

# Survive *to* Thrive



*27 Practices  
of Resilient Entrepreneurs,  
Innovators, and Leaders*

Faisal Hoque  
Lydia Dishman

# **Survive to Thrive**

## **27 Practices of Resilient Entrepreneurs, Innovators, and Leaders**

**by Faisal Hoque & Lydia Dishman**

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# Book Overview

Although many ideas never make it off the page and most new ventures fail, we tend to hear about people when they are successful, not when they are struggling.

This creates a distorted perception of how people succeed. Behind every “overnight success” is the story of a person, team, or organization, facing a host of obstacles that have the potential to shut them down. Those who do prevail share one thing in common, the ability to draw from within to weather whatever comes their way.

Ultimately, there is no one definition of success. The authors have examined the stories of a variety of leaders who faced ill health, professional setbacks, emotional loss, and various other life-changing events, in order to illustrate how each achieved a personal transformation and success. The authors do not endorse or denounce any specific individual, company, product or service that may be referenced in the stories.

This book illuminates how anyone can attain the resilience that is required to repeatedly push forward in the face of adversity.

To our loved ones - who support and encourage us as we  
chase our dreams.

*“The emperor writes: How should you be? You should be like a rocky promontory against which the restless surf continuously pounds. It stands fast while the churning sea is lulled to sleep at its feet. I hear you say – ‘How unlucky that this should happen to me.’*

*But not at all.*

*Perhaps say instead ‘How lucky I am that I am not broken by what has happened, and I am not afraid of what is about to happen. For the same blow might have stricken anyone, but not many who would have absorbed it without capitulation and complaint.’”*

*- Meditations by Marcus Aurelius*

*(as read in the Starz television series *Black Sails*)*

# Introduction

## Reframing Resilience, Redefining Success

**W**hy would anyone want to become an entrepreneur? For that matter, why would anyone want to risk everything to develop a new idea or to lead a team towards a goal when there is no guarantee of success?

This road is often long and lonely, filled with brutal hours, massive amounts of stress, and a large amount of personal sacrifice. In some cases, failure takes an unimaginable toll. Yet some persist, for a few crucial reasons.

**To survive:** They have no other choice.

**To pursue a dream:** They want to fulfill their personal and/or financial dreams.

**To make a difference:** They want to make a difference, to do something that has a positive and long-lasting impact.

My own journey has had these touchstones.

At the age of 14, I began what would be the first of my many businesses: cobbling together stereo components to sell from my father's home in Dhaka, Bangladesh in order to save the money needed to support my plan to pursue schooling in the United States.

At 17, I'd achieved that goal. In the summer of 1986 I had just finished my first semester at Southern Illinois University at Carbondale where I was studying electrical engineering. I would quickly learn an important lesson not found on any circuit board. After paying tuition for summer and fall, I had just \$700.00 left. With no family members nearby and no source of financial help, I realized my dreams were in immediate, clear, and present danger of demise.

That is, until I introduced myself to the art and science of polishing marble floors, cleaning stairs and the arena after concerts and games, putting a shine on furniture, and scrubbing bathrooms. As an on-campus "janitorial engineer," I worked the graveyard shift, every weeknight from 12 a.m. to 3 a.m. and every Friday and Saturday night from 12 a.m. to 8 a.m. It was there, in the corridors of Carbondale, where I discovered what it means to survive.

Ten years later, I began the planning of my second company, EC Cubed, with a goal to invent and commercialize reusable software components for B-to-B commerce. We launched in December of 1996, signed with GE as our first customer, and received media attention in every major news outlet.

In less than two years, after raising millions of dollars from so-called expert venture capital (VC) firms and securing top-tier customers, I was fired from my position as the Chairman and CEO of my own company with the accusation that we were "not growing fast enough."

At that time, I was working on my very first book. The VC who took over not only fired me, but retained the manuscript of my book as intellectual property, built on the company's time!

Over the next 18 months, I watched from the sidelines as my company was run into the ground in the hands of these VCs. Their "expert management team" wasted over \$70 million in investments and destroyed customer relationships.

While this was happening, I began writing a new book and laid the

groundwork for a new business. I incorporated my next tech company on August 13th, 1999 and in December of that same year, my new book was published, the company closed its first round of financing, and we signed up our first customer. In January 2000, we opened our doors for business.

Then the Internet bubble burst, followed by the attacks of September 11, 2001, when the world as we knew it, stopped. Fortunately, my company, survived both calamities. PepsiCo, Northrop Grumman, French Social Security Services, and others signed on. Things were going relatively well -- until the market crash of 2008. By 2009, things again came to a screeching halt. Many of our pending contracts, including a massive opportunity with the Department of Homeland Security, disappeared over the next 24 months.

At the end of 2012, against better judgment, I made a very bad debt financing deal. Things got ugly -- missed payrolls, angry investors, disappointed employees, financial loss, betrayals, blame, and isolation -- the classic mix of major disappointment in work, life, and people.

During this time I began to question the very fundamentals my life - my purpose, my work, and my contribution to the world. What kept me together, aside from sheer willpower, was my family and my moral responsibility toward others.

I began to notice a change in myself, triggering the next phase of my journey. I poured my heart into writing my book *Everything Connects* with my friend and coauthor Drake Baer. Rooted in Eastern philosophies and cognitive psychology, the book forced me to contemplate one's authentic calling, creativity, and driving value.

And so I once again began reinventing myself. This time the change was much more profound. My calling, my priorities, my definition of success, everything had been transformed.

At the end of 2013, I launched Shadoka, a venture focused on enabling entrepreneurship, growth, and social impact with digital platforms, thought leadership, and capital. Why begin the hard work of starting over?

As I've pointed out before, the need to survive, to pursue a dream, and to make a difference kept calling me to begin again. However, something else gave me the strength and courage to persevere and build. It was resilience.

The noun resilience stems from the Latin *resiliens*, “to rebound, recoil.” As a character trait, resilience is a person's mental ability to recover from misfortune, illness, or depression.

Bouncing back and moving forward also require grit. Angela Duckworth, Assistant Professor at the University of Pennsylvania, and her research colleagues define grit as “perseverance and passion for long-term goals.” Duckworth writes, “the gritty individual approaches achievement as a marathon; his or her advantage is stamina.”

Those who survive and ultimately thrive in business, and in life, have this kind of grit and resilience. Resilient people develop a mental capacity which allows them to adapt with ease during times of adversity. It is the courage and the power within them — not the circumstances outside — that keep them moving.

In the midst of adversity, they discover what they are truly made of.

We believe resiliency is an attitude; it is your belief that you can conquer anything. It's the ability to go from days to weeks to months and years to reach your destination, defining and re-defining it along the way. At times, it means using adversity to find the opportunities that lead us to our true destiny.

Helen Keller had that attitude. That is what enabled her to say: “*Life is either a daring adventure or nothing at all. Security is mostly a superstition. It does not exist in nature.*”

As you read this book, you will be introduced to some remarkable people with inspiring stories to tell. But first, we want to talk about Helen Keller, as her story has had profound impacts on your authors.

To illustrate her daily struggle and uncompromising ability to push through challenges, Keller wrote these words in her autobiography, *The Story of My Life*:

“For, after all, everyone who wishes to gain true knowledge must climb the Hill Difficulty alone, and since there is no royal road to the summit, I must zigzag it in my own way. I slip back many times, I fall, I stand still, I run against the edge of hidden obstacles, I lose my temper and find it again and keep it better, I trudge on, I gain a little, I feel encouraged, I get more eager and climb higher and begin to see the widening horizon. Every struggle is a victory. One more effort and I reach the luminous cloud, the blue depths of the sky, the uplands of my desire.”

This may be a revelation to those who only know about Keller from school, when William Gibson’s play “The Miracle Worker,” was required reading.

In it, Annie Sullivan takes center stage, with Keller’s parents seeking out this “half-blind Yankee schoolgirl” to take care of their child, who had become violent due to her inability to communicate. Sullivan’s persistence and care brings Keller back to the light -- featured within the play is a pivotal moment when Keller connects the finger spelling of water with the cool stuff flowing over her hand -- giving her voice a new way of expression. Everyone lives happily ever after. Curtain.

But Helen Keller’s story did not end there. It was just beginning.

Keller was born in 1880 in Tuscumbia, Alabama, the elder daughter of a former Confederate soldier and cotton plantation owner.<sup>1</sup> A precocious child who began speaking at six months, Keller soon became ill with a sickness that robbed her of her sight and hearing before she was two years old.

Rendered unable to communicate when the voices around her fell silent, Keller industriously worked with gestures to make herself understood. Nevertheless, frustration often set in and with it came tantrums. In her own words, Keller said, she was “less than an animal.”

Her parents, willing to go to great lengths to help their daughter, even

journeyed to Baltimore, meeting with a prominent oculist to see if sight could be restored. They went on to Washington, D.C. to meet with Alexander Graham Bell to see if he could refer a special teacher. Keller's parents ended up finding the help their daughter required in Annie Sullivan.

The teacher arrived a few months before Keller turned seven. Sullivan's method: finger spelling the name of an object she would hand her student, wasn't immediately successful. And when Keller failed, she turned to rage—until the moment she was able to put the feeling of water running over her hand together with the letters spelled in her other palm. Though that moment has been covered extensively in Keller's life story, it's important to note that that day, she learned 30 other new words and embarked on what would become a lifelong career as an entrepreneur and innovator.

Though Annie Sullivan stayed with Keller for nearly 50 years, her student went on to other teachers and schools, progressively gaining attention for her impressive accomplishments. She wrote *The Story of My Life* at age 21, graduated from Radcliffe with honors at 24, and went on to become a well-regarded speaker. During her life, Keller wasn't afraid to take on tough social and political issues including women's suffrage, pacifism and birth control.

She testified before Congress to advocate for the improvement of the welfare of blind individuals. In partnership with the renowned city planner George Kessler, she founded Helen Keller International to combat the causes and consequences of blindness and malnutrition in 1915. Five years later she helped found the American Civil Liberties Union.

Along the way she captured the hearts of many prominent individuals, including Mark Twain and Martha Graham. Wow.

Keller's accomplishments filled our heads for a while, coupled with thoughts of “how did she manage all that?” and “would I ever have the intestinal fortitude to not only overcome such adversity but to turn it into a platform to help others?”

Pondering those questions, you may be feeling inadequate, even with

full command of all of your senses. But take comfort in the works of John McCrone, author of four books and a blog, which delve into the complexities of neuroscience and human evolution.

In a blog post<sup>2</sup>, McCrone explores the world of the deaf from an historical perspective. From the horrors of how ancient Spartans would kill deaf children and Romans stripped them of civil and legal rights, to 1770s Scotland and the creation of a special school for the deaf, and to sign language in the 1970s. He goes on to discuss the role the mind plays in “inner language” and the thoughts that lead to different interpretations of words.

And that is when he drops the hammer on the dramatic transformation of Helen Keller from what seemed like a feral childhood, to one of heightened learning. How could she not achieve, he argues, when she had the ability to see and hear for the first years of her life and thereafter had the support of her family to build on? Though McCrone agrees that her learning to read in multiple ways -- lips, Braille, chalkboard -- is impressive, he keeps it at that: learning. Other deaf and blind children did it all the time.

Today, we can turn to Daniel Kish for a modern take on Keller’s achievements. Robbed of sight at the tender age of one year, he learned to use tongue clicking, listening to the sound that came back -- the human version of bats’ echolocation -- to “see.” Using this technique, Kish is able to travel alone, ride a bike, and more importantly, teach others with visual impairment to navigate the world with their ears. He founded the nonprofit World Access for the Blind<sup>3</sup> to assist others in seeing.

We, who are gifted with the use of our eyes and ears, tend to fall into the darkness of uncertainty when trying to put ourselves in Keller or Kish’s place. Fear is a knee-jerk reaction when we try to imagine how we’d go about our days, doing (or perhaps *not* doing) all the things we normally do.

But even if our senses were taken away, or if we should suffer some

other personal or professional calamity, we can still have the ability to recover, learn, and adapt.

And that is the key message of this book.

While putting Helen Keller or Daniel Kish's story in context, we began to think about the many leaders who, when life served up a disaster, health crisis, threat to someone they love, or fear caused a stumbling block, were able to draw deep from within to persevere, even if it meant learning a new way of navigating the world. Lest you think that each of these people were gifted with an extraordinary supply of self-esteem that allowed them to sail through life, think again.

There is much to learn about the roots of resilience through the stories of courage that have been collected within these pages. We've structured the narratives according to the concepts brought forth by Edith Grotberg, Ph.D., senior scientist and director of the International Resilience Research Project for the Civitan International Research Center at the University of Alabama at Birmingham.<sup>4</sup>

Grotberg believes resilience is the universal human capacity to face, overcome, and even be strengthened by experiences of adversity. She draws from three sources, which are labeled like mantras: I am, I have, and I can. The basic principles are thus:

**I AM:**

- » a person people can like and love
- » loving and empathetic
- » willing to be responsible for what I do

**I HAVE:**

- » people I trust and who love me, no matter what
- » role models
- » health, education, and support

## **I CAN:**

- » communicate
- » manage feelings and solve problems
- » seek out trusting relationships.

The book's three sections go beyond these principles and dig more deeply into each of these concepts by highlighting the stories of real people. Though the situations are unique to the individual, you'll find they elicit emotion and action that is easy to recognize and relate to in relation to your own experiences.

Each individual's story examines the essential tools needed to overcome obstacles and seize upon an opportunity. Each also incorporates practical applications for reframing the reaction to setbacks.

The stories you are about to read may also help guide you through a process that can redefine fear as just a signal that something isn't working. Not only is that a powerful way to diffuse a strong emotion, it also opens up opportunities for re-examining your personal definition of success.

Ultimately, we hope that, like the individuals profiled here, you will come to understand that success comes in a full menu of flavors, most of which have nothing to do with money.

Rather, success is a fluid thing that requires a person to be just as flexible and tough as a sapling. It may bend, but does not break when the storms come. It makes use of the rain and wind to continue to grow stronger.