



RYAN HOLIDAY

EGO
IS THE
ENEMY

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CONTENTS

The Painful Prologue *xix*

INTRODUCTION 1

PART I. ASPIRE

TALK, TALK, TALK 23

TO BE OR TO DO? 29

BECOME A STUDENT 36

DON'T BE PASSIONATE 44

FOLLOW THE CANVAS STRATEGY 51

RESTRAIN YOURSELF 59

GET OUT OF YOUR OWN HEAD 66

THE DANGER OF EARLY PRIDE 73

WORK, WORK, WORK 79

FOR EVERYTHING THAT COMES NEXT, EGO IS
THE ENEMY . . . 85


PART II. SUCCESS

ALWAYS STAY A STUDENT	101
DON'T TELL YOURSELF A STORY	107
WHAT'S IMPORTANT TO YOU?	114
ENTITLEMENT, CONTROL, AND PARANOIA	120
MANAGING YOURSELF	126
BEWARE THE DISEASE OF ME	132
MEDITATE ON THE IMMENSITY	138
MAINTAIN YOUR SOBRIETY	144
FOR WHAT OFTEN COMES NEXT, EGO IS THE ENEMY . . .	150

PART III. FAILURE

ALIVE TIME OR DEAD TIME?	170
THE EFFORT IS ENOUGH	175
<i>FIGHT CLUB</i> MOMENTS	182
DRAW THE LINE	188
MAINTAIN YOUR OWN SCORECARD	195
ALWAYS LOVE	200
FOR EVERYTHING THAT COMES NEXT, EGO IS THE ENEMY . . .	208

EPILOGUE	211
<i>What Should You Read Next?</i>	<i>219</i>
<i>Selected Bibliography</i>	<i>221</i>
<i>Acknowledgments</i>	<i>225</i>



He is a bold surgeon, they say, whose hand does not tremble when he performs an operation upon his own person; and he is often equally bold who does not hesitate to pull off the mysterious veil of self-delusion, which covers from his view the deformities of his own conduct.

—ADAM SMITH

S ometime around the year 374 B.C., Isocrates, one of the most well-known teachers and rhetoricians in Athens, wrote a letter to a young man named Demonicus. Isocrates had been a friend of the boy's recently deceased father and wanted to pass on to him some advice on how to follow his father's example.

The advice ranged from practical to moral—all communicated in what Isocrates described as “noble maxims.” They were, as he put it, “precepts for the years to come.”

Like many of us, Demonicus was ambitious, which is why Isocrates wrote him, because the path of ambition can be dangerous. Isocrates began by informing the young man that “no adornment so becomes you as modesty, justice, and self-control; for these are the virtues by which, as all men are agreed, the character of the young is held in restraint.”

“Practice self-control,” he said, warning Demonicus not to fall under the sway of “temper, pleasure, and pain.” And “abhor flatterers as you would deceivers; for both, if trusted, injure those who trust them.”

He wanted him to “Be affable in your relations with those who approach you, and never haughty; for the pride of the arrogant even slaves can hardly endure” and “Be slow in deliberation, but be prompt to carry out your resolves” and that the “best thing which we have in ourselves is good judgment.” Constantly train your intellect, he told him, “for the greatest thing in the smallest compass is a sound mind in a human body.”

Some of this advice might sound familiar. Because it made its way over the next two thousand years to William Shakespeare, who often warned about ego run amok. In fact, in *Hamlet*, using this very letter as his model, Shakespeare puts Isocrates’ words in the mouth of his character Polonius in a speech to his son, Laertes. The speech, if you happen to have heard it, wraps up with this little verse.

*This above all: to thine own self be true,
And it must follow, as the night the day,
Thou canst not then be false to any man.
Farewell. My blessing season this in thee!*

As it happened, Shakespeare’s words also made their way to a young United States military officer named William Tecumseh Sherman, who would go on to become perhaps this country’s greatest general and strategic thinker. He may never have heard of Isocrates, but he loved the play and often quoted this very speech.

Like Demonicus', Sherman's father died when he was very young. Like Demonicus, he was taken under the wing of a wise, older man, in this case Thomas Ewing, a soon-to-be U.S. senator and friend of Sherman's father, who adopted the young boy and raised him as his own.

What's interesting about Sherman is that despite his connected father, almost no one would have predicted much more than regional accomplishments—least of all that he would one day need to take the unprecedented step of *refusing the presidency of the United States*. Unlike a Napoleon, who bursts upon the scene from nowhere and disappears in failure just as quickly, Sherman's ascent was a slow and gradual one.

He spent his early years at West Point, and then in the army. For his first few years in service, Sherman traversed nearly the entire United States on horseback, slowly learning with each posting. As the rumblings of Civil War broke out, Sherman made his way east to volunteer his services and he was shortly put to use at the Battle of Bull Run, a rather disastrous Union defeat. Benefiting from a dire shortage of leadership, Sherman was promoted to brigadier general and was summoned to meet with President Lincoln and his top military adviser. On several occasions, Sherman freely strategized and planned with the president, but at the end of his trip, he made one strange request; he'd accept his new promotion only with the assurance that he'd *not* have to assume superior command. Would Lincoln give him his word on that? With every other general asking for as much rank and power as possible, Lincoln happily agreed.

At this point in time, Sherman felt more comfortable as a

number two. He felt he had an honest appreciation for his own abilities and that this role best suited him. Imagine that—an ambitious person turning down a chance to advance in responsibilities because he actually wanted to be ready for them. Is that really so crazy?

Not that Sherman was always the perfect model of restraint and order. Early in the war, tasked with defending the state of Kentucky with insufficient troops, his mania and tendency to doubt himself combined in a wicked way. Ranting and raving about being undersupplied, unable to get out of his own head, paranoid about enemy movements, he broke form and spoke injudiciously to several newspaper reporters. In the ensuing controversy, he was temporarily recalled from his command. It took weeks of rest for him to recover. It was one of a few nearly catastrophic moments in his otherwise steadily ascendant career.

It was after this brief stumble—having learned from it—that Sherman truly made his mark. For instance, during the siege at Fort Donelson, Sherman technically held a senior rank to General Ulysses S. Grant. While the rest of Lincoln's generals fought amongst themselves for personal power and recognition, Sherman waived his rank, choosing to cheerfully support and reinforce Grant instead of issuing orders. This is your show, Sherman told him in a note accompanying a shipment of supplies; call upon me for any assistance I can provide. Together, they won one of the Union's first victories in the war.

Building on his successes, Sherman began to advocate for his famous march to the sea—a strategically bold and audacious plan, not born out of some creative genius but rather relying on the exact topography he had scouted and

studied as a young officer in what had then seemed like a pointless backwater outpost.

Where Sherman had once been cautious, he was now confident. But unlike so many others who possess great ambition, he *earned* this opinion. As he carved a path from Chattanooga to Atlanta and then Atlanta to the sea, he avoided traditional battle after traditional battle. Any student of military history can see how the exact same invasion, driven by ego instead of a strong sense of purpose, would have had a far different ending.

His realism allowed him to see a path through the South that others thought impossible. His entire theory of maneuver warfare rested on deliberately avoiding frontal assaults or shows of strength in the form of pitched battles, and ignoring criticism designed to bait a reaction. He paid no notice and stuck to his plan.

By the end of the war, Sherman was one of the most famous men in America, and yet he sought no public office, had no taste for politics, and wished simply to do his job and then eventually retire. Dismissing the incessant praise and attention endemic to such success, he wrote as a warning to his friend Grant, “Be natural and yourself and this glittering flattery will be as the passing breeze of the sea on a warm summer day.”

One of Sherman’s biographers summarized the man and his unique accomplishments in a remarkable passage. It is why he serves as our model in this phase of our ascent.

Among men who rise to fame and leadership two types are recognizable—those who are born with a belief in themselves and those in whom it is a slow growth dependent on actual achievement. To the

EGO IS THE ENEMY

men of the last type their own success is a constant surprise, and its fruits the more delicious, yet to be tested cautiously with a haunting sense of doubt whether it is not all a dream. In that doubt lies true modesty, not the sham of insincere self-depreciation but the modesty of “moderation,” in the Greek sense. It is poise, not pose.

One must ask: if your belief in yourself is *not* dependent on actual achievement, then what is it dependent on? The answer, too often when we are just setting out, is *nothing*. Ego. And this is why we so often see precipitous rises followed by calamitous falls.

So which type of person will you be?

Like all of us, Sherman had to balance talent and ambition and intensity, especially when he was young. His victory in this struggle was largely why he was able to manage the life-altering success that eventually came his way.

This probably all sounds strange. Where Isocrates and Shakespeare wished us to be self-contained, self-motivated, and ruled by principle, most of us have been trained to do the opposite. Our cultural values almost try to make us dependent on validation, entitled, and ruled by our emotions. For a generation, parents and teachers have focused on building up everyone’s *self-esteem*. From there, the themes of our gurus and public figures have been almost exclusively aimed at inspiring, encouraging, and assuring us that we can do whatever we set our minds to.

In reality, this makes us weak. Yes, you, with all your talent and promise as a boy wonder or a girl-who’s-going-places. We take it for granted that you have promise. It’s why you’ve

landed in the prestigious university you now attend, why you've secured the funding you have for your business, why you've been hired or promoted, why whatever opportunity you now have has fallen into your lap. As Irving Berlin put it, "Talent is only the starting point." The question is: Will you be able to make the most of it? Or will you be your own worst enemy? Will you snuff out the flame that is just getting going?

What we see in Sherman was a man deeply tied and connected to reality. He was a man who came from nothing and accomplished great things, without ever feeling that he was in some way *entitled* to the honors he received. In fact, he regularly and consistently deferred to others and was more than happy to contribute to a winning team, even if it meant less credit or fame for himself. It's sad to think that generations of young boys learned about Pickett's glorious cavalry charge, a Confederate charge that *failed*, but the model of Sherman as a quiet, unglamorous realist is forgotten, or worse, vilified.

One might say that the ability to evaluate one's own ability is the most important skill of all. Without it, improvement is impossible. And certainly ego makes it difficult every step of the way. It is certainly more pleasurable to focus on our talents and strengths, but where does that get us? Arrogance and self-absorption inhibit growth. So does fantasy and "vision."

In this phase, you must practice seeing yourself with a little distance, cultivating the ability to get out of your own head. Detachment is a sort of natural ego antidote. It's *easy* to be emotionally invested and infatuated with your own work. Any and every narcissist can do that. What is rare is not

raw talent, skill, or even confidence, but humility, diligence, and self-awareness.

For your work to have truth in it, it must come from truth. If you want to be more than a flash in the pan, you must be prepared to focus on the long term.

We will learn that though we *think* big, we must act and live small in order to accomplish what we seek. Because we will be *action* and *education* focused, and forgo validation and status, our ambition will not be grandiose but iterative—one foot in front of the other, learning and growing and putting in the time.

With their aggression, intensity, self-absorption, and endless self-promotion, our competitors don't realize how they jeopardize their own efforts (to say nothing of their sanity). We will challenge the myth of the self-assured genius for whom doubt and introspection is foreign, as well as challenge the myth of pained, tortured artist who must sacrifice his health for his work. Where they are both divorced from reality and divorced from other people, we will be deeply connected, aware, and learning from all of it.

Facts are better than dreams, as Churchill put it.

Although we share with many others a *vision* for greatness, we understand that our *path* toward it is very different from theirs. Following Sherman and Isocrates, we understand that ego is our enemy on that journey, so that when we do achieve our success, it will not sink us but make us stronger.

TALK, TALK, TALK

Those who know do not speak.
Those who speak do not know.

—LAO TZU

In his famous 1934 campaign for the governorship of California, the author and activist Upton Sinclair took an unusual step. Before the election, he published a short book titled *I, Governor of California and How I Ended Poverty*, in which he outlined, in the past tense, the brilliant policies he had enacted as governor . . . the office he had not yet won.

It was an untraditional move from an untraditional campaign, intended to leverage Sinclair's best asset—as an author, he knew he could communicate with the public in a way that others couldn't. Now, Sinclair's campaign was always a long shot and hardly in good shape when they published the book. But observers at the time noticed immediately the effect it had—not on the voters, but on Sinclair himself. As Carey McWilliams later wrote about his friend's gubernatorial bid as it went south, “Upton not only realized

that he would be defeated but seemed somehow to have lost interest in the campaign. In that vivid imagination of his, he had already acted out the part of ‘I, Governor of California,’ . . . so why bother to enact it in real life?”

The book was a best seller, the campaign a failure. Sinclair lost by something like a quarter of a million votes (a margin of more than 10 percentage points); he was utterly decimated in what was probably the first modern election. It’s clear what happened: his talk got out ahead of his campaign and the will to bridge the gap collapsed. Most politicians don’t write books like that, but they get ahead of themselves just the same.

It’s a temptation that exists for everyone—for talk and hype to replace action.

The empty text box: “What’s on your mind?” Facebook asks. “Compose a new tweet,” Twitter beckons. Tumblr. LinkedIn. Our inbox, our iPhones, the comments section on the bottom of the article you just read.

Blank spaces, begging to be filled in with thoughts, with photos, with stories. With what we’re *going* to do, with what things *should* or *could* be like, what we hope will happen. Technology, asking you, prodding you, soliciting *talk*.

Almost universally, the kind of performance we give on social media is *positive*. It’s more “Let me tell you how well things are going. Look how great I am.” It’s rarely the truth: “I’m scared. I’m struggling. I don’t know.”

At the beginning of any path, we’re excited and nervous. So we seek to comfort ourselves externally instead of inwardly. There’s a weak side to each of us, that—like a trade union—isn’t exactly malicious but at the end of the day still

wants get as much public credit and attention as it can for doing the least. That side we call ego.

The writer and former Gawker blogger Emily Gould—a real-life Hannah Horvath if there ever was one—realized this during her two-year struggle to get a novel published. Though she had a six-figure book deal, she was stuck. Why? She was too busy “spending a lot of time on the Internet,” that’s why.

In fact, I can’t really remember anything else I did in 2010. I tumbl’d, I tweeted, and I scrolled. This didn’t earn me any money but it felt like work. I justified my habits to myself in various ways. I was building my brand. Blogging was a creative act—even “curating” by reblogging someone else’s post was a creative act, if you squinted. It was also the only creative thing I was doing.

In other words, she did what a lot of us do when we’re scared or overwhelmed by a project: she did everything *but* focus on it. The actual novel she was supposed to be working on stalled completely. For a year.

It was easier to talk about writing, to do the exciting things related to art and creativity and literature, than to commit the act itself. She’s not the only one. Someone recently published a book called *Working On My Novel*, filled with social media posts from writers who are clearly *not* working on their novels.

Writing, like so many creative acts, is hard. Sitting there, staring, mad at yourself, mad at the material because it doesn’t seem good enough and *you* don’t seem good enough.