AMIDST THE TURMOIL OF EVENTS, DO NOT LOSE YOUR PRESENCE OF MIND

THE COUNTERBALANCE STRATEGY

In the heat of battle, the mind tends to lose its balance. Too many things confront you at the same time--unexpected setbacks, doubts and criticisms from your own allies. There's a danger of responding emotionally, with fear, depression, or frustration. It is vital to keep your presence of mind, maintaining your mental powers whatever the circumstances. You must actively resist the emotional pull of the moment--staying decisive, confident, and aggressive no matter what hits you. Make the mind tougher by exposing it to adversity. Learn to detach yourself from the chaos of the battlefield. Let others lose their heads; your presence of mind will steer you clear of their influence and keep you on course.

> [*Presence of mind*] *must play a great role in war, the domain of the unexpected, since it is nothing but an increased capacity of dealing with the unexpected. We admire presence of mind in an apt repartee, as we admire quick thinking in the face of danger.... The expression "presence of mind" precisely conveys the speed and immediacy of the help provided by the intellect.*
>
> *ON WAR*, CARL VON CLAUSEWITZ, 1780-1831

THE HYPERAGGRESSIVE TACTIC

Vice Admiral Lord Horatio Nelson (1758-1805) had been through it all. He had lost his right eye in the siege of Calvi and his right arm in the Battle of Tenerife. He had defeated the Spanish at Cape St. Vincent in 1797 and had thwarted Napoleon's Egyptian campaign by defeating his navy at the Battle of the Nile the following year. But none of his tribulations and triumphs prepared him for the problems he faced from his own colleagues in the British navy as they prepared to go to war against Denmark in February 1801.

Nelson, England's most glorious war hero, was the obvious choice to lead the fleet. Instead the Admiralty chose Sir Hyde Parker, with Nelson his second-

in-command. This war was a delicate business; it was intended to force the disobedient Danes to comply with a British-led embargo on the shipping of military goods to France. The fiery Nelson was prone to lose his cool. He hated Napoleon, and if he went too far against the Danes, he would produce a diplomatic fiasco. Sir Hyde was an older, more stable, even-tempered man who would do the job and nothing more.

Nelson swallowed his pride and took the assignment, but he saw trouble ahead. He knew that time was of the essence: the faster the navy sailed, the less chance the Danes would have to build up their defenses. The ships were ready to sail, but Parker's motto was "Everything in good order." It wasn't his style to hurry. Nelson hated his casualness and burned for action: he reviewed intelligence reports, studied maps, and came up with a detailed plan for fighting the Danes. He wrote to Parker urging him to seize the initiative. Parker ignored him.

More life may trickle out of men through thought than through a gaping wound.

THOMAS HARDY, 1840-1928

At last, on March 11, the British fleet set sail. Instead of heading for Copenhagen, however, Parker anchored well to the north of the city's harbor and called a meeting of his captains. According to intelligence reports, he explained, the Danes had prepared elaborate defenses for Copenhagen. Boats anchored in the harbor, forts to the north and south, and mobile artillery batteries could blast the British out of the water. How to fight this artillery without terrible losses? Also, pilots who knew the waters around Copenhagen reported that they were treacherous, places of sandbars and tricky winds. Navigating these dangers under bombardment would be harrowing. With all of these difficulties, perhaps it was best to wait for the Danes to leave harbor and then fight them in open sea.

Nelson struggled to control himself. Finally he let loose, pacing the room, the stub of his lost arm jerking as he spoke. No war, he said, had ever been won by waiting. The Danish defenses looked formidable "to those who are children at war," but he had worked out a strategy weeks earlier: he would attack from the south, the easier approach, while Parker and a reserve force would stay to the city's north. Nelson would use his mobility to take out the Danish guns. He had studied the maps: sandbars were no threat. As for the wind, aggressive action was more important than fretting over wind.

Nelson's speech energized Parker's captains. He was by far their most successful leader, and his confidence was catching. Even Sir Hyde was

impressed, and the plan was approved.

> *So Grant was alone; his most trusted subordinates besought him to change his plans, while his superiors were astounded at his temerity and strove to interfere. Soldiers of reputation and civilians in high places condemned, in advance, a campaign that seemed to them as hopeless as it was unprecedented. If he failed, the country would concur with the Government and the Generals. Grant knew all this, and appreciated his danger, but was as invulnerable to the apprehensions of ambition as to the entreaties of friendship, or the anxieties even of patriotism. That quiet confidence in himself which never forsook him, and which amounted indeed almost to a feeling of fate, was uninterrupted. Having once determined in a matter that required irreversible decision, he never reversed, nor even misgave, but was steadily loyal to himself and his plans. This absolute and implicit faith was, however, as far as possible from conceit or enthusiasm; it was simply a consciousness or conviction, rather, which brought the very strength it believed in; which was itself strength, and which inspired others with a trust in him, because he was able thus to trust himself.*
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> *MILITARY HISTORY OF ULYSSES S. GRANT*, ADAM BADEAU, 1868

The next morning Nelson's line of ships advanced on Copenhagen, and the battle began. The Danish guns, firing on the British at close range, took a fierce toll. Nelson paced the deck of his flagship, HMS *Elephant*, urging his men on. He was in an excited, almost ecstatic state. A shot through the mainmast nearly hit him: "It is warm work, and this day may be the last to any of us at any moment," he told a colonel, a little shaken up by the blast, "but mark you, I would not be elsewhere for thousands."

Parker followed the battle from his position to the north. He now regretted agreeing to Nelson's plan; he was responsible for the campaign, and a defeat here could ruin his career. After four hours of back-and-forth bombardment, he had seen enough: the fleet had taken a beating and had gained no advantage. Nelson never knew when to quit. Parker decided it was time to hoist signal flag 39, the order to withdraw. The first ships to see it were to acknowledge it and pass the signal on down the line. Once acknowledged there was nothing else to do but retreat. The battle was over.

On board the *Elephant*, a lieutenant told Nelson about the signal. The vice-admiral ignored it. Continuing to pound the Danish defenses, he eventually called to an officer, "Is number sixteen still hoisted?" Number 16 was his own flag; it meant "Engage the enemy more closely." The officer confirmed that the

flag was still flying. "Mind you keep it so," Nelson told him. A few minutes later, Parker's signal still flapping in the breeze, Nelson turned to his flag captain: "You know, Foley, I have only one eye--I have a right to be blind sometimes." And raising his telescope to his blind eye, he calmly remarked, "I really do not see the signal."

Torn between obeying Parker and obeying Nelson, the fleet captains chose Nelson. They would risk their careers along with his. But soon the Danish defenses started to crack; some of the ships anchored in the harbor surrendered, and the firing of the guns began to slow. Less than an hour after Parker's signal to stop the battle, the Danes surrendered.

The next day Parker perfunctorily congratulated Nelson on the victory. He did not mention his subordinate's disobedience. He was hoping the whole affair, including his own lack of courage, would be quietly forgotten.

Interpretation

When the Admiralty put its faith in Sir Hyde, it made a classical military error: it entrusted the waging of a war to a man who was careful and methodical. Such men may seem calm, even strong, in times of peace, but their self-control often hides weakness: the reason they think things through so carefully is that they are terrified of making a mistake and of what that might mean for them and their career. This doesn't come out until they are tested in battle: suddenly they cannot make a decision. They see problems everywhere and defeat in the smallest setback. They hang back not out of patience but out of fear. Often these moments of hesitation spell their doom.

> *There was once a man who may be called the "generalissimo" of robbers and who went by the name of Hakamadare. He had a strong mind and a powerful build. He was swift of foot, quick with his hands, wise in thinking and plotting. Altogether there was no one who could compare with him. His business was to rob people of their possessions when they were off guard. Once, around the tenth month of a year, he needed clothing and decided to get hold of some. He went to prospective spots and walked about, looking. About midnight when people had gone to sleep and were quiet, under a somewhat blurry moon he saw a man dressed in abundant clothes sauntering about on a boulevard. The man, with his trouser-skirt tucked up with strings perhaps and in a formal hunting robe which gently covered his body, was playing the flute, alone, apparently in no hurry to go to any particular place. Wow, here's a fellow who's shown up just to give me his clothes, Hakamadare thought. Normally he would have gleefully run up and beaten his quarry*

down and robbed him of his clothes. But this time, unaccountably, he felt something fearsome about the man, so he followed him for a couple of hundred yards. The man himself didn't seem to think, Somebody's following me. On the contrary, he continued to play the flute with what appeared to be greater calm. Give him a try, Hakamadare said to himself, and ran up close to the man, making as much clatter as he could with his feet. The man, however, looked not the least disturbed. He simply turned to look, still playing the flute. It wasn't possible to jump on him. Hakamadare ran off. Hakamadare tried similar approaches a number of times, but the man remained utterly unperturbed. Hakamadare realized he was dealing with an unusual fellow. When they had covered about a thousand yards, though, Hakamadare decided he couldn't continue like this, drew his sword, and ran up to him. This time the man stopped playing the flute and, turning, said, "What in the world are you doing?" Hakamadare couldn't have been struck with greater fear even if a demon or a god had run up to attack him when he was walking alone. For some unaccountable reason he lost both heart and courage. Overcome with deathly fear and despite himself, he fell on his knees and hands. "What are you doing?" the man repeated. Hakamadare felt he couldn't escape even if he tried. "I'm trying to rob you," he blurted out. "My name is Hakamadare." "I've heard there's a man about with that name, yes. A dangerous, unusual fellow, I'm told," the man said. Then he simply said to Hakamadare, "Come with me," and continued on his way, playing the flute again. Terrified that he was dealing with no ordinary human being, and as if possessed by a demon or a god, Hakamadare followed the man, completely mystified. Eventually the man walked into a gate behind which was a large house. He stepped inside from the verandah after removing his shoes. While Hakamadare was thinking, He must be the master of the house, the man came back and summoned him. As he gave him a robe made of thick cotton cloth, he said, "If you need something like this in the future, just come and tell me. If you jump on somebody who doesn't know your intentions, you may get hurt." Afterward it occurred to Hakamadare that the house belonged to Governor of Settsu Fujiwara no Yasumasa. Later, when he was arrested, he is known to have observed, "He was such an unusually weird, terrifying man!" Yasumasa was not a warrior by family tradition because he was a son of Munetada. Yet he was not the least inferior to anyone who was a warrior by family tradition. He had a strong mind, was quick with his hands, and had tremendous strength. He was also subtle in thinking and plotting. So even the imperial court did not feel insecure in employing him in the way of the warrior. As a result, the whole world greatly feared him and was intimidated by him.

LEGENDS OF THE SAMURAI, HIROAKI SATO, 1995

Lord Nelson operated according to the opposite principle. Slight of build, with a delicate constitution, he compensated for his physical weakness with fierce determination. He forced himself to be more resolute than anyone around him. The moment he entered battle, he ratcheted up his aggressive impulses. Where other sea lords worried about casualties, the wind, changes in the enemy's formation, he concentrated on his plan. Before battle no one strategized or studied his opponent more thoroughly. (That knowledge helped Nelson to sense when the enemy was ready to crumble.) But once the engagement began, hesitation and carefulness were dropped.

Presence of mind is a kind of counterbalance to mental weakness, to our tendency to get emotional and lose perspective in the heat of battle. Our greatest weakness is losing heart, doubting ourselves, becoming unnecessarily cautious. Being more careful is not what we need; that is just a screen for our fear of conflict and of making a mistake. What we need is double the resolve--an intensification of confidence. That will serve as a counterbalance.

In moments of turmoil and trouble, you must force yourself to be more determined. Call up the aggressive energy you need to overcome caution and inertia. Any mistakes you make, you can rectify with more energetic action still. Save your carefulness for the hours of preparation, but once the fighting begins, empty your mind of doubts. Ignore those who quail at any setback and call for retreat. Find joy in attack mode. Momentum will carry you through.

The senses make a more vivid impression on the mind than systematic thought.... Even the man who planned the operation and now sees it being carried out may well lose confidence in his earlier judgment.... War has a way of masking the stage with scenery crudely daubed with fearsome apparitions. Once this is cleared away, and the horizon becomes unobstructed, developments will confirm his earlier convictions--this is one of the great chasms between planning and execution.

--*Carl von Clausewitz,* ON WAR *(1780-1831)*

THE DETACHED-BUDDHA TACTIC

Watching the movie director Alfred Hitchcock (1899-1980) at work on a film set was often quite a surprise to those seeing it for the first time. Most filmmakers are wound-up balls of energy, yelling at the crew and barking out orders, but

Hitchcock would sit in his chair, sometimes dozing, or at least with his eyes half closed. On the set of *Strangers on a Train*, made in 1951, the actor Farley Granger thought Hitchcock's behavior meant he was angry or upset and asked him if anything was wrong. "Oh," Hitchcock replied sleepily, "I'm so bored." The crew's complaints, an actor's tantrums--nothing fazed him; he would just yawn, shift in his chair, and ignore the problem. "Hitchcock...didn't seem to direct us at all," said the actress Margaret Lockwood. "He was a dozing, nodding Buddha with an enigmatic smile on his face."

It was hard for Hitchcock's colleagues to understand how a man doing such stressful work could stay so calm and detached. Some thought it was part of his character--that there was something inherently cold-blooded about him. Others thought it a gimmick, a put-on. Few suspected the truth: before the filmmaking had even begun, Hitchcock would have prepared for it with such intense attention to detail that nothing could go wrong. He was completely in control; no temperamental actress, no panicky art director, no meddling producer could upset him or interfere with his plans. Feeling such absolute security in what he had set up, he could afford to lie back and fall asleep.

Hitchcock's process began with a storyline, whether from a novel or an idea of his own. As if he had a movie projector in his head, he would begin to visualize the film. Next, he would start meeting with a writer, who would soon realize that this job was unlike any other. Instead of taking some producer's half-baked idea and turning it into a screenplay, the writer was simply there to put on paper the dream trapped in Hitchcock's mind. He or she would add flesh and bones to the characters and would of course write the dialog, but not much else. When Hitchcock sat down with the writer Samuel Taylor for the first script meeting on the movie *Vertigo* (1958), his descriptions of several scenes were so vivid, so intense, that the experiences seemed almost to have been real, or maybe something he had dreamed. This completeness of vision foreclosed creative conflict. As Taylor soon realized, although he was writing the script, it would remain a Hitchcock creation.

Once the screenplay was finished, Hitchcock would transform it into an elaborate shooting script. Blocking, camera positions, lighting, and set dimensions were spelled out in detailed notes. Most directors leave themselves some latitude, shooting scenes from several angles, for example, to give the film editor options to work with later on. Not Hitchcock: he essentially edited the entire film in the shooting script. He knew exactly what he wanted and wrote it down. If a producer or actor tried to add or change a scene, Hitchcock was outwardly pleasant--he could afford to pretend to listen--but inside he was totally unmoved.

Nothing was left to chance. For the building of the sets (quite elaborate in a movie like *Rear Window*), Hitchcock would present the production designer with precise blueprints, floor plans, incredibly detailed lists of props. He supervised every aspect of set construction. He was particularly attentive to the clothes of his leading actresses: according to Edith Head, costumer on many Hitchcock movies, including *Dial M for Murder* in 1954, "There was a reason for every color, every style, and he was absolutely certain about everything he settled on. For one scene he saw [Grace Kelly] in pale green, for another in white chiffon, for another in gold. He was really putting a dream together in the studio." When the actress Kim Novak refused to wear a gray suit in *Vertigo* because she felt it made her look washed out, Hitchcock told her he wanted her to look like a woman of mystery who had just stepped out of the San Francisco fog. How could she argue with that? She wore the suit.

Hitchcock's actors found working with him strange yet pleasant. Some of Hollywood's best--Joseph Cotten, Grace Kelly, Cary Grant, Ingrid Bergman--said that he was the easiest director to work for: his nonchalance was catching, and since his films were so carefully staged as not to depend on the actor's performance in any particular scene, they could relax. Everything went like clockwork. As James Stewart told the cast of *The Man Who Knew Too Much* (1956), "We're in the hands of an expert here. You can lean on him. Just do everything he tells you and the whole thing will be okay."

As Hitchcock sat calmly on the set, apparently half asleep, the cast and crew could see only the small part each one played. They had no idea how everything fit into his vision. When Taylor saw *Vertigo* for the first time, it was like seeing another man's dream. The film neatly duplicated the vision Hitchcock had expressed to him many months before.

Interpretation

The first film Hitchcock directed was *The Pleasure Garden*, a silent he made in 1925. The production went wrong in every conceivable way. Hitchcock hated chaos and disorder; unexpected events, panicky crew members, and any loss of control made him miserable. From that point on, he decided, he would treat filmmaking like a military operation. He would give his producers, actors, and crew no room to mess up what he wanted to create. He taught himself every aspect of film production: set design, lighting, the technicalities of cameras and lenses, editing, sound. He ran every stage of the film's making. No shadow could fall between the planning and the execution.

Establishing control in advance the way Hitchcock did might not seem like presence of mind, but it actually takes that quality to its zenith. It means entering

battle (in Hitchcock's case a film shoot) feeling calm and ready. Setbacks may come, but you will have foreseen them and thought of alternatives, and you are ready to respond. Your mind will never go blank when it is that well prepared. When your colleagues barrage you with doubts, anxious questions, and slipshod ideas, you may nod and pretend to listen, but really you're ignoring them--you've out-thought them in advance. And your relaxed manner will prove contagious to other people, making them easier to manage in turn.

It is easy to be overwhelmed by everything that faces you in battle, where so many people are asking or telling you what to do. So many vital matters press in on you that you can lose sight of your goals and plans; suddenly you can't see the forest for the trees. Understand: presence of mind is the ability to detach yourself from all that, to see the whole battlefield, the whole picture, with clarity. All great generals have this quality. And what gives you that mental distance is preparation, mastering the details beforehand. Let people think your Buddha-like detachment comes from some mysterious source. The less they understand you the better.

For the love of God, pull yourself together and do not look at things so darkly: the first step backward makes a poor impression in the army, the second step is dangerous, and the third becomes fatal.

--Frederick the Great (1712-86), letter to a general

KEYS TO WARFARE

We humans like to see ourselves as rational creatures. We imagine that what separates us from animals is the ability to think and reason. But that is only partly true: what distinguishes us from animals just as much is our capacity to laugh, to cry, to feel a range of emotions. We are in fact emotional creatures as well as rational ones, and although we like to think we govern our actions through reason and thought, what most often dictates our behavior is the emotion we feel in the moment.

We maintain the illusion that we are rational through the routine of our daily affairs, which helps us to keep things calm and apparently controlled. Our minds seem rather strong when we're following our routines. But place any of us in an adverse situation and our rationality vanishes; we react to pressure by growing fearful, impatient, confused. Such moments reveal us for the emotional creatures we are: under attack, whether by a known enemy or unpredictably by a colleague, our response is dominated by feelings of anger, sadness, betrayal.

Only with great effort can we reason our way through these periods and respond rationally--and our rationality rarely lasts past the next attack.

Understand: your mind is weaker than your emotions. But you become aware of this weakness only in moments of adversity--precisely the time when you need strength. What best equips you to cope with the heat of battle is neither more knowledge nor more intellect. What makes your mind stronger, and more able to control your emotions, is internal discipline and toughness.

No one can teach you this skill; you cannot learn it by reading about it. Like any discipline, it can come only through practice, experience, even a little suffering. The first step in building up presence of mind is to see the need for it--to want it badly enough to be willing to work for it. Historical figures who stand out for their presence of mind--Alexander the Great, Ulysses S. Grant, Winston Churchill--acquired it through adversity, through trial and error. They were in positions of responsibility in which they had to develop this quality or sink. Although these men may have been blessed with an unusual amount of personal fortitude, they had to work hard to strengthen this into presence of mind.

> *The first quality of a General-in-Chief is to have a cool head which receives exact impressions of things, which never gets heated, which never allows itself to be dazzled, or intoxicated, by good or bad news. The successive simultaneous sensations which he receives in the course of a day must be classified, and must occupy the correct places they merit to fill, because common sense and reason are the results of the comparison of a number of sensations each equally well considered. There are certain men who, on account of their moral and physical constitution, paint mental pictures out of everything: however exalted be their reason, their will, their courage, and whatever good qualities they may possess, nature has not fitted them to command armies, nor to direct great operations of war.*
>
> NAPOLEON BONAPARTE, 1769-1821

The ideas that follow are based on their experience and hard-won victories. Think of these ideas as exercises, ways to toughen your mind, each a kind of counterbalance to emotion's overpowering pull.

Expose yourself to conflict. George S. Patton came from one of America's most distinguished military families--his ancestors included generals and colonels who had fought and died in the American Revolution and the Civil War. Raised

on stories of their heroism, he followed in their footsteps and chose a career in the military. But Patton was also a sensitive young man, and he had one deep fear: that in battle he would turn coward and disgrace the family name.

Patton had his first real taste of battle in 1918, at the age of thirty-two, during the Allied offensive on the Argonne during World War I. He commanded a tank division. At one point during the battle, Patton managed to lead some American infantrymen to a position on a hilltop overlooking a key strategic town, but German fire forced them to take cover. Soon it became clear that they were trapped: if they retreated, they would come under fire from positions on the sides of the hill; if they advanced, they would run right into a battery of German machine guns. If they were all to die, as it seemed to Patton, better to die advancing. At the moment he was to lead the troops in the charge, however, Patton was stricken by intense fear. His body trembled, and his legs turned to jelly. In a confirmation of his deepest fears, he had lost his nerve.

At that instant, looking into the clouds beyond the German batteries, Patton had a vision: he saw his illustrious military ancestors, all in their uniforms, staring sternly down at him. They seemed to be inviting him to join their company--the company of dead war heroes. Paradoxically, the sight of these men had a calming effect on the young Patton: calling for volunteers to follow him, he yelled, "It is time for another Patton to die!" The strength had returned to his legs; he stood up and charged toward the German guns. Seconds later he fell, hit in the thigh. But he survived the battle.

From that moment on, even after he became a general, Patton made a point of visiting the front lines, exposing himself needlessly to danger. He tested himself again and again. His vision of his ancestors remained a constant stimulus--a challenge to his honor. Each time it became easier to face down his fears. It seemed to his fellow generals, and to his own men, that no one had more presence of mind than Patton. They did not know how much of his strength was an effort of will.

The story of Patton teaches us two things. First, it is better to confront your fears, let them come to the surface, than to ignore them or tamp them down. Fear is the most destructive emotion for presence of mind, but it thrives on the unknown, which lets our imaginations run wild. By deliberately putting yourself in situations where you have to face fear, you familiarize yourself with it and your anxiety grows less acute. The sensation of overcoming a deep-rooted fear in turn gives you confidence and presence of mind. The more conflicts and difficult situations you put yourself through, the more battle-tested your mind will be.

There was a fox who had never seen a lion. But one day he happened to meet one of these beasts face to face. On this first occasion he was so terrified that he felt he would die of fear. He encountered him again, and this time he was also frightened, but not so much as the first time. But on the third occasion when he saw him, he actually plucked up the courage to approach him and began to chat. This fable shows that familiarity soothes our fears.

FABLES, AESOP, SIXTH CENTURY B.C.

Second, Patton's experience demonstrates the motivating power of a sense of honor and dignity. In giving in to fear, in losing your presence of mind, you disgrace not only yourself, your self-image, and your reputation but your company, your family, your group. You bring down the communal spirit. Being a leader of even the smallest group gives you something to live up to: people are watching you, judging you, depending on you. To lose your composure would make it hard for you to live with yourself.

Be self-reliant. There is nothing worse than feeling dependent on other people. Dependency makes you vulnerable to all kinds of emotions--betrayal, disappointment, frustration--that play havoc with your mental balance.

Early in the American Civil War, General Ulysses S. Grant, eventual commander in chief of the Northern armies, felt his authority slipping. His subordinates would pass along inaccurate information on the terrain he was marching through; his captains would fail to follow through on his orders; his generals were criticizing his plans. Grant was stoical by nature, but his diminished control over his troops led to a diminished control over himself and drove him to drink.

In the words of the ancients, one should make his decisions within the space of seven breaths. Lord Takanobu said, "If discrimination is long, it will spoil." Lord Naoshige said, "When matters are done leisurely, seven out of ten will turn out badly. A warrior is a person who does things quickly." When your mind is going hither and thither, discrimination will never be brought to a conclusion. With an intense, fresh and unde-laying spirit, one will make his judgments within the space of seven breaths. It is a matter of being determined and having the spirit to break right through to the other side.

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

Grant had learned his lesson by the time of the Vicksburg campaign, in 1862-63. He rode the terrain himself, studying it firsthand. He reviewed intelligence reports himself. He honed the precision of his orders, making it harder for his captains to flout them. And once he had made a decision, he would ignore his fellow generals' doubts and trust his convictions. To get things done, he came to rely on himself. His feelings of helplessness dissolved, and with them all of the attendant emotions that had ruined his presence of mind.

Being self-reliant is critical. To make yourself less dependent on others and so-called experts, you need to expand your repertoire of skills. And you need to feel more confident in your own judgment. Understand: we tend to overestimate other people's abilities--after all, they're trying hard to make it look as if they knew what they were doing--and we tend to underestimate our own. You must compensate for this by trusting yourself more and others less.

It is important to remember, though, that being self-reliant does not mean burdening yourself with petty details. You must be able to distinguish between small matters that are best left to others and larger issues that require your attention and care.

Suffer fools gladly. John Churchill, the Duke of Marlborough, is one of history's most successful generals. A genius of tactics and strategy, he had tremendous presence of mind. In the early eighteenth century, Churchill was often the leader of an alliance of English, Dutch, and German armies against the mighty forces of France. His fellow generals were timid, indecisive, narrow-minded men. They balked at the duke's bold plans, saw dangers everywhere, were discouraged at the slightest setback, and promoted their own country's interests at the expense of the alliance. They had no vision, no patience: they were fools.

> *On a famous occasion during the civil war, Caesar tripped when disembarking from a ship on the shores of Africa and fell flat on his face. With his talent for improvisation, he spread out his arms and embraced the earth as a symbol of conquest. By quick thinking he turned a terrible omen of failure into one of victory.*
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> *CICERO: THE LIFE AND TIMES OF ROME'S GREATEST POLITICIAN*, ANTHONY EVERITT, 2001

The duke, an experienced and subtle courtier, never confronted his colleagues directly; he did not force his opinions on them. Instead he treated them like children, indulging them in their fears while cutting them out of his plans. Occasionally he threw them a bone, doing some minor thing they had suggested or pretending to worry about a danger they had imagined. But he never let himself get angry or frustrated; that would have ruined his presence of mind, undermining his ability to lead the campaign. He forced himself to stay patient and cheerful. He knew how to suffer fools gladly.

> *We mean the ability to keep one's head at times of exceptional stress and violent emotion.... But it might be closer to the truth to assume that the faculty known as self-control--the gift of keeping calm even under the greatest stress--is rooted in temperament. It is itself an emotion which serves to balance the passionate feelings in strong characters without destroying them, and it is this balance alone that assures the dominance of the intellect. The counter-weight we mean is simply the sense of human dignity, the noblest pride and deepest need of all: the urge to act rationally at all times. Therefore we would argue that a strong character is one that will not be unbalanced by the most powerful emotions.*
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> *ON WAR*, CARL VON CLAUSEWITZ, 1780-1831

Understand: you cannot be everywhere or fight everyone. Your time and energy are limited, and you must learn how to preserve them. Exhaustion and frustration can ruin your presence of mind. The world is full of fools--people who cannot wait to get results, who change with the wind, who can't see past their noses. You encounter them everywhere: the indecisive boss, the rash colleague, the hysterical subordinate. When working alongside fools, do not fight them. Instead think of them the way you think of children, or pets, not important enough to affect your mental balance. Detach yourself emotionally. And while you're inwardly laughing at their foolishness, indulge them in one of their more harmless ideas. The ability to stay cheerful in the face of fools is an important skill.

Crowd out feelings of panic by focusing on simple tasks. Lord Yamanouchi, an aristocrat of eighteenth-century Japan, once asked his tea master to accompany him on a visit to Edo (later Tokyo), where he was to stay for a while. He wanted to show off to his fellow courtiers his retainer's skill in the rituals of

the tea ceremony. Now, the tea master knew everything there was to know about the tea ceremony, but little else; he was a peaceful man. He dressed, however, like a samurai, as his high position required.

One day, as the tea master was walking in the big city, he was accosted by a samurai who challenged him to a duel. The tea master was not a swordsman and tried to explain this to the samurai, but the man refused to listen. To turn the challenge down would disgrace both the tea master's family and Lord Yamanouchi. He had to accept, though that meant certain death. And accept he did, requesting only that the duel be put off to the next day. His wish was granted.

In panic, the tea master hurried to the nearest fencing school. If he were to die, he wanted to learn how to die honorably. To see the fencing master ordinarily required letters of introduction, but the tea master was so insistent, and so clearly terrified, that at last he was given an interview. The fencing master listened to his story.

> *However, he perceived now that it did not greatly matter what kind of soldiers he was going to fight, so long as they fought, which fact no one disputed. There was a more serious problem. He lay in his bunk pondering upon it. He tried to mathematically prove to himself that he would not run from a battle.... A little panic-fear grew in his mind. As his imagination went forward to a fight, he saw hideous possibilities. He contemplated the lurking menaces of the future, and failed in an effort to see himself standing stoutly in the midst of them. He recalled his visions of broken-bladed glory, but in the shadow of the impending tumult he suspected them to be impossible pictures. He sprang from the bunk and began to pace nervously to and fro. "Good Lord, what's th' matter with me?" he said aloud. He felt that in this crisis his laws of life were useless. Whatever he had learned of himself was here of no avail. He was an unknown quantity. He saw that he would again be obliged to experiment as he had in early youth. He must accumulate information of himself, and meanwhile he resolved to remain close upon his guard lest those qualities of which he knew nothing should everlastingly disgrace him. "Good Lord!" he repeated in dismay.... For days he made ceaseless calculations, but they were all wondrously unsatisfactory. He found that he could establish nothing. He finally concluded that the only way to prove himself was to go into the blaze, and then figuratively to watch his legs to discover their merits and faults. He reluctantly admitted that he could not sit still and with a mental slate and pencil derive an answer. To gain it, he must have blaze, blood, and danger, even as a chemist requires this, that, and the other. So he fretted for an*

opportunity.

THE RED BADGE OF COURAGE, STEPHEN CRANE, 1871-1900

The swordsman was sympathetic: he would teach the poor visitor the art of dying, but first he wanted to be served some tea. The tea master proceeded to perform the ritual, his manner calm, his concentration perfect. Finally the fencing master yelled out in excitement, "No need for you to learn the art of death! The state of mind you're in now is enough for you to face any samurai. When you see your challenger, imagine you're about to serve tea to a guest. Take off your coat, fold it up carefully, and lay your fan on it just as you do at work." This ritual completed, the tea master was to raise his sword in the same alert spirit. Then he would be ready to die.

The tea master agreed to do as his teacher said. The next day he went to meet the samurai, who could not help but notice the completely calm and dignified expression on his opponent's face as he took off his coat. Perhaps, the samurai thought, this fumbling tea master is actually a skilled swordsman. He bowed, begged pardon for his behavior the day before, and hurried away.

When circumstances scare us, our imagination tends to take over, filling our minds with endless anxieties. You need to gain control of your imagination, something easier said than done. Often the best way to calm down and give yourself such control is to force the mind to concentrate on something relatively simple--a calming ritual, a repetitive task that you are good at. You are creating the kind of composure you naturally have when your mind is absorbed in a problem. A focused mind has no room for anxiety or for the effects of an overactive imagination. Once you have regained your mental balance, you can then face the problem at hand. At the first sign of any kind of fear, practice this technique until it becomes a habit. Being able to control your imagination at intense moments is a crucial skill.

Unintimidate yourself. Intimidation will always threaten your presence of mind. And it is a hard feeling to combat.

During World War II, the composer Dmitry Shostakovich and several of his colleagues were called into a meeting with the Russian ruler Joseph Stalin, who had commissioned them to write a new national anthem. Meetings with Stalin were terrifying; one misstep could lead you into a very dark alley. He would stare you down until you felt your throat tighten. And, as meetings with Stalin often did, this one took a bad turn: the ruler began to criticize one of the

composers for his poor arrangement of his anthem. Scared silly, the man admitted he had used an arranger who had done a bad job. Here he was digging several graves: Clearly the poor arranger could be called to task. The composer was responsible for the hire, and he, too, could pay for the mistake. And what of the other composers, including Shostakovich? Stalin could be relentless once he smelled fear.

Shostakovich had heard enough: it was foolish, he said, to blame the arranger, who was mostly following orders. He then subtly redirected the conversation to a different subject--whether a composer should do his own orchestrations. What did Stalin think on the matter? Always eager to prove his expertise, Stalin swallowed the bait. The dangerous moment passed.

Shostakovich maintained his presence of mind in several ways. First, instead of letting Stalin intimidate him, he forced himself to see the man as he was: short, fat, ugly, unimaginative. The dictator's famous piercing gaze was just a trick, a sign of his own insecurity. Second, Shostakovich faced up to Stalin, talking to him normally and straightforwardly. By his actions and tone of voice, the composer showed that he was not intimidated. Stalin fed off fear. If, without being aggressive or brazen, you showed no fear, he would generally leave you alone.

The key to staying unintimidated is to convince yourself that the person you're facing is a mere mortal, no different from you--which is in fact the truth. See the person, not the myth. Imagine him or her as a child, as someone riddled with insecurities. Cutting the other person down to size will help you to keep your mental balance.

Develop your *Fingerspitzengefuhl* (fingertip feel). Presence of mind depends not only on your mind's ability to come to your aid in difficult situations but also on the speed with which this happens. Waiting until the next day to think of the right action to take does you no good at all. "Speed" here means responding to circumstances with rapidity and making lightning-quick decisions. This power is often read as a kind of intuition, what the Germans call "*Fingerspitzengefuhl*" (fingertip feel). Erwin Rommel, who led the German tank campaign in North Africa during World War II, had great fingertip feel. He could sense when the Allies would attack and from what direction. In choosing a line of advance, he had an uncanny feel for his enemy's weakness; at the start of a battle, he could intuit his enemy's strategy before it unfolded.

To Rommel's men their general seemed to have a genius for war, and he did

possess a quicker mind than most. But Rommel also did things to enhance his quickness, things that reinforced his feel for battle. First, he devoured information about the enemy--from details about its weaponry to the psychological traits of the opposing general. Second, he made himself an expert in tank technology, so that he could get the most out of his equipment. Third, he not only memorized maps of the North African desert but would fly over it, at great risk, to get a bird's-eye view of the battlefield. Finally, he personalized his relationship with his men. He always had a sense of their morale and knew exactly what he could expect from them.

Rommel didn't just study his men, his tanks, the terrain, and the enemy--he got inside their skin, understood the spirit that animated them, what made them tick. Having felt his way into these things, in battle he entered a state of mind in which he did not have to think consciously of the situation. The totality of what was going on was in his blood, at his fingertips. He had *Fingerspitzengefuhl*.

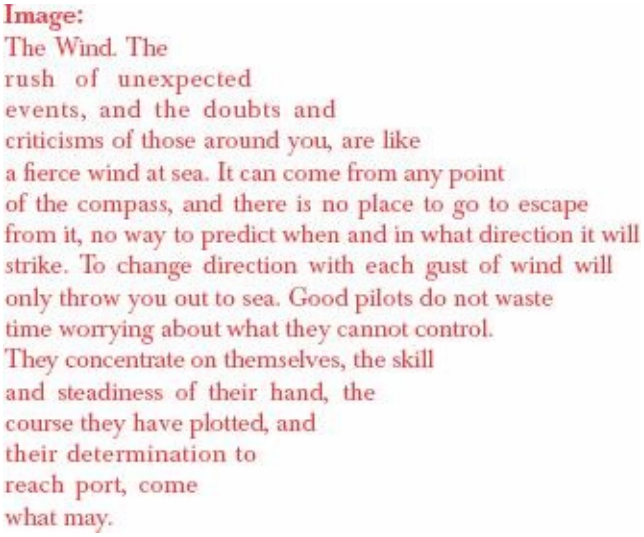
Whether or not you have the mind of a Rommel, there are things you can do to help you respond faster and bring out that intuitive feel that all animals possess. Deep knowledge of the terrain will let you process information faster than your enemy, a tremendous advantage. Getting a feel for the spirit of men and material, thinking your way into them instead of looking at them from outside, will help to put you in a different frame of mind, less conscious and forced, more unconscious and intuitive. Get your mind into the habit of making lightning-quick decisions, trusting your fingertip feel. Your mind will advance in a kind of mental blitzkrieg, moving past your opponents before they realize what has hit them.

Finally, do not think of presence of mind as a quality useful only in periods of adversity, something to switch on and off as you need it. Cultivate it as an everyday condition. Confidence, fearlessness, and self-reliance are as crucial in times of peace as in times of war. Franklin Delano Roosevelt showed his tremendous mental toughness and grace under pressure not only during the crises of the Depression and World War II but in everyday situations--in his dealings with his family, his cabinet, his own polio-racked body. The better you get at the game of war, the more your warrior frame of mind will do for you in daily life. When a crisis does come, your mind will already be calm and prepared. Once presence of mind becomes a habit, it will never abandon you.

The man with centre has calm, unprejudiced judgment. He knows what is

important, what unimportant. He meets realilty serenely and with detachment keeping his sense of proportion. The Hara no aru hito [*man with centre*] *faces life calmly, is tranquil, ready for anything.... Nothing upsets him. If suddenly fire breaks out and people begin to shout in wild confusion* [*he*] *does the right thing immediately and quietly, he ascertains the direction of the wind, rescues what is most important, fetches water, and behaves unhesitatingly in the way the emergency demands. The* Hara no nai hito *is the opposite of all this. The* Hara no nai hito *applies to the man without calm judgment. He lacks the measure which should be second nature. Therefore he reacts haphazardly and subectively, arbitrarily and capriciously. He cannot distinguish between important and unimportant, essential and unessential. His judgment is not based upon facts but on temporary conditions and rests on subjective foundations, such as moods, whims, "nerves."* The Hara no nai hito *is easily startled, is nervous, not because he is particularly sensitive but because he lacks that inner axis which would prevent his being thrown off centre and which would enable him to deal with situations realistically....* Hara [*centre, belly*] *is only in slight measure innate. It is above all the result of persistent self-training and discipline, in fact the fruit of responsible, individual development. That is what the Japanese means when he speaks of the* Hara no dekita hito *, the man who has accomplished or finished his belly, that is, himself: for he is mature. If this development does not take place, we have the* Hara no dekita inai hito, *someone who has not developed, who has remained immature, who is too young in the psychological sense. The Japanese also say* Hara no dekita inai hito wa hito no ue ni tatsu koto ga dekinai: *the man who has not finished his belly cannot stand above others (is not fit for leadership).*

HARA: THE VITAL CENTRE, KARLFRIED GRAF VON DURCKHEIM, 1962



Authority: A great part of courage is the courage of having done the thing before.

--Ralph Waldo Emerson (1803-82)

REVERSAL

It is never good to lose your presence of mind, but you can use those moments when it is under threat to know how to act in the future. You must find a way to put yourself in the thick of battle, then watch yourself in action. Look for your own weaknesses, and think about how to compensate for them. People who have never lost their presence of mind are actually in danger: someday they will be taken by surprise, and the fall will be harsh. All great generals, from Julius Caesar to Patton, have at some point lost their nerve and then have been the stronger for winning it back. The more you have lost your balance, the more you will know about how to right yourself.

You do not want to lose your presence of mind in key situations, but it is a wise course to find a way to make your enemies lose theirs. Take what throws you off balance and impose it on them. Make them act before they are ready. Surprise them--nothing is more unsettling than the unexpected need to act. Find their weakness, what makes them emotional, and give them a double dose of it. The more emotional you can make them, the farther you will push them off course.