

FROM THE AUTHOR OF *THE ZURICH AXIOMS*
AND *THE LUCK FACTOR*

HOW TO GET LUCKY

13 TECHNIQUES FOR DISCOVERING
AND TAKING ADVANTAGE OF LIFE'S
GOOD BREAKS

MAX GUNTHER



... Sample ...

How To Get Lucky

Also by Max Gunther

Instant Millionaires

The Luck Factor

The Very, Very Rich and How They Got That Way

The Zurich Axioms

How To Get Lucky



13 techniques for discovering and taking
advantage of life's good breaks



by
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Editor's Note

How *To Get Lucky* was originally published in 1986 and is one of a series of books by Max Gunther extolling, as he saw it, the concept of lucky living. His first title in this area, *The Luck Factor*, looked at why some people might be luckier than others and this follow-on title suggests possible steps you might attempt to potentially improve your luck. The techniques themselves may have some weird and wonderful names, but we have deliberately reproduced this lost classic in its original, unchanged form and with it we hope to bring a little luck into your life.

Harriman House, 2010

Part I

The Commanding Factor

The Supreme Insult

William S. Hoffman was a gambler but not a successful one. He wrote a book about his life entitled *The Loser*. Trying to sort out the reasons why he was never able to make it, he arrived at a very interesting conclusion: *He failed because he tried to deny the role of luck in his life.*

He had learned this unproductive and dangerous attitude from his father, an athletic coach. The senior Hoffman liked to pep talk his teams with windy pronouncements derived from the Work Ethic. One of his favorites was: “If you’re good, you don’t need luck.”

What nonsense.

Of course you need luck. It doesn’t matter how good a football player you are. If you have the bad luck to trip on a loose stair runner and sprain your ankle the night before the big game, none of your hard-earned strengths and skills are going to do you the least bit of good. All those hours of practice, all that admirable grit and determination – all are down the drain. The coach can recite Work Ethic apothegms at you until he is blue in the face, but he cannot change the facts.

It isn’t enough just to be good. You’ve got to be lucky, too.

The junior Hoffman, the gambler, evidently listened too seriously to his father’s bad advice. He thought he could become a successful gambler through sheer hard work. All he had to do, young Hoffman believed, was apply himself to an assiduous study of horses, cards, or dice. “If you’re good, you don’t need luck.” Having become good, he figured, he would be in a position to conquer the world.

That was what he thought. Things didn't work according to plan. Bad luck hit him. He wasn't prepared to handle it. He went broke.

You have *got* to have good luck. Without it, nothing will work right for you. Good luck is the essential basic component of success, no matter what your personal definition of "success" may be.

What is it you want from life? To be rich? Famous? Respected in a profession? Happily married? Well loved? Whatever your goals may be, have you achieved them? It is unlikely you would be reading this book if your answer were yes.

Nearly all of us would have to answer no, we have not yet achieved our goals. And why not? Apply the question to your own life. What is it that has prevented you from getting where you want to be? Is it that you aren't good enough? Or simply that you haven't been lucky enough?

The second answer – not lucky enough – is by far the more likely to be the truth. Most of us are "good" in one way or another – good enough, as often as not, to reach whatever goals we have wished to set for ourselves. We have failed to reach those goals largely because of a lack of luck.

There are any number of ways to demonstrate this truth to yourself. It was emphasized strongly for me during a recent period when, quite by chance, I went to see a series of plays performed by amateur theatrical groups in my home county. Many of the groups' members told me that they had dreamed of acting professionally but were still waiting for the big break – or had given up waiting. I asked myself why the big break had never come their way. Lack of talent? Certainly not, in most cases. These men and women were at least as good as the stars we see every week on TV or at the movies. What was the difference, then? Why had the stars soared to a pinnacle of success while thousands of other actors and actresses, equally good, were never able to climb higher than a hometown dramatic club?

There was only one answer: luck. Being in the right place at the right time. Knowing somebody who knew somebody.

Being good simply is not enough.



Luck. It blunders in and out of our lives, unbidden, unexpected, sometimes welcome and sometimes not. It plays a role in all our affairs, often the commanding role. No matter how carefully you design your life, you cannot know how that design will be changed by the working of random events. You can only know the events will occur. You can only wait for them and hope they are in your favor.

Luck is the supreme insult to human reason. You can't ignore it, yet you can't plan for it. Man's grandest and most meticulous designs will fail if they are hit with bad luck, but the silliest ventures will succeed with good luck. Misfortune is always striking good people who don't deserve it, while many a scoundrel dies rich and happy. Whenever we think we have some answers, luck is there to mock us.

Is there anything to be made of it? Anything sensible to be said of it? Anything useful to be done about it?

Surprisingly, yes, there is. Probably more than you think.

You cannot control your luck in a precise way. You cannot say, "I want the next card I draw to be the queen of diamonds," and have any reasonable expectation of that outcome. Luck isn't amenable to fine-tuning of that kind. To hope for such control is to dream of magic. It doesn't happen.

But you *can* bring about a substantial and even startling improvement in the quality of your luck. You can turn it from mostly bad to mostly good, from pretty good to better. Wherever you need luck and have been seeking it – in investments, gambling, career, love, friendships – you can upgrade your chances of becoming one of life's winners.

I know this is true because I've seen it happen. The luck-changing precepts you are about to study – the thirteen techniques

of lucky positioning – are not just wisps of gassy theory. They were not invented by a bearded shrink sitting in his study, puffing on his pipe. Instead, they are derived from direct observations of men's and women's lives.

The lucky and the unlucky: What are the differences between them? What do the lucky know, what do they *do*, that the unlucky don't? Are they lucky because they have some special ways of handling life or because – well, just because they're lucky?

I've been pursuing the answers to these questions for more than twenty years.

The Factor Nobody Talks About

We had better define our term before we go further. So:

Luck (noun): Events that influence your life but are not of your making.

Such events – good luck and bad luck – are the main shaping forces of human life. If you believe you are in perfect control of your life, you are kidding yourself.

You owe your very existence to a chancy event that happened before you were born: the coming together of your mother and father. How did they first meet? You will almost certainly discover that it was by chance. Because of that random event, you are alive today. The random mixing of chromosomes dictated your sex, your size, the color of your skin and eyes, the shape of your nose, your predisposition to certain diseases, and a host of other factors that you had no control of; factors that have already influenced your life heavily and will go on influencing it until it ends.

Other lucky and unlucky events have occurred, or will occur, during your lifetime. Events such as winning a million-dollar lottery prize; getting killed in an air crash; falling into a golden career opportunity through somebody you meet at a party; contracting cancer; stumbling into a life-changing love affair through a mix-up in theatre seats, losing your shirt in a stock market crash. Events of this nature can profoundly affect your life but aren't of your making; and all of them, hence, fit our definition of "luck."

Luck is one of the most important elements in men's and women's lives. Indeed, in many lives it is unequivocally *the* most important. Yet, strangely, people don't talk about it much. In fact, most people are like William Hoffman, the gambler, and his father, the coach: They are reluctant to acknowledge luck's huge influence.

It will be useful to take a brief look at this reluctance. You must clear it out of your way before you can begin the process of changing your luck.



Why do people deny the role of luck? For one thing, we hate to think we are at the mercy of random happenings. We prefer to stay snugly wrapped in the illusion that we control our own destinies.

Life seems safer when I can say to myself, "The future will happen as I plan it." It won't, of course. Deep inside, we all know it won't. But the truth is too scary to contemplate without an illusion to snuggle up against.

Another reason why we prefer not to discuss luck's role is that it diminishes us and steals our dignity. Go to your local library and pick up any stage or screen star's autobiography. How did this man or woman rise to such an exalted position? Why, by being smart, talented, courageous, and resolute, of course.

And lucky? You aren't likely to find the word mentioned.

What the star fails to emphasize is that he or she began the long climb in competition with thousands of other smart, talented young hopefuls. We don't know their names today because they didn't get the big break. Of all those deserving your aspirants, only one was lucky enough to be slinging hash in a diner when a great producer stepped in for a bowl of chilli.

Though it is usually obvious to any astute reader that the star's success was largely a result of blind luck, the star naturally does not dwell on that fact. You will hardly ever find a movie autobiography that says, "I'm really just an ordinary clod. I'm no more beautiful, talented or resolute than all those competitors

whose names you don't know. In fact a lot of them would look better on a movie screen than I do." The only thing they didn't have was luck. Such a confession would diminish the star's luminosity.

The reluctance to talk about luck isn't confined to the theatrical business, of course. All successful people avoid diminishment in the same way. Business executives do it in explaining how they got to be chairman of the board. Military officers do it in recalling how they won great battles. Politicians do it in listing the things that went right during their time in office. Luck, if mentioned at all, is never emphasized.

You will never see a president of the United States standing in front of a TV camera and saying, "Well folks, nobody has the faintest idea of how it happened, but during my term at the White House, no new wars have broken out and the unemployment rate dropped. I'm one of the luckiest presidents you'll ever have!"

Nor will you ever hear a stock market speculator admit that his great killing, the one that made him rich, was the result of sheer luck. After the fact, he will construct a chain of reasoning to demonstrate how cleverly he figured everything out.



Still other reasons for denying luck's role lie embedded at odd angles in the Work Ethic, also known as the Protestant or Puritan Ethic. We are taught from kindergarten on that we're supposed to make our way in life by hard work, perseverance, fortitude, and all those grindstony things. If, instead, we make it by blind luck, we're ashamed to say so in public – or even to admit it to ourselves.

Conversely, if we are walloped by bad luck, our Puritan heritage encourages us to think it's probably our own fault. We are supposedly responsible for our own outcomes, whether good or bad.

"Character is destiny," Heraclitus wrote some twenty-five centuries ago. Great stacks of plays, novels, movies, and TV dramas have since tried to prove the point. They haven't succeeded

because it is unprovable. The best you can say of it is that, in some lives, it is half true. If I'm unlucky enough to be killed by a drunk driver on the highway, my destiny has nothing to do with my character. I might have been a saint or a sinner, a great philosopher or a bumbling nincompoop. None of that matters. My destiny has arrived. I'm dead.

Despite its obvious weakness, Heraclitus's aphorism survives, deeply embedded in our cultural consciousness. If things go wrong in your life, you aren't supposed to blame bad luck. Instead, you're supposed to look for the reasons inside yourself.

Those inside-the-self reasons may be pretty hard to find. Let's say you're unemployed. Why? Because the company you worked for went bankrupt. The debacle wasn't in any way your fault; it was just bad luck. But if you offer that as the reason for your jobless state, people will mutter behind your back that you are only whining or making excuses. They will suspect that the real reason for your joblessness is a personal flaw of some kind.

Or perhaps your hunt for a new job has been frustrated by prejudice based on race, ethnic origin, or age. That isn't your fault, either, it is just more bad luck. But if you say that's what it is, only a few will believe you.

We are culturally conditioned to deny the role of luck. The search for those elusive inside-the-self reasons even clouds our understanding of literature. All American and European kids (and for all I know, Russian and Chinese kids, too) get the "tragic flaw" theory of great literature laid on them in high school or college. This theory holds that in Shakespeare's tragedies or Dostoevski's novels or the epic poems of Homer, the heroes and heroines always bring their troubles on themselves through some failing of character. Teachers and professors insist that this is so, and many generations of kids have been given the same choice: agree or flunk.

The fact is, however, that you have to look pretty hard to find those "tragic flaws" that supposedly are behind the tragic happenings. There is no good evidence that either Homer or

Shakespeare, for example, bought this goofy theory. In the *Iliad*, much of what happens is brought about by the manipulations of the gods – in other words, by good and bad luck that the human characters have no control of. Shakespeare’s tragedies are similar. *Hamlet* opens with the hero in a fix because of events he had nothing to do with. It ends with nearly everybody dead by mistake – a blither of bloody blunders. It isn’t a play about tragic flaws. It is a play about bad luck.

Why do English professors deny it? A good answer was offered recently by Phyllis Rose, a professor of English at Wesleyan University and no fan of the “tragic flaw” notion. Students are taught that the character flaw is a necessary ingredient of tragedy, Professor Rose wrote in *The New York Times*: “If the hero or heroine didn’t have a flaw, it wouldn’t be tragic because it wouldn’t ‘mean’ anything. It would just be bad luck.”

She added, wryly, “To convince students that bad luck isn’t tragic must take some fancy teaching.” But that is what is taught, and most people seem to buy the notion. And now, we have uncovered yet another reason why the role of luck in human experience is so persistently denied. Luck isn’t “meaningful” enough. We yearn for life to have meaning. Acknowledging luck’s role takes half the meaning out of it.

If I do wrong and come to a bad end as a direct result of my own wickedness or weakness, the episode is supposed to teach some kind of lesson to me and others. But if I’m peacefully walking along the street and get run over by a truck, nobody learns anything.

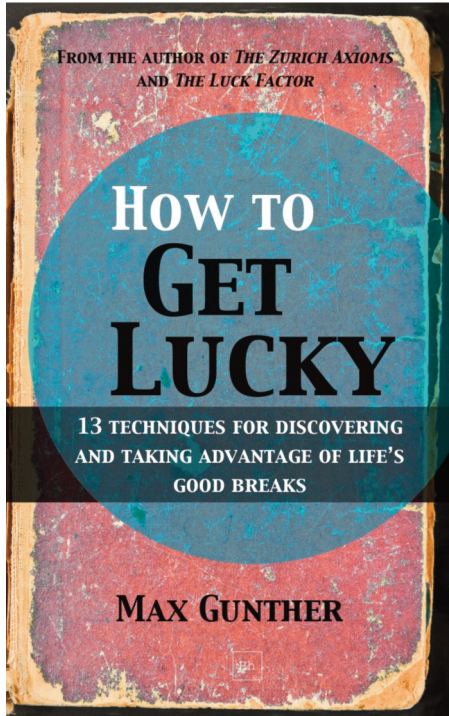
Life is like that much of the time: completely random and meaningless. Not only college English professors but all the rest of us are uncomfortable with that fact. But it is a fact you must look square in the eye if you want to do something about your luck.

The first step toward improving your luck is to acknowledge that it exists. That brings us to the First Technique of Lucky Positioning.

How To Get Lucky

13 techniques for discovering and taking advantage of life's good breaks

Max Gunther



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