

**SIMPLE
STEP
to a
Life
LESS
SHITTY**

the Big Sad Sequel

ADAM GNADIE

Simple Steps to a Life Less Shitty
Expanded edition

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ALSO BY ADAM GNADE

Fiction

Hymn California

Caveworld

Locust House

This is the End of Something But It's Not the End of You

Float Me Away, Floodwaters

Non-fiction

The Do-It-Yourself Guide to Fighting the Big Motherfuckin' Sad

Praise for *Simple Steps to a Life Less Shitty*

“Adam Gnade is a writer who can capture what it feels like to feel everything. Sometimes you just need someone to hand you something that will collect your thoughts for you and help make sense of an idea of some kind of future. This book will open you up if you let it.” -Dana Margolin of the band Porridge Radio

“The reason these pages resonate is simple. The system—that is to say, the force of capital and its toxic influence on the body and mind—hasn’t beaten you yet. On the pages of this compassionate and personal work are cracks through which the light of better futures beam. So, too, are the tools to shape those cracks into doorways.” -Andrew Mears of the band Youthmovies, author of *Kettledrum*

“This is one of the most relatable books you will ever read, a castle of strength built on the always-true foundation of kindness, direction, and joy.” -Nathaniel Kennon Perkins, author of *Wallop*

“If you have taken a yoga class before, the instructor most likely said something like, ‘Let us wish peace upon all living beings’ as they tried to spread a thick layer of positivity that, well ... not all of us relate to in any way, shape, or form. Upon reading *Simple Steps to a Life Less Shitty*, you quickly realize it’s kinda like going to yoga—retaining that element of inner-peace, and at the same time being completely aware that the human species is a total-butthole-motherfucking-jerk, and that some of us will just have to do a more effective job at navigating through this world.” - Justin Pearson, of The Locust, Dead Cross, and Swing Kids, Three One G, author of *From the Graveyard of the Arousal Industry*

“Reading this makes you feel better about the world and there’s not a lot of that going around right now. Full of wisdom about growing up, making art, and learning to live without cynicism and despair. Adam’s books have always been the truth, and this one is no different.” -Bart Schaneman, author of *The Silence is the Noise*

“Combining personal narrative and empathy, he offers up evidence of what has worked for him, but, more importantly, that it might not tomorrow. There’s a good balance of affirmation and hope with verisimilitude and clear thinking. You have to be careful who you trust in this world, but I think Gnade might be one of the good ones.” -Craven Rock, *Razorcake*

“Reading Adam Gnade’s small book of self-help lists and anecdotes makes you feel warm, like a hug from an old friend or how it is when dark chocolate melts in your mouth. In this book, the hard bitter world softens until you can taste the richness and depth and hidden sweetness, and it nourishes and invigorates you.” -Nicole Morning, author of *Soft Animal*

“This spiritual sequel to *The Do-It-Yourself Guide to Fighting the Big Motherfuckin’ Sad* packs the same punch as its predecessor, while offering up new gems of insight. ‘Talk to someone who makes you feel good. Watch a movie. Lie on the floor and stare at the ceiling. Read in bed. It’s all okay. I’m right there with you.’ This isn’t advice from a perfect person; Gnade is down in the trenches with us, sharing the same struggle.” -Jonas Cannon, author of *The Greatest Most Traveling Circus*

“Sometimes our sadnesses are so stealthy we don’t notice them before they wreak their havoc. This book is a guide to catching those fuckers before they move in and take over. Gnade sharply investigates the flickers of emotional distress that lead to insurmountable despair so that we might slow them down and reroute them before they grow wild. *Simple Steps to a Life Less Shitty* rests in the nuances of sadness and fear to remind us that heartbreak is a collective experience and that goodness is worth fighting for.” -Dylan Pyles, Wise Blood Booksellers

Praise for *The Do-It-Yourself Guide to Fighting the Big Motherfuckin' Sad*

“Adam Gnade offers a kick in the pants for those of us struggling with anxiety and depression. He writes with such honesty and compassion that the [book] reads like a long, fervent pep talk from a friend over records and comfort food. Even if you don't struggle with the Big Motherfuckin' Sad all the time, this is a good item to keep around for those moments when you're feeling blue and need to be affirmed.” -Brodie Lancaster, *Rookie* magazine

“*The Do-It-Yourself Guide to Fighting the Big Motherfuckin' Sad* by Adam Gnade is a blueprint to listening and caring for yourself.” -Amy Lam, *Bitch* magazine

“The holidays are their own special, toxic mix of consumerism, hedonism and, let's face it, absurdism. They also have a tendency to make me nostalgic and sad. So Adam's self-described 'anti-depression guide/guide to a freer, more lawless life' was the perfect find for me this month.” -Lisa Mecham, *TheRumpus.net*

“Whether you're in need of some help shaking the winter blues in preparation for spring or you're just seeking reminders to be happy, Gnade's *Do-It-Yourself Guide to Fighting the Big Motherfuckin' Sad* is definitely worth dipping into for a quick pick-me-up.” -Katy Haas, *NewPages.com*

AUTHOR'S NOTE ON THE EXPANDED EDITION

This book collects writing about depression, happiness, coping, and survival, all published in various forms in the year 2014. Typing this now, at the beginning of 2021, still neck-deep in the COVID-19 pandemic, the problems of 2014 weigh much differently than those we've faced this past year. Does that make them smaller? In some ways yes. Some ways no. This book is a time capsule of a year where I struggled each day to stay above the water. I hope you will find some sort of commonality in me getting my ass kicked on a regular basis. Seven years later I still get my ass kicked, but I've learned a lot of tricks to keep standing. One of the ways I have learned those tricks was by writing these notes.

PS. There's a lot of space left blank in this edition. My hope is that you'll use that space to make notes and start your own lists.

INTRODUCTION

I'm friends with a lot of heartbroken people—good people, smart people, but the kind of shit-luck folks who can't pull their lives out of the muck and thrive no matter how hard they try. I'm that way too. I'm bad with money and I make stupid choices that come back to haunt me. I get fatalistic, angry, freaked-out, and confused. I forget half of what I'm supposed to remember (and remember most of what I'd rather forget). What it comes down to is I suck at life like how some people are bad pool players or awful cooks, but I'm trying to do better. I want all the things I dreamed of when I was a kid. I want victory and satisfaction and rest. I want to have a cleaner, easier time of it. ("It" being everything, the whole damn pony-ride, birth to death and all points in between.)

A few years ago, Jessie Duke, her partner at the time, and I gave away most of our things and left Portland to start a farm in rural Kansas. These days Jessie runs a publishing house from the front room, which pays the bills and keeps us in hay, chicken food, and feed corn; the expenses are low, so her press and my writing keep the farm running, even during the hard times.

The goal is to live outside the confines of capitalism, as much as anyone can. It's been four years and we're not there yet, but we're trying every day. Which feels good—the trying. It's nice having a direction in which to move.

Still, it's a struggle. From dealing with animal

death, shitty rural cops, local bigots, and endless winter to learning to build structures sturdy enough to keep out the coyote packs, responsibility weighs heavy. Now, there are struggles that wear you down and there are struggles that build you up. I think (I hope) this is one of the latter.

Regardless, life out here is the Real Life and sometimes Real is far from pleasant, easy, or beautiful. I cannot overstate this: we are not “living the dream” or any other bland, forced platitude or meaningless half-truth people throw around on social media. A lot of our problems come from outside the boundaries of this farm. Personal things. Awful, painful, private things that derail your plans and knock your feet out from under you. Life will smack you the fuck down. You will go to ugly places—to the very bottom of everything, but sometimes that’s just what you need to shape up and do better.

One thing I learned this past year is that you need to fail horribly every now and again to see clearly and get back on the right path. You’ll get tough, and if you can get tough without getting bitter, hard, or closed-up inside then you’re on the right track.

This book is part of my ongoing series of notes on searching for a better, kinder, smarter way to live; on finding your place as a good person in a mean, shitty, daunting world.

What you’re about to read is all experimental territory for me, but I know this: life is too short to

waste your time on a decades-long losing streak. We're here on this Earth for a short time. At some point, you need to enjoy it. At some point, you need to feel like you're doing the right thing and in the right place. I want that and I hope you do too.

-Adam Gnade
The Hard Fifty Farm, 2014
Rural Kansas

NEW YEAR'S RESOLUTIONS

- 1) Surprise everyone with how far you've come.
- 2) Be capable after feeling weak and helpless for so long.
- 3) Cut life down to healthy essentials. Including people. No more screaming shitheads and abusers.
- 4) Be strong but kind.
- 5) Be a warm, golden sun to those around you.
- 6) Be of service. Take care of those closest to you.
- 7) Remember the state motto of Kansas: *Ad astra per aspera*, "To the stars through hardship." Work backbreakingly hard at everything you do. Diligence, clear perspective, and good ideas will pay off.

BEING GOOD TO YOURSELF IS NOT SELF-INDULGENT

Alright, let's get the most obvious shit out of the way first. You have to eat—well and healthy. You have to drink a lot of fucking water (a lot more than you probably think you do). You have to spend some time alone to get your head straight and level out. You have to sleep every night because that's when your brain repairs itself from the stress of the day. It's obvious, yeah, but half the people I know are really bad at this stuff. I am too.

I'm very driven in what I want from life and it ends up knocking me on my ass a lot. There's that Joanna Newsom line from her first record that goes, "never draw so close to the heat/that you forget that you must eat."

Everything you want to do will be done better if you treat yourself well. We're essentially living engines. If you want an engine to keep running and do its job you have to treat it well. Give it oil and tune-ups. Give it fuel. Fix what's broke as soon as it's broke. People need to get over the idea that being good to yourself is self-indulgent. Next time you catch yourself thinking like that, read this section again. Keep reading it until it sticks. There's no shame in needing reminders.

LIFE IS OFTEN SHIT, BUT SOMETIMES SHIT IS THE BEST FERTILIZER

- 1) Grow something from the ruins of your smashed-up life. Get better. Pull away from your shitty past. Rise.
- 2) Turn your shipwrecks into garden plots.
- 3) We're going to suffer no matter what. Turn some of that suffering around on itself and find the beauty within.
- 4) Sometimes the mean shit people say about you just makes them look evil and you not so bad.
- 5) Hit back and take comfort in how well you end up swinging.
- 6) There are so many shitty, monstrous, vile people in the world. Always find the worthwhile ones to outweigh the fuckheads. I guarantee there's at least one good person within your extended circle who will give you exactly what your heart needs.
- 7) Always remember that most of your favorite art came from heartbreak, depression, boredom, and fear. Remember how much that art helped you. If you can do the same for someone else (whether in art or action) you've lived a worthwhile life.

FEELING UNMOTIVATED? ME FUCKING TOO

When I'm feeling unmotivated (which is often), I try to remember everything mean anyone has ever said about me. Then I work toward proving the bastards wrong.

WHEN YOU'RE FIGHTING WITH SOMEONE OR TALKING SHIT ABOUT SOMEONE OR JUDGING SOMEONE, YOU NEED TO TAKE A STEP BACK AND ASK YOURSELF:

- 1) Am I fighting the right person? Am I lashing out at them when I should be taking stock of myself?
- 2) Isn't there someone *worse* I should be focusing my energy on?
- 3) Am I angry at this person because they reflect some part of myself I don't like? If so, why don't I work on changing myself?
- 4) How important will this be in a month? A year? Forty years?
- 5) Is this worth all the stress? The stress that's keeping me from doing good things?
- 6) Can I win this?
- 7) If I do win this, what do I gain?

NO MATTER HOW HARD WE HUSTLE WE ARE ALL GOING TO DIE

Your time here is incredibly limited. Chances are you're wasting your time on so many different levels. Take a minute to chill the fuck out. Eat some pasta. Talk to someone who makes you feel good. Watch a movie. Lie on the floor and stare at the ceiling. Read in bed. It's all okay. I'm right there with you.

DOES IT FEEL LIKE THE WORLD IS ENDING?

When it feels like the world is ending, you need to find someone to tell you it's not. Never underestimate the benefit of a fresh perspective.

IF YOU WANT TO MITIGATE DISAPPOINTMENT, LEARN TO FOLLOW THROUGH

1) Follow through as a preemptive strike against missed opportunities.

2) Follow through with the book you want to write or the trip you want to take to see your friend or that big life change you've been dreaming about forever. Don't wind up disappointed in ten years because you never got to it.

3) Follow through on your dreams because there are a lot of good, smart, talented people with big ideas but most of them start shit they can't finish. (I do all the time. I'm as big a flake as anyone. You'd be horrified at the list of things I haven't made good on.)

4) Follow through with your friends. Tell them you love them. Call them back. Write that letter or email you said you were going to write. Someday it'll be too late. Someday might come sooner than you think. It might be tomorrow. It might be right now.

5) My good friend Bart Schaneman once told me that as a substantial person you need to do what you say you're going to do. Whether drunk or sober, don't make promises you can't keep. If you say you're going to do a thing, you do that thing. All you have is your good name. Don't give anyone cause to doubt your credibility.

6) Just because someone has no follow-through does not make them a bad person.

7) We all flake on people and responsibilities. No one wins this game every time. Do your best, try not to judge, and keep refining yourself.

FIND A GOOD MOTTO

A motto can be a great tool. You don't have to stick with it, but you can stick with it today and that'll be alright. Write it down. Remember it. Use it until you don't have a use for it anymore. Your priorities will change. Your goals and dreams will change. Let them change and accommodate them as well as possible.

PASSIVE-AGGRESSIVE PEOPLE ARE FUCKING MISERABLE

- 1) One of the worst, most self-defeating things you can be is passive-aggressive. Want to stay sad and angry? Want your bitterness to fester until you're a beacon of disappointment? Be passive-aggressive.
- 2) Being passive-aggressive won't get you what you want. What it will do is sabotage your relationships with people.
- 3) No one's ever like, "Hey, you know what I like best about them? They're really passive-aggressive."
- 4) No one's ever like, "Maybe I should work on myself in order to be more passive-aggressive."
- 5) A passive-aggressive action is usually obvious to everyone except the person who's doing it. Check yourself and make sure that's not you. Learn what it means to be passive-aggressive and drive all forms of it out of your life.
- 6) Think about the myth of St. Patrick driving all the snakes of Ireland into the sea. Do that with your passive-aggressive tendencies. Drown that fucking shit.
- 7) The Oxford English Dictionary defines passive-aggressive as: "adjective of or denoting a type of behavior or personality characterized

by indirect resistance to the demands of others and an avoidance of direct confrontation, as in procrastinating, pouting, or misplacing important materials.” Is that you? If so, it’s time to change.

WRITE IT DOWN

When you're sad and hopeless you will forget everything you told yourself to remember. Write it down before that happens.

SOMETIMES YOU'RE ON TOP OF THE WORLD, SOMETIMES THE WORLD IS ON TOP OF YOU

In his 1952 novel *East of Eden*, John Steinbeck writes, “And it never failed that during the dry years the people forgot about the rich years, and during the wet years they lost all memory of the dry years. It was always that way.” You need the perspective to know that it’s not always going to be this bad. Shit gets better. Then it gets worse. But the fact that it sometimes gets better (at least for a while) gives me a reason to keep trying.

REMEMBER THESE SMALL TIPS, PART 1

- 1) Remember: When things aren't working and you're doing the same shit over and over again, you need to stop and try something different. Turn left when you keep hitting a dead-end to the right.
- 2) Remember: A good person takes care of those closest to them. A good person does not lash out against them.
- 3) Remember: Strive for self-awareness. Don't forget that most assholes don't know they're assholes. Don't be the person everyone secretly dreads being around.
- 4) Remember: Find something you believe in and draw it close to your heart because a thing you can love and build each day can help save you.
- 5) Remember: Unhappy people will always try to take away the things that make you the happiest.
- 6) Remember: If you are with someone who wants to control you then you need to leave. People who desire to control others are absolute shitheads and should not be tolerated.
- 7) Remember: Accept help. You might think you're a burden but you're probably not.

WHEN YOU FEEL SCATTERED INSIDE...

- 1) Write a list of things that make you feel balanced, clear-headed, and right with yourself.
- 2) Keep it close and check in with it when you feel like a piece of shit.
- 3) Stick it on the wall.
- 4) Write it on your arm.
- 5) Make copies of it.
- 6) Revise your list obsessively.
- 7) Sometimes you need to build a set of stairs to get up to the front door.

PEOPLE WHO ARE HURTING

1) A lot of people I know who are really hurting are suffering because of one person in their life. Often they don't realize that all their stress and anguish could be relieved by getting free of that person or, in some cases, fixing the relationship. If you are in an abusive relationship, you need to work to get out. Start right now. You can always do better. There are some great, sweet, honest, goodhearted people out there who would love to be your friend or go out with you or hire you or just sit in the park and drink a beer with you.

2) A lot of people I know who are really hurting need someone to take a bit of the weight and responsibility from them but are too afraid or overwhelmed to ask. Don't make your tired friends ask for help. Step up and shoulder the weight.

3) A lot of people I know who are really hurting spend too much time on the internet looking for someone or something to relate to. (In most cases, it's not there.) Last week when Jessie was having a really awful day, her boy Liam (he's two) told her, "No crying. No phone. Go outside. Dance."

4) A lot of people I know who are really hurting need to be told that it's okay to say "No." Overextending yourself will break you down. Some people are givers, but when givers give too much, someone needs to be there to tell them they're damaging themselves.

5) A lot of people I know who are really hurting need to know they don't have to take it on all at once.

6) A lot of people I know who are really hurting could use a break. If someone you love needs a break (from whatever it is), please help them out.

7) A lot of people I know who are really hurting don't realize we all feel this way sometimes and that talking about it with someone you trust might save your life.

ARE YOU JUDGING YOURSELF?

You're probably judging yourself too hard right now. And if you aren't, you were probably judging yourself too hard an hour ago.

BEING AN ASSHOLE DOESN'T ALWAYS EQUATE TO BEING "HONEST"

1) I hate when people tell you something mean then brush it off by saying, "Hey, I'm just bein' honest." No, you're not. You're being a fucking shithead.

2) Also, being nice doesn't always equal being a pushover.

3) The best you can be is gentle, rational, and good-hearted.

4) Honesty can be tender and mannered.

5) Be respectful in your dealings with everyone. You don't know what awful shit they're dealing with at that very moment. Don't be the person who makes it worse.

6) Watch out for people's feelings. Even if it's someone you'll never see again. Their life is just as important as yours. None of us are the star of this movie.

7) You can be tough without being an asshole. Being mean doesn't make you tough. It makes you a shitty person.

WHEN DEALING WITH HORRIBLE ASSHOLES REMEMBER THE AWFUL CYCLE OF ABUSE

- 1) Most bad adults were just good kids who were ruined by the bad adults who raised them.
- 2) Everyone starts out sweet, kind, and full of love and wonder. No matter how awful bad adults are, that good small thing is still in there somewhere.
- 3) Bad adults are casualties of war. Act accordingly.
- 4) You'll meet a lot of bad adults in your life, but don't let them turn you into something you're not.
- 5) If you can't help them then tell them they need to get help and remove yourself from the situation.
- 6) If you have kids, teach them to understand truth and fairness.
- 7) If you have kids, teach them that to be good is to be kind.

YOUR PHONE AND SOCIAL MEDIA ARE PROBABLY MAKING IT WORSE

A phone is no substitute for a friend, a walk outside, or a homecooked meal. Use it like any tool; just know when it's time to put it in the toolshed and lock the door. If you have to do social media, set certain times for it. Don't get consumed. It's not that important, no matter how it feels at the time.

WORK TOWARD A BETTER LIFE EVERY DAY

The path to a better life is the goal. You need to work toward it every day. Even if you're taking small steps, tiny steps, the point is to make progress and to keep progressing. Of course your definition of "a better life" will change as you push for it. That's okay. You need to accept that your plans will change, just don't accept anything less than your ideal. Pay attention to what you want. Map it out. Even if it takes your whole life to get there, your days will be better because of the steps you've taken.

IF YOU FEEL LIKE YOU NEED TO GET HELP

Do it. Trust your gut. Don't be afraid to reach out to people. The worst thing you can do in that situation is to sit and let your mind run through an endless fucking cycle of, "Is this really bad enough to ask for help?" If you think it's bad enough, it's probably bad enough.

WHEN YOU'RE HURTING REMEMBER THIS:

Nothing works better than looking at the root causes of your depression and making the fundamental life changes it takes to drive out what ails you. Are you actually depressed or are you just spending too much time with assholes and toxic people? Step back and look at your life and say, "What is there in my life that's not contributing to happiness, peace of mind, and satisfaction?" Get rid of all those things. Have a bonfire of all the dark, rotten, shitty weight. Toss it in the flames. Walk away.

A ROUGH GUIDE TO FIGHTING FAIR

- 1) Figure out how to balance “virtuous” and “sweet” with “not giving a fuck” and you’ll be on the right path.
- 2) Find the good guys and stick with them while the bad guys continue to take advantage of people, fight over money, and pretend to be your friend.
- 3) Be honest without exception but never mean under the guise of being honest.
- 4) Just the same: Be kind, but don’t be a pushover.
- 5) Embrace strength without oppression.
- 6) Always stick up for those who can’t do so themselves. You’ll know an unfair fight when you see one.
- 7) Be a better judge of character and see the assholes for who they are. Try not to be naïve, but don’t stop trusting. It’s a hard balance—a lifelong process.

THE INTERNET IS A GOOD TOOL, BUT IT'S PROBABLY MAKING YOUR LIFE HARDER

1) You can always turn off your phone. Do it. Press that button and hold it down until the screen goes dark. Slap that laptop shut.

2) The “attention economy” is unbecoming of a good, smart, substantial person.

3) What good does checking Twitter every 12 minutes do you? What do you get out of that? It's empty. Your time is precious. Don't waste it with obsessive dead-end busy work, plastic celebrities who wouldn't give a fuck about you, and doom-scrolling.

4) Think about your biggest hero. Picture them in your head. Would you respect them as much if you saw them hunched over their phone all day like a boring fucking zombie? No, you want them out there in the world doing heroic things, writing that great novel/song/whatever, saving the planet, standing up for the disenfranchised, or whatever else it was that made you love them in the first place. Let's try to be as good as our heroes. Use their example then set your own.

5) A lot of people hang up their real selves like a coat in a closet before they go online. Manufactured internet personalities are not real personalities.

6) Too much useless info is making it harder for

all of us to cope with everyday hassles. We're overfull with inconsequential information that does nothing good for us.

7) Remember this: Everyone wants you to put down your phone. The person behind you in line at the post office, the family driving next to you as you swerve into their lane, the guy taking your order at Waffle House, your friends, your family, your parents, your kids. What they all think when they see you staring at your phone is: "Please, *please* put that away." You can be so much better than this.

LIST-MAKING AS A SIMPLE STEP TO A LIFE LESS SHITTY

I make lists because without the structure of lists I have no direction. I waste time worrying about what to do next and I blunder into a lot of stupid mistakes and forget things. I've got one of those worthless selective memories where I can remember endless minor details that work to my advantage when I'm writing fiction, but I can't keep my daily responsibilities together to save my life. All of this adds up to anxiety, regret, and missed opportunities. So, I make lists and when I make lists I'm happier.

Here are the seven sections from my list-book. Maybe they'll give you an idea of where to go with your own:

1) "Five-year plan." This one is pretty elaborate and includes big things like where I want to be living in five years and the toxic bullshit I'd like to see cut from my life. I don't want to be rich, but I'm about as ambitious as you get about wanting to write good things. This section is where I store the plans that keep me on track. It's half pep-talk, half blueprint, and I refine it every day.

2) "Daily to-do list." I make this one before bed after the work is done. It varies every day and most of the time I only get a tiny fraction of it done. What's left over is carried on to the next day's tasks, or to a section I call:

3) “Overdue to-dos.” These run the gamut of farm things I need to buy that I’ll never have money for to broken things that need fixing to all sorts of schemes that only require an hour of free time and the right headspace to be checked off. This is the section that I fail at the most. Sometimes I don’t want to look at this page because it makes me feel worthless, but I do because what are we if we don’t look our failures in the eye and acknowledge them? You have to know your problems like close friends if you’re ever going to move beyond them.

4) “Life goals.” Like the five-year plan, I rewrite this section all the time. This is the big stuff. Long-term plans. A lot of guesswork.

5) “Publishing goals for the year.” These are the things I want in print by the end of the year. Includes ideas on how to surprise everyone with each new thing you release and plans for making whatever you’re working on your “one great work.”

6) “Money and finances.” I have a checking account and two \$750-limit Mastercards I use in an attempt to build credit enough to buy a small chunk of land one day. This section has vertical columns down the middle of the page for each account and I update their balance every morning. There’s also a column for bills I have to pay that month, a column for money owed by me and to me, and one for expenses in the foreseeable future. Life is pretty spare out here on the farm so I have to run a tight ship with my expenses or

stuff gets overwhelming fast.

7) “Secret section.” These are lists too embarrassing to talk about here. Personal stuff, angry stuff; life goals in the sense of chipping away at the things I don’t like about myself. These are the ones you really need if you want to overhaul your life and live better. Of all the lists in the book, this section is the most important.

This works for me right now and I’m going to stick with it until it doesn’t anymore. You’ve got to be flexible and if something doesn’t work for you (or if it stops working) you need to know when to jump ship and try something else.

YOUR FRIENDS WILL CARRY YOU HOME

Sometimes life is pretty dumb. Mine's kind of dumb right now. Well, "dumb" in the sense that every day feels like either:

1) a bucket of pennies and broken glass pouring onto my head from the top of the Empire State Building.

2) an endless relay chain of buckets full of dog shit thrown in my face by everyone who ever beat me up in junior high.

3) a nightmare you can't wake up from or maybe you do wake up but then you realize you're actually still dreaming and now the nightmare is worse.

4) two giant stones grinding against each other with my head in the middle.

5) every cop in the world lining up to do a cannonball into my pool (I don't have a pool) then pissing in it.

6) a mysterious, super-strong mule that jumps out of the bushes when I'm walking around outside and kicks me in the face before running off, laughing.

That being said, all you people out there who keep telling me you've got my back, you make me feel as if the stupid bullshit doesn't mean a thing. Thank you.

Go find people like that. They'll keep you alive. Rugged individualism is self-sabotage. Communal work (and work in service of others) is one of the most important things you can do. This is no overstatement. Write it on your binder in Sharpie: "Your friends will carry you home."

WHEN IT FEELS LIKE ALL IS LOST YOU NEED TO FIND REASONS TO REMIND YOU THAT IT'S NOT

It's a gray, muggy afternoon on the farm. Low skies. Rain clouds in the distance. The only sound is the buzzing, rasping drone of the cicadas. Then thunder—a rumble too far off to affect us (but not unreal or immaterial because of it). The morning farm chores done, Jessie's inside editing a manuscript of mine and her partner's watching a movie. I'm outside with their boys, Liam and Jack, who are playing with sticks in front of the goat pen—Jack shouting baby gibberish and falling over onto his knees, getting up, falling over again; Liam digging his stick into the dry dirt by the fence-line, singing a song about dump-trucks and fish, stirring little clouds of dust around his ankles.

Yesterday I told Jessie, “If you work on edits, I’ll watch the babies all weekend,” but there’s no compromise there. Liam and Jack remind me the world is not a shitty, terrible place, and that’s a priceless thing to do for someone. We might be on the verge of war and we might have a lot of snaky folks in our lives, but the boys have a goodness that outshines the dark. It’s innocence, yeah, but that’s too easy. It’s unguarded optimism and openness, unbridled excitement, easy laughs and acceptance of the gentle things.

When they say they love something, their honesty shines like a burning pine torch in the blackest night. When they smile there is no agenda or falsity.

No matter how much you love your life we all deal with fuckheads on a regular basis. We deal with sharky careerists, racists, wounded vipers, politicians in punks' clothing, dreamkillers, petty kings and fascists, abusers, cops, homophobes and transphobes, liars—the kind of people Woody Guthrie sang against. You need some defense against those people, a barrier wall—whether it's a band you love or a room in your house or a trusted friend or a book you believe in. You need a shield to step behind when the shit starts to fly. (Because it will. Even when you think you've got it wired, the shit will fly again.)

I'd rather spend the weekend with Liam and Jack than go to shows or parties. I'd rather be with them than eat my favorite meal or hear my favorite record or read my favorite books all day. Those are all good things, but they're not good enough. I want something better than "good enough." I want trueness on the next level and I want love and substance and satisfaction. I want to feel okay about the world and about my life, and I want to feel that way not because I'm being delusional but because I've been given reasons. These boys are my reasons. They're smart and they're kind, and a new generation of that can't fail to do good work.

Today I feel better about the world—a world of bloody squabbles and a crashing climate, inequality and chemical warfare. I won't ignore those things, and I'll do what I can to fight against them, but the fact that I can find some solace in the midst of utter bullshit makes me feel like all is not lost.

REMEMBER THESE SMALL TIPS, PART 2

1) Remember: Not everyone heals using things like home-cooked dinners, hot baths, and good books. Some people need the raging squall to heal. As long as you hurt no one (including yourself) there is nothing wrong with this.

2) Remember: No one's going to work as hard as you at getting what you truly want. Treat yourself well. You are your best employee. Don't be a shitty boss to yourself.

3) Remember: We all self-sabotage but most of us aren't aware we're doing it as it's happening. Pay attention to how you fail and how you wound up there.

4) Remember: The people with the most time on their hands are often the most critical of everyone else. Always consider the source of criticism.

5) Remember: Reading the news will make you feel like the world is ending. The world isn't ending. It's changing.

6) Remember: If you think no one likes you, you're probably overlooking people who actually do.

7) Remember: Listen to advice, but don't forget that no one else is you. You have your own "balanced" and your own "happy" and no one can tell you how to get there but you.

SOMETIMES BRAVERY IS THE SCARIEST THING IN THE WORLD (AND MAYBE THE MOST IMPORTANT)

Often a good quote is what I need to get through the day. Something I can write down and check back in with when I'm worn out by the struggle, when the future scares the hell out of me, and the easy exit starts sounding good. Because sometimes I don't want to fight anymore. Done. Quit it all. Step through the black doorway and fall into nowhere.

It's a dark night here on the farm and I'm thinking of Sophie Scholl. Sophie was part of an anti-Nazi nonviolent resistance group called The White Rose. She did the same sort of thing a lot of my friends do (publishing, activism, writing, distribution) and she was put to death because of it, and while I'd like to think the stuff I'm involved in has the power to change lives, Sophie's actually did.

Sophie, her brother Hans, and their friend Christoph Probst were convicted of high treason for printing and distributing leaflets instructing Germans on passive resistance. They were executed by guillotine on February 22nd, 1943.

Sophie was 21 years old. She was the girl who volunteers at your local info-shop; the kid serving up Food Not Bombs every week in every city; the small press owner; the quiet one in the first row

of your poli-sci class.

In the months following her death, millions of copies of the final White Rose pamphlet were dropped over Nazi-occupied Germany by allied forces. In 1993, on the 50th anniversary of the execution, the playwright Lillian Garrett-Groag told *Newsday*: “It is possibly the most spectacular moment of resistance that I can think of in the twentieth century ... The fact that five little kids, in the mouth of the wolf, where it really counted, had the tremendous courage to do what they did, is spectacular to me.”

What really gets me about Sophie’s story is this quote I’m about to show you.

It’s been a rough year on the farm and this quote has given me the strength to push on and believe in what I’m doing despite all the mean bastards and (what seems like) hopeless odds.

So here it is, friends, Sophie Scholl on bravery in the heart of devastation:

“The real damage is done by those millions who want to ‘survive.’ The honest men who just want to be left in peace. Those who don’t want their little lives disturbed by anything bigger than themselves. Those with no sides and no causes. Those who won’t take measure of their own strength, for fear of antagonizing their own weakness. Those who don’t like to make waves—or enemies. Those for whom freedom, honor, truth, and principles are only literature. Those

who live small, mate small, die small. It's the reductionist approach to life: if you keep it small, you'll keep it under control. If you don't make any noise, the bogeyman won't find you. But it's all an illusion, because they die too, those people who roll up their spirits into tiny little balls so as to be safe. Safe?! From what? Life is always on the edge of death; narrow streets lead to the same place as wide avenues, and a little candle burns itself out just like a flaming torch does. I choose my own way to burn."

BE WHAT YOU KNOW YOU ARE

Most people have this version of themselves they believe is the true version. A lot of the time that version doesn't line up with what everyone else sees. Who you think you are and the public's perception of you are often wildly different. Maybe you know you're braver than you've proven yourself to be thus far. Maybe you were born labeled with a gender that doesn't fit you. We've all got discrepancies with what we know we are and what people think we are. Some might call those delusions, but we are who we believe ourselves to be; we just need to work at it until our lives and actions line up with our beliefs and intentions. Change your life until you are who you know you are.

HOW TO BUILD A CASTLE, OR A ROUGH GUIDE TO FIGHTING SLEEP ANXIETY

Some people fall asleep easy, but a lot of us lie in bed running through cycles of fatalism, disaster scenarios, and work stress. It's like that X song goes, "I must not think bad thoughts." But sometimes you do, and sometimes you can't push them away. Then you obsess and you lie in bed and stew and feel psychotic until you pass out an hour before your alarm goes off.

What I've found is you can build a safe place and block out the darkness—and it bears mentioning that my head gets DARK. I fight to stay away from unwanted thoughts, but the more I try to think of other things the worse my thoughts get until I'm sure the world is over and that everyone either hates me or is embarrassed by me.

Here is how I get past it:

1) As soon as you lie down you come up with a setting. Say, an island off the map, a blip on the radar screen, the kind of place no one will ever find you.

2) Then you start with the structure. In your mind, you build the castle walls—stonewalls, high and thick and topped with battlements. You imagine the brickwork and the creation of the drawbridge and moat.

3) After that, you go inside. Pull up the drawbridge,

lower the gate, and bar it tight.

4) Establish a water source. (A stream that runs through it or a well?)

5) Next you map out the crop rows. Plant quinoa or maybe soy for protein. An herb garden with basil, rosemary, and oregano. Tomato plants. Summer squash, zucchini, and pattypan. Lots of greens. Maybe a wheat field. A mushroom den. Fruit trees? Avocado trees? A peach orchard? A vineyard? Anything goes. You can do whatever you want.

6) Then you build your safe spot inside the castle walls. Doesn't need to be an actual castle. A cabin or a cottage tucked back in the tangle of weeds and honeysuckle vine. Nothing fancy. One or two bedrooms. Sturdy walls. Clean. A simple front-room with a good chair and big windows and bookcases. (Stop for a second and inventory the books. What makes you feel safe? Who do you read to keep in contact with who you are? There are no phones here. No TV. No Internet and no electricity. Maybe a hand-crank record player. Live simple. Have simple tastes.) Cooking happens outside in the garden—a firepit or a clay oven. Build that. Maybe put a wood-burning stove in the front-room. Put a rough-cut Adirondack chair on the porch. A cord of wood if your island has winters. The important part is that it's safe—a healthy, nourishing, self-sufficient, contained, quiet place where no one bad can get to you.

7) When you're done with that you need to

decide whether you want to be alone or whether you're going to bring in people (and animals) you love and trust. Sometimes I imagine a small community of my favorite people. Sometimes it's just me by my lonesome. What matters is you make it secure and benevolent, and you leave all the shitty elements outside—and an ocean away. The end of all worries. A disconnect from unwanted deadlines and illness and bills and cops and bad bosses and all other forms of negative responsibility or hierarchy.

You build your safe space then pretty soon you're out.

Most of the time I don't make it past planting my crops before I'm asleep.

On the bad days, I build the motherfucker five or six times. Of course, it's healthy (and essential) to confront and come to terms with your dark thoughts, but there's a time for that. Do it by daylight. Don't keep yourself up at night and spiral off into a shitty next day. Life is hard enough without being ill-equipped to handle the minor battles of the day.

REMEMBER THESE SMALL TIPS, PART 3

1) Remember: Life is only a contest if you make it one.

2) Remember: You can learn a lot about a person by looking at their bookshelf. Be afraid of anyone who won't let you see their books. That guy reading *How to Get a "Yes" from a "No" Person* is not your friend or anyone else's.

3) Remember: We're all hypocrites sometimes. Don't beat yourself up over it.

4) Remember: Any decent person will love the weird parts of you best.

6) Remember: Anyone who shames you for taking medication to calm your mind or fight your depression or anxiety is a bad person. Also, don't ever go off your meds cold turkey without a doctor helping you. That can kill you.

7) Remember: Capitalism is hurting you. If you're upset by that last statement, you're either rich or misunderstanding the word. Capitalism isn't you making money. It isn't you being successful or having a good job or wanting a better life or nicer stuff. The current version of American capitalism is an economic system where working-class employees are exploited for the financial gain of the bosses and shareholders of a corporation. The environment suffers, small businesses suffer, equality suffers, diversity suffers, the worker

suffers, YOU suffer. Find ways to resist it. Do something now. It all counts.

YOU NEED TO REMEMBER HOW TO LOVE SIMPLE THINGS WHEN THE WORLD TELLS YOU TO GET CYNICAL

Today Jessie and I and her two boys went to town and were followed back to the farm by a wall of black clouds as tall as the sky. A mountain of darkness—boiling, growing, falling in on itself, surging upward, a great black cloud like a heap of skulls.

Driving down 4th Street, I watched as people got out of their cars to stand and take pictures of the storm. A whole sidewalk of people stopped dead in their tracks. Looking up. Phones in raised hands. To their backs, pale blue sky.

We got to the farm and scrambled to get the animals in the barn as the breeze picked up. Then it hit us. It came like boulders tumbling down a hill.

Once we'd battened down the hatches, I went back outside to feel the air move. It was a living thing—a growl of force. The lightning flashed jagged across the horizon. I felt alive, ecstatic.

Now it's nearly eight. I've got the lights off and a few candles burning. Outside the dusk is silvery and green and sheets of rain sweep through the cattle pastures, a waterfall off the roofline.

I hope to hell I never get too jaded to enjoy a good

thunderstorm. If that ever happens feel free to beat me over the head with a hammer because that means I'm done.

You've got to hold some things close to your heart and love them no matter how your life changes (or how you change). Loving things keeps you grounded. It helps you retain innocence and identity. It lets you hold onto some sense of wonder when the whole world is telling you that you need to get cynical to survive.

REMEMBER THESE SMALL TIPS, PART 4

1) Remember: The key to a good empire is compromise, not domination or conquest.

2) Remember: Some days the hardest thing in the world is letting yourself rest. I don't want to miss anything. Still, one of the big truths of life is no matter what you do or how late you stay up you will miss things. A lot of things. You need to make your peace with that.

3) Remember: Some of the best character traits to look for in someone are kindness, humor, a sense of humor, disregard for power, openness, and generosity of spirit.

4) Remember: There is not much that's cooler or more beautiful than courage.

5) Remember: One day you will be dead. If you're wasting your life in a bad situation you owe it to yourself to get out. What's the worth and measure of your life if you spend it in a prison you could leave? You deserve better than this.

6) Remember: You will have dream-come-true moments this year and you will also get the shitstorm. It doesn't "get better" like everyone says. It gets different.

7) Remember: Sometimes you have to start over. There is no shame in that. Sometimes starting over is the one thing that will get you what you want.

A LOVE NOTE TO THE FUTURE AT THE END OF A SHIT-YEAR

One of my problems with nostalgia is I feel like my glory days are right now. Maybe this is unhealthy but most of the time I don't want to revisit the past because what I remember is the worst stuff. Being a teenager? My early twenties? Depressed and scared shitless and overfull with ideas and none of them worth a damn? I'll write about those things (and hide them in fiction), but I won't miss them.

"Right now" things are happening and today is "right now." What I know is this: you need to find your glory days and not wait for them (or worse, mourn them). You make everything you do the best thing you've done. Which is nearly impossible but you try.

I hope this doesn't sound too melodramatic but 2014 was a fucking devastator. Everyone I know had it bad, and the bad kept coming. Things eased off for me a bit this fall and life has been an equal mixture of dream-come-true and this-hurts-but-you-will-push-through-it since then.

For reasons I haven't mentioned in this book (and plan to keep private), this year was the worst of my life. Every New Year's Eve I tell myself this year will be "the one." Still, in the past few years life has gotten harder, uglier, and dumber. Not just for me. Look around. Cops killing young Black men. Everyone killing the Earth. A return

to 1950s Conservatism. Rampant Neoliberalism and a new rise of fascism and white supremacy. Monetization of all-things free. Everyone so self-righteous, so *damning* atop their shitty towers.

All that said, there were good days too—moments that made it (mostly) worthwhile. Pure kindness and solace and triumph. Heroes emerging from the wilderness. Days when you stomped on the skulls of your demons and shot your fist up to the sky and screamed “Fuck yeah!” and meant it. Glory days. The real shit.

Next year might follow this one down the trash road. Nevertheless, I’m excited about the future. I’m excited about tomorrow and I’m excited for the coming spring. I’m excited to see all the people who keep me moving and I’m excited about the work that’s ahead.

I have so many things I want to put in my books—things I’m not good enough to write yet, things I haven’t processed well enough to articulate, but goddamn I want to tell them.

I have always believed that you need to have something to look forward to in order to stay on track when the slings and arrows come in earnest. That’s mine—the bulk of stories I can’t write yet but will someday. You’ve got to believe in your potential to do great things even if you don’t believe you have what it takes to do them right now. That’s what keeps me working, alive, and optimistic.

SOMETIMES YOU'RE COMPLETELY WRONG AND THAT'S FINE

- 1) Just because you think you're a failure doesn't always mean you are.
- 2) Just because you think you're doomed doesn't always mean you are.
- 3) Just because you think you can't do better doesn't mean you can't.
- 4) Just because you think it's all downhill from here doesn't always mean it is.
- 5) Just because you think all people are cruel doesn't mean all of them are.
- 6) Just because you think you'll never trust anyone again doesn't necessarily mean you won't surprise yourself and fall in love or meet your new best friend.
- 7) Just because you think you'll never win again doesn't mean you won't win bigger than ever before.

GO. FIGHT. WIN.

Tonight at dusk a big, gray owl swooped down and grabbed one of my favorite chickens—a young barred rock I call “Dodo Conway”—and five of Dodo’s sisters raced over and tackled the owl and drummed the shit out of it then chased it off. Ten minutes later I saw one of those same hens strutting through the field clutching a snake she’d just killed. They hustle and they work together. All day.

The news has been bad on all fronts. There’s no turning your face from that. You can stay away from the newspapers. You can ignore the internet. Irrespective of this, planes are shot out of the sky and bombs fall on houses. People are dying everywhere—real people, nice people, people you might’ve been friends with or fallen in love with or worked alongside had you been born elsewhere.

It’s getting to me—to say the very least. One of the many burdens of memory is that an idea, a sentence overheard, a bit of news seen on someone’s Facebook feed as you look over their shoulder can latch onto you and burn you up from inside. There are certain things you will never unhear or unsee.

It’s quiet tonight on the farm with everyone on the road except me. Today two of the local farmers pitched in and hayed our field and left without taking any with them or waiting for a thanks. Sixty-five hundred pounds of good brome

hay, a winter's worth of food for the sheep and goats. Tonight I'm going to town to get a case of Dos Equis and a bag of limes then come back and listen to records and try to write as many letters as I can until I pass out. It's a way to stop thinking of awful things and find some easiness of mind and fellowship in isolation.

These past eight months have been radio silence from me. I'm getting worse and worse at returning correspondence. That being said, tonight I'm vowing to keep in touch. People call out to you and you call back to them—if you're worth a damn. Lately, I've not been worth much of anything. I know that, and I'm trying.

Does it matter? Does anything matter? Sometimes life feels futile, empty. Action without payoff. Ambition without the benefit of acknowledgement. But you keep trying. You keep hoping. You keep writing letters even when you're a year behind and you keep fighting winged things that want to carry you off into the sky and you keep pushing forward with your dreams held tight. You pay attention and you give yourself time to breathe.

It's good to have a motto and right now our motto here on the farm is an old cheerleader chant: "Go. Fight. Win."

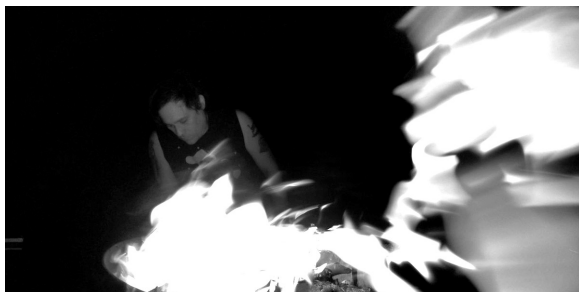
I know what the inverse of action is, and I don't want anything to do with that. Once you stop you start to rot. And by "stop" I don't mean "relax." By all means, relax every single chance you get. The

ability to relax (or look inward while you struggle) is part of what keeps us above ground. You do that and you keep believing in your path and in a future where your life will be better than it is now. Belief counts for a lot. So does planning big and shoving yourself into the thick of life. That's what you need to do: believe, push, and know when to step back and heal. Go. Fight. Win.

Simple Steps to a Life Less Shitty Hall of Fame

Endless thanks to Jonas Cannon, Jack Christian, Liam Christian, Jessie Duke, Dana Margolin, Bran Black Moon, Andrew Mears, Nicole Morning, Justin Pearson, Nathaniel Kennon Perkins, Dylan Pyles, Bart Schaneman, and Elizabeth Thompson for helping with this book's new edition.

About the author



Born in the beach-town of San Diego, California, Adam Gnade now lives on the Ruby Teeth Homestead in rural Kansas. He writes a series of novels and audio recordings of fiction backed by music that are released by Three One G and Bread & Roses Press and runs the record label for writers, Hello America Stereo Cassette. His Big Sad series (of which this book is a part) is his sole attempt at nonfiction. His latest novels are *This is the End of Something But It's Not the End of You* and *Float Me Away, Floodwaters*, released respectively in February of 2020 and January of 2021. He recommends the fiction of Jesmyn Ward, Ocean Vuong, Louise Erdrich, and Roberto Bolaño, and music by Porridge Radio, Bright Eyes, Ebony Tusks, and Big Thief. His favorite band is The Locust and his favorite meal is “a beans, rice, and guacamole burrito from anywhere in San Diego, especially Pokez or El Cotixan.” He is currently working on a novel “about food” and editing a collection of three short novels written during the 2020 COVID quarantine.

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The sequel to the indie press bestseller *The Do-It-Yourself Guide to Fighting the Big Motherfuckin' Sad*, Adam Gnade's pocketsize book *Simple Steps to a Life Less Shitty* is a roadmap and a compass to assist you in navigating the utter bullshit of life in the modern age. *Simple Steps* is a book that says, "Life is inherently frustrating, sad, and painful. Here are some ways to deal with it and not be such a fucking mess all the time." These realistic tips, pep-talks, lists, and short essays are free of mindless positivity and empty, shallow platitudes. Instead, the reader is given usable ideas, practical advice, and workable solutions. A book to pick up when it feels as if you can't catch a break or do anything right, this is a toolkit for the dark days.

"Adam Gnade is a writer who can capture what it feels like to feel everything."

-Dana Margolin of the band Porridge Radio

"On the pages of this compassionate and personal work are cracks through which the light of better futures beam."

-Andrew Mears of the band Youthmovies, author of *Kettledrum*

"This is one of the most relatable books you will ever read, a castle of strength built on the always-true foundation of kindness, direction, and joy."

-Nathaniel Kennon Perkins, author of *Wallop*

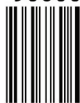


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