

CREATE A SENSE OF URGENCY AND DESPERATION

THE DEATH-GROUND STRATEGY

You are your own worst enemy. You waste precious time dreaming of the future instead of engaging in the present. Since nothing seems urgent to you, you are only half involved in what you do. The only way to change is through action and outside pressure. Put yourself in situations where you have too much at stake to waste time or resources--if you cannot afford to lose, you won't. Cut your ties to the past; enter unknown territory where you must depend on your wits and energy to see you through. Place yourself on "death ground," where your back is against the wall and you have to fight like hell to get out alive.

Cortes ran all that aground with the ten ships. Cuba, to be sure, was still there, in the blue sea, with its farms, its cows and its tame Indians; but the way to Cuba was no longer through sunny blue waves, rocked in soft idleness, oblivious of danger and endeavor; it was through Motecucuma's court, which had to be conquered by ruse, by force, or by both; through a sea of warlike Indians who ate their prisoners and donned their skins as trophies; at the stroke of their chief's masterly hand, the five hundred men had lost that flow of vital memories and hopes which linked up their souls with their mother-island; at one stroke, their backs had been withered and had lost all sense of life. Henceforward, for them, all life was ahead, towards those forbidding peaks which rose gigantically on the horizon as if to bar all access to what was now not merely their ambition, but their only possible aim--Mexico, mysterious and powerful behind the conflicting tribes.

HERNAN CORTES: CONQUEROR OF MEXICO, SALVADOR DE
MADARIAGA, 1942

THE NO-RETURN TACTIC

In 1504 an ambitious nineteen-year-old Spaniard named Hernan Cortes gave up his studies in law and sailed for his country's colonies in the New World. Stopping first in Santo Domingo (the island today comprising Haiti and the Dominican Republic), then in Cuba, he soon heard about a land to the west called Mexico--an empire teeming with gold and dominated by the Aztecs, with

their magnificent highland capital of Tenochtitlan. From then on, Cortes had just one thought: someday he would conquer and settle the land of Mexico.

Over the next ten years, Cortes slowly rose through the ranks, eventually becoming secretary to the Spanish governor of Cuba and then the king's treasurer for the island. In his own mind, though, he was merely biding his time. He waited patiently while Spain sent other men to Mexico, many of them never to return.

Finally, in 1518, the governor of Cuba, Diego de Velazquez, made Cortes the leader of an expedition to discover what had happened to these earlier explorers, find gold, and lay the groundwork for the country's conquest. Velazquez wanted to make that future conquest himself, however, so for this expedition he wanted a man he could control, and he soon developed doubts about Cortes--the man was clever, perhaps too much so. Word reached Cortes that the governor was having second thoughts about sending him to Mexico. Deciding to give Velazquez no time to nurse his misgivings, he managed to slip out of Cuba in the middle of the night with eleven ships. He would explain himself to the governor later.

The expedition landed on Mexico's east coast in March 1519. Over the next few months, Cortes put his plans to work--founding the town of Veracruz, forging alliances with local tribes who hated the Aztecs, and making initial contact with the Aztec emperor, whose capital lay some 250 miles to the west. But one problem plagued the conquistador: among the 500 soldiers who had sailed with him from Cuba were a handful who had been placed there by Velazquez to act as spies and make trouble for him if he exceeded his authority. These Velazquez loyalists accused Cortes of mismanaging the gold that he was collecting, and when it became clear that he intended to conquer Mexico, they spread rumors that he was insane--an all-too-convincing accusation to make about a man planning to lead 500 men against half a million Aztecs, fierce warriors known to eat their prisoners' flesh and wear the skins as trophies. A rational man would take the gold they had, return to Cuba, and come back later with an army. Why stay in this forbidding land, with its diseases and its lack of creature comforts, when they were so heavily outnumbered? Why not sail for Cuba, back home where their farms, their wives, and the good life awaited them?

Cortes did what he could with these troublemakers, bribing some, keeping a close eye on others. Meanwhile he worked to build a strong enough rapport with the rest of his men that the grumblers could do no harm. All seemed well until the night of July 30, when Cortes was awoken by a Spanish sailor who, begging for mercy, confessed that he had joined in a plot to steal a ship and return that very evening to Cuba, where the conspirators would tell Velazquez about

Cortes's goal of conquering Mexico on his own.

Meditation on inevitable death should be performed daily. Every day when one's body and mind are at peace, one should meditate upon being ripped apart by arrows, rifles, spears and swords, being carried away by surging waves, being thrown into the midst of a great fire, being struck by lightning, being shaken to death by a great earthquake, falling from thousand-foot cliffs, dying of disease or committing seppuku at the death of one's master. And every day without fail one should consider himself as dead.

HAGAKURE: THE BOOK OF THE SAMURAI, YAMAMOTO
TSUNETOMO, 1659-1720

Cortes sensed that this was the decisive moment of the expedition. He could easily squash the conspiracy, but there would be others. His men were a rough lot, and their minds were on gold, Cuba, their families--anything but fighting the Aztecs. He could not conquer an empire with men so divided and untrustworthy, but how to fill them with the energy and focus for the immense task he faced? Thinking this through, he decided to take swift action. He seized the conspirators and had the two ringleaders hanged. Next, he bribed his pilots to bore holes in all of the ships and then announce that worms had eaten through the boards of the vessels, making them unseaworthy.

Pretending to be upset at the news, Cortes ordered what was salvageable from the ships to be taken ashore and then the hulls to be sunk. The pilots complied, but not enough holes had been bored, and only five of the ships went down. The story of the worms was plausible enough, and the soldiers accepted the news of the five ships with equanimity. But when a few days later more ships were run aground and only one was left afloat, it was clear to them that Cortes had arranged the whole thing. When he called a meeting, their mood was mutinous and murderous.

This was no time for subtlety. Cortes addressed his men: he was responsible for the disaster, he admitted; he had ordered it done, but now there was no turning back. They could hang him, but they were surrounded by hostile Indians and had no ships; divided and leaderless, they would perish. The only alternative was to follow him to Tenochtitlan. Only by conquering the Aztecs, by becoming lords of Mexico, could they get back to Cuba alive. To reach Tenochtitlan they would have to fight with utter intensity. They would have to be unified; any dissension would lead to defeat and a terrible death. The situation was desperate, but if the men fought desperately in turn, Cortes guaranteed that he would lead them to victory. Since the army was so small in number, the glory and riches

would be all the greater. Any cowards not up to the challenge could sail the one remaining ship home.

There is something in war that drives so deeply into you that death ceases to be the enemy, merely another participant in a game you don't wish to end.

PHANTOM OVER VIETNAM, JOHN TROTTI, USMC, 1984

No one accepted the offer, and the last ship was run aground. Over the next months, Cortes kept his army away from Veracruz and the coast. Their attention was focused on Tenochtitlan, the heart of the Aztec empire. The grumbling, the self-interest, and the greed all disappeared. Understanding the danger of their situation, the conquistadors fought ruthlessly. Some two years after the destruction of the Spanish ships, and with the help of their Indian allies, Cortes's army laid siege to Tenochtitlan and conquered the Aztec empire.

"You don't have time for this display, you fool," he said in a severe tone. "This, whatever you're doing now, may be your last act on earth. It may very well be your last battle. There is no power which could guarantee that you are going to live one more minute...." "...Acts have power," he said, "Especially when the person acting knows that those acts are his last battle. There is a strange consuming happiness in acting with the full knowledge that whatever one is doing may very well be one's last act on earth. I recommend that you reconsider your life and bring your acts into that light.... Focus your attention on the link between you and your death, without remorse or sadness or worrying. Focus your attention on the fact you don't have time and let your acts flow accordingly. Let each of your acts be your last battle on earth. Only under those conditions will your acts have their rightful power. Otherwise they will be, for as long as you live, the acts of a timid man." "Is it so terrible to be a timid man?" "No. It isn't if you are going to be immortal, but if you are going to die there is not time for timidity, simply because timidity makes you cling to something that exists only in your thoughts. It soothes you while everything is at a lull, but then the awesome, mysterious world will open its mouth for you, as it will open for every one of us, and then you will realize that your sure ways were not sure at all. Being timid prevents us from examining and exploiting our lot as men."

JOURNEY TO IXTLAN: THE LESSONS OF DON JUAN, CARLOS
CASTANEDA, 1972

Interpretation On the night of the conspiracy, Cortes had to think fast. What

was the root of the problem he faced? It was not Velazquez's spies, or the hostile Aztecs, or the incredible odds against him. The root of the problem was his own men and the ships in the harbor. His soldiers were divided in heart and mind. They were thinking about the wrong things--their wives, their dreams of gold, their plans for the future. And in the backs of their minds there was always an escape route: if this conquest business went badly, they could go home. Those ships in the harbor were more than just transportation; they represented Cuba, the freedom to leave, the ability to send for reinforcements--so many possibilities.

For the soldiers the ships were a crutch, something to fall back on if things got ugly. Once Cortes had identified the problem, the solution was simple: destroy the ships. By putting his men in a desperate place, he would make them fight with utmost intensity.

A sense of urgency comes from a powerful connection to the present. Instead of dreaming of rescue or hoping for a better future, you have to face the issue at hand. Fail and you perish. People who involve themselves completely in the immediate problem are intimidating; because they are focusing so intensely, they seem more powerful than they are. Their sense of urgency multiplies their strength and gives them momentum. Instead of five hundred men, Cortes suddenly had the weight of a much larger army at his back.

Like Cortes you must locate the root of your problem. It is not the people around you; it is yourself, and the spirit with which you face the world. In the back of your mind, you keep an escape route, a crutch, something to turn to if things go bad. Maybe it is some wealthy relative you can count on to buy your way out; maybe it is some grand opportunity on the horizon, the endless vistas of time that seem to be before you; maybe it is a familiar job or a comfortable relationship that is always there if you fail. Just as Cortes's men saw their ships as insurance, you may see this fallback as a blessing--but in fact it is a curse. It divides you. Because you think you have options, you never involve yourself deeply enough in one thing to do it thoroughly, and you never quite get what you want. Sometimes you need to run your ships aground, burn them, and leave yourself just one option: succeed or go down. Make the burning of your ships as real as possible--get rid of your safety net. Sometimes you have to become a little desperate to get anywhere.

The ancient commanders of armies, who well knew the powerful influence of necessity, and how it inspired the soldiers with the most desperate courage, neglected nothing to subject their men to such a pressure.

--Niccolo Machiavelli (1469-1527)

THE DEATH-AT-YOUR-HEELS TACTIC

In 1845 the writer Fyodor Dostoyevsky, then twenty-four, shook the Russian literary world with the publication of his first novel, *Poor Folk*. He became the toast of St. Petersburg society. But something about his early fame seemed empty to him. He drifted into the fringes of left-wing politics, attending meetings of various socialist and radical groups. One of these groups centered on the charismatic Mikhail Petrashevsky.

Three years later, in 1848, revolution broke out all across Europe. Inspired by what was happening in the West, Russian radical groups like Petrashevsky's talked of following suit. But agents of Czar Nicholas I had infiltrated many of these groups, and reports were written about the wild things being discussed at Petrashevsky's house, including talk of inciting peasant revolts. Dostoyevsky was fervent about freeing the serfs, and on April 23, 1849, he and twenty-three other members of the Petrashevsky group were arrested.

After eight months of languishing in jail, the prisoners were awakened one cold morning and told that today they would finally hear their sentences. A few months' exile was the usual punishment for their crime; soon, they thought, their ordeal would be over.

They were bundled into carriages and driven through the icy streets of St. Petersburg. Emerging from the carriages into Semyonovsky Square, they were greeted by a priest; behind him they could see rows of soldiers and, behind the soldiers, thousands of spectators. They were led toward a scaffold covered in black cloth at the center of the square. In front of the scaffold were three posts, and to the side was a line of carts laden with coffins.

Lord Naoshige said, "The Way of the Samurai is in desperateness. Ten men or more cannot kill such a man. Common sense will not accomplish great things. Simply become insane and desperate."

HAGAKURE: THE BOOK OF THE SAMURAI, YAMAMOTO
TSUNETOMO, 1659-1720

Dostoyevsky could not believe what he saw. "It's not possible that they mean to execute us," he whispered to his neighbor. They were marched to the scaffold and placed in two lines. It was an unbelievably cold day, and the prisoners were wearing the light clothes they'd been arrested in back in April. A drumroll sounded. An officer came forward to read their sentences: "All of the accused are guilty as charged of intending to overthrow the national order, and are therefore condemned to death before a firing squad." The prisoners were too stunned to speak.

As the officer read out the individual charges and sentences, Dostoyevsky found himself staring at the golden spire of a nearby church and at the sunlight bouncing off it. The gleams of light disappeared as a cloud passed overhead, and the thought occurred to him that he was about to pass into darkness just as quickly, and forever. Suddenly he had another thought: If I do *not* die, if I am *not* killed, my life will suddenly seem endless, a whole eternity, each minute a century. I will take account of everything that passes--I will not waste a second of life again.

The prisoners were given hooded shirts. The priest came forward to read them their last rites and hear their confessions. They said good-bye to one another. The first three to be shot were tied to the posts, and the hoods were pulled over their faces. Dostoyevsky stood in the front, in the next group to go. The soldiers raised their rifles, took aim--and suddenly a carriage came galloping into the square. A man got out with an envelope. At the last second, the czar had commuted their death sentences.

It had long been known, of course, that a man who, through disciplined training, had relinquished any desire or hope for survival and had only one goal--the destruction of his enemy--could be a redoubtable opponent and a truly formidable fighter who neither asked nor offered any quarter once his weapon had been unsheathed. In this way, a seemingly ordinary man who, by the force of circumstances rather than by profession, had been placed in the position of having to make a desperate choice, could prove dangerous, even to a skilled fencing master. One famous episode, for example, concerns a teacher of swordsmanship who was asked by a superior to surrender a servant guilty of an offense punishable by death. This teacher, wishing to test a theory of his concerning the power of that condition we would call "desperation," challenged the doomed man to a duel. Knowing full well the irrevocability of his sentence, the servant was beyond caring one way or the other, and the ensuing duel proved that even a skilled fencer and teacher of the art could find himself in great difficulty when confronted by a man who, because of his acceptance of imminent death, could go to the limit (and even beyond) in his strategy, without a single hesitation or distracting consideration. The servant, in fact, fought like a man possessed, forcing his master to retreat until his back was almost to the wall. At last the teacher had to cut him down in a final effort, wherein the master's own desperation brought about the fullest coordination of his courage, skill, and determination.

SECRETS OF THE SAMURAI, OSCAR RATTI AND ADELE

Later that morning, Dostoyevsky was told his new sentence: four years hard labor in Siberia, to be followed by a stint in the army. Barely affected, he wrote that day to his brother, "When I look back at the past and think of all the time I squandered in error and idleness,...then my heart bleeds. Life is a gift...every minute could have been an eternity of happiness! If youth only knew! Now my life will change; now I will be reborn."

A few days later, ten-pound shackles were put on Dostoyevsky's arms and legs--they would stay there for the length of his prison term--and he was carted off to Siberia. For the next four years, he endured the most abysmal prison conditions. Granted no writing privileges, he wrote novels in his head, memorized them. Finally, in 1857, still serving the army period of his sentence, he was allowed to start publishing his work. Where before he would torture himself over a page, spend half a day idling it away in thought, now he wrote and wrote. Friends would see him walking the streets of St. Petersburg mumbling bits of dialogue to himself, lost in his characters and plots. His new motto was "Try to get as much done as possible in the shortest time."

Some pitied Dostoyevsky his time in prison. That made him angry; he was grateful for the experience and felt no bitterness. But for that December day in 1849, he felt, he would have wasted his life. Right up until his death, in 1881, he continued writing at a frantic pace, churning out novel after novel--*Crime and Punishment*, *The Possessed*, *The Brothers Karamazov*--as if each one were his last.

Interpretation Czar Nicholas had decided to sentence the Petrashevsky radicals to hard labor soon after their arrest. But he wanted to teach them a harsher lesson as well, so he dreamed up the cruel theater of the death sentence, with its careful details--the priest, the hoods, the coffins, the last-second pardon. This, he thought, would really humble and humiliate them. In fact, some of the prisoners were driven insane by the events of that day. But the effect on Dostoyevsky was different: he had been afflicted for years with a sense of wandering, of feeling lost, of not knowing what to do with his time. An extremely sensitive man, that day he literally felt his own death deep in his bones. And he experienced his "pardon" as a rebirth.

The effect was permanent. For the rest of his life, Dostoyevsky would consciously bring himself back to that day, remembering his pledge never to waste another moment. Or, if he felt he had grown too comfortable and

complacent, he would go to a casino and gamble away all his money. Poverty and debt were for him a kind of symbolic death, throwing him back on the possible nothingness of his life. In either case he would have to write, and not the way other novelists wrote--as if it were a pleasant little artistic career, with all its attendant delights of salons, lectures, and other frills. Dostoyevsky wrote as if his life were at stake, with an intense feeling of urgency and seriousness.

Death is impossible for us to fathom: it is so immense, so frightening, that we will do almost anything to avoid thinking about it. Society is organized to make death invisible, to keep it several steps removed. That distance may seem necessary for our comfort, but it comes with a terrible price: the illusion of limitless time, and a consequent lack of seriousness about daily life. We are running away from the one reality that faces us all.

As a warrior in life, you must turn this dynamic around: make the thought of death something not to escape but to embrace. Your days are numbered. Will you pass them half awake and halfhearted or will you live with a sense of urgency? Cruel theaters staged by a czar are unnecessary; death will come to you without them. Imagine it pressing in on you, leaving you no escape--for there *is* no escape. Feeling death at your heels will make all your actions more certain, more forceful. This could be your last throw of the dice: make it count.

While knowing that we will die someday, we think that all the others will die before us and that we will be the last to go. Death seems a long way off. Is this not shallow thinking? It is worthless and is only a joke within a dream.... Insofar as death is always at one's door, one should make sufficient effort and act quickly.

--Hagakure: The Book of the Samurai, Yamamoto Tsunetomo (1659-1720)

KEYS TO WARFARE

Quite often we feel somewhat lost in our actions. We could do this or that--we have many options, but none of them seem quite necessary. Our freedom is a burden--what do we do today, where do we go? Our daily patterns and routines help us to avoid feeling directionless, but there is always the niggling thought that we could accomplish so much more. We waste so much time. Upon occasion all of us have felt a sense of urgency. Most often it is imposed from outside: we fall behind in our work, we inadvertently take on more than we can handle, responsibility for something is thrust into our hands. Now everything changes; no more freedom. We have to do this, we have to fix that. The surprise is always how much more spirited and more alive this makes us feel; now everything we do seems necessary. But eventually we go back to our normal

patterns. And when that sense of urgency goes, we really do not know how to get it back.

Leaders of armies have thought about this subject since armies existed: how can soldiers be motivated, be made more aggressive, more desperate? Some generals have relied on fiery oratory, and those particularly good at it have had some success. But over two thousand years ago, the Chinese strategist Sun-tzu came to believe that listening to speeches, no matter how rousing, was too passive an experience to have an enduring effect. Instead Sun-tzu talked of a "death ground"--a place where an army is backed up against some geographical feature like a mountain, a river, or a forest and has no escape route. Without a way to retreat, Sun-tzu argued, an army fights with double or triple the spirit it would have on open terrain, because death is viscerally present. Sun-tzu advocated deliberately stationing soldiers on death ground to give them the desperate edge that makes men fight like the devil. That is what Cortes did in Mexico, and it is the only sure way to create a real fire in the belly. The world is ruled by necessity: People change their behavior only if they have to. They will feel urgency only if their lives depend on it.

Taking advantage of the opportunity, they began to question Han Hsin. "According to The Art of War, when one fights he should keep the hills to his right or rear, and bodies of water in front of him or to the left," they said. "Yet today you ordered us on the contrary to draw up ranks with our backs to the river, saying 'We shall defeat Chao and feast together!' We were opposed to the idea, and yet it has ended in victory. What sort of strategy is this?" "This is in The Art of War too," replied Han Hsin. "It is just that you have failed to notice it! Does it not say in The Art of War: 'Drive them into a fatal position and they will come out alive; place them in a hopeless spot and they will survive'? Moreover, I did not have at my disposal troops that I had trained and led from past times, but was forced, as the saying goes, to round up men from the market place and use them to fight with. Under such circumstances, if I had not placed them in a desperate situation where each man was obliged to fight for his own life, but had allowed them to remain in a safe place, they would have all run away. Then what good would they have been to me?" "Indeed!" his generals exclaimed in admiration. "We would never have thought of that."

*RECORDS OF THE HISTORIAN, SZUMA CHIEN, CIRCA 145 B.C.-
CIRCA 86 B.C.*

Death ground is a psychological phenomenon that goes well beyond the battlefield: it is any set of circumstances in which you feel enclosed and without options. There is very real pressure at your back, and you cannot retreat. Time is running out. Failure--a form of psychic death--is staring you in the face. You must act or suffer the consequences.

Understand: we are creatures who are intimately tied to our environment--we respond viscerally to our circumstances and to the people around us. If our situation is easy and relaxed, if people are friendly and warm, our natural tension unwinds. We may even grow bored and tired; our environment is failing to challenge us, although we may not realize it. But put yourself in a high-stakes situation--a psychological death ground--and the dynamic changes. Your body responds to danger with a surge of energy; your mind focuses. Urgency is forced on you; you are compelled to waste no more time.

The trick is to use this effect deliberately from time to time, to practice it on yourself as a kind of wake-up call. The following five actions are designed to put you on a psychological death ground. Reading and thinking about them won't work; you must put them into effect. They are forms of pressure to apply to yourself. Depending on whether you want a low-intensity jolt for regular use or a real shock, you can turn the level up or down. The scale is up to you.

Stake everything on a single throw. In 1937 the twenty-eight-year-old Lyndon B. Johnson--at the time the Texas director of the National Youth Administration--faced a dilemma. The Texas congressman James Buchanan had suddenly died. Since loyal Texan voters tended to return incumbents to office, a Texan congressional seat generally came available only every ten or twenty years--and Johnson wanted to be in Congress by the time he was thirty; he did not have ten years to wait. But he was very young and was virtually unknown in Buchanan's old district, the tenth. He would be facing political heavyweights whom voters would heavily favor. Why try something that seemed doomed to failure? Not only would the race be a waste of money, but the humiliation, if Johnson lost badly, could derail his long-term ambitions.

Unlimited possibilities are not suited to man; if they existed, his life would only dissolve in the boundless. To become strong, a man's life needs the limitations ordained by duty and voluntarily accepted. The individual attains significance as a free spirit only by surrounding himself with these limitations and by determining for himself what his duty is.

THE I CHING, CHINA, CIRCA EIGHTH CENTURY B.C.

Johnson considered all this--then decided to run. Over the next few weeks, he campaigned intensely, visiting the district's every backwater village and town, shaking the poorest farmer's hand, sitting in drugstores to meet people who had never come close to talking to a candidate before. He pulled every trick in the book--old-style rallies and barbecues, newfangled radio ads. He worked night and day--and hard. By the time the race was over, Johnson was in a hospital, being treated for exhaustion and appendicitis. But, in one of the great upsets in American political history, he had won.

By staking his future on one throw, Johnson put himself in a death-ground situation. His body and spirit responded with the energy he needed. Often we try too many things at one time, thinking that one of them will bring us success--but in these situations our minds are diffused, our efforts halfhearted. It is better to take on one daunting challenge, even one that others think foolish. Our future is at stake; we cannot afford to lose. So we don't.

Act before you are ready. In 49 B.C. a group of Roman senators, allied with Pompey and fearing the growing power of Julius Caesar, ordered the great general to disband his army or be considered a traitor to the Republic. When Caesar received this decree, he was in southern Gaul (modern-day France) with only five thousand men; the rest of his legions were far to the north, where he had been campaigning. He had no intention of obeying the decree--that would have been suicide--but it would be weeks before the bulk of his army could join him. Unwilling to wait, Caesar told his captains, "Let the die be cast," and he and his five thousand men crossed the Rubicon, the river marking the border between Gaul and Italy. Leading troops onto Italian soil meant war with Rome. Now there was no turning back; it was fight or die. Caesar was compelled to concentrate his forces, to not waste a single man, to act with speed, and to be as creative as possible. He marched on Rome. By seizing the initiative, he frightened the senators, forcing Pompey to flee.

Death is nothing, but to live defeated is to die every day.

NAPOLEON BONAPARTE, 1769-1821

When danger is greatest.--It is rare to break one's leg when in the course of

life one is toiling upwards--it happens much more often when one starts to take things easy and to choose the easy paths.

FRIEDRICH NIETZSCHE, 1844-1900

We often wait too long to act, particularly when we face no outside pressure. It is sometimes better to act before you think you are ready--to force the issue and cross the Rubicon. Not only will you take your opponents by surprise, you will also have to make the most of your resources. You have committed yourself and cannot turn back. Under pressure your creativity will flourish. Do this often and you will develop your ability to think and act fast.

Enter new waters. The Hollywood studio MGM had been good to Joan Crawford: it had discovered her, made her a star, crafted her image. By the early 1940s, though, Crawford had had enough. It was all too comfortable; MGM kept casting her in the same kinds of roles, none of them a challenge. So, in 1943, Crawford did the unthinkable and asked out of her contract.

Be absolute for death; either death or life Shall thereby be the sweeter. Reason thus with life: If I do lose thee, I do lose a thing That none but fools would keep: a breath thou art, Servile to all the skyey influences, That dost this habituation, where thou keep'st, Hourly afflict: merely, thou art death's fool; For him thou labour'st by thy flight to shun And yet runn'st toward him still. Thou art not noble; For all the accommodations that thou bear'st Are nursed by baseness. Thou'rt by no means valiant; For thou dost fear the soft and tender fork Of a poor worm. Thy best of rest is sleep, And that thou oft provokest; yet grossly fear'st Thy death, which is no more.

MEASURE FOR MEASURE, WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE, 1564-1616

The consequences for Crawford could have been terrible; to challenge the studio system was considered highly unwise. Indeed, when she then signed up with Warner Brothers, predictably enough she was offered the same mediocre sorts of scripts. She turned them down. On the verge of being fired, she finally found the part she had been looking for: the title role in *Mildred Pierce*, which, however, she was not offered. Setting to work on the director, Michael Curtiz, she managed to change his mind and land the role. She gave the performance of her life, won her only Best Actress Oscar, and resurrected her career.

In leaving MGM, Crawford was taking a big chance. If she failed to succeed

at Warner Brothers, and quickly, her career would be over. But Crawford thrived on risk. When she was challenged, when she felt on edge, she burst with energy and was at her best. Like Crawford, you sometimes have to force yourself onto death ground--leaving stale relationships and comfortable situations behind, cutting your ties to the past. If you give yourself no way out, you will have to make your new endeavor work. Leaving the past for unknown terrain is like a death--and feeling this finality will snap you back to life.

Make it "you against the world." Compared to sports like football, baseball is slow and has few outlets for aggression. This was a problem for the hitter Ted Williams, who played best when he was angry--when he felt that it was him against the world. Creating this mood on the field was difficult for Williams, but early on, he discovered a secret weapon: the press. He got into the habit of insulting sportswriters, whether just by refusing to cooperate with them or by verbally abusing them. The reporters returned the favor, writing scathing articles on his character, questioning his talent, trumpeting the slightest drop in his batting average. It was when Williams was hammered by the press, though, that he played best. He would go on a hitting tear, as if to prove them wrong. In 1957, when he carried on a yearlong feud with the papers, he played perhaps his greatest season and won the batting title at what for a baseball player is the advanced age of forty. As one journalist wrote, "Hate seems to activate his reflexes like adrenaline stimulates the heart. Animosity is his fuel!"

For Williams the animosity of the press and, with the press, of the public, was a kind of constant pressure that he could read, hear, and feel. They hated him, they doubted him, they wanted to see him fail; he would show them. And he did. A fighting spirit needs a little edge, some anger and hatred to fuel it. So do not sit back and wait for people to get aggressive; irritate and infuriate them deliberately. Feeling cornered by a multitude of people who dislike you, you will fight like hell. Hatred is a powerful emotion. Remember: in any battle you are putting your name and reputation on the line; your enemies will relish your failure. Use that pressure to make yourself fight harder.

Keep yourself restless and unsatisfied. Napoleon had many qualities that made him perhaps history's greatest general, but the one that raised him to the heights and kept him there was his boundless energy. During campaigns he worked eighteen to twenty-hour days. If necessary, he would go without sleep for several

days, yet sleeplessness rarely reduced his capacities. He would work in the bath, at the theater, during a dinner party. Keeping his eye on every detail of the war, he would ride endless miles on horseback without tiring or complaining.

O gentlemen, the time of life is short! To spend that shortness basely were too long, If life did ride upon a dial's point, Still ending at the arrival of an hour. An if we live, we live to tread on kings; If die, brave death, when princes die with us!

KING HENRY IV, PART I, WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE, 1564-1616

Certainly Napoleon had extraordinary endurance, but there was more to it than that: he never let himself rest, was never satisfied. In 1796, in his first real position of command, he led the French to a remarkable victory in Italy, then immediately went on another campaign, this time in Egypt. There, unhappy with the way the war was going and with a lack of political power that he felt was cutting into his control over military affairs, he returned to France and conspired to become first consul. This achieved, he immediately set out on his second Italian campaign. And on he went, immersing himself in new wars, new challenges, that required him to call on his limitless energy. If he did not meet the crisis, he would perish.

When we are tired, it is often because we are bored. When no real challenge faces us, a mental and physical lethargy sets in. "Sometimes death only comes from a lack of energy," Napoleon once said, and lack of energy comes from a lack of challenges, comes when we have taken on less than we are capable of. Take a risk and your body and mind will respond with a rush of energy. Make risk a constant practice; never let yourself settle down. Soon living on death ground will become a kind of addiction--you won't be able to do without it. When soldiers survive a brush with death, they often feel an exhilaration that they want to have again. Life has more meaning in the face of death. The risks you keep taking, the challenges you keep overcoming, are like symbolic deaths that sharpen your appreciation of life.

Image:

Fire. By itself it has
no force; it depends
on its environment. Give
it air, dry timber, a wind
to fan the flames, and it
gains a terrifying momentum,
growing hotter, feeding off
itself, consuming everything
in its path. Never leave
such power to chance.

Authority: When you will survive if you fight quickly and perish if you do not, this is called [death] ground.... Put them in a spot where they have no place to go, and they will die before fleeing. If they are to die there, what can they not do? Warriors exert their full strength. When warriors are in great danger, then they have no fear. When there is nowhere to go, they are firm, when they are deeply involved, they stick to it. If they have no choice, they will fight.

--The Art of War, *Sun-tzu* (fourth century B.C.)

REVERSAL

If the feeling of having nothing to lose can propel you forward, it can do the same for others. You must avoid any conflict with people in this position. Maybe they are living in terrible conditions or, for whatever reason, are suicidal; in any case they are desperate, and desperate people will risk everything in a fight. This gives them a huge advantage. Already defeated by circumstances, they have nothing to lose. You do. Leave them alone.

Conversely, attacking enemies when their morale is low gives you the advantage. Maybe they are fighting for a cause they know is unjust or for a leader they do not respect. Find a way to lower their spirits even further. Troops with low morale are discouraged by the slightest setback. A show of force will crush their fighting spirit.

Always try to lower the other side's sense of urgency. Make your enemies think they have all the time in the world; when you suddenly appear at their border, they are in a slumbering state, and you will easily overrun them. While you are sharpening your fighting spirit, always do what you can to blunt theirs.