

# You, UNSTUCK

You Are the Solution  
to Your Greatest Problem



Seth Adam Smith



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**Seth Adam Smith**



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***Dedicated to***

*Boyd Adams, my grandfather,  
and Lyn Adams Smith, my mother,  
for their never-ending faith and support.*

*You are the reason why I insist on  
going by my full name.*

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## PART 1

# *Stuck*



## 1

### **By the Beating of Our Own Wings**

Over seven hundred years ago, an Italian poet by the name of Dante Alighieri wrote an epic poem entitled *Divine Comedy*—an allegorical representation of the soul's journey to (or away from) God.

The first part of the poem contains a chilling description of the nine circles of hell. As Dante figuratively descends these nine levels, he details the torture and agony of the souls he witnesses along the way.

In the ninth circle, the very depth and center of hell, Dante encounters Satan: a massive, terrifying beast with six wings and three nightmarish faces of different colors. Upon his back rests the entire vestibule of hell—and surrounding him is an element that we all fear and dread.

Hellfire?

No, there is no fire in Satan's level of torment.

According to Dante, instead of standing in the midst of fire, Satan is standing waist deep *in a lake of solid ice*.

If you think that's strange, wait until you read this:

*The emperor of the realm of grief protruded  
From mid-breast up above the surrounding ice....*

*If he was truly once as beautiful  
As he is ugly now, and raised his brows  
Against his Maker—then all sorrow may well...*

*Two wings spread forth from under [his head]...*

*Strong, and befitting such a bird, immense—  
I have never seen at sea so broad a sail—  
Unfeathered, batlike, and issuing three winds*

*That went forth as he beat them, to freeze the whole  
Realm of [hell] that surrounded him.  
He wept with all [eyes], and the tears fell...<sup>1</sup>*

Did you catch that?

Satan's lake of ice—Satan's prison—is kept frozen *by the beating of his own wings*.

This is one of the most impressive ironies in literature because it symbolically illustrates three things: the isolation of hell, the stagnation of hell, and the fact that the isolation and stagnation of hell are *of our own making*. In his anger, frustration, and bitterness, Satan has sunk to the lowest levels of isolation. There,

by the beating of his own wings, this fallen angel is “trapped,” crushed under the weight of his own victims and mired in a frozen lake of victimhood.

You see, in Dante’s *Inferno* (one of the three parts of *The Divine Comedy*), Satan has embraced the most damning philosophy of all time. This philosophy is contemptible and destructive, crushing hope and freezing its followers in a lake of stagnation. Instead of ennobling and strengthening those who embrace it, this belief drags men and women down. It encourages isolation, fosters fear, and perpetuates resentment. It robs men and women of their strength and will to fight; it makes them give in and fall down instead of holding true and standing up. Like a pernicious plague, this belief—if embraced—will stunt our growth and limit our life.

The philosophy?

*I can’t change. I am a victim of my circumstances.*

And yet, for all its horrifying consequences, we nevertheless cling to this damning belief to one degree or another. To make it go down easier, we sugarcoat it with pleasing justifications and reassure ourselves that this belief will soothe our pains. And for a time, it does. Like the addict who self-medicates with drugs or the alcoholic who escapes life through drink, we run to victimhood to make ourselves feel better. The belief that we’re not responsible for our actions gives us a buzz, or a temporary relief, before dropping us down lower than before.

It’s like eating a chocolate-covered razor blade—it tastes sweet at first, but after you swallow it, the chocolate wears off and the razor is exposed.

You see, victimhood is a vicious thing; it takes and tortures its prisoners. Unaware that the belief is the thing that is hurting us and halting us, we will continue to blame anything and everything around us—even our own bodies—but certainly not ourselves.

And so it is with Dante's Satan. Blaming others for his misfortune, he sits at the bottom level of hell, trapped in a prison of his own making.

Although we are certainly not like the “fallen angel” of Dante's *Inferno*, we can pull some powerful, personal lessons from his imprisonment.

Often, we may feel trapped, isolated, beaten down, and defeated. We may feel like our lives are pure hell. But in those moments, we must realize this one, powerful truth: we *do* have the power to stop “beating our wings” (or fists) at our problems. Again, we cannot always control what happens to us, but we can always control how we react. And more often than not, it is our reaction to the situation that liberates us—or damns us.

To get out of your own personal hell, you must recognize that you are a person of worth and that you have an inherent power to persist and strength to move forward. No matter what you might be tempted to think, there is *always* someone out there who believes in you. Use that belief in you to light a fire of belief in yourself. Believing in yourself will free you from stagnation and light the way forward.

Use the following affirmation as encouragement:

*I choose to live by choice, not by chance.*

*I choose to make changes, not excuses.<sup>2</sup>*

We are always free to choose—to act and not be acted upon. The sooner we embrace this belief and accept our responsibility, the sooner we will triumph over our circumstances and become a victor instead of a victim.

## 2

### Focus on What You Can Do

Now, after discussing all that, we probably need to talk about our “yeah, buts.” You might have read all that Dante/damnation stuff and said to yourself, “*Yeah, but* I really can’t do that thing because [insert convincing reason as to why you can’t do that thing].”

You might say, “Yeah, but I physically can’t do that.” Or you might say, “Yeah, but I just don’t have enough education.” Or you could say, “Yeah, but I’ve made too many mistakes.” Or “Yeah, but I’m mentally and emotionally broken—I’m damaged goods.”

Admit it, you have a “yeah, but.”

It’s OK—everyone has a “yeah, but.”

Well, here’s my “yeah, but.”

I struggle with chronic, genetic depression, which can often be debilitating and heart-wrenching. Depression runs in my family, and it would be easy for me to use that factor as a means to push away from others and blame my circumstances. And for many years, that’s exactly what I did.

But to be perfectly honest, those were the most difficult times of my life. It wasn’t until I felt a moment of empathy in the wilderness that I began to see my way forward.

## *A Lesson in the Wilderness*

I used to hate hiking and camping with my whole soul. (Is there any way to emphasize that without using expletives?) But in my early twenties, my struggle with depression became so severe that my dad suggested I work at a wilderness therapy program for at-risk youth in Arizona. And for some reason that remains unknown to me, I agreed.

*I don't know what I was thinking.*

This wilderness therapy program wasn't like camping with family and friends (you know, the kind that gives you a warm fuzzy). This was trailblazing, bushwhacking, backbreaking hiking in the sunbaked desert—without the slightest hint of civilization for miles.

On my first day of work, I swear my trainer led our group through everything I could *possibly* be allergic to (for which she expressed zero remorse).

On my second day of work—after a grueling hike to the summit of a mesa—I came to the conclusion that it was my trainer's intention to kill me. It was the only way to explain a hike that was seemingly inspired by *The Hunger Games*.

At the end of the day, I crawled under my shelter, curled up into the fetal position, and prayed for the sweet release of death. Then it started to rain. It was almost as if God were underscoring my pathetic situation.

*This was day two of eight.* Before us lay another fifteen to twenty miles through a harsh and unforgiving stretch of desert.

I couldn't do it. I physically couldn't do it. I was chubby, allergic, unfit, and inexperienced. To top it off, I was a pasty-white kid from Alaska. I wasn't built for these desert conditions!



Curled up underneath my shelter, shaking with pain and frustration, I couldn't see the way forward. I didn't believe I could do it.

But then my trainer, Xela (pronounced "Shayla"), offered me some encouragement. Crouching down next to my shelter, she asked me how I was doing. I grumbled a number of phrases that thinly veiled my discomfort.

She quietly nodded, and we sat in silence for a few minutes. Then, instead of offering me trite words of encouragement, she said something radically different.

"I know, it sucks," she said.

I furrowed my brow. "You think so, too?"

"Oh yeah. Hiking in the heat, the bugs, the water, the weight of the pack—it's hard. Especially your first couple of weeks."

"So it gets better?" I asked.

She shrugged. "It's *always* hard," she said. "But now it's more—*understandable*. I've made it through the hikes before. I know that they don't last forever. I know that I'll make it out of the canyon because I've made it out of other canyons. I know that I'll eventually climb the mountain because I've climbed other mountains. And tonight? I know I'll make it through this rain—because I've done it before. You'll make it through this, Seth."

It was a moment of empathy that transformed my experience. It didn't lessen the pain, by any means. I was still incredibly sore and suffering from severe allergies. But something inside me responded to Xela's belief that I was going to make it. All I had to do was keep moving forward, small step by small step.

Perhaps many of our struggles can be compared to hiking in the wilderness. *It's never easy*. In fact, the most exhilarating and worthwhile hikes are filled with blood, toil, tears, and sweat. But

in the midst of our greatest pains we can find comfort and encouragement in the fact that others with similar struggles have successfully gone before us. Like my trainer Xela, I've learned that the path forward isn't easy, but it can become understandable as we learn from the lives of others.

Likewise, I know that if you continue to move forward—however slow your pace might seem—you will conquer your darkest canyons and your tallest mountains.

As for me, I can attest to a marvelous, inexplicable power that has come to me whenever I've resolved to move forward—in spite of the obstacles. When I truly believe that I have some control over my circumstance, then in that moment I'm given strength to face my demons. It hasn't been easy, and it hasn't been a onetime event. I have to continually reassert my belief that I have control over my life—that I am not helpless and hopeless.

This process of taking ownership of my life and circumstances has always been worth the fight. In a quote attributed to author Robert Louis Stevenson, he said: "In each of us, two natures are at war—the good and the evil. All our lives the fight goes on between them, and one of them must conquer. But in our own hands lies the power to choose—what we want most to be, we *are*."<sup>1</sup>

### 3

## Can't vs. Can

One of the most important steps to overcoming obstacles is changing one's language. Out of a desire to help other people move forward, I've often written about my struggles with

depression on my blog. Because of this willingness to be open, I get a lot of emails from people asking for help, and I give advice whenever possible. Every now and then, I'll get pushback emails splattered with one of my least favorite words in the English language—*can't*.

*I can't do that. I just can't. I've already tried and failed.*

*I can't. I can't talk to anybody. I can't overcome this.*

*I can't believe that things will ever get better. I can't.*

*I can't. I can't. I CAN'T!*

And in the end, I have to agree with them. They *can't* do it. But it's probably not because they're physically unable to do it; instead, it's because their disbelief prevents them from seeing any alternative.

They might put forth some minimal effort to convince other people that they're trying, but inside they've already decided that whatever they can do will not work. Whatever their doctor, their therapist, their friend, or a book says simply isn't going to work, because they've already decided that it won't work.

To be clear, I'm not talking about having doubt. I'm talking about cold, hard disbelief. Doubt contains some measure of faith, while disbelief is the total and absolute lack of hope. The doubter is willing to cautiously hike a new trail, while the disbeliever refuses to believe there even *is* a trail.

Or it's like a person who has a medical problem but doesn't believe in the power of doctors or medicine. This person can complain about his symptoms, sincerely desiring relief, but if he refuses the medicine simply because he doesn't believe it will work, it's very unlikely that he will be healed.

Or it's like a person who believes that she can't run a marathon. If she doesn't believe that she could ever run a marathon, she probably never will. Why would she? She would be too skeptical to sign up, let alone train for one.

I could tell you over and over and over again that you can do this or accomplish that, but my encouragements are all meaningless unless you believe them.

In his book *No Excuses*, Brian Tracy makes this excellent point:

Now, how can you tell if your favorite excuse is valid or not? It's simple. Look around and ask, "Is there anyone else who has my same excuse who is successful anyway?"

When you ask this question, if you are honest, you will have to admit that there are thousands and even millions of people who have had it far worse than you have who have gone on to do wonderful things with their lives. And what thousands and millions of others have done, you can do as well—if you try.<sup>1</sup>

If you want to move forward in life, the first thing you need to do is replace *can't* with *can*. No matter how bad things might seem, you *must* become an optimist about your situation. As Winston Churchill once said, "For myself I am an optimist—it does not seem to be much use being anything else."<sup>2</sup>

"But what if I literally can't?" you might ask. "What if I'm not using my situation as an excuse?" That's a perfectly valid question. The man who has lost his right arm is certainly not making an excuse when he says that he can't write with his right hand.

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