm insecure that I worry if I don't say yes to everything. I'm going to miss out and I'll never get another opportunity again.

And I also think, "Hey, I've got everything so unlocked that I can just do this stuff on autopilot and that taking more and more projects isn't going to affect my actual output," right? And so those are ways that ego has affected me. I think certainly, and maybe you've experienced this as a writer, when I look back at my own writing, especially the writing that I did when I was younger, I cringe at the certainty that I was writing with and the dismissiveness with which I would treat opposing arguments. And I know that I alienated potential readers and I wasn't holding myself to a high enough standard when I was acting that way.

[00:09:08.5] JG: Yeah, I was thinking of that quote from Steven Pressfield where he talks about the difference between an amateur and a pro, and one of the differences is the pro is constantly questioning themselves whereas the amateur is overblown with self-confidence and he thinks he's amazing.

[00:09:22.5] RH: Totally. I've written about this before but it's like when you think that whatever you thought about for two seconds, let's say someone is discussing some problem and then off the top of your head, you're like, "Oh here's the solution." The idea that whatever you just basically pulled out of your ass or like whatever you thought about for two seconds, the idea that that's just gold is something that I think all creative people and people who are successful can fall prey to.

Because you've gotten used to having good instincts but there is a certain amount of condescension and ego and thinking that, "Hey, I know all of these other people have been putting their heads together for months but one second for me is all that it takes to instantly

solve everything. So that sort of certainty and that immediacy, to me is usually a sign of ego. It's like I try to push myself to think a little bit deeper and to not immediately jump into everything.

[00:10:19.2] JG: Yeah. The older I get, the less advice I give or at least the less unsolicited advice I give and I am the eldest of four siblings and so it's just sort of natural for me too, "Hey, here is how you not screw up your life younger sibling," you know? But I have done it with my friends that have gotten into trouble.

[00:10:39.3] RH: Do you find one of the other things that I've found that I have tried to work on more of my own life that I think is another sort of sign of ego is just because someone asked you a question doesn't mean you should answer it and it doesn't mean you know the answer or that you're the best person to answer and that you can just say, "I don't know." I've tried to do because I do talks and there'll be a Q&A and it's like because I'm on stage and they're not on stage, I know they're expecting an answer but that doesn't mean that I should just make one up if I don't know.

[00:11:13.2] JG: Right, yeah that happened to me recently. I was at an event and I was talking about my book and finding your calling and you're figuring out what you're supposed to do with your life and there was this middle aged woman there who was unemployed and she was like, "You know, what do I do? How do I find a job? How do I find a job that I don't hate that will pay the bills and be meaningful?" And I was like, "I don't really know."

I could try to answer this but the truth is I don't know, does anybody have an answer for her? Does anybody have a resource? And somebody was like, "Oh you should do such and such, and check this out," and it was another middle-aged woman who had been there before and I was like that was way better than me making something up or shouting out a platitude.

[00:11:58.2] RH: Right, that's exactly right and I think when people think that humility is somehow a weakness, it is actually a sign of strength. It's actually the ability to say, "You know what? I'm not sure I'm the best person to answer this," or, "I'm not sure that I can answer this in two seconds so I am going to take some time to think about it." Or, "I'm going to tell you upfront what I think my weaknesses are when it comes to this thing. Because I am confident enough in myself that I don't need to lie or pretend to be something that I know I'm not."

[00:12:28.6] JG: Yeah and I think it's obvious. I mean if you're faking it, it eventually becomes obvious that you have no idea on what you're talking about and you don't want to build a reputation around that.

[00:12:37.5] RH: Well I say that in the book, I think faking it until you make it is such easy advice to give but if you think about it for two seconds it's obviously horrible advice, right? Like I say, would you want your doctor to fake it until he makes it or would you rather he not see patients until he makes it, right? And it just happens that, especially for writers or entrepreneurs, the stuff you don't need permission to do, people think that they can get away with faking it until they make it, right?

They think, "Oh since I can just call myself a writer and I am one, I don't actually have to put in the work. There's no cost for doing this and I think that that's wrong. Instead of faking it until you make it, you should work until you make it and I am not saying that some external authority is the one who gets to decide whether you're a writer or not. But I am saying that it's very dangerous to think that faking is going to get you anywhere.

Especially because what you learned as you become successful is that there is no such thing as making it. Even when you have done the things that you thought might have been impossible. I didn't dream that I would write this many books by this age, but I don't wake up every morning being like, "And I've made it and now I don't need to fake it anymore," you know? You never feel like you have arrived because there is no finish line.

[00:13:55.2] JG: Yeah, this was something that when we first were introduced by a mutual friend via e-mail that, I think after the first conversation we had, you were like, "Do you really believe that about writing? That you can just call yourself a writer and then you became one?" And then we had kind of an interesting conversation because there are two sides of that. One is the self-conscious person who is writing, who is not a writer yet, "I am not a writer yet, I'm not a writer yet," and is waiting for some sort of external validation and they're not doing daring work because they still don't think they've earned it and then there's the thing that we see more and more online where I am going, "Gosh, I hope I am not contributing to this," where people are self-proclaimed experts and they haven't actually done anything to earn that title and I think both of those extremes are dangerous.

[00:14:42.8] RH: And I talk a little bit about this in the book, Aristotle's Golden Mean basically says that every virtue is a mid-point between two vices. So just deciding that you are a writer because you read a book and you've always wanted to be a writer if that's a problem and so is also doubting yourself endlessly and being crippled by the fear of whether you're a writer or not, both of those are bad. What's in the middle is the idea that, "Hey, I have to earn this thing but really no one ever gets to tell me that I've earned it."

So it requires judgment and discipline and digression and in that way, those three traits which are hard to do that I think filters out the writers from the non-writers. You know I am so sick of people who write books about how to have the bestselling book and that's their only book. You know that makes me so mad because I know how hard it is there's this wonderful quote from Richard Feynman where he's saying, "I know how hard it is to really know something so it pisses me off when I see people flippantly talking about knowing something, because that's not how it is."

[00:15:58.4] JG: Right, "I know hard it is to know something". So, Ryan, you keep using this word successful in correlation to ego, is it possible that ego can be the enemy long before you're successful. I mean when does this affect us? Because I'm wondering about the person who's listening who's going, "Well I'm not successful. I'm not a published author or a big named speaker. I am just trying to hack it out on the side." Where do they fit in this?

[00:16:26.7] RH: Well I think ego is most dangerous actually when you're starting out because that's where it sort of kills you before you even get going. That's what prevents the rocket from even getting off the ground and we see that, right? There's this quote from Cyril Connolly. which I love. He says, "Whom the gods wish to destroy they first call promising," and it's when you say, "Hey that kid is talented," it's when their chest swells up and they start to become convinced that they're good already, that they don't ever get good.

And a lot of organizations, publishers, agents what they are really looking for is potential, right? Like a major league scout is looking for a ball player who shows potential. They're not saying, "Hey, you're an all-star already." They are saying, "You have the potential to be that." If you let that label that you have potential go to your head. It's like spending monthly on a credit card that

you are not making enough money to pay off. And so, I think it's when we're starting out and we start to feel pride and self-satisfaction or that we're destined for great things that we stop doing the work and we lose the humility required to learn in order to actually fulfill that potential if we're ever going to do it.

[00:17:47.7] JG: One of the things that you talked about in the book and this is something that I think is a shared interest of ours, this idea of apprenticeship, of studying under a master craftsman, which is really a lost art in our culture today and there's a chapter called *Become a Student* and I love this because to me, it feels antithetical to our culture, which is all about just going out and being great and hand in hand with humility is this idea of becoming somebody's student. So how do you do that and why does it matter?

[00:18:19.5] RH: Well one of the benefits of being a student is you've essentially, instead of being satisfied with yourself, you've now handed over a sort of approval to another person, right? You don't get to grade your own test and decide whether you did a good job or not. Somebody else is doing that, sometimes literally, often times not literary. For instance, I was basically an apprentice to Robert Green. That wasn't our official arrangement but that's how I see it in retrospect.

And every day, I am waking up and working for this person who is a master of their craft. So just being around him is inherently humbling but also, I'm now having to rise to meet his standards. So I am 20-years-old, the level of quality that Robert Green expects is infinitely higher than the standard I would hold myself to as a 20-year-old. So it's day in and day out being forced to stretch, to hit that in the same way that having a personal trainer or going to cross fit is going to make you do because you are not picking the workout. If you're picking the workout, most people, they round the edges off so it's not as hard and so I think that's the essential art.

What I would say I've learned about actually getting into one of those relationships, a couple of things. One it's not some official thing, you don't apply, "Hey I will be your mentee, you will be my mentor." It's not really how it works and two, you need to find a niche like I get a lot of e-mails from young kids and I think one of the mistakes they make is they go, "Hey, I heard you work for Robert Green. I want to do that for you. Please, I'll do anything," and they mean like they'll do any kind of work and usually, they are even offering not to get paid but I don't say yes

to that because I don't have a crippling need to fill. I am not waking up every day going I need someone to help me or I would have hired that person.

So when someone just comes to you with an open-ended offer to do anything, in a weird way that is kind of an imposition. Because now, I have to think of something to do for this person, who by the way I don't really know anything about and I don't know if they're qualified at all. I think it's far better when you say, "Hey, I noticed you are working on this project. I'm really interested in that topic. Here are a few things that I think would be of service to you that I think I could do." That is, it might seem like not a big difference but it is a fundamentally different offer.

[00:20:43.4] JG: Yeah, no absolutely. Because it's going to be more work for you. You said it was an imposition, it totally is. Like, "Okay, let me find something for you to do and when you run out of things then I've got to find something else for you to do." That's going to slow you down versus somebody saying, "Hey I see this thing. I am actually pretty good at that thing. You probably don't even know that you needed help with that thing, let me help you."

[00:21:01.3] RH: Yeah and people don't realize how under qualified they are for most things like Tyler Cowen wrote this amazing book called *Average is Over* and he was looking at 30 or 40% of the male population doesn't even meet the basic requirements for the military. You think the military would accept anyone but actually no, they won't. And he's like, "If you ask successful entrepreneurs, hey would you let these people work for you for free?" Usually, they're like, "No. I know exactly what I need and I will pay a lot of money for that but I don't really have any interest in unskilled, untrained labor."

So I encourage people to develop some skill and you're in a better negotiating position. It's like if you come to someone it's like, "I'll do literally anything for no amount of money," you've basically said like, "Hey, I'm a slave. I'm not worth anything." But if you come to that same person and you say, "Hey, I noticed that your logo on your website is not very good. I'm not an amazing designer but I think I can do a better job would you like me to help you with that?"

Well now, we just had, and I say "yes" or whoever it is that says "yes", now we just had an interaction where you've distinguished yourself as a semi-skilled individual and that is a fundamentally different point to be coming from then, "Hey, I will get your coffee in the morning."

[00:22:25.2] JG: Yeah or to even actually do it like, “Hey Ryan, I saw that your logo didn’t look great. Here’s a shot at it, feel free to use it or not use it.” Immediately just go, “Oh this is good or not good and you’d know how good they are without even having to say yes or no to anything and you’re sort of compromised and you’re like, “Well, I’m kind of stuck here now because I said yes and then they sent me this piece of junk.”

[00:22:47.7] RH: Well my research assistant, he not only didn’t do that. I think that’s great but just to show how it’s really about distinguishing yourself, he distinguished himself to me by I probably knew of him for maybe a year, a year and a half and he would just e-mail me questions every once in a while about things that he was working on that he’s like, “Hey, I am reading this book that I’ve know you’ve recommended before. I am confused by this section what do you think it means?”

Or he would say, “I read this article, I thought you might like it. What do you think of it?” Right? And so he’s not showing me that he’s good at doing a task for me but he is showing me that he has a discerning mind, that he can interact in a semi-professional normal way that he’s not annoying or obnoxious and he’s also showing me that he has discipline and initiative and so it was an informal job interview although he didn’t know that and I didn’t know it.

[00:23:48.5] JG: No, I love that and I mean he’s also honoring your attention. He’s going, “Look, I take your advice, I read the books that you recommend, I am interested in learning more from you,” and I don’t know about you but if somebody does that in earnest, it’s endearing and you want to invest in people. You just don’t want to face people that are going to waste your time and not listen.

[00:24:08.6] RH: Right. I don’t want to get an e-mail on a Tuesday evening that’s just somebody putting their fate into my hands. That’s like a responsibility that is frankly intimidating to me and I’m just not — in a weird way, I think what people don’t think about is if they said “yes”, that’s probably not someone you want to work for, right? Robert Green wasn’t, “Hey, I’m just hiring anyone off the street, you seem good enough,” you know? He had a problem with a research assistant that he was replacing a specific person and he gave me a trial project and then went

from there and I think people have to realize that it's not, if it can be anyone for anything because of a random e-mail, it's probably not the opportunity that you think it is.

[00:24:56.5] JG: So you are somebody who was very successful, are very successful at a young age and you talked about the book being “the kid”, being the person that everybody is like, “Why are you so gifted?” Like you said, what they're really saying is “you've got potential” but often what comes out is “wow, you have arrived” and you can start to believe that story.

So my question is this because, in my experience, I start to get good at one thing and in my mind, there's this complex where I go, “Well I can't fail at anything. I did this thing and I'd be great at this thing too.” I write books so I should be able to run a successful business. Those are the same thing but it's very different. Was there a time when you got really good at something and then you went and tried something else and it was a humbling experience? Was there a time when ego brought you into something that you were kind of in over your head?

[00:25:54.8] RH: I think you're right. Obviously one of the biggest disruptive effects of ego is convincing people of their invincibility or their infallibility when in fact neither of those things are true. There was that great line in *Billions* where he says, “When people call you Superman long enough, you start to think you can fly.” Well just because you think you can fly doesn't mean you can fly. I think for me, definitely early on I just thought that everything would come easily to me.

I remember this one meeting where they were like, “Okay Ryan is here, he's going to take notes,” and I never asked, I didn't go like, “Okay, what do you want me to take notes on? What do these notes look like,” you know? I really just wanted to pay attention to the conversation. When the notes came back, they were terrible. I didn't write any of the things down and then everyone is super mad at me and I didn't get invited to those meetings anymore.

And so it was thinking like, “Oh I'm invited to this meeting, I'm an equal.” Not, “It's a privilege to be invited to this meeting and I have to earn my keep by taking meticulous notes and essentially transcribing the entire thing.” I remember another really early meeting when I was working in Hollywood that this stuck with me. It might be in the book but I have never really written about it before but I remember there was some conversation between executives. And I knew a little bit about that thing because I was friends with one of the people there talking about and I sort of

butted in and said something. Everyone just looked at me and then went back to the conversation.

And afterward, my boss he was like, “Why did you say that? Did you say it because it needed to be said? Or did you say it because you want to have something to say or because it needed to be said?” And I was like, “You’re totally right. I was just talking because I wanted to be recognized in the meeting.”

I’ve even experienced this with people who have worked for me. If you interrupt me — I am inviting you there because I am looking out for you. I want you to be exposed to the things but if you embarrass me if you show yourself to not be very intelligent, if you interrupt my flow in the meeting, if you are in any way negative to this scenario or situation, I’m not going to invite you back.

And so there’s that delicate balance you have to learn when you are young. You have to suppress your ego to be able to do it. There’s some line in one of Joan Didion’s books where she goes like, “You’re the least important person in the room and don’t you forget it,” and I think that attitude I got really good at having that attitude and it allowed me to be the fly on the wall in a lot of situations that were ultimately very formative to me.

[00:28:33.0] JG: Yeah. I love that. I’d love to change of conversation to talk about writing because you are somebody who has done something that I think a few people do, which is help author succeed and then actually be a successful author yourself. Usually, somebody’s like a bit of one or the other and you’ve been able to translate the process and I don’t know if that was deconstructing what you learned from working with people like Robert Green, Tim Ferriss, etcetera. Or if it was just an intuitive thing at the get go. But I would love to just talk writing for a little bit and especially how you approach the craft of writing books because I think it’s fascinating especially the research stuff.

[00:29:11.3] RH: Well thank you. I do think I have — a lot of writers are inscrutable even to themselves. They don’t know how they do what they do. Those people are usually extraordinarily talented and I wonder if in some ways not knowing that it’s just a way for them to keep sane. Like when you see really great basketball players after the interview or after the

game interview that they're sort of like, "You just got to work hard and we went out there and we played a good game."

You would hope that they would be very articulate about this performance they just put on but they're not. And so I think whatever my ability to communicate how these things are and work with other people and help them with theirs, it's because I'm not at that level, right? I think what you find and maybe this is common in some really great coaches out there too not that I'm that, but sometimes it's because of your own weaknesses or because something comes slightly less naturally to you, you are forced to understand it more intellectually than someone who doesn't stop and think about that.

So I don't see myself as a great natural writer. I see someone who just hacks it. I just work incredibly hard and that my books are feats of discipline rather feeds of inspiration and so obviously because it's discipline and I have a system and a formula in its pieces, I am able to deconstruct that a little bit more and explain it to other people. I don't know if that answers your question but...

[00:30:45.9] JG: No, that's good. So my first big question about this is a few years ago, it seems to me and you can clarify this, you made a shift in terms of what your brand was as an author. You had these early successes as a marketing guy and you wrote a couple of books about publicity and marketing and then you started shifting towards these most recent two books which are about Stoicism and ancient philosophy and just lots of great anecdotes of success stories and failures throughout history. Was that an intentional shift? Is the first question.

[00:31:26.3] RH: It is interesting how these stories sort of get cobbled together and I talk a little bit actually about this in the book. But the truth is I sold a book about — actually, before I did my marketing book, I had an offer from a small publishing house called Green Leaf in Austin to do a book about Stoic philosophy and I turned it down because I didn't think that, I got some really good advice but basically I wasn't ready to do it.

So I turned that down and then about two years later, I sold this book that was an expose of marketing and media and that came out but to my fans at the time, they were like, "Wait, what is

this? I thought you write about strategy and philosophy.” So I remember that reaction very vividly and then, that book did really well and mostly people in marketing and media read it. So that was my audience. But the proposal that I sold immediately after was for this book about Stoic philosophy.

And then it just happened that in between — the stories are always much more complicated than you think but in between those two books, I wrote a marketing article about growth hacking that got turned into an e-book and then a physical book. So then it happened that I did two marketing books instead of a marketing and a philosophy book. Then the philosophy book came out and I actually had gotten a lot less money for that book.

I don't think anyone thought it would do that well and slowly over the last few years, it did really, really well and it just happened that right before that book came out, I'd sold this second book. So it can feel that it's sort of a plan or contra shift but really, I think everyone is sort of winging it and I guess when I think about my own brand as a writer, I think about it more as I write about things that are interesting to me and I happen to have these two lanes.

I have marketing and business and then I have a strategy and philosophy and they overlap but often they exist very separately in terms of the titles. Like I would put, “Trust me I'm a growth hacker on the marketing business one and I would put *The Obstacle Is the Way* and *Ego Is The Enemy* on the other one. But they definitely influence each other and they have a lot of overlap even in terms of their readers.

[00:33:34.2] JG: Yeah, totally. All of your books continue to sell well just based on my watching the Amazon rankings, which is something that not a lot of books do. Something that I am learning first hand from you just how you can continue to keep a book selling and I remember reaching out to you a few years ago and you said, “Well you have to write a good book. It has to start there, it has to be a book that people want to read and talk about,” which sounds like people want to roll their eyes or whatever. But that's not as easy as it sounds otherwise everybody would do it. So how do you come up with a great book idea?

[00:34:08.3] RH: I think it's probably 50% the book idea, right? Because ostensibly any book could last but some books don't because they are *How to Prepare For Y2K*. You know, that book

is not going to sell after Y2K. So Groupon Strategies or a lot of business books are very ephemeral in the sense of what they tackle. But even ones that are not don't sell well over time I think for two reasons. One, what's in the book even if the concept is perennial, what's in the book is not.

So the examples are they're very author based. So it's like, "My friend Steve once told me." Or, "An article in the New York Times in February said," and so they don't last well and then the author's marketing and sales platform and positioning doesn't take advantage of the one thing that makes books sell over time, which is one person recommending it to another person. So it's like if you don't write a book that is possible for one person to recommend to another person, it's not going to happen and if you don't market it in such a way to encourage that, it is also not going to happen.

[00:35:21.4] JG: How important is the title because your past two books especially, I mean I thought *The Obstacle is The Way*, talking about the obstacles in the way, I recommended that book to people because I just ran into so many people. Like that was the answer like you think the thing standing in your way is preventing you from whatever you want to do like your boss won't let you do this thing so you're just going on, "Oh, my job sucks and I can't do the things that I want to do."

The book title itself was like, "Here you go." I'd give people the book but really, all I want to do is read the title and go, "Oh yeah, like this thing that is standing in my way isn't really standing in my way", I can use this. How important is the title to that, to achieving the end of writing a book that one person will want to tell one other person about?

[00:36:02.1] RH: I think it's essential. It's probably your title and then the packaging and the positioning of the book are probably your most important decisions because everything stems from that. They say "don't judge a book by its cover", but that's what covers are for. And so what I like about *The Obstacle Is The Way* is as you're saying, you don't need to read the book to recommend it. You can just hear about it and agree with it and that's enough and I realize that that might seem like a superficial or a manipulative thing, but if I told you, "Jeff that you are going to write a book and its title was going to become Enter the Lexicon or become a phrase

that people use but no one is going to read your book,” you would still be like, “Sure, that’s great.” You know what I mean? As an author, you’re just starving for any resonance.

But I’ll give you an example of how this works. So I, originally the title for *The Obstacle Is The Way*, there is an exercise in Stoicism and the philosopher Pierre Hadot, he calls it “Turning Obstacles Upside Down”. So when I sold it as a proposal, it was called *Turning Obstacles Upside Down* and then I thought maybe it will be called like *The Little Book of Flipping Obstacles*. I couldn’t figure that out and then there was this Zen saying that I heard. It’s called, “The obstacle is the path” and there’s a stoic quote where he says, “The impediment to action advances action, which stands in the way becomes the way.”

So I was like, “There it is. The obstacle is the way, that’s the best expression of that, of this central truth of the book,” and then I was like, “That’s the title, we’re done.” And my publisher, both the UK and the US publisher they were like, “What if we just call it *The Way*? That’s shorter and we think more broad and more mysterious. Shouldn’t we go with that?” And I knew instantly that we should not do that because it’s not clear what it’s about, right?

So I think it’s this balance of mystery and also clear and empathic statement. *The Talent Myth* is a great idea for a perennial book title because you’re like, “Oh yeah I agree, it’s not just about talent” or as your title, *The Art of Work* is so great because what I just did is an idiom that exists and that is survived, I don’t know how long that one is, but let’s say centuries. And so you’re drafting off the cultural resonance of that truth.

[00:38:35.6] JG: I love that story about the obstacle is the way. How it’s a mash up of several quotes and it just came together. When I think of the way I think of growing up, going to Sunday school in this Presbyterian church in the basement and they had this Bibles from the 1970’s that had these green covers with all these hippies on the front, it was called “The Way”.

[00:38:56.6] RH: My feeling is that its very sort of woo-woo eastern and it’s not a book, the book has become a very popular with sports coaches, right? And they’re not handing out a book called *The Way* but they are going to call a book, *The Obstacles is the Way*. Or for *Ego is the Enemy*, is it “the ego is the enemy” or is it “ego is the enemy”? And the original title we’d shopped around for that one was *Keep Your Identity Small* which I think is a great expression

and it's very important. But it is less empowering. It is telling you the opposite of "ego is the enemy". We get excited and we go into battle against things that's up. Keep your identity small is like a whisper and that wasn't really what I was going to go for.

[00:39:44.5] JG: So a lot of what we're talking about comes from your research process, devouring quotes, reading lots of books, I love your monthly newsletter I think with all the books that you're reading. I am an avid reader and I love that you are too and always looking for just good books new to me and what I love about your books is there is this timelessness to them. At least for the past two books where there are all these historical anecdotes and I love that.

I know maybe not everybody loves that but I love extrapolating principles from, "Gosh, this has worked for centuries for literary thousands of people. It is probably going to work for me. It's probably going to be okay." Can you tell me a little bit about your research process? How long does it take to research a book, how do you do the research? You've got some great photo by photo break down of how you wrote this last book that we'll link to that I love that you did. But can you share a little bit of just about your research process, which I'm fascinated?

[00:40:39.0] RH: Yes, well first off I think the reason you do these stories is people are always going to trust people they've heard of over you. So I happened to use this, The Obstacle is the Way, the philosophy of life. But would you rather hear about Ulysses Grant winning the civil war or would you rather hear about me breaking up with my girlfriend in high school? Even if it's the same philosophy it's not as interesting or timeless as we're just talking about.

But for me, I feel like the research process is just going out into the world and consuming as many books and documentaries and research papers and movies and interesting conversations and news articles as possible but you're not just chewing these things up and spitting them out. It's I'm taking them and then I'm constantly saving material for later. I have probably, I am looking here, probably 200 notecards on my desk of just things that I've accumulated in the last couple of months and then those need to be categorized.

I store them all in a box and I have, because I am so busy with the launch, I have stacks of books that I've read that I need to go through and take all the information, the stories, the facts, words I have never heard before, I need to take all of that and synthesize it and turn it into something. So whether that's putting them into a notebook or an Evernote file or into a physical

notecard, you have to take that information and remove it and then put it into something that you can organize into a book.

You've written enough books to know that the idea is like, you have an idea for a book. That's 200 words. You could write the introduction off inspiration and your own opinion alone and then you run smack into chapter one and all of a sudden you have to tell the story or cite a study because the reader doesn't want to hear 250 pages of your opinion and so that the researches about accumulating those things.

[00:42:47.7] JG: So I'm wondering, do you start with a big idea and then go research it? Or have you been researching this for a long time and then you give it a name, put a proposal together and then start assimilating all of those research that you've already collected? What does that process look like?

[00:43:02.9] RH: It's both. So for *The Obstacles is the Way*, I am trying to think of when it would have been. Let's say in 2008 or '09, I read this book by Pierre Hadot that gave the thing about turning obstacles upside down and I wrote it down on a notecard because it was really smart and interesting and then I didn't sell that book until late 2012. So four or five years passed, but in that time, I was slowly discovering other examples of turning the obstacle upside down. I was making notes of them.

And so it was I had a stack of research and then I sat down and it was like, "What do I want my next book to be around?" as soon as you've finished your book, I'm sure you start to enjoy the satisfaction for a couple of weeks and then your mind just starts percolating about what could be next and you go to what, at least I go to what I've been accumulating and I go, "You know I have noticed a lot of examples of that turning obstacles upside down thing. Maybe there is something there?"

Ego is the Enemy came out of noticing the way in which un-humble people caused problems for themselves and how arrogance is so costly and also how people can start to live in their own fantasy world. I was really fascinated by that and so I kept examples of when originally I thought, it would be called like "your life is not a movie" or something like that. I wanted to talk about the way that we can start to think where these James Bond-esque people and that that can

be really misleading. And so I was just accumulating stuff and eventually then you go, “Okay this is what I am writing a book about,” and then the research gets really serious.

[00:44:51.2] JG: How long does it take you to do the research process?

[00:44:54.3] RH: With *Ego*, it was probably, I would say six to eight months of like deliberate research about that topic. But years before that and then during the writing as well. So it’s not such a distinct phase.

[00:45:12.3] JG: At what point do you submit the book proposal, actually sell the book? Is it pre-researched or you sell the idea and then you start that formal research process, that six to eight months?

[00:45:21.9] RH: I find that’s the hardest thing because the publisher wants you to have as much as possible so they know whether it’s a good idea or not and the author things, “I don’t want to do anything until you pay me,” right?

[00:45:33.7] JG: Of course.

[00:45:35.0] RH: So it’s like a standoff and basically you try to sell the proposal with whatever the minimum amount of research you get away with is.

[00:45:45.7] JG: So how long do you spend writing a book? Do you spend a year? Do you say, “Okay, here’s my proposal I can get this back to you in a year, six to eight months of research plus however many months of writing.” What does that timetable usually look like?

[00:46:02.4] RH: I think I sold *Ego is the Enemy* or I started selling it in March or April and *Obstacle* came out May, this is in 2014 and then *Ego* is out now June of 2016. So the whole process took a little over two years. This book was the longest, I did a draft pretty quickly and then it took almost a year of editing and working on it until it was not — basically a year of editing and the publishing part of things. So I have never experienced that before. Like *Obstacle* was done and then it was out a year later but I didn’t work on it for that year, I worked on other things.

[00:46:46.6] JG: Right. Yeah it's a fascinating process and I don't really know when I start to get an idea but I'll go through Evernote and I started doing this and I realized that in the middle of every book that I am writing, my mind will start wondering and I'll just start clipping articles or whatever that I'm like, "Oh this would be great, but it doesn't really fit with this book," and basically two years before I start working on a book, I'm clipping those articles and the idea is sort germinating. It's fascinating to hear how it works.

[00:47:14.8] RH: Well I think that's very important. I think good writers are always saving things for later.

[00:47:23.0] JG: Yeah, phrases, whatever stories.

[00:47:24.6] RH: Yeah.

[00:47:24.7] JG: Yeah, love that. A couple of few final questions. You have an interesting take on the bestseller list, what's your stance on that? This is kind of bringing you back to Ego, so many authors rise the New York Times bestseller. When I watch you marketing a book you're doing a lot but you're trying to sell a lot of copies of the book and not just sell a lot of copies of the book in a week, and hit a bestseller list. What's your approach to that and stance on that? I mean you have worked with so many authors were like this is "the thing" to achieve, what do you think about all of that?

[00:47:59.8] RH: Yeah, it's a hard discussion to have because it is so sensitive and because not everyone can relate to it. It's a lucky club to be a part of to be one of the people who complains about how the lists work and I understand that but they are completely unfair and totally unrepresented and I'm not saying that because I'm aggrieved. I am saying that objectively like they're not at all based on how many copies you sell in a week, right?

But my book that has sold the least amount of copies its first week hit the Wall Street Journal bestseller list and my book that sold the most copies has not appeared on that same list. So basically what I see so many authors do is they conflate being a bestseller and selling the best and so they end up taking their eye off the ball if the ball is selling this many copies to readers in a shorter time as possible to get a groundswell of interest and buzz around the book that will hopefully sustain it over the long-term, if that's the ball then trying to impress capricious editors

in New York City who have inscrutable criteria for what a list is, you end up doing a lot of things that are not selling as many copies.

So for instance, most normal want to buy their books on Amazon. Are you trying to convince your readers to buy your book from somewhere other than Amazon because it will help you hit this list? That to me is not a good decision. What's frustrating and this happened with Ego is I sold more than enough copies across all retailers like I did not play the game and I know how the game is worked because I have helped a lot of authors play that game and it can be quite lucrative. But I did not play the game and I still put up enough points to win and I appeared on some lists and not on others.

So ultimately what I think matters is how many copies you sell. And then if you do hit a list, it's some nice social proof to go on the cover and maybe it increases the prestigiousness of your resume but at the end of the day, what matters is how well your books sells overtime. So whether you hit the list or not, what matters is, is your book still selling a year from now and hopefully, is it still selling 10 years from now?

[00:50:19.8] JG: Right. The thing I hate about it is the average person, you ask the average person walking down the street, "What does it mean to be a New York Times bestseller?" And they're like, "Oh, it means that you've sold the most amount of books," and I just wish that we could culturally redefine that but I'm with you, yeah.

[00:50:36.3] RH: It's interesting for me. Like one of the things that helped me not chase these things is I hit the Wall Street Journal list on my first book and then I've never hit the New York Times list personally. I've ghost written books that I have, so I guess I could technically call myself that but I don't. But even though my bio says "Wall Street Journal bestselling author" they say "National bestseller" is the phrase inside the industry. People will still introduce me all the time as New York Times bestseller, like not me asking them but they just do. And so I realized that most people don't care. They just don't care at all.

So I think the only bestseller thing that I had a strong opinion about is that I don't like when you see Amazon listed like someone saying "Hey I am a bestselling author," because you ranked well on Amazon category. Because that can literary mean selling as few as two or three copies.

If you sold two copies of a book at midnight in a category that there are no books written in, you're a "bestselling author" and to me, that's just downright fraud to call yourself that because you know that it's not true.

[00:51:42.4] JG: Right and an associate of yours wrote a great article about that that I will link to, which is hilarious and they did exactly that. A few copies at midnight in an obscure category and it became a bestseller. Okay, the last question, you are preparing to become a dad?

[00:51:56.9] RH: Yes.

[00:51:57.9] JG: Which is exciting, congratulations.

[00:51:59.2] RH: Thank you.

[00:51:59.5] JG: Yeah. How does that affect, how does knowing that affect all of the stuff that you've been talking about, what it means to be a writer, what it means to raise a little life, what lessons do you want to impart to your child? And I am just curious where your mind is at right now?

[00:52:19.9] RH: I have no idea. Some of those feel like parenting questions that I am not qualified to answer. But I was writing, I wrote this in my journal this morning. I just been really busy and I've got a lot planned like up almost to the day my wife is supposed to go into labor and I have other stuff that I want to commit to but I know that I shouldn't and I was writing to myself that none of these things are important compared to having a kid. But more importantly, they're not important to a kid, right?

So like me not being there because I was on a podcast or because some bookstore offered to let me talk there. Those are gratifying to my ego but they're totally inconsequential to this human being that is coming or will be alive at that point and that's the hardest — my selfishness prevents me from seeing that all the time and I think it's easier to justify that attitude towards other adults.

But I'm going to need to remind myself and work on making sure that I'm not prioritizing these gratifying but utterly insignificant things compared to that thing, which someone like you has had

to do, you know what I mean? I'm not there yet but you must realize that these human beings. They trust you and they are dependent on you and they matter more than an article.

[00:53:51.0] JG: Yeah, that is pretty insightful Ryan. That's good.

[00:53:53.1] RH: Thanks.

[00:53:53.6] JG: Yeah because especially when your kids start talking, our son Aden is four and I'll tell him like, "Oh I got to go do this." He's like, "But why?" Like the other day, I was getting ready to work. I had this meeting at 9:30, he's like, "Dad can we go slip and sliding?" Because we'd been slip and sliding the previous night and we were eating breakfast and he came down to breakfast in his swim trunks and my knee jerk reaction is like, "No, that is impractical."

I'm like, "But why not?" And so we went slip and sliding and yeah a friend of mine was telling me this story, running around with his kids and it's like, "Come on hurry, we've got to go," which is the thing you say with kids a lot like, "Come on get your shoes on," and the kids were like, "Why are we always hurrying?" And my friend just stopped and he goes, "I don't know? We have nowhere to be. I don't know why we're doing this. I don't know why I feel like we have to do this quickly."

So kids totally help you realize what's insignificant including all the things that sometimes just feel really good to our egos. So that's well said. Man, it's always a pleasure. I love the new book. Thanks for taking some time. I highly recommend everybody listening to pick it up. It's an easy, practical, insightful read and thanks again for your time Ryan.

[00:55:05.6] RH: Thank you, of course.

[END OF INTERVIEW]

[00:55:13.3] AT: So how do you look at your ego differently now? We'd love to know, so you can either send a tweet to Jeff @jeffgoins or you can go to today's episode at goinswriter.com/121 and leave a comment there. We appreciate the time you take to listen to our show.

My name is Andy Traub and on behalf of Jeff, thanks for spending some time with us. Now go build your portfolio.

RH: They say, “Don’t just a book by its cover,” but that’s what covers are for.”

[END]