

# **The Daily Laws**

# What's in it for me? A roadmap to the realities of the modern world.

Imagine life as it used to be for our distant ancestors. Here, in this wilderness, food is always scarce. Danger is everywhere. The weather can shift in a second. A predator could be crouched in the grass. Everywhere there are threats and obstacles. One bad decision, one moment of inattentiveness, and that's it – game over. Here, failing to pay attention to reality means, at best, injury and, at worst, death. The brain evolved to keep us alive in this environment. It's a tool, a tool for navigating a perilous reality – the reality of hunting and gathering and avoiding the jaws of saber-toothed tigers. Fast-forward to today. There's food on the table. We live in cities, sheltered from the elements. The saber-toothed tigers are long dead. But we've still got the same tool in our head, a brain that evolved over the course of thousands of years to help us navigate a reality that we can now only imagine. Today, unlike our ancestors, we can indulge in fantasies and daydreams. We can let our guard down, and our environment probably won't kill us. Today, the main threats we face are interpersonal, psychological, posed by other people rather than predators. These dangers are subtler than the dangers of old. It's possible, even, to ignore them, to pretend they don't exist. It's possible, in other words, to detach from reality – to become naive. But the dangers are very much there. And you ignore them at your peril. The purpose of these blinks is to bring you into intimate contact with the reality we live in now. So let's get into it and take a quick trip through *The Daily Laws*, by Robert Greene.

## January

First things first: Why is it called *The Daily Laws*? Well, Robert Greene structured his material like a calendar. There are 12 sections, one for each month of the year, and for every day of the month there's a piece of advice. Greene calls these bits of advice "laws." Hence the title: a law for each day – *The Daily Laws*. We'll cover each month, exploring the most important laws. And, heads up, the first three blinks aren't really about bringing you into closer contact with the interpersonal perils of reality today. But don't fret. We'll get there. Ready to start? Then let's begin at the beginning: January. And, by the way, you're reading this and it's not January, don't stress. Just think of this as the January of your journey, the beginning, the head of the trail. The first part of the journey is about Mastery. And the first step on that journey is identifying your Life Task. We won't get to Mastery in this blink. Mastery is the theme of blink number three. This month, there's one law that's absolutely crucial: Reconnect with your childhood passions and find your Life Task. How do you find your Life Task? Well, it's maybe better to think of it not as a treasure hunt, as a seeking for something out there, but as an archeological dig, an unearthing of something inside of you. The story of Robert Greene's life task is the perfect example. As a child, Greene knew what he wanted to be. He loved words. He wanted to be a writer – maybe a novelist. Then came high school, college, graduation. He had to find a job, make a living. He still loved words – loved reading, loved writing. But being a novelist wasn't going to pay the bills. He became a journalist. Which didn't last. A few years later, an editor advised him to switch careers. His style was strange, his ideas were esoteric, he wasn't "writer material." Greene was devastated. But he realized that the editor was right. He still loved words, still loved writing. But he wasn't a journalist. He didn't know it at the time, but he was a different

kind of writer. And thus began a long period of searching. He traveled Europe, from Greece to Barcelona, Paris to Dublin. He took whatever work presented itself: construction, English teaching, receptionist at a hotel. All this time, he read and he wrote. He returned to Los Angeles, his home town. More odd jobs. More reading. Always writing. By the time he was 36, he'd worked about sixty jobs since quitting journalism. From the outside, he seemed adrift, unmoored, and there were periods of self-doubt and depression – but something prevented him from feeling truly lost. There was always a feeling that he was being guided by an inner force. When his big opportunity came, he was ready. While in Italy, he met a book producer, and he found himself pitching an idea – an idea that would later become *The 48 Laws of Power*. Suddenly, all that reading he'd done, all the ideas he'd absorbed, coalesced into a coherent, compelling pitch. The rest is history. He got a book deal and the book was a huge success. The point is this: Greene knew, even when he was a little kid – some part of him knew what his Life Task was. It was to write. Though there were false starts, though there was lots of seemingly aimless wandering, he did arrive at his Life Task. Had he not paid attention to that inner voice, had he ignored the impulse to write, his Life Task might have remained unrealized. So what's your Life Task? A good place to start is with your childhood. What were you obsessed with? What did you love doing? If you can't remember, ask someone who can, a parent or a grandparent, maybe a family friend. Even if you don't know what it is at this exact moment, your Life Task is there, waiting to be unearthed.

## February

February is the month of apprenticeship. If February could only have one law, it might be this: there's no skipping the Apprenticeship Phase. If you want to get to the next step, Mastery, you cannot skip the Apprenticeship Phase. Think of anyone that you consider a master – Leonardo di Vinci, Bruce Lee, even Robert Greene. In each case, pretty much always, there was a long Apprenticeship Phase that preceded Mastery. Geniuses are not born fully formed. In Greene's case, he did tons of reading and writing before he published his first book. Or take Napoleon. He was famous for his seemingly preternatural military skill. A quick look at the map or at the enemy's distant encampment – and boom, he'd suddenly know whether to fall back or advance, or simply to delay for the time being. His subordinates were in awe of him. Did their leader have mystical powers or what? You know where this is going. Napoleon's skills weren't mystical. They were the product of a long and intense apprenticeship. At military academy, he had burned with ambition, and he found himself entrusted with serious responsibilities at a young age. Through long years of arduous study and incessant practice, he honed his abilities bit by bit. So what's the law? There's no skipping the Apprenticeship Phase! People may look like natural geniuses; they're almost certainly not. Remember this, and accept that you'll be an apprentice many times in your life – like every time you set out to learn a new skill or step into a new role. Don't let the Apprenticeship Phase frustrate you. Embrace it. Learn all you can. And, slowly but surely, you'll get through it and enter the next phase.

## March

Which is Mastery. After the Apprentice Phase comes Mastery. But a quick thing about Mastery. It's not a destination. You don't get there and call it a day. It's an ongoing process, a practice, a state of being. Rather than "attaining" Mastery, it might be better

to talk about “maintaining” Mastery. In some ways, Mastery is just an extension of the Apprenticeship Phase, since, even as a Master, you need to remain committed to learning, to growing, to developing your skills. Only difference is you’re not apprenticed to a Master; you’re apprenticed to Mastery – to the act of learning itself, the act of striving toward Mastery. The instant you stop learning is the instant you’ll start to lose your grasp on Mastery. So what’s March’s main law? Mastery is a process. But also: always try to get to the Inside. What’s this mean? Well, think of learning any complicated skill. Learning the piano, say. At the beginning, you’re on the outside: the piano is just a bunch of black and white keys. At this point, that’s about all you’ve got. You don’t know how to play a chord or a scale. You’re on the outside. The goal is to get to the Inside. This means going through the arduous, boring, slow process of learning the basics. This process isn’t necessarily fun. It’s often disorienting and aggravating – but, little by little, the piano stops being a jumble of keys. You start to think in chords. You stop thinking about where your fingers should go. You’ve entered into the instrument, playing instinctually, understanding it not from the outside in but from the inside out. That’s what it means to get Inside. And that’s about as good a description of Mastery as you’re going to get. Whatever you’re undertaking, be it a sport or a writing project or learning the piano, you have to get to the Inside. Remember, though, that it’s a process. You can get to the Inside – but you can always go deeper. You can always learn more. A Master is never content with where they are. Real Master’s are eternally pursuing Mastery, always trying to get even more Inside.

## April

It’s time for a subject change. The last three months were about the path to Mastery. The next five – so, through August – are about the game of power that’s always being played, both in the workplace and out, and how to navigate that game. So let’s get started. If there were only one law for April, it’d be this: Never Outshine the Master. During Greene’s period of searching, when he bounced from job to job, back before he wrote *The 48 Laws of Power*, he worked as a researcher, digging up interesting life stories for inclusion in a series of documentaries. At the time, Greene was in his mid-twenties, and when it came to the world of power plays and office politics – the game of power that’s always being played – he was completely naive. He had no idea there was a game. And he paid a price for that. He was great at his job. He was ambitious. He was friendly. He had excellent ideas. But, for some reason, his boss seemed to hate him. So Greene did everything he could to make her like him. He talked to her more. He tried to get her more involved in the development of his ideas. This didn’t help. Actually, it seemed to make the problem worse. In the end, baffled and frustrated, he quit. So what had Greene done wrong? In short, he’d outshone the master. He’d been too hungry, too ambitious, simply too good at what he did. His success made his boss feel insecure, and violated this month’s law, which, again, is “Don’t Outshine the Master.” It was hard at the time, but, long term, it helped Greene. He lost his naivety, and became an observer, and a player, of the game of power, which we’ll be talking about even more in the next blink.

## May

May’s law is short and sweet: The game of power is always being played. Always. That’s the reality. You can pretend the game doesn’t exist. But that doesn’t put an end to the game. This gives you three options: embrace it, deny it, or accept it. Embracing it, really

loving the game, can be an issue. I'm talking about the Machiavellis among us – the people who both delight in manipulation and con-artistry and also think these are the only tools you need to get through life. They fail to understand that, sure, people are power hungry and manipulative, but they can also be empathic and cooperative. Not understanding this means that the true-blue Machievellis pretty much always fall from power. They never get past a certain point because they don't understand all sides of the game. Denying the game also has drawbacks. That is, if you want power. It doesn't matter whether you truly believe there is no game or whether you find participating in the game distasteful – total nonparticipation will result, over time, in you being pushed aside. You may be fine with that. You may not want power and responsibility precisely because attaining it requires game-playing. If you want responsibility, though, if you want power, there's one approach that's better than the rest: acceptance. Wanting power? That's just part of human nature. It always has been. It always will be. You don't have to like it. You don't have to dislike it. All you have to do is accept it. The game is always being played. With this acceptance, you can choose to stay on the sidelines sometimes, simply observing. Other times, you can engage, using your knowledge of the game to improve your position. Other people are playing this game constantly, so it behooves you to learn the rules, to understand the laws of power. So remember: the game of power is always being played. There's no opting out. And it's best to simply accept that.

## June

So let's assume that you want power. That's understandable. It's only natural. What are the tools that will help you get it? Well, one invaluable skill is the art of deception. Officially, we disapprove of deception. Good people are forthright, frank, honest. They tell the truth, whether it's in their interest or not. Lies and masquerades, on the other hand, are the preserve of cowards and con artists. Or at least, that's the official line. In reality, human interaction depends on deception: on bluffs, half truths and, sometimes, outright lies. If you want power, it's best to acknowledge this and use it to your advantage. You don't need to constantly deceive others, of course. But you also shouldn't deceive yourself. Deception is part of the game. So what is June's law? Never unintentionally disparage someone's intelligence. Intelligence and ego are inextricably linked. Just think about how hard it is to acknowledge that someone else is more intelligent than you are. Not to pay lip service to their intelligence – but to really acknowledge your intellectual inferiority and their intellectual superiority. We immediately start to come up with justifications, right? Like, "Sure, she may have a PhD, but she's not so bright when it comes to day-to-day life" or "Well, he had an expensive education, and if I'd had those opportunities . . ." You get the idea. Intelligence is central to the way people see themselves – so it's never a good idea to make someone feel unintelligent. They'll resent you and they'll still think they're smarter. So it's far better to deceive them. Even if you know that you're smarter than someone, you should make them feel that their intellect is superior to yours. This will soften them up, make them lower their guard, which will create an environment where it'll be easier to get what you're after: power.

## July and August

The laws in July and August are similar. July is all about seduction. August is all about persuasion. Both of these skills are central to the game of power. Power comes in many



forms, but some are harder to detect than others. We're so used to imagining power as brute force that we forget it's often a subtler phenomenon. The ability to entice people, to excite their interest - in other words, the ability to seduce and persuade them - is a form of power that's easily as potent as the power to intimidate or suppress, and it's usually far more effective. Winning someone to your side is better than forcing someone to join it. So what are the most important laws when it comes to seduction and persuasion? For seduction, an invaluable tactic is delaying satisfaction. Here, we can learn from the figure of the coquette. A coquette is a flirt, a woman who can wrap men around her finger by enticing them and holding them at bay at the same time. She seems to hold out satisfaction - in the form of sex, attention, or love - only to dash her suitors' hopes by changing her capricious mind once again. She knows all too well that attraction grows when it's unsatisfied, and that holding herself aloof is often the best way to woo. When it comes to persuasion, let's return to that giant of history: Napoleon. Just as a coquette keeps her suitors on the edge of their seats, promising satisfaction yet never quite giving it, Napoleon, history's greatest manager of men, kept his subordinates in suspense. Here's how: he knew precisely how to use reward and punishment to influence behavior. He rarely rebuked people - but that made his rebukes all the more effective. Their rarity gave them extra force. He also rarely gave praise or promotions; when he did, it was only ever merit-based. Again, the rarity of the praise increased its value tenfold. The effect this approach had was this: his soldiers were in perpetual suspense, always afraid of displeasing, always hoping to impress. You're probably familiar with the result. Napoleon commanded millions of young men - none of them particularly disciplined or soldierly - and transformed them into an army of exceeding power and effectiveness. So that's August's central law: keep the people you want to control in suspense. And don't forget about delaying satisfaction - the more you make someone wait for something, the more they'll want it.

## September, October, and November

Life can sometimes feel like a battlefield. We're beset on all sides by struggles and difficulties, trials and tribulations. Sometimes just getting by can seem to require more strength than we possess. That's why it's important to be able to elevate yourself above the petty struggles of each day - to adopt a higher and wider perspective, a point of vantage from which life's daily battles seem smaller and more manageable. Taking this perspective means thinking strategically, with a view to our long-term goals and our deepest convictions. When we fail to elevate our thoughts in this way, we get stuck in tactical hell, bogged down in trifles and reacting unthinkingly to every stressor life throws in our way. Bickering couples often find themselves in tactical hell. They get so wrapped up in winning each battle and proving themselves right, that they forget the long-term damage they're doing to their relationship. Instead of elevating their perspective, they get stuck in the bitter here-and-now. The only way out is to take a step back and gain some detachment. Ask yourself: Do I need to be enmeshed in this battle - or is there another, higher perspective I can take? That's September's law - take an elevated view of life. October's law is similar. It encourages us to get in touch with our negative emotions, like fear or anger - to analyze them rather than dwelling on them. One way to do this is simply to take a step back, which is November's law. When you feel yourself being drawn into an emotional whirlpool, allowing yourself to become embroiled in some sudden upsetting passion, pause for a minute. Wait before responding to that text. Go ahead and write the email, but wait a bit before sending it. Refraining from action gets easier the more you do it - think of it like a muscle you're strengthening. By avoiding the pull of petty yet draining situations, you save your time

for the things that really matter.

# December

This is the last blink, and it's about taking the themes of the previous blink to an even higher level. What are the things that really matter in life? What is it you should spend your precious time doing? If not squabbling, if not battling, what are you to do in the spare moments life affords you? Well, you could start by appreciating life more – by intensifying your sense of awe at the grandeur of the universe, and reflecting on your good fortune for existing within it. Too often, we allow our minds to circle the same pedestrian, uninspiring topics day after day, thinking about our bills and chores and reputations. But what if you made a conscious effort to dwell on grander things instead – on the limitlessness of time and space, on the eons of evolution that went into creating us, on the awesome power and complexity of the human mind? The author calls this grandeur the Cosmic Sublime – the magnificence of the universe, in other words. How much richer life seems when we attune ourselves to this beauty, instead of the fanfare of the media and its cycle of celebrities! A great role model here is the writer Virginia Woolf. When she was 23, she returned for the first time in years to her family's cottage by the sea. In the intervening time, her mother, father and closest step sister had died. The empty house and, nearby, the relentless sound of waves on the shore, brought home to Woolf the inescapable passage of time. Listening to the waves, Woolf was overcome by a sense of the infinite, of the antiquity and the perpetuity of the sea. Over the next three decades, Woolf would return again and again to the same spot – and eventually capture her experience of the Cosmic Sublime in a novel, *To the Lighthouse*, a difficult but breathtakingly beautiful book. These blinks were, for the most part, about the game of power and how best to play that game – but it's crucial to rest, to take a step back, to remember that the game, though it's always being played, is just a human invention. Best case scenario, it results in a breakthrough – a creative work like Woolf's novel. At the very least, it'll leave you refreshed for the next round.

## Final summary

The first three blinks were about the path toward mastery. First, you have to identify your Life Task. Second, the Apprenticeship Phase – there's no skipping it. And, finally, Mastery is a process. Next, Never Outshine the Master, and remember: the game of power is always being played; there's no opting out. A valuable tool in the game is deception. This doesn't mean you need to deceive people all the time, but don't deceive yourself into thinking that others aren't trying to deceive you. Seduction and persuasion are two more powerful tools. You can seduce by delaying satisfaction and persuade by keeping people in suspense. Avoid tactical hell by elevating your perspective, analyzing your negative emotions, and, when necessary, taking a step back. Finally, get in touch with the Cosmic Sublime. Who knows, you might write a literary classic. Worst case, it'll leave you refreshed for the next round of the game.