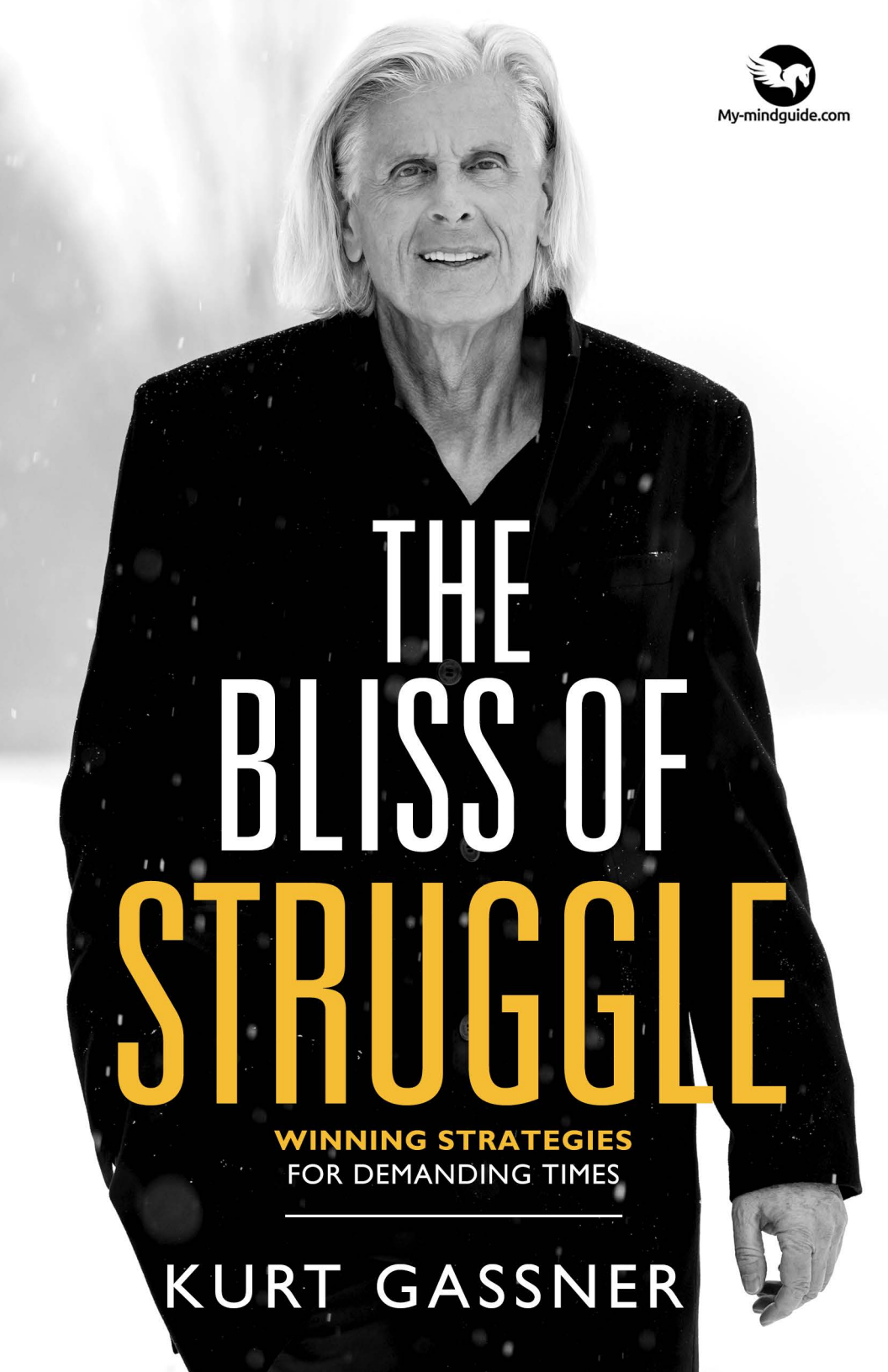
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FOR DEMANDING TIMES
KURT GASSNER

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BY

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The Bliss of Struggle
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Struggles

Introduction

"When you walk to the edge of all the light you have and take that first step into the darkness of the unknown, you must believe that one of two things will happen. There will be something solid for you to stand upon or you will be taught to fly."

~ Patrick Overton, The Leaning Tree: [poems]

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A seed is planted in the ground and watered. Almost immediately, it begins to awaken from its slumber and react to its new environment. Though it appears completely dead and lifeless outside of the soil, it comes alive and does the most unbelievable things once it has been planted. It cannot be seen by those above ground without special camera technology. But beneath the surface, an almost magical process is taking place — one that we take for granted because it is happening simultaneously around the world billions of times.

We see the growth of plants as routine and mundane when it is quite extraordinary. That seed uses the benefit of deep, dark soil to construct the building blocks for the rest of its life cycle. It turns out that plants require darkness as much as they require light. Darkness signals them to perform certain functions that are essential for their lives over the long term.

By the fourth week of pregnancy, babies have not perceived any light as their tiny visual systems are formed. It will take a

few more weeks before light, mostly red hues, can penetrate the mother's belly. Then, four weeks later, eyelids are formed to cover the baby's new eyes and plunge it back into a place where light must struggle to reach. The next several weeks of development must be completed in darkness. For the remaining months of the pregnancy, the baby will get small infusions of light. But the darkness is critical to the development of every system in its tiny body. Less than one percent of ambient light outside the mother's belly can penetrate. It is not until the fifth or sixth month that the eyelids can separate relatively easily and signal to the baby that there is something beyond the warm waters of the womb.

The advent of digital photography has caused many to forget that old school photographers had to build dark rooms to make beautiful pictures. These rooms with hardly any light provided the perfect environment for light-sensitive materials to develop slowly and accurately.

There are a million places in our world where darkness plays an essential role. Even the earth itself is arranged so that morning follows night. Without those long-night seasons where the sun hides away and allows the moon to be the star of the show, we would not have the smooth transitions of the tides. There are places in our universe that are perpetually bright – like the sun. But there are dark places in our universe where only the faintest amount of light reaches. That darkness is a major part of the delicate balance that keeps the galaxy in place.

The contrast between light and dark is both a physical and metaphysical expression for human beings. From a natural

perspective, human beings would suffer from the interruption to the flow of serotonin that comes when it is dark. Nighttime also cools the earth's temperature so that the sun does not cook the entire planet.

Beyond physical darkness, however, are the places and times in our lives when a different type of darkness touches us through sickness, fear, poverty, or death. When these dark elements reach us, we often recoil and ask why. We complain, cry, and decry the darkness. Could it be, however, that we fail to see the beauty that is available to us by way of the darkness?

So many of us fear the dark. Literal fear of the dark, or nyctophobia, afflicts millions. In the U.S. alone, 11 million people have some sort of extreme reaction to darkness, making it a more common affliction than fear of heights. But there is another fear of the dark that plagues humans that is not perceived with the human eye. It is the fear of the dark places we might find ourselves when we want to be someplace else.

In the coming pages, I will cover the dark places of poverty, sickness, loss, and fear in ways that you may have never considered before. I hope to unlock the truth that there can be extreme beauty even in dark places and that truth challenges you and makes you stronger. And what makes you stronger makes you unstoppable.

To be born on the dark side can make you tough beyond your wildest dreams. You can turn the tables on nearly any situation. In today's world, with all its changes and challenges, you can make yourself more able to survive, adapt, and be resilient.

With the right mindset, just about every cloud can reveal its silver lining. An enlightened mind can view any adversity as an opportunity. Mindset can move you from fear and overwhelm to determination and contentment. The right mindset has been proven even to impact the body. People who have been given a short time to live, for example, develop a powerful mindset toward life and are still alive a decade later. Where some are crushed by adversity, others thrive. Why? It isn't just because they are go-getters with a never-say-die attitude. It is because they learn something from their tough times that others miss.

When you have had a rough start in life, you may feel that you are being pulled in two opposing directions. One side of the universe seems to be taunting you with statistics and stories about how people who experienced a similar start ended up. And it's never good news. The other side of the universe consists of all the feel-good messages that tell you that you can abandon your past, overcome it, and become a new person. They encourage you to "change your life."

Of course, I understand what they mean, but what is the truth? You can't change your life — not the history part of it; it cannot be rewritten. And you can't change the present since you are living through it. You can only shape and guide the future. Trying to plan a future without acknowledging the past means living a sort of schizophrenic existence. You are who you are *with* your difficult past. Your past does not define you. But you are connected to it because it has led you, step-by-step, to the person you are.

Messages about following your dreams are ineffective when you are haunted by nightmares of yesterday. If you feel

embarrassed, ashamed, guilt-ridden, or thwarted by your past, you will find moving forward tricky — if not impossible.

In the coming pages, I hope to show you how to engage the imagination, receive new information, change your perspective, and receive the strength to stand on the rubble of the past with an eye toward your ever-emerging future. You will feel empowered to integrate your past failures, difficulties, and yes, even embarrassment into a future that is rich and well-rounded. Through these techniques, you will learn to imagine the future by bringing your past to the present in a healthy way.

Struggles

Chapter One

How it All Began

"Someone I loved once gave me a box full of darkness. It took me years to understand that this, too, was a gift."
~ Mary Oliver

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I'm a terminal "start-up" person. Not a day goes by that I don't have a rush of ideas looking for real estate in my brain. I generally find a home for all of my ideas. Some get to move from community lodging to prime locations in the penthouse of my mind. For some, living life with this flurry of activity might generate a call to their therapist for the next available appointment. For me, it is the only way to live. The high-speed traffic taking place in my head is not only a source of exhilaration that keeps me fresh regardless of the date on my birth certificate. It also serves as a continual testament to the power of the human mind to lift us from one place to another. No matter how deep in the mud we might be at one point in our lives, if we can harness the superpowers within, our potential is limitless… and frighteningly so!

I was born into poverty. Not the kind of poverty where you still manage to have name-brand clothes and the latest smartphone. Rather, the old-fashioned type of poverty where

meals were a luxury. My prospects appeared rather slim to anyone looking at me from the outside. Thankfully, my perspective was from the inside out. From there, the world was a menu, and I was sitting at its table, ready to place my order and dine on the feast it would set before me. I had no idea how I would get out of the pit of poverty, but I was convinced that, somehow, I would.

An outsider's perspective might have done an inventory of my life and found me lacking in all of the creature comforts that define wealth. But I assessed that I had talent, creativity, goals, and desire. I was sitting on an invisible king's ransom. I wasn't going to waste time with worry. I was going to get busy doing.

Besides, they don't know how I started.

I often say that being born on the dark side can make you stronger. I say this from firsthand experience. I was born shortly after the end of World War II. The world was still torn in two, and the ravages of war were evident in the cities where the war was waged. But the war had not just changed the landscape of the countries involved. It had shaped the mindset of the people who lived through it. Being raised in the 50s by parents who had seen war meant that my training as a child was different from kids whose parents had not seen war. There was a seriousness to their parenting. We made up for what we may have lacked in financial resources in determination and drive.

If I had any doubt that the war was a terribly dark period in my parents' lives, there was always the visual reminder of

my father's missing leg. Both of my parents had been students. But then, my father was drafted and served in the military. He came out of the war with just one leg. There were no spoils for the soldiers of war to divide. We had absolutely no money and lived together in a one-room apartment. Work was scarce at the time, particularly for a man with a significant disability. They struggled to feed and clothe themselves. Then I was conceived.

After the war, I was born into abject poverty in Linz/Danube, Austria. Everything was in rubble. The city was split between the Russians and the U.S. Our tiny little room had no running water, no bathroom, and no toilet.

Despite their love for their new baby boy, my parents reached the point where they could not afford to keep me. They just couldn't manage it unless they both worked, leaving no one to care for me. So, with broken hearts, they gave me to an orphanage, or a baby sanctuary, when I was just twelve months old. This is where rooms full of babies live where they might at least be fed wholesome food and dressed in warm, clean clothes.

I can only imagine what it must have been like for them to walk away from their baby, not knowing if I would be held and loved or if they would ever see me again. It was a terribly dark time for them and a dark era for the whole world. So many babies had to be abandoned and given away.

I remained in the baby sanctuary until I reached the age of three. Even at that early age, I was aware of the struggles that separated me from my family. We were finally reunited, but the

poverty we labored under continued. There was a series of ups and downs that were so devastating that it eventually strained my parents' marriage.

The next years were a terrible struggle. My father was a young breadwinner for three children and a wife who moved from one job to another trying to provide for us. Life was stressful and, when I was just eight, they split up for one year. We moved to Austria. After one year, my parents decided to attempt to piece their marriage back together. We moved to Germany, but the change of scenery was not enough to heal the divide between them. It was obvious that divorce was close.

When I was thirteen, we moved to a sad little house in Traun, Austria. It was always cold and extremely uncomfortable. I spent a lot of time alone because my mother had to work, leaving me with the grown-up responsibility of caring for three siblings.

I attended school, but it was clear that I was not living a similar life to my classmates. Life is not easy when you are the only one in the class who can't afford to go on the school excursions. My life changed when my parents enrolled me in a beautiful boarding school. I breathed a sigh of relief to be in such comfortable surroundings and looked forward to staying there for the rest of my education. Unfortunately, just one year later, my hopes were dashed. My father couldn't afford the monthly payments, and I was forced to leave.

At the age of sixteen, I was old enough to work, so it was time for me to leave home and go out into the world independently.

My birth happened during a tragic time, I spent my younger years away from the people who loved me, and now I was just a teenager having to fend for myself in the world alone. It was hard, but I knew I would make it. I was more resilient because I had already lived many years in the basement of society.

I found a furnished room in a boarding house where I lived alone. At the age of seventeen, I enlisted in the military primarily because they offered a salary, food, and lodging. At the age of eighteen, I started my quest to climb the social ladder with the goal of reaching the very top.

When I say I wasn't born with a golden spoon, I say it with authority. I can also say with authority that it is the responsibility of every person to make the best of the problems handed to them by life. I decided that I had spent enough years on the dark side of life. I had paid whatever dues life decided I must pay. It was time to reinvent myself. That is precisely what I did.

The path of reinvention was long and hard. But I was strong enough to meet the task head-on because I had been born into times that were equally long and hard. I was no stranger to the dark side. The difference was that I was a helpless child the first time. This time, even though I would be driving in the dark, I had my hand firmly on the steering wheel. I was in control.

I was able to do whatever I wanted. I desired a beautiful life with a lovely home. I wanted to be financially secure. I accomplished that. From each achievement, I set a new goal.

I want to stress that people who have started life on the dark side, or been plunged into darkness, can still have their dreams

come true. There is no shame in poverty. Poverty teaches you gratitude for everything you receive. Poverty keeps you alert to every opportunity. Poverty builds character. And poverty keeps you hungry for more, not physically but figuratively. I always wanted more because I knew that I had what it took to achieve a better life.

You can create the life you want. I see a lot of my contemporaries have reached their 60s and 70s. They complain about being bored. Many of them have started drinking to combat the boredom and silence the voices of their dreams calling out to them to get busy living. They lament that they spent their 20s, 30s, 40s, and 50s working and building careers. Once they retired, they didn't know what to do with themselves. The rest of their lives are purposeless and empty. They are stuck.

I want to encourage the young readers to get in hot pursuit of their dreams now while they are young. I want to encourage older readers by letting them know that their lives are not over. As long as you have breath, you have opportunity. Even if your health is declining and your mind is a bit fuzzy, you can reinvent yourself. You may be surprised to find that when you get busy living, your brain waves start to fire again. Your increased activity may help your body regain its strength. Most importantly, you can satisfy the longings of your heart by doing what you crave.