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THE 48 LAWS OF POWER

THE LAWS OF HUMAN NATURE

ROBERT GREENE

The Laws of Human Nature

Robert Greene

VIKING

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The Laws of Human Nature

Introduction

> If you come across any special trait of meanness or stupidity . . . you must be careful not to let it annoy or distress you, but to look upon it merely as an addition to your knowledge—a new fact to be considered in studying the character of humanity. Your attitude towards it will be that of the mineralogist who stumbles upon a very characteristic specimen of a mineral.
>
> —*Arthur Schopenhauer*

Throughout the course of our lives, we inevitably have to deal with a variety of individuals who stir up trouble and make our lives difficult and unpleasant. Some of these individuals are leaders or bosses, some are colleagues, and some are friends. They can be aggressive or passive-aggressive, but they are generally masters at playing on our emotions. They often appear charming and refreshingly confident, brimming with ideas and enthusiasm, and we fall under their spell. Only when it is too late do we discover that their confidence is irrational and their ideas ill-conceived. Among colleagues, they can be those who sabotage our work or careers out of secret envy, excited to bring us down. Or they could be colleagues or hires who reveal, to our dismay, that they are completely out for themselves, using us as stepping-stones.

What inevitably happens in these situations is that we are caught off guard, not expecting such behavior. Often these types will hit us with elaborate cover stories to justify their actions, or blame handy scapegoats. They know how to confuse us and draw us into a drama they control. We might protest or become angry, but in the end we feel rather helpless—the damage is done. Then another such type enters our life, and the same story repeats itself.

We often notice a similar sensation of confusion and helplessness when it comes to ourselves and our own behavior. For instance, we suddenly say something that offends our boss or colleague or friend—we are not quite sure where it came from, but we are frustrated to find that some anger and tension from within has leaked out in a way that we regret. Or perhaps we enthusiastically throw our weight into some project or scheme, only to realize it was quite foolish and a terrible waste of time. Or perhaps we fall in love with a person who is

precisely the wrong type for us and we know it, but we cannot help ourselves. What has come over us, we wonder?

In these situations, we catch ourselves falling into self-destructive patterns of behavior that we cannot seem to control. It is as if we harbor a stranger within us, a little demon who operates independently of our willpower and pushes us into doing the wrong things. And this stranger within us is rather weird, or at least weirder than how we imagine ourselves.

What we can say about these two things—people's ugly actions and our own occasionally surprising behavior—is that we usually have no clue as to what causes them. We might latch onto some simple explanations: "That person is evil, a sociopath" or "Something came over me; I wasn't myself." But such pat descriptions do not lead to any understanding or prevent the same patterns from recurring. The truth is that we humans live on the surface, reacting emotionally to what people say and do. We form opinions of others and ourselves that are rather simplified. We settle for the easiest and most convenient story to tell ourselves.

What if, however, we could dive below the surface and see deep within, getting closer to the actual roots of what causes human behavior? What if we could understand why some people turn envious and try to sabotage our work, or why their misplaced confidence causes them to imagine themselves as godlike and infallible? What if we could truly fathom why people suddenly behave irrationally and reveal a much darker side to their character, or why they are always ready to provide a rationalization for their behavior, or why we continually turn to leaders who appeal to the worst in us? What if we could look deep inside and judge people's character, avoiding the bad hires and personal relationships that cause us so much emotional damage?

If we really understood the roots of human behavior, it would be much harder for the more destructive types to continually get away with their actions. We would not be so easily charmed and misled. We would be able to anticipate their nasty and manipulative maneuvers and see through their cover stories. We would not allow ourselves to get dragged into their dramas, knowing in advance that our interest is what they depend on for their control. We would finally rob them of their power through our ability to look into the depths of their character.

Similarly, with ourselves, what if we could look within and see the source of our more troubling emotions and why they drive our behavior, often against

our own wishes? What if we could understand why we are so compelled to desire what other people have, or to identify so strongly with a group that we feel contempt for those who are on the outside? What if we could find out what causes us to lie about who we are, or to inadvertently push people away?

Being able to understand more clearly that stranger within us would help us to realize that it is not a stranger at all but very much a part of ourselves, and that we are far more mysterious, complex, and interesting than we had imagined. And with that awareness we would be able to break the negative patterns in our lives, stop making excuses for ourselves, and gain better control of what we do and what happens to us.

Having such clarity about ourselves and others could change the course of our lives in so many ways, but first we must clear up a common misconception: we tend to think of our behavior as largely conscious and willed. To imagine that we are not always in control of what we do is a frightening thought, *but in fact it is the reality*. We are subject to forces from deep within us that drive our behavior and that operate below the level of our awareness. We see the results—our thoughts, moods, and actions—but have little conscious access to what actually moves our emotions and compels us to behave in certain ways.

Look at our anger, for instance. We usually identify an individual or a group as the cause of this emotion. But if we were honest and dug down deeper, we would see that what often triggers our anger or frustration has deeper roots. It could be something in our childhood or some particular set of circumstances that triggers the emotion. We can discern distinct patterns if we look—when this or that happens, we get angry. But in the moment that we feel anger, we are not reflective or rational—we merely ride the emotion and point fingers. We could say something similar about a whole slew of emotions that we feel—specific types of events trigger sudden confidence, or insecurity, or anxiety, or attraction to a particular person, or hunger for attention.

Let us call the collection of these forces that push and pull at us from deep within *human nature*. Human nature stems from the particular wiring of our brains, the configuration of our nervous system, and the way we humans process emotions, all of which developed and emerged over the course of the five million years or so of our evolution as a species. We can ascribe many of the details of our nature to the distinct way we evolved as a social animal to ensure our survival—learning to cooperate with others, coordinating our actions with the group on a high level, creating novel forms of communication

and ways of maintaining group discipline. This early development lives on within us and continues to determine our behavior, even in the modern, sophisticated world we live in.

To take one example, look at the evolution of human emotion. The survival of our earliest ancestors depended on their ability to communicate with one another well before the invention of language. They evolved new and complex emotions—joy, shame, gratitude, jealousy, resentment, et cetera. The signs of these emotions could be read immediately on their faces, communicating their moods quickly and effectively. They became extremely permeable to the emotions of others as a way to bind the group more tightly together—to feel joy or grief as one—or to remain united in the face of danger.

To this day, we humans remain highly susceptible to the moods and emotions of those around us, compelling all kinds of behavior on our part—unconsciously imitating others, wanting what they have, getting swept up in viral feelings of anger or outrage. We imagine we're acting of our own free will, unaware of how deeply our susceptibility to the emotions of others in the group is affecting what we do and how we respond.

We can point to other such forces that emerged from this deep past and that similarly mold our everyday behavior—for instance, our need to continually rank ourselves and measure our self-worth through our status is a trait that is noticeable among all hunter-gatherer cultures, and even among chimpanzees, as are our tribal instincts, which cause us to divide people into insiders or outsiders. We can add to these primitive qualities our need to wear masks to disguise any behavior that is frowned upon by the tribe, leading to the formation of a shadow personality from all the dark desires we have repressed. Our ancestors understood this shadow and its dangerousness, imagining it originated from spirits and demons that needed to be exorcised. We rely on a different myth—"something came over me."

Once this primal current or force within us reaches the level of consciousness, we have to react to it, and we do so depending on our individual spirit and circumstances, usually explaining it away superficially without really understanding it. Because of the precise way in which we evolved, there are a limited number of these forces of human nature, and they lead to the behavior mentioned above—envy, grandiosity, irrationality, shortsightedness, conformity, aggression, and passive aggression, to name a few. They also lead to empathy and other positive forms of human behavior.

For thousands of years, it has been our fate to largely grope in the shadows

when it comes to understanding ourselves and our own nature. We have labored under so many illusions about the human animal—imagining we descended magically from a divine source, from angels instead of primates. We have found any signs of our primitive nature and our animal roots deeply distressing, something to deny and repress. We have covered up our darker impulses with all kinds of excuses and rationalizations, making it easier for some people to get away with the most unpleasant behavior. But finally we're at a point where we can overcome our resistance to the truth about who we are through the sheer weight of knowledge we have now accumulated about human nature.

We can exploit the vast literature in psychology amassed over the last one hundred years, including detailed studies of childhood and the impact of our early development (Melanie Klein, John Bowlby, Donald Winnicott), as well as works on the roots of narcissism (Heinz Kohut), the shadow sides of our personality (Carl Jung), the roots of our empathy (Simon Baron-Cohen), and the configuration of our emotions (Paul Ekman). We can now cull the many advances in the sciences that can aid us in our self-understanding—studies of the brain (Antonio Damasio, Joseph E. LeDoux), of our unique biological makeup (Edward O. Wilson), of the relationship between the body and the mind (V. S. Ramachandran), of primates (Frans de Waal) and hunter-gatherers (Jared Diamond), of our economic behavior (Daniel Kahneman), and of how we operate in groups (Wilfred Bion, Elliot Aronson).

We can also include in this the works of certain philosophers (Arthur Schopenhauer, Friedrich Nietzsche, José Ortega y Gasset) who have illuminated so many aspects of human nature, as well as the insights of many novelists (George Eliot, Henry James, Ralph Ellison), who are often the most sensitive to the unseen parts of our behavior. And finally, we can include the rapidly expanding library of biographies now available, revealing human nature in depth and in action.

This book is an attempt to gather together this immense storehouse of knowledge and ideas from different branches (see the bibliography for the key sources), to piece together an accurate and instructive guide to human nature, basing itself on the evidence, not on particular viewpoints or moral judgments. It is a brutally realistic appraisal of our species, dissecting who we are so we can operate with more awareness.

Consider *The Laws of Human Nature* a kind of codebook for deciphering people's behavior—ordinary, strange, destructive, the full gamut. Each chapter deals with a particular aspect or law of human nature. We can call them laws in

that under the influence of these elemental forces, we humans tend to react in relatively predictable ways. Each chapter has the story of some iconic individual or individuals who illustrate the law (negatively or positively), along with ideas and strategies on how to deal with yourself and others under the influence of this law. Each chapter ends with a section on how to transform this basic human force into something more positive and productive, so that we are no longer passive slaves to human nature but actively transforming it.

You might be tempted to imagine that this knowledge is a bit old-fashioned. After all, you might argue, we are now so sophisticated and technologically advanced, so progressive and enlightened; we have moved well beyond our primitive roots; we are in the process of rewriting our nature. But the truth is in fact the opposite—we have never been more in the thrall of human nature and its destructive potential than now. And by ignoring this fact, we are playing with fire.

Look at how the permeability of our emotions has only been heightened through social media, where viral effects are continually sweeping through us and where the most manipulative leaders are able to exploit and control us. Look at the aggression that is now openly displayed in the virtual world, where it is so much easier to play out our shadow sides without repercussions. Notice how our propensities to compare ourselves with others, to feel envy, and to seek status through attention have only become intensified with our ability to communicate so quickly with so many people. And finally, look at our tribal tendencies and how they have now found the perfect medium to operate in—we can find a group to identify with, reinforce our tribal opinions in a virtual echo chamber, and demonize any outsiders, leading to mob intimidation. The potential for mayhem stemming from the primitive side of our nature has only increased.

It is simple: Human nature is stronger than any individual, than any institution or technological invention. It ends up shaping what we create to reflect itself and its primitive roots. It moves us around like pawns.

Ignore the laws at your own peril. Refusing to come to terms with human nature simply means that you are dooming yourself to patterns beyond your control and to feelings of confusion and helplessness.

The Laws of Human Nature is designed to immerse you in all aspects of human behavior and illuminate its root causes. If you let it guide you, it will

radically alter how you perceive people and your entire approach to dealing with them. It will also radically change how you see yourself. It will accomplish these shifts in perspective in the following ways:

First, the Laws will work to transform you into a calmer and more strategic observer of people, helping to free you from all the emotional drama that needlessly drains you.

Being around people stirs up our anxieties and insecurities as to how others perceive us. Once we feel such emotions, it becomes very hard to observe people as we are drawn into our own feelings, evaluating what people say and do in *personal* terms—do they like me or dislike me? The Laws will help you avoid falling into this trap by revealing that people are generally dealing with emotions and issues that have deep roots. They're experiencing some desires and disappointments that predate you by years and decades. You cross their path at a particular moment and become the convenient target of their anger or frustration. They're projecting onto you certain qualities they want to see. In most cases, they're not relating to you as an individual.

This should not upset you but liberate you. The book will teach you to stop taking personally their insinuating comments, shows of coldness, or moments of irritation. The more you grasp this, the easier it will be to react not with your emotions but rather with the desire to understand where their behavior might come from. You will feel much calmer in the process. And as this takes root in you, you will be less prone to moralize and judge people; instead you will accept them and their flaws as part of human nature. People will like you all the more as they sense this tolerant attitude in you.

Second, the Laws will make you a master interpreter of the cues that people continually emit, giving you a much greater ability to judge their character.

Normally, if we pay attention to people's behavior, we are in a rush to fit their actions into categories and to hurry to conclusions, so we settle for the judgment that suits our own preconceptions. Or we accept their self-serving explanations. The Laws will rid you of this habit by making it clear how easy it is to misread people and how deceptive first impressions can be. You will slow yourself down, mistrust your initial judgment, and instead train yourself to *analyze* what you see.

You will think in terms of opposites—when people overtly display some trait, such as confidence or hypermasculinity, they are most often concealing the contrary reality. You will realize that people are continually playing to the public, making a show of being progressive and saintly only to better disguise their shadow. You will see the signs of this shadow leaking out in everyday life.

If people take an action that seems out of character, you will take note: what often appears out of character is actually more of their true character. If people are essentially lazy or foolish, they leave clues to this in the smallest of details that you can pick up well before their behavior harms you. The ability to gauge people's true worth, their degree of loyalty and conscientiousness, is one of the most important skills you can possess, helping you avoid the bad hires, partnerships, and relationships that can make your life miserable.

Third, the Laws will empower you to take on and outthink the toxic types who inevitably cross your path and who tend to cause long-term emotional damage.

Aggressive, envious, and manipulative people don't usually announce themselves as such. They have learned to appear charming in initial encounters, to use flattery and other means of disarming us. When they surprise us with their ugly behavior, we feel betrayed, angry, and helpless. They create constant pressure, knowing that in doing so they overwhelm our minds with their presence, making it doubly hard to think straight or strategize.

The Laws will teach you how to identify these types in advance, which is your greatest defense against them. Either you will steer clear of them or, foreseeing their manipulative actions, you will not be blindsided and thus will be better able to maintain your emotional balance. You will learn to mentally cut them down to size and focus on the glaring weaknesses and insecurities behind all of their bluster. You will not fall for their myth, and this will neutralize the intimidation they depend on. You will scoff at their cover stories and elaborate explanations for their selfish behavior. Your ability to stay calm will infuriate them and often push them into overreaching or making a mistake.

Instead of being weighed down by these encounters, you might even come to appreciate them as a chance to hone your skills of self-mastery and toughen yourself up. Outsmarting just one of these types will give you a great deal of confidence that you can handle the worst in human nature.

Fourth, the Laws will teach you the true levers for motivating and influencing people, making your path in life that much easier.

Normally, when we meet resistance to our ideas or plans, we cannot help trying to directly change people's minds by arguing, lecturing, or cajoling them, all of which makes them more defensive. The Laws will teach you that people are naturally stubborn and resistant to influence. You must begin any attempt by lowering their resistance and never inadvertently feeding their defensive tendencies. You will train yourself to discern their insecurities and

never inadvertently stir them up. You will think in terms of *their* self-interest and the self-opinion they need validated.

Understanding the permeability of emotions, you will learn that the most effective means of influence is to alter your moods and attitude. People are responding to your energy and demeanor even more than to your words. You will get rid of any defensiveness on your part. Instead, feeling relaxed and genuinely interested in the other person will have a positive and hypnotic effect. You will learn that as a leader your best means of moving people in your direction lies in setting the right tone through your attitude, empathy, and work ethic.

Fifth, the Laws will make you realize how deeply the forces of human nature operate within you, giving you the power to alter your own negative patterns.

Our natural response to reading or hearing about the darker qualities in human nature is to exclude ourselves. It is always the other person who is narcissistic, irrational, envious, grandiose, aggressive, or passive-aggressive. We almost always see ourselves as having the best intentions. If we go astray, it is the fault of circumstances or people forcing us to react negatively. The Laws will make you stop once and for all this self-deluding process. We are all cut from the same cloth, and we all share the same tendencies. The sooner you realize this, the greater your power will be in overcoming these potential negative traits within you. You will examine your own motives, look at your own shadow, and become aware of your own passive-aggressive tendencies. This will make it that much easier to spot such traits in others.

You will also become humbler, realizing you're not superior to others in the way you had imagined. This will not make you feel guilty or weighed down by your self-awareness, but quite the opposite. You will accept yourself as a complete individual, embracing both the good and the bad, dropping your falsified self-image as a saint. You will feel relieved of your hypocrisies and free to be more yourself. People will be drawn to this quality in you.

Sixth, the Laws will transform you into a more empathetic individual, creating deeper and more satisfying bonds with the people around you.

We humans are born with a tremendous potential for understanding people on a level that is not merely intellectual. It is a power developed by our earliest ancestors, in which they learned how to intuit the moods and feelings of others by placing themselves in their perspective.

The Laws will instruct you in how to bring out this latent power to the

highest degree possible. You will learn to slowly cut off your incessant interior monologue and listen more closely. You will train yourself to assume the other's viewpoint as best you can. You will use your imagination and experiences to help you feel how they might feel. If they are describing something painful, you have your own painful moments to draw upon as analogues. You will not be simply intuitive, but rather you will analyze the information you glean in this empathic fashion, gaining insights. You will continually cycle between empathy and analysis, always updating what you observe and increasing your ability to see the world through their eyes. You will notice a physical sensation of connection between you and the other that will emerge from this practice.

You will need a degree of humility in this process. You can never know exactly what people are thinking and can easily make mistakes, and so you must not rush to judgments but keep yourself open to learning more. People are more complex than you imagine. Your goal is to simply see their point of view better. As you go through this process, it becomes like a muscle that gets stronger the more you exercise it.

Cultivating such empathy will have innumerable benefits. We are all self-absorbed, locked in our own worlds. It is a therapeutic and liberating experience to be drawn outside ourselves and into the world of another. It is what attracts us to film and any form of fiction, entering the minds and perspectives of people so different from ourselves. Through this practice your whole way of thinking will shift. You are training yourself to let go of preconceptions, to be alive in the moment, and to continually adapt your ideas about people. You will find such fluidity affecting how you attack problems in general—you will find yourself entertaining other possibilities, taking alternative perspectives. This is the essence of creative thinking.

Finally, the Laws will alter how you see your own potential, making you aware of a higher, ideal self within you that you will want to bring out.

We can say that we humans have two contrary selves within us—a lower and a higher. The lower tends to be stronger. Its impulses pull us down into emotional reactions and defensive postures, making us feel self-righteous and superior to others. It makes us grab for immediate pleasures and distractions, always taking the path of least resistance. It induces us to adopt what other people are thinking, losing ourselves in the group.

We feel the impulses of the higher self when we are drawn out of ourselves, wanting to connect more deeply with others, to absorb our minds in our work, to think instead of react, to follow our own path in life, and to discover what

makes us unique. The lower is the more animal and reactive side of our nature, and one that we easily slip into. The higher is the more truly human side of our nature, the side that makes us thoughtful and self-aware. Because the higher impulse is weaker, connecting to it requires effort and insight.

Bringing out this ideal self within us is what we all really want, because it is only in developing this side of ourselves that we humans feel truly fulfilled. The book will help you accomplish this by making you aware of the potentially positive and active elements contained within each law.

Knowing our propensity for irrationality, you will learn to become aware of how your emotions color your thinking (chapter 1), giving you the ability to subtract them and become truly rational. Knowing how our attitude in life effects what happens to us, and how naturally our minds tend to close up out of fear (chapter 8), you will learn how to forge an attitude that is expansive and fearless. Knowing you have the propensity to compare yourself with others (chapter 10), you will use this as a spur to excel in society through your superior work, to admire those who achieve great things, and to be inspired by their example to emulate them. You will work this magic on each of the primal qualities, using your expanded knowledge of human nature to resist the strong downward pull of your lower nature.

Think of the book in the following way: you are about to become an apprentice in human nature. You will be developing some skills—how to observe and measure the character of your fellow humans and see into your own depths. You will work on bringing out your higher self. And through practice you will emerge a master of the art, able to thwart the worst that other people can throw at you and to mold yourself into a more rational, self-aware, and productive individual.

> Man will only become better when you make him see what he is like.
>
> —*Anton Chekhov*

1

Master Your Emotional Self

The Law of Irrationality

You like to imagine yourself in control of your fate, consciously planning the course of your life as best you can. But you are largely unaware of how deeply your emotions dominate you. They make you veer toward ideas that soothe your ego. They make you look for evidence that confirms what you already want to believe. They make you see what you want to see, depending on your mood, and this disconnect from reality is the source of the bad decisions and negative patterns that haunt your life. Rationality is the ability to counteract these emotional effects, to think instead of react, to open your mind to what is really happening, as opposed to what you are feeling. It does not come naturally; it is a power we must cultivate, but in doing so we realize our greatest potential.

The Inner Athena

One day toward the end of the year 432 BC, the citizens of Athens received some very disturbing news: representatives from the city-state of Sparta had arrived in town and presented to the Athenian governing council new terms of peace. If Athens did not agree to these terms, then Sparta would declare war. Sparta was Athens's archenemy and in many ways its polar opposite. Athens led a league of democratic states in the region, while Sparta led a confederation of oligarchies, known as the Peloponnesians. Athens depended on its navy and on its wealth—it was the preeminent commercial power in the Mediterranean. Sparta depended on its army. It was a total military state. Up until then, the two powers had largely avoided a direct war because the consequences could be devastating—not only could the defeated side lose its influence in the region,

but its whole way of life could be put in jeopardy—certainly for Athens its democracy and its wealth. Now, however, war seemed inevitable and a sense of impending doom quickly settled on the city.

A few days later, the Athenian Assembly met on the Pnyx Hill overlooking the Acropolis to debate the Spartan ultimatum and decide what to do. The Assembly was open to all male citizens, and on that day close to ten thousand of them crowded on the hill to participate in the debate. The hawks among them were in a state of great agitation—Athens should seize the initiative and attack Sparta first, they said. Others reminded them that in a land battle the Spartan forces were nearly unbeatable. Attacking Sparta in this way would play straight into their hands. The doves were all in favor of accepting the peace terms, but as many pointed out, that would only show fear and embolden the Spartans. It would only give them more time to enlarge their army. Back and forth went the debate, with emotions getting heated, people shouting, and no satisfactory solution in sight.

Then toward the end of the afternoon, the crowd suddenly grew quiet as a familiar figure stepped forward to address the Assembly. This was Pericles, the elder statesman of Athenian politics, now over sixty years old. Pericles was beloved, and his opinion would matter more than anyone's, but despite the Athenians' respect for him, they found him a very peculiar leader—more of a philosopher than a politician. To those old enough to remember the start of his career, it was truly surprising how powerful and successful he had become. He did nothing the usual way.

In the earliest years of their democracy, before Pericles had appeared on the scene, the Athenians had preferred a certain personality type in their leaders—men who could give an inspiring, persuasive speech and had a flair for drama. On the battlefield these men were risk takers; they often pushed for military campaigns that they could lead, giving them a chance to gain glory and attention. They advanced their careers by representing some faction in the Assembly—landowners, soldiers, aristocrats—and doing everything they could to further its interests. This led to highly divisive politics. Leaders would rise and fall in cycles of a few years, but the Athenians were fine with this; they mistrusted anyone who lasted long in power.

Then Pericles entered public life around 463 BC, and Athenian politics would never be the same. His first move was the most unusual of all. Although he came from an illustrious aristocratic family, he allied himself with the growing lower and middle classes of the city—farmers, oarsmen in the navy, the

craftsmen who were the pride of Athens. He worked to increase their voice in the Assembly and give them greater power in the democracy. This was not some small faction he now led but the majority of Athenian citizens. It would seem impossible to control such a large, unruly mob of men, with their varied interests, but he was so fervent in increasing their power that he slowly gained their trust and backing.

As his influence grew, he started to assert himself in the Assembly and alter its policies. He argued against expanding Athens's democratic empire. He feared the Athenians would overreach and lose control. He worked to consolidate the empire and strengthen existing alliances. When it came to war and to serving as a general, he strove to limit campaigns and to win through maneuvers, with minimal loss of lives. To many this seemed unheroic, but as these policies took effect, the city entered a period of unprecedented prosperity. There were no more needless wars to drain the coffers, and the empire was functioning more smoothly than ever.

What Pericles did with the growing surplus of money startled and amazed the citizenry: instead of using it to buy political favors, he initiated a massive public building project in Athens. He commissioned temples, theaters, and concert halls, putting all of the Athenian craftsmen to work. Everywhere one looked, the city was becoming more sublimely beautiful. He favored a form of architecture that reflected his personal aesthetics—ordered, highly geometric, monumental yet soothing to the eye. His greatest commission was that of the Parthenon, with its enormous forty-foot statue of Athena. Athena was the guiding spirit of Athens, the goddess of wisdom and practical intelligence. She represented all of the values Pericles wanted to promote. Singlehandedly Pericles had transformed the look and spirit of Athens, and it entered a golden age in all of the arts and sciences.

What was perhaps the strangest quality of Pericles was his speaking style—restrained and dignified. He did not go in for the usual flights of rhetoric. Instead, he worked to convince an audience through airtight arguments. This would make people listen closely, as they followed the interesting course of his logic. The style was compelling and calming.

Unlike any of the other leaders, Pericles remained in power year after year, decade after decade, putting his total stamp on the city in his quiet, unobtrusive way. He had his enemies. This was inevitable. He had stayed in power so long that many accused him of being a secret dictator. He was suspected of being an atheist, a man who scoffed at all traditions. That would explain why

he was so peculiar. But nobody could argue against the results of his leadership.

And so now, as he began to address the Assembly that afternoon, his opinion on war with Sparta would carry the most weight, and a hush came over the crowd as they anxiously waited to hear his argument.

"Athenians," he began, "my views are the same as ever: I am against making any concessions to the Peloponnesians, even though I am aware that the enthusiastic state of mind in which people are persuaded to enter upon a war is not retained when it comes to action, and that people's minds are altered by the course of events." Differences between Athens and Sparta were supposed to be settled through neutral arbitrators, he reminded them. It would set a dangerous precedent if they gave in to the Spartans' unilateral demands. Where would it end? Yes, a direct land battle with Sparta would be suicide. What he proposed instead was a completely novel form of warfare—limited and defensive.

He would bring within the walls of Athens all those living in the area. Let the Spartans come and try to lure us into fighting, he said; let them lay waste to our lands. We will not take the bait; we will not fight them on land. With our access to the sea we will keep the city supplied. We will use our navy to raid their coastal towns. As time goes on, they will grow frustrated by the lack of battle. Having to feed and supply their standing army, they will run out of money. Their allies will bicker among themselves. The war party within Sparta will be discredited and a real lasting peace will be agreed upon, all with minimal expenditure of lives and money on our part.

"I could give you many other reasons," he concluded, "why you should feel confident in ultimate victory, if only you will make up your minds not to add to the empire while the war is in progress, and not to go out of your way to involve yourselves in new perils. What I fear is not the enemy's strategy but our own mistakes." The novelty of what he was proposing aroused great debate. Neither hawks nor doves were satisfied with his plan, but in the end, his reputation for wisdom carried the day and his strategy was approved. Several months later the fateful war began.

In the beginning, all did not proceed as Pericles had envisioned. The Spartans and their allies did not grow frustrated as the war dragged on, but only bolder. The Athenians were the ones to become discouraged, seeing their lands destroyed without retaliation. But Pericles believed his plan could not fail as long as the Athenians remained patient. Then, in the second year of the war, an unexpected disaster upended everything: a powerful plague entered the city;

with so many people packed within the walls it spread quickly, killing over one third of the citizenry and decimating the ranks of the army. Pericles himself caught the disease, and as he lay dying he witnessed the ultimate nightmare: all that he had done for Athens over so many decades seemed to unravel at once, the people descending into group delirium until it was every man for himself. If he had survived, he almost certainly would have found a way to calm the Athenians down and broker an acceptable peace with Sparta, or adjust his defensive strategy, but now it was too late.

Strangely enough, the Athenians did not mourn for their leader. They blamed him for the plague and railed at the ineffectiveness of his strategy. They were not in a mood anymore for patience or restraint. He had outlived his time, and his ideas were now seen as the tired reactions of an old man. Their love of Pericles had turned to hate. With him no longer there, the factions returned with a vengeance. The war party became popular. The party fed off the people's growing bitterness toward the Spartans, who had used the plague to advance their positions. The hawks promised they would regain the initiative and crush the Spartans with an offensive strategy. For many Athenians, such words came as a great relief, a release of pent-up emotions.

As the city slowly recovered from the plague, the Athenians managed to gain the upper hand, and the Spartans sued for peace. Wanting to completely defeat their enemy, the Athenians pressed their advantage, only to find the Spartans recover and turn the tables. Back and forth it went, year after year. The violence and bitterness on both sides increased. At one point Athens attacked the island of Melos, a Spartan ally, and when the Melians surrendered, the Athenians voted to kill all of their men and sell the women and children into slavery. Nothing remotely like this had ever happened under Pericles.

Then, after so many years of a war without end, in 415 BC several Athenian leaders had an interesting idea about how to deliver the fatal blow. The city-state of Syracuse was the rising power on the island of Sicily. Syracuse was a critical ally of the Spartans, supplying them with much-needed resources. If the Athenians, with their great navy, could launch an expedition and take control of Syracuse, they would gain two advantages: it would add to their empire, and it would deprive Sparta of the resources it needed to continue the war. The Assembly voted to send sixty ships with an appropriate-sized army on board to accomplish this goal.

One of the commanders assigned to this expedition, Nicias, had great doubts as to the wisdom of this plan. He feared the Athenians were underestimating the

strength of Syracuse. He laid out all of the possible negative scenarios; only a much larger expedition could ensure victory. He wanted to squelch the plan, but his argument had the opposite effect. If a larger expedition was necessary, then that was what they would send—one hundred ships and double the number of soldiers. The Athenians smelled victory in this strategy and nothing would deter them.

In the ensuing days, Athenians of all ages could be seen in the streets drawing maps of Sicily, dreaming of the riches that would pour into Athens and the final humiliation of the Spartans. The day of the launching of the ships turned into a great holiday and the most awe-inspiring spectacle they had ever seen—an enormous armada filling the harbor as far as the eye could see, the ships beautifully decorated, the soldiers, glistening in their armor, crowding the decks. It was a dazzling display of the wealth and power of Athens.

As the months went by, the Athenians desperately sought news of the expedition. At one point, through the sheer size of the force, it seemed that Athens had gained the advantage and had laid siege to Syracuse. But at the last moment, reinforcements arrived from Sparta, and now the Athenians were on the defensive. Nicias sent off a letter to the Assembly describing this negative turn of events. He recommended either giving up and returning to Athens, or the sending of reinforcements right away. Unwilling to believe in the possibility of defeat, the Athenians voted to send reinforcements—a second armada of ships almost as large as the first. In the months after this, the Athenians' anxiety reached new heights—for now the stakes had been doubled and Athens could not afford to lose.

One day a barber in Athens's port town of Piraeus heard a rumor from a customer that the Athenian expedition, every ship and almost every man, had been wiped out in battle. The rumor quickly spread to Athens. It was hard to believe, but slowly panic set in. A week later the rumor was confirmed and Athens seemed doomed, drained of money, ships, and men.

Miraculously, the Athenians managed to hold on. But over the next few years, severely imbalanced by the losses in Sicily, they staggered from one reeling blow to another, until finally in 405 BC Athens suffered its final loss and was forced to agree to the harsh terms of peace imposed by Sparta. Their years of glory, their great democratic empire, the Periclean golden age were now and forever over. The man who had curbed their most dangerous emotions—aggression, greed, hubris, selfishness—had been gone from the scene for too long, his wisdom long forgotten.

Interpretation: As Pericles surveyed the political scene early in his career, he noticed the following phenomenon: Every Athenian political figure believed he was rational, had realistic goals, and plans on how to get there. They all worked hard for their political factions and tried to increase their power. They led Athenian armies into battle and often came out ahead. They strove to expand the empire and bring in more money. And when their political maneuvering suddenly backfired, or the wars turned out badly, they had excellent reasons for why this had happened. They could always blame the opposition or, if need be, the gods. And yet, if all these men were so rational, why did their policies add up to so much chaos and self-destructiveness? Why was Athens such a mess and the democracy itself so fragile? Why was there so much corruption and turbulence? The answer was simple: his fellow Athenians were not rational at all, merely selfish and shrewd. What guided their decisions was their base emotions—hunger for power, attention, and money. And for those purposes they could be very tactical and clever, but none of their maneuvers led to anything that lasted or served the overall interests of the democracy.

What consumed Pericles as a thinker and a public figure was how to get out of this trap, how to be truly rational in an arena dominated by emotions. The solution he came up with is unique in history and devastatingly powerful in its results. It should serve as our ideal. In his conception, the human mind has to worship something, has to have its attention directed to something it values above all else. For most people, it is their ego; for some it is their family, their clan, their god, or their nation. For Pericles it would be *nous*, the ancient Greek word for "mind" or "intelligence." *Nous* is a force that permeates the universe, creating meaning and order. The human mind is naturally attracted to this order; this is the source of our intelligence. For Pericles, the *nous* that he worshipped was embodied in the figure of the goddess Athena.

Athena was literally born from the head of Zeus, her name itself reflecting this—a combination of "god" (*theos*) and "mind" (*nous*). But Athena came to represent a very particular form of *nous*—eminently practical, feminine, and earthy. She is the voice that comes to heroes in times of need, instilling in them a calm spirit, orienting their minds toward the perfect idea for victory and success, then giving them the energy to achieve this. To be visited by Athena was the highest blessing of them all, and it was her spirit that guided great generals and the best artists, inventors, and tradesmen. Under her influence, a

man or woman could see the world with perfect clarity and hit upon the action that was just right for the moment. For Athens, her spirit was invoked to unify the city, make it prosperous and productive. In essence, Athena stood for rationality, the greatest gift of the gods to mortals, for it alone could make a human act with divine wisdom.

To cultivate his inner Athena, Pericles first had to find a way to master his emotions. Emotions turn us inward, away from *nous*, away from reality. We dwell on our anger or our insecurities. If we look out at the world and try to solve problems, we see things through the lens of these emotions; they cloud our vision. Pericles trained himself to never react in the moment, to never make a decision while under the influence of a strong emotion. Instead, he analyzed his feelings. Usually when he looked closely at his insecurities or his anger, he saw that they were not really justified, and they lost their significance under scrutiny. Sometimes he had to physically get away from the heated Assembly and retire to his house, where he remained alone for days on end, calming himself down. Slowly, the voice of Athena would come to him.

He decided to base all of his political decisions on one thing—what actually served the greater good of Athens. His goal was to unify the citizenry through genuine love of democracy and belief in the superiority of the Athenian way. Having such a standard helped him avoid the ego trap. It impelled him to work to increase the participation and power of the lower and middle classes, even though such a strategy could easily turn against him. It inspired him to limit wars, even though this meant less personal glory for him. And finally it led to his greatest decision of all—the public works project that transformed Athens.

To help himself in this deliberative process, he opened his mind to as many ideas and options as possible, even to those of his opponents. He imagined all of the possible consequences of a strategy before committing to it. With a calm spirit and an open mind, he hit upon policies that sparked one of the true golden ages in history. One man was able to infect an entire city with his rational spirit. What happened to Athens after he departed from the scene speaks for itself. The Sicilian expedition represented everything he had always opposed—a decision secretly motivated by the desire to grab more land, blinded to its potential consequences.

Understand: Like everyone, you think you are rational, but you are not. Rationality is not a power you are born with but one you acquire through

training and practice. The voice of Athena simply stands for a higher power that exists within you right now, a potential you have perhaps felt in moments of calmness and focus, the perfect idea coming to you after much thinking. You are not connected to this higher power in the present because your mind is weighed down with emotions. Like Pericles in the Assembly, you are infected by all of the drama that others churn up; you are continually reacting to what people give you, experiencing waves of excitement, insecurity, and anxiety that make it hard to focus. Your attention is pulled this way and that, and without the rational standard to guide your decisions, you never quite reach the goals that you set. At any moment this can change with a simple decision—to cultivate your inner Athena. Rationality is then what you will value the most and that which will serve as your guide.

Your first task is to look at those emotions that are continually infecting your ideas and decisions. Learn to question yourself: Why this anger or resentment? Where does this incessant need for attention come from? Under such scrutiny, your emotions will lose their hold on you. You will begin to think for yourself instead of reacting to what others give you. Emotions tend to narrow the mind, making us focus on one or two ideas that satisfy our immediate desire for power or attention, ideas that usually backfire. Now, with a calm spirit, you can entertain a wide range of options and solutions. You will deliberate longer before acting and reassess your strategies. The voice will become clearer and clearer. When people besiege you with their endless dramas and petty emotions, you will resent the distraction and apply your rationality to think past them. Like an athlete continually getting stronger through training, your mind will become more flexible and resilient. Clear and calm, you will see answers and creative solutions that no one else can envision.

> It's just as though one's second self were standing beside one; one is sensible and rational oneself, but the other self is impelled to do something perfectly senseless, and sometimes very funny; and suddenly you notice that you are longing to do that amusing thing, goodness knows why; that is, you want to, as it were, against your will; though you fight against it with all of your might, you want to.
>
> —Fyodor Dostoyevsky, *A Raw Youth*

Keys to Human Nature

Whenever anything goes wrong in our life, we naturally seek an explanation. To not find some cause for why our plans went awry, or why we faced sudden resistance to our ideas, would be deeply disturbing to us and intensify our pain. But in looking for a cause, our minds tend to revolve around the same types of explanations: someone or some group sabotaged me, perhaps out of dislike; large antagonistic forces out there, such as the government or social conventions, hindered me; I received bad advice, or information was kept from me. Finally—if worse comes to worst—it was all bad luck and unfortunate circumstances.

These explanations generally emphasize our helplessness. "What could I have done differently? How could I have possibly foreseen the nasty actions of X against me?" They are also somewhat vague. We usually can't point to specific malicious actions of others. We can only suspect or imagine. These explanations tend to intensify our emotions—anger, frustration, depression—which we can then wallow in and feel bad for ourselves. Most significantly, our first reaction is to look outward for the cause. Yes, we might be responsible for some of what happened, but for the most part, other people and antagonistic forces tripped us up. This reaction is deeply ingrained in the human animal. In ancient times, it might have been the gods or evil spirits who were to blame. We of the present choose to call them other names.

The truth, however, is very different from this. Certainly there are individuals and larger forces out there that continually have an effect on us, and there is much we cannot control in the world. But generally what causes us to go astray in the first place, what leads to bad decisions and miscalculations, is our deep-rooted irrationality, the extent to which our minds are governed by emotion. We cannot see this. It is our blind spot, and as exhibit A of this blind spot, let's look at the crash of 2008, which can serve as a compendium of all varieties of human irrationality.

In the aftermath of the crash, the following were the most common explanations in the media for what had happened: trade imbalances and other factors led to cheap credit in the early 2000s, which led to excess leverage; it was impossible to place accurate value on the highly complex derivatives that were being traded, so no one really could gauge profits and losses; there existed a shrewd and corrupt cabal of insiders who had incentives to manipulate the system for quick profits; greedy lenders pushed subprime mortgages on unsuspect-

ing homeowners; there was too much government regulation; there was not enough government oversight; computer models and trading systems ran amok.

These explanations reveal a remarkable denial of a basic reality. Leading up to the crash of 2008, millions of people made daily decisions on whether to invest or not invest. At each point of these transactions, buyers and sellers could have pulled back from the riskiest forms of investment but decided not to. There were plenty of people out there warning of a bubble. Only a few years before, the crash of the giant hedge fund Long-Term Capital Management showed exactly how a larger crash could and would occur. If people had longer memories, they could think back to the bubble of 1987; if they read history, the stock market bubble and crash of 1929. Almost any potential homeowner can understand the risks of no-money-down mortgages and lending terms with fast-rising interest rates.

What all of the analysis ignores is the basic irrationality that drove these millions of buyers and sellers up and down the line. They became infected with the lure of easy money. This made even the most educated investor emotional. Studies and experts were pulled in to bolster ideas that people were already disposed to believe in—such as the proverbial "this time it's different" and "housing prices never go down." A wave of unbridled optimism swept through masses of people. Then came the panic and crash and the ugly confrontation with reality. Instead of coming to terms with the orgy of speculation that had overwhelmed one and all, making smart people look like idiots, fingers were pointed at outside forces, anything to deflect the real source of the madness. This is not something peculiar to the crash of 2008. The same types of explanations were trotted out after the crashes of 1987 and 1929, the railway mania in the 1840s in England, and the South Sea bubble of the 1720s, also in England. People spoke of reforming the system; laws were passed to limit speculation. And none of this worked.

Bubbles occur because of the intense emotional pull they have on people, which overwhelms any reasoning powers an individual mind might possess. They stimulate our natural tendencies toward greed, easy money, and quick results. It is hard to see other people making money and not join in. There is no regulatory force on the planet that can control human nature. And because we do not confront the real source of the problem, bubbles and crashes keep repeating, and will keep repeating as long as there are suckers and people who do not read history. The recurrence of this mirrors the recurrence in our own lives of the same problems and mistakes, forming negative patterns. It is hard to learn from experience when we are not looking inward, at the true causes.

Understand: The first step toward becoming rational is to understand our *fundamental irrationality*. There are two factors that should render this more palatable to our egos: nobody is exempt from the irresistible effect of emotions on the mind, not even the wisest among us; and to some extent irrationality is a function of the structure of our brains and is wired into our very nature by the way we process emotions. Being irrational is almost beyond our control. To understand this, we must look at the evolution of emotions themselves.

For millions of years, living organisms depended on finely tuned instincts for survival. In a split second, a reptile could sense danger in the environment and respond with an instantaneous flight from the scene. There was no separation between impulse and action. Then, slowly, for some animals this sensation evolved into something larger and longer—a feeling of fear. In the beginning this fear merely consisted of a high level of arousal with the release of certain chemicals, alerting the animal to a possible danger. With this arousal and the attention that came with it, the animal could respond in several ways instead of just one. It could become more sensitive to the environment and learn. It stood a better chance of survival because its options were widened. This sensation of fear would last only a few seconds or even less, for speed was of the essence.

For social animals, these arousals and feelings took on a deeper and more important role: they became a critical form of communication. Vicious sounds or hair standing on end could display anger, warding off an enemy or signaling a danger; certain postures or smells revealed sexual desire and readiness; postures and gestures signaled the desire to play; certain calls from the young revealed deep anxiety and the need for the mother to return. With primates, this became ever more elaborate and complex. It has been shown that chimpanzees can feel envy and the desire for vengeance, among other emotions. This evolution took place over the course of hundreds of millions of years. Much more recently, cognitive powers developed in animals and humans, culminating in the invention of language and abstract thinking.

As many neuroscientists have affirmed, this evolution has led to the higher mammalian brain being composed of three parts. The oldest is the reptilian part of the brain, which controls all automatic responses that regulate the body. This is the instinctive part. Above that is the old mammalian or limbic brain, governing feeling and emotion. And on top of that has evolved the neocortex, the part that controls cognition and, for humans, language.

Emotions originate as physical arousal designed to capture our attention and cause us to take notice of something around us. They begin as chemical re-

actions and sensations that we must then translate into words to try to understand. But because they are processed in a different part of the brain from language and thinking, this translation is often slippery and inaccurate. For instance, we feel anger at person X, whereas in fact the true source of this may be envy; below the level of conscious awareness we feel inferior in relation to X and want something he or she has. But envy is not a feeling that we are ever comfortable with, and so often we translate it as something more palatable—anger, dislike, resentment. Or let us say one day we are feeling a mood of frustration and impatience; person Y crosses our path at the wrong moment and we lash out, unaware that this anger is prompted by a different mood and out of proportion to Y's actions. Or let us say that we are truly angry at person Z. But the anger is sitting inside of us, caused by someone in our past who hurt us deeply, perhaps a parent. We direct the anger at Z because they remind us of this other person.

In other words, we do not have conscious access to the origins of our emotions and the moods they generate. Once we feel them, all we can do is try to interpret the emotion, translate it into language. But more often than not we get this wrong. We latch onto interpretations that are simple and that suit us. Or we remain baffled. We don't know why we feel depressed, for example. This unconscious aspect of emotions also means that it is very hard for us to learn from them, to stop or prevent compulsive behavior. Children who felt abandoned by their parents will tend to create patterns of abandonment in later life, without seeing the reason. (See *Trigger Points from Early Childhood*, on page 32.)

The communicating function of emotions, a critical factor for social animals, also becomes somewhat tricky for us. We communicate anger when it is something else we are feeling, or about someone else, but the other person cannot see this and so they react as if personally attacked, which can create cascading misinterpretations.

Emotions evolved for a different reason than cognition. These two forms of relating to the world are not connected seamlessly in our brains. For animals, unburdened by the need to translate physical sensations into abstract language, emotions function smoothly, as they were meant to. For us, the split between our emotions and our cognition is a source of constant internal friction, comprising a second Emotional Self within us that operates beyond our will. Animals feel fear for a brief time, then it is gone. We dwell on our fears, intensifying them and making them last well past the moment of danger, even to the point of feeling constant anxiety.

Many might be tempted to imagine that we have somehow tamed this Emotional Self through all of our intellectual and technological progress. After all, we don't appear as violent or passionate or superstitious as our ancestors; but this is an illusion. Progress and technology have not rewired us; they have merely altered the forms of our emotions and the type of irrationality that comes with them. For instance, new forms of media have enhanced the age-old ability of politicians and others to play on our emotions, in ever subtler and more sophisticated ways. Advertisers bombard us with highly effective subliminal messages. Our continual connection to social media makes us prone to new forms of viral emotional effects. These are not media designed for calm reflection. With their constant presence, we have less and less mental space to step back and think. We are as besieged with emotions and needless drama as the Athenians in the Assembly, because human nature has not changed.

Clearly the words *rational* and *irrational* can be quite loaded. People are always labeling those who disagree with them "irrational." What we need is a simple definition that can be applied as a way of judging, as accurately as possible, the difference between the two. The following shall serve as our barometer: We constantly feel emotions, and they continually infect our thinking, making us veer toward thoughts that please us and soothe our egos. It is impossible to not have our inclinations and feelings somehow involved in what we think. Rational people are aware of this and through introspection and effort are able, to some extent, to subtract emotions from their thinking and counteract their effect. Irrational people have no such awareness. They rush into action without carefully considering the ramifications and consequences.

We can see the difference in the decisions and actions that people take and the results that ensue. Rational people demonstrate over time that they are able to finish a project, to realize their goals, to work effectively with a team, and to create something that lasts. Irrational people reveal in their lives negative patterns—mistakes that keep repeating, unnecessary conflicts that follow them wherever they go, dreams and projects that are never realized, anger and desires for change that are never translated into concrete action. They are emotional and reactive and unaware of this. Everyone is capable of irrational decisions, some of which are caused by circumstances beyond our control. And even the most emotional types can hit upon great ideas or succeed momentarily through boldness. So it is important to judge over time whether a person is rational or irrational. Can they sustain success and hit upon several good strategies? Can they adjust and learn from failures?

We can also see the difference between a rational and irrational person in particular situations, when it comes to calculating long-term effects and seeing what truly matters. For instance: In a divorce proceeding with child custody issues, rational people will manage to let go of their bitterness and prejudice and reason what is in the best overall long-term interests of the child. Irrational people will become consumed with a power struggle against the spouse, will let resentments and desires for vengeance secretly guide their decisions. This will lead to a protracted battle and a damaged child.

When it comes to hiring an assistant or partner, rational people will use competence as their barometer—can this person do the job? An irrational person will easily fall under the spell of those who are charming, who know how to feed their insecurities, or who pose little challenge or threat, and will hire them without realizing the reasons. This will lead to mistakes and inefficiencies, for which the irrational person will blame others. When it comes to career decisions, rational people will look for positions that fit their long-term goals. Irrational types will decide based on how much money they can immediately make, what they feel they deserve in life (sometimes very little), how much they can slack off on the job, or how much attention the position might bring them. This will lead to career dead ends.

In all cases, the degree of awareness represents the difference. Rational people can readily admit their own irrational tendencies and the need to be vigilant. On the other hand, irrational people become highly emotional when challenged about the emotional roots of their decisions. They are incapable of introspection and learning. Their mistakes make them increasingly defensive.

It is important to understand that rationality is not some means of transcending emotion. Pericles himself valued bold and adventurous action. He *loved* the spirit of Athena and the inspiration she brought. He wanted Athenians to feel love for their city and empathy for their fellow citizens. What he envisioned was a state of balance—a clear understanding of why we feel the way we do, conscious of our impulses so that we can think without being secretly compelled by our emotions. Pericles wanted the energy that comes from impulses and emotions to serve our thinking self. That was his vision of rationality, and our ideal.

Fortunately, to acquire rationality is not complicated. It simply requires knowing and working through a three-step process. First, we must become aware of what we shall call *low-grade irrationality*. This is a function of the continual moods and feelings that we experience in life, below the level of

consciousness. When we plan or make decisions, we are not aware of how deeply these moods and feelings skew the thinking process. They create in our thinking pronounced biases that are so deeply ingrained in us that we see evidence of them in all cultures and all periods of history. These biases, by distorting reality, lead to the mistakes and ineffective decisions that plague our lives. Being aware of them, we can begin to counterbalance their effects.

Second, we must understand the nature of what we shall call *high-grade irrationality*. This occurs when our emotions become inflamed, generally because of certain pressures. As we think about our anger, excitement, resentment, or suspicion, it intensifies into a reactive state—everything we see or hear is interpreted through the lens of this emotion. We become more sensitive and more prone to other emotional reactions. Impatience and resentment can bleed into anger and deep distrust. These reactive states are what lead people to violence, to manic obsessions, to uncontrollable greed, or to desires to control another person. This form of irrationality is the source of more acute problems—crises, conflicts, and disastrous decisions. Understanding how this type of irrationality operates can allow us to recognize the reactive state as it is happening and pull back before we do something we regret.

Third, we need to enact certain strategies and exercises that will strengthen the thinking part of the brain and give it more power in the eternal struggle with our emotions.

The following three steps will help you begin on the path toward rationality. It would be wise to incorporate all three into your study and practice in human nature.

Step One: Recognize the Biases

Emotions are continually affecting our thought processes and decisions, below the level of our awareness. And the most common emotion of them all is the desire for pleasure and the avoidance of pain. Our thoughts almost inevitably revolve around this desire; we simply recoil from entertaining ideas that are unpleasant or painful to us. We imagine we are looking for the truth, or being realistic, when in fact we are holding on to ideas that bring a release from tension and soothe our egos, make us feel superior. This *pleasure principle in thinking* is the source of all of our mental biases. If you believe that you are somehow immune to any of the following biases, it is simply an example of the pleasure

principle in action. Instead, it is best to search and see how they continually operate inside you, as well as learn how to identify such irrationality in others.

Confirmation Bias

I look at the evidence and arrive at my decisions through more or less rational processes.

To hold an idea and convince ourselves we arrived at it rationally, we go in search of evidence to support our view. What could be more objective or scientific? But because of the pleasure principle and its unconscious influence, we manage to find the evidence that confirms what we *want* to believe. This is known as *confirmation bias*.

We can see this at work in people's plans, particularly those with high stakes. A plan is designed to lead to a positive, desired objective. If people considered the possible negative and positive consequences equally, they might find it hard to take any action. Inevitably they veer toward information that confirms the desired positive result, the rosy scenario, without realizing it. We also see this at work when people are supposedly asking for advice. This is the bane of most consultants. In the end, people want to hear their own ideas and preferences confirmed by an expert opinion. They will interpret what you say in light of what they want to hear; and if your advice runs counter to their desires, they will find some way to dismiss your opinion, your so-called expertise. The more powerful the person, the more they are subject to this form of the confirmation bias.

When investigating confirmation bias in the world, take a look at theories that seem a little too good to be true. Statistics and studies are trotted out to prove them; these are not very difficult to find, once you are convinced of the rightness of your argument. On the internet, it is easy to find studies that support both sides of an argument. In general, you should never accept the validity of people's ideas because they have supplied "evidence." Instead, examine the evidence yourself in the cold light of day, with as much skepticism as you can muster. Your first impulse should always be to find the evidence that disconfirms your most cherished beliefs and those of others. That is true science.

Conviction Bias

I believe in this idea so strongly. It must be true.

We hold on to an idea that is secretly pleasing to us, but deep inside we might have some doubts as to its truth, and so we go an extra mile to convince ourselves—to believe in it with great vehemence and to loudly contradict

anyone who challenges us. How can our idea not be true if it brings out in us such energy to defend it, we tell ourselves? This bias is revealed even more clearly in our relationship to leaders—if they express an opinion with heated words and gestures, colorful metaphors and entertaining anecdotes, and a deep well of conviction, it must mean they have examined the idea carefully to express it with such certainty. Those, on the other hand, who express nuances, whose tone is more hesitant, reveal weakness and self-doubt. They are probably lying, or so we think. This bias makes us susceptible to salesmen and demagogues who display conviction as a way to convince and deceive. They know that people are hungry for entertainment, so they cloak their half-truths with dramatic effects.

Appearance Bias

I understand the people I deal with; I see them just as they are.

We see people not as they are, but as they appear to us. And these appearances are usually misleading. First, people have trained themselves in social situations to present the front that is appropriate and that will be judged positively. They seem to be in favor of the noblest causes, always presenting themselves as hardworking and conscientious. We take these masks for reality. Second, we are prone to fall for the *halo effect*—when we see certain negative or positive qualities in a person (social awkwardness, intelligence), other positive or negative qualities are implied that fit with this. People who are good-looking generally seem more trustworthy, particularly politicians. If a person is successful, we imagine they are probably also ethical, conscientious, and deserving of their good fortune. This obscures the fact that many people who have gotten ahead have done so through less-than-moral actions, which they cleverly disguise from view.

The Group Bias

My ideas are my own. I do not listen to the group. I am not a conformist.

We are social animals by nature. The feeling of isolation, of difference from the group, is depressing and terrifying. We experience tremendous relief when we find others who think the same way we do. In fact, we are motivated to take up ideas and opinions *because* they bring us this relief. We are unaware of this pull and so imagine we have come to certain ideas completely on our own. Look at people who support one party or the other, one ideology—a noticeable orthodoxy or correctness prevails, without anyone saying anything or applying overt pressure. If someone is on the right or the left, their opinions will

almost always follow the same direction on dozens of issues, as if by magic, and yet few would ever admit this influence on their thought patterns.

The Blame Bias

I learn from my experience and mistakes.

Mistakes and failures elicit the need to explain. We want to learn the lesson and not repeat the experience. But in truth, we do not like to look too closely at what we did; our introspection is limited. Our natural response is to blame others, circumstances, or a momentary lapse of judgment. The reason for this bias is that it is often too painful to look at our mistakes. It calls into question our feelings of superiority. It pokes at our ego. We go through the motions, pretending to reflect on what we did. But with the passage of time, the pleasure principle rises and we forget what small part in the mistake we ascribed to ourselves. Desire and emotion will blind us yet again, and we will repeat exactly the same mistake and go through the same mild recriminating process, followed by forgetfulness, until we die. If people truly learned from their experience, we would find few mistakes in the world and career paths that ascend ever upward.

Superiority Bias

I'm different. I'm more rational than others, more ethical as well.

Few would say this to people in conversation. It sounds arrogant. But in numerous opinion polls and studies, when asked to compare themselves with others, people generally express a variation of this. It's the equivalent of an optical illusion—we cannot seem to see our faults and irrationalities, only those of others. So, for instance, we'll easily believe that those in the other political party do not come to their opinions based on rational principles, but those on our side have done so. On the ethical front, few of us will ever admit that we have resorted to deception or manipulation in our work or have been clever and strategic in our career advancement. Everything we've got, or so we think, comes from natural talent and hard work. But with other people, we are quick to ascribe to them all kinds of Machiavellian tactics. This allows us to justify whatever we do, no matter the results.

We feel a tremendous pull to imagine ourselves as rational, decent, and ethical. These are qualities highly promoted in the culture. To show signs otherwise is to risk great disapproval. If all of this were true—if people were rational and morally superior—the world would be suffused with goodness and peace.

We know, however, the reality, and so some people, perhaps all of us, are merely deceiving ourselves. Rationality and ethical qualities must be achieved through awareness and effort. They do not come naturally. They come through a maturation process.

Step Two: Beware the Inflaming Factors

Low-grade emotions continually affect our thinking, and they originate from our own impulses—for instance, the desire for pleasing and comforting thoughts. High-grade emotion, however, comes at certain moments, reaches an explosive pitch, and is generally sparked by something external—a person who gets under our skin, or particular circumstances. The level of arousal is higher and our attention is captured completely. The more we think about the emotion, the stronger it gets, which makes us focus even more on it, and so on and so forth. Our minds tunnel into the emotion, and everything reminds us of our anger or excitement. We become reactive. Because we are unable to bear the tension this brings, high-grade emotion usually culminates in some rash action with disastrous consequences. In the middle of such an attack we feel possessed, as if a second, limbic self has taken over.

It is best to be aware of these factors so that you can stop the mind from tunneling and prevent the releasing action that you will always come to regret. You should also be aware of high-grade irrationality in others, to either get out of their way or help bring them back to reality.

Trigger Points from Early Childhood

In early childhood we were at our most sensitive and vulnerable. Our relationship to our parents had a much greater impact on us the further back in time we go. The same could be said for any early powerful experience. These vulnerabilities and wounds remain buried deep within our minds. Sometimes we try to repress the memory of these influences, if they happen to be negative—great fears or humiliations. Sometimes, however, they are associated with positive emotions, experiences of love and attention that we continually want to relive. Later in life, a person or event will trigger a memory of this positive or negative experience, and with it a release of powerful chemicals or hormones associated with the memory.

Take, for example, a young man who had a distant, narcissistic mother. As an infant or child, he experienced her coldness as abandonment, and to be abandoned must mean he was somehow unworthy of her love. Or similarly, a new sibling on the scene caused his mother to give him much less attention, which he equally experienced as abandonment. Later in life, in a relationship, a woman might hint at disapproval of some trait or action of his, all of which is part of a healthy relationship. This will hit a trigger point—she is noticing his flaws, which, he imagines, precedes her abandonment of him. He feels a powerful rush of emotion, a sense of imminent betrayal. He does not see the source of this; it is beyond his control. He overreacts, accuses, withdraws, all of which leads to the very thing he feared—abandonment. His reaction was to some reflection in his mind, not to the reality. This is the height of irrationality.

The way to recognize this in yourself and in others is by noticing behavior that is suddenly childish in its intensity and seemingly out of character. This could center on any key emotion. It could be fear—of losing control, of failure. In this case, we react by withdrawing from the situation and the presence of others, like a child curling up into a ball. A sudden illness, brought on by the intense fear, will conveniently cause us to have to leave the scene. It could be love—desperately searching to re-create a close parental or sibling relationship in the present, triggered by someone who vaguely reminds us of the lost paradise. It could be extreme mistrust, originating from an authority figure in early childhood who disappointed or betrayed us, generally the father. This often triggers a sudden rebellious attitude.

The great danger here is that in misreading the present and reacting to something in the past, we create conflict, disappointments, and mistrust that only strengthen the wound. In some ways, we are programmed to repeat the early experience in the present. Our only defense is awareness as it is happening. We can recognize a trigger point by the experience of emotions that are unusually primal, more uncontrollable than normal. They trigger tears, deep depression, or excessive hope. People under the spell of these emotions will often have a very different tone of voice and body language, as if they were physically reliving a moment from early life.

In the midst of such an attack, we must struggle to detach ourselves and contemplate the possible source—the wound in early childhood—and the patterns it has locked us into. This deep understanding of ourselves and our vulnerabilities is a key step toward becoming rational.

Sudden Gains or Losses

Sudden success or winnings can be very dangerous. Neurologically, chemicals are released in the brain that give a powerful jolt of arousal and energy, leading to the desire to repeat this experience. It can be the start of any kind of addiction and manic behavior. Also, when gains come quickly we tend to lose sight of the basic wisdom that true success, to really last, must come through hard work. We do not take into account the role that luck plays in such sudden gains. We try again and again to recapture that high from winning so much money or attention. We acquire feelings of grandiosity. We become especially resistant to anyone who tries to warn us—they don't understand, we tell ourselves. Because this cannot be sustained, we experience an inevitable fall, which is all the more painful, leading to the depression part of the cycle. Although gamblers are the most prone to this, it equally applies to businesspeople during bubbles and to people who gain sudden attention from the public.

Unexpected losses or a string of losses equally create irrational reactions. We imagine we are cursed with bad luck and that this will go on indefinitely. We become fearful and hesitant, which will often lead to more mistakes or failures. In sports, this can induce what is known as choking, as previous losses and misses weigh on the mind and tighten it up.

The solution here is simple: whenever you experience unusual gains or losses, that is precisely the time to step back and counterbalance them with some necessary pessimism or optimism. Be extra wary of sudden success and attention—they are not built on anything that lasts and they have an addictive pull. And the fall is always painful.

Rising Pressure

The people around you generally appear sane and in control of their lives. But put any of them in stressful circumstances, with the pressure rising, and you will see a different reality. The cool mask of self-control comes off. They suddenly lash out in anger, reveal a paranoid streak, and become hypersensitive and often petty. Under stress or any threat, the most primitive parts of the brain are aroused and engaged, overwhelming people's reasoning powers. In fact, stress or tension can reveal flaws in people that they have carefully concealed from view. It is often wise to observe people in such moments, precisely as a way to judge their true character.

Whenever you notice rising pressure and stress levels in your life, you must

watch yourself carefully. Monitor any signs of unusual brittleness or sensitivity, sudden suspicions, fears disproportionate to the circumstances. Observe with as much detachment as possible, finding time and space to be alone. You need perspective. Never imagine that you are someone who can withstand rising stress without emotional leakage. It is not possible. But through self-awareness and reflection you can prevent yourself from making decisions you will come to regret.

Inflaming Individuals

There are people in the world who by their nature tend to trigger powerful emotions in almost everyone they encounter. These emotions range among the extremes of love, hatred, confidence, and mistrust. Some examples in history would include King David in the Bible, Alcibiades in ancient Athens, Julius Caesar in ancient Rome, Georges Danton during the French Revolution, and Bill Clinton. These types have a degree of charisma—they have the ability to express eloquently emotions they are feeling, which inevitably stirs parallel emotions in others. But some of them can also be quite narcissistic; they project their internal drama and troubles outward, catching other people up in the turmoil they create. This leads to profound feelings of attraction in some and repulsion in others.

It is best to recognize these inflamers by how they affect others, not just yourself. No one can remain indifferent to them. People find themselves incapable of reasoning or maintaining any distance in their presence. They make you think of them continually when not in their presence. They have an obsessive quality, and they can lead you to extreme actions as a devoted follower or as an inveterate enemy. On either end of the spectrum—attraction or repulsion—you will tend to be irrational and you will desperately need to distance yourself. A good strategy to utilize is to see through the front they project. They inevitably try to cast a larger-than-life image, a mythic, intimidating quality; but in fact they are all too human, full of the same insecurities and weaknesses we all possess. Try to recognize these very human traits and demythologize them.

The Group Effect

This is the high-grade variety of the *group bias.* When we are in a group of a large enough size, we become different. Notice yourself and others at a sporting event, a concert, a religious or political gathering. It is impossible to not feel

yourself caught up in the collective emotions. Your heart beats faster. Tears of joy or sadness come more readily. Being in a group does not stimulate independent reasoning but rather the intense desire to belong. This can happen equally in a work environment, particularly if the leader plays on people's emotions to spur competitive, aggressive desires, or creates an us-versus-them dynamic. The group effect does not necessarily require the presence of others. It can occur virally, as some opinion spreads over social media and infects us with the desire to share the opinion—generally of a strong variety, such as outrage.

There is an exhilarating, positive aspect to the stimulation of group emotions. It is how we can be rallied to do something for the collective good. But if you notice the appeal is to more diabolical emotions, such as hatred of the other, rabid patriotism, aggression, or sweeping worldviews, you need to inoculate yourself and see through the powerful pull as it works on you. It is often best to avoid the group setting if possible in order to maintain your reasoning powers, or to enter such moments with maximum skepticism.

Be aware of demagogues who exploit the group effect and stimulate outbreaks of irrationality. They inevitably resort to certain devices. In a group setting, they begin by warming up the crowd, talking about ideas and values that everyone shares, creating a pleasant feeling of agreement. They rely on vague but loaded words full of emotive quality such as *justice* or *truth* or *patriotism*. They talk of abstract, noble goals rather than the solving of specific problems with concrete action.

Demagogues in politics or the media try to stir a continual sense of panic, urgency, and outrage. They must keep the emotional levels high. Your defense is simple: Consider your reasoning powers, your ability to think for yourself, your most precious possession. Resent any kind of intrusion upon your independent mind by others. When you feel you are in the presence of a demagogue, become doubly wary and analytical.

A FINAL WORD ON THE IRRATIONAL IN HUMAN NATURE: DO NOT IMAGINE THAT THE more extreme types of irrationality have somehow been overcome through progress and enlightenment. Throughout history we witness continual cycles of rising and falling levels of the irrational. The great golden age of Pericles, with its philosophers and its first stirrings of the scientific spirit, was followed by an age of superstition, cults, and intolerance. This same phenomenon

happened after the Italian Renaissance. That this cycle is bound to recur again and again is part of human nature.

The irrational simply changes its look and its fashions. We may no longer have literal witch hunts, but in the twentieth century, not so very long ago, we witnessed the show trials of Stalin, the McCarthy hearings in the U.S. Senate, and the mass persecutions during the Chinese Cultural Revolution. Various cults are continually being generated, including cults of personality and the fetishizing of celebrities. Technology now inspires religious fervor. People have a desperate need to believe in something and they will find it anywhere. Polls have revealed that increasing numbers of people believe in ghosts, spirits, and angels, in the twenty-first century.

As long as there are humans, the irrational will find its voices and means of spreading. Rationality is something to be acquired by individuals, not by mass movements or technological progress. Feeling superior and beyond it is a sure sign that the irrational is at work.

Step Three: Strategies Toward Bringing Out the Rational Self

Despite our pronounced irrational tendencies, two factors should give us all hope. First and foremost is the existence throughout history and in all cultures of people of high rationality, the types who have made progress possible. They serve as ideals for all of us to aim for. These include Pericles, the ruler Aśoka of ancient India, Marcus Aurelius of ancient Rome, Marguerite de Valois in medieval France, Leonardo da Vinci, Charles Darwin, Abraham Lincoln, the writer Anton Chekhov, the anthropologist Margaret Mead, and the businessman Warren Buffett, to name but a few. All of these types share certain qualities—a realistic appraisal of themselves and their weaknesses; a devotion to truth and reality; a tolerant attitude toward people; and the ability to reach goals that they have set.

The second factor is that almost all of us at some point in our lives have experienced moments of greater rationality. This often comes with what we shall call the *maker's mind-set*. We have a project to get done, perhaps with a deadline. The only emotion we can afford is excitement and energy. Other emotions simply make it impossible to concentrate. Because we have to get results, we become exceptionally practical. We focus on the work—our mind calm, our ego not intruding. If people try to interrupt or infect us with

them down to human size. They no longer elicited hatred but rather pity. You must think more like a writer in approaching the people you deal with, even the worst sorts.

Find the optimal balance of thinking and emotion. We cannot divorce emotions from thinking. The two are completely intertwined. But there is inevitably a dominant factor, some people more clearly governed by emotions than others. What we are looking for is the proper ratio and balance, the one that leads to the most effective action. The ancient Greeks had an appropriate metaphor for this: the rider and the horse.

The horse is our emotional nature continually impelling us to move. This horse has tremendous energy and power, but without a rider it cannot be guided; it is wild, subject to predators, and continually heading into trouble. The rider is our thinking self. Through training and practice, it holds the reins and guides the horse, transforming this powerful animal energy into something productive. The one without the other is useless. Without the rider, no directed movement or purpose. Without the horse, no energy, no power. In most people the horse dominates, and the rider is weak. In some people the rider is too strong, holds the reins too tightly, and is afraid to occasionally let the animal go into a gallop. The horse and rider must work together. This means we consider our actions beforehand; we bring as much thinking as possible to a situation before we make a decision. But once we decide what to do, we loosen the reins and enter action with boldness and a spirit of adventure. Instead of being slaves to this energy, we channel it. That is the essence of rationality.

As an example of this ideal in action, try to maintain a perfect balance between skepticism (rider) and curiosity (horse). In this mode you are skeptical about your own enthusiasms and those of others. You do not accept at face value people's explanations and their application of "evidence." You look at the results of their actions, not what they say about their motivations. But if you take this too far, your mind will close itself off from wild ideas, from exciting speculations, from curiosity itself. You want to retain the elasticity of spirit you had as a child, interested in everything, while retaining the hard-nosed need to verify and scrutinize for yourself all ideas and beliefs. The two can coexist. It is a balance that all geniuses possess.

Love the rational. It is important to not see the path to rationality as something painful and ascetic. In fact, it brings powers that are immensely satisfying and pleasurable, much deeper than the more manic pleasures the world

tends to offer us. You have felt this in your own life when absorbed in a project, time flowing by, and experiencing occasional bursts of excitement as you make discoveries or progress in your work. There are other pleasures as well. Being able to tame the Emotional Self leads to an overall calmness and clarity. In this state of mind you are less consumed by petty conflicts and considerations. Your actions are more effective, which also leads to less turmoil. You have the immense satisfaction of mastering yourself in a deep way. You have more mental space to be creative. You feel more in control.

Knowing all of this, it will become easier to motivate yourself to develop this power. In this sense, you are following the path of Pericles himself. He envisioned the goddess Athena embodying all of the practical powers of rationality. He worshipped and loved this goddess above all others. We may no longer venerate the goddess as a deity, but we can appreciate on a deep level all of those who promote rationality in our own world, and we can seek to internalize their power as much as we can.

> "Trust your feelings!"—But feelings are nothing final or original; behind feelings there stand judgments and evaluations which we inherit in the form of . . . inclinations, aversions. . . . The inspiration born of a feeling is the grandchild of a judgment—and often of a false judgment!—and in any event not a child of your own! To trust one's feelings—means to give more obedience to one's grandfather and grandmother and their grandparents than to the gods which are in us: our reason and our experience.
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> —*Friedrich Nietzsche*

2

Transform Self-love into Empathy

The Law of Narcissism

We all naturally possess the most remarkable tool for connecting to people and attaining social power—empathy. When cultivated and properly used, it can allow us to see into the moods and minds of others, giving us the power to anticipate people's actions and gently lower their resistance. This instrument, however, is blunted by our habitual self-absorption. We are all narcissists, some deeper on the spectrum than others. Our mission in life is to come to terms with this self-love and learn how to turn our sensitivity outward, toward others, instead of inward. We must recognize at the same time the toxic narcissists among us before getting enmeshed in their dramas and poisoned by their envy.

The Narcissistic Spectrum

From the moment we are born, we humans feel a never-ending need for attention. We are social animals to the core. Our survival and happiness depend on the bonds we form with others. If people do not pay attention to us, we cannot connect to them on any level. Some of this is purely physical—we must have people looking at us to feel alive. As those who have gone through long periods of isolation can attest, without eye contact we begin to doubt our existence and to descend into a deep depression. But this need is also deeply psychological: through the quality of attention we receive from others, we feel recognized and appreciated for who we are. Our sense of self-worth depends on this. Because this is so important to the human animal, people will do almost anything to get attention, including committing a crime or attempting suicide. Look behind almost any action, and you will see this need as a primary motivation.

In trying to satisfy our hunger for attention, however, we face an inevitable problem: there is only so much of it to go around. In the family, we have to compete with our siblings; at school, with classmates; at work, with colleagues. The moments in which we feel recognized and appreciated are fleeting. People can largely be indifferent to our fate, as they must deal with their own problems. There are even some who are downright hostile and disrespectful to us. How do we handle those moments when we feel psychologically alone, or even abandoned? We can double our efforts to get attention and notice, but this can exhaust our energy and it can often have the opposite effect—people who try too hard seem desperate and repulse the attention they want. We simply cannot rely on others to give us constant validation, and yet we crave it.

Facing this dilemma from early childhood on, most of us come up with a solution that works quite well: we create a self, an image of ourselves that comforts us and makes us feel validated *from within*. This self is composed of our tastes, our opinions, how we look at the world, what we value. In building this self-image, we tend to accentuate our positive qualities and explain away our flaws. We cannot go too far in this, for if our self-image is too divorced from reality, other people will make us aware of the discrepancy, and we will doubt ourselves. But if it is done properly, in the end we have a self that we can love and cherish. Our energy turns inward. *We* become the center of our attention. When we experience those inevitable moments when we are alone or not feeling appreciated, we can retreat to this self and soothe ourselves. If we have moments of doubt and depression, our self-love raises us up, makes us feel worthy and even superior to others. This self-image operates as a thermostat, helping us to regulate our doubts and insecurities. We are no longer completely dependent on others for attention and recognition. We have *self-esteem*.

This idea might seem strange. We generally take this self-image completely for granted, like the air we breathe. It operates on a largely unconscious basis. We don't feel or see the thermostat as it operates. The best way to literally visualize this dynamic is to look at those who lack a coherent sense of self—people we shall call *deep narcissists*.

In constructing a self that we can hold on to and love, the key moment in its development occurs between the ages of two and five years old. As we slowly separate from our mother, we face a world in which we cannot get instant gratification. We also become aware that we are alone and yet dependent on our parents for survival. Our answer is to identify with the best qualities of our

parents—their strength, their ability to soothe us—and incorporate these qualities into ourselves. If our parents encourage us in our first efforts at independence, if they validate our need to feel strong and recognize our unique qualities, then our self-image takes root, and we can slowly build upon it. Deep narcissists have a sharp break in this early development, and so they never quite construct a consistent and realistic feeling of a self.

Their mothers (or fathers) might be deep narcissists themselves, too self-absorbed to acknowledge the child, to encourage its early efforts at independence. Or alternatively the parents could be enmeshers—overinvolved in the child's life, suffocating it with attention, isolating it from others, and living through its advancement as a means to validate their own self-worth. They give the child no room to establish a self. In the backgrounds of almost all deep narcissists we find either abandonment or enmeshment. The result is that they have no self to retreat to, no foundation for self-esteem, and are completely dependent on the attention they can get from others to make them feel alive and worthy.

In childhood, if such narcissists are extroverts, they can function reasonably well, and even thrive. They become masters at attracting notice and monopolizing attention. They can appear vivacious and exciting. In a child, such qualities can seem a sign of future social success. But underneath the surface, they are becoming dangerously addicted to the hits of attention they stimulate to make them feel whole and worthy. If they are introverts, they will retreat to a fantasy life, imagining a self that is quite superior to others. Since they will not get validation of this self-image from others because it is so unrealistic, they will also have moments of great doubt and even self-loathing. They are either a god or a worm. Lacking a coherent core, they could imagine themselves to be anyone, and so their fantasies will keep shifting as they try on new personalities.

The nightmare for deep narcissists generally arrives in their twenties and thirties. They have failed to develop that inner thermostat, a cohesive sense of self to love and depend upon. The extroverts must constantly attract attention to feel alive and appreciated. They become more dramatic, more exhibitionistic and grandiose. This can become tiresome and even pathetic. They have to change friends and scenes so that they can have a fresh audience. Introverts fall deeper into a fantasy self. Being socially awkward yet radiating superiority, they tend to alienate people, increasing their dangerous isolation. In both cases, drugs or alcohol or any other form of addiction can become a necessary crutch to soothe them in the inevitable moments of doubt and depression.

completely self-absorbed, almost always below the mark. If for a moment they manage to engage with others, some comment or action will trigger their insecurities and they will go plummeting down. But mostly they tend to sink deeper into themselves over time. Other people are instruments. Reality is just a reflection of their needs. Constant attention is their only way of survival.

Above that halfway mark is what we shall call the *functional narcissist*, where most of us reside. We also are self-absorbed, but what prevents us from falling deep into ourselves is a coherent sense of self that we can rely upon and love. (It is ironic that the word *narcissism* has come to mean self-love, when it is in fact the case that the worst narcissists have no cohesive self to love, which is the source of their problem.) This creates some inner resiliency. We may have deeper narcissistic moments, fluctuating below the mark, particularly when depressed or challenged in life, but inevitably we elevate ourselves. Not feeling continually insecure or wounded, not always needing to fish for attention, functional narcissists can turn their attention outward, into their work and into building relationships with people.

Our task, as students of human nature, is threefold. First, we must fully understand the phenomenon of the deep narcissist. Although they are in the minority, some of them can inflict an unusual amount of harm in the world. We must be able to distinguish the toxic types that stir up drama and try to turn us into objects they can use for their purposes. They can draw us in with their unusual energy, but if we become enmeshed, it can be a nightmare to disengage. They are masters at turning the tables and making others feel guilty. Narcissistic leaders are the most dangerous of all, and we must resist their pull and see through the façade of their apparent creativity. Knowing how to handle the deep narcissists in our lives is an important art for all of us.

Second, we must be honest about our own nature and not deny it. We are all narcissists. In a conversation we are all champing at the bit to talk, to tell our story, to give our opinion. We like people who share our ideas—they reflect back to us our good taste. If we happen to be assertive, we see assertiveness as a positive quality because it is ours, whereas others, more timid, will rate it as obnoxious and value introspective qualities. We are all prone to flattery because of our self-love. Moralizers who try to separate themselves and denounce the narcissists in the world today are often the biggest narcissists of them all—they love the sound of their voice as they point fingers and preach. *We are all on the spectrum of self-absorption*. Creating a self that we can love is a healthy development, and there should be no stigma attached to it. Without self-esteem

from within, we would fall into deep narcissism. But to move beyond functional narcissism, which should be our goal, we must first be honest with ourselves. Trying to deny our self-absorbed nature, trying to pretend we are somehow more altruistic than others, makes it impossible for us to transform ourselves.

Third and most important, we must begin to make the transformation into the *healthy narcissist*. Healthy narcissists have a stronger, even more resilient sense of self. They tend to hover closer to the top of the scale. They recover more quickly from any wounds or insults. They do not need as much validation from others. They realize at some point in life that they have limits and flaws. They can laugh at these flaws and not take slights so personally. In many ways, by embracing the full picture of themselves, their self-love is more real and complete. From this stronger inner position, they can turn their attention outward more often and more easily. This attention goes in one of two directions, and sometimes both. First, they are able to direct their focus and their love into their work, becoming great artists, creators, and inventors. Because their outward focus on the work is more intense, they tend to be successful in their ventures, which gives them the necessary attention and validation. They can have moments of doubt and insecurity, and artists can be notoriously brittle, but work stands as a continual release from too much self-absorption.

The other direction healthy narcissists take is toward people, developing empathic powers. Imagine empathy as the realm lying at the very top of the scale and beyond—complete absorption in others. By our very nature, we humans have tremendous abilities to understand people from the inside out. In our earliest years, we felt completely bonded with our mother, and we could sense her every mood and read her every emotion in a preverbal way. Unlike any other animal or primate, we also had the ability to extend this beyond the mother to other caregivers and people in our vicinity.

This is the physical form of empathy that we feel even to this day with our closest friends, spouses, or partners. We also have a natural ability to take the perspective of others, to think our way inside their minds. These powers largely lie dormant because of our self-absorption. But in our twenties and beyond, feeling more confident about ourselves, we can begin to focus outward, on people, and rediscover these powers. Those who practice this empathy often become superior social observers in the arts or sciences, therapists, and leaders of the highest order.

The need to develop this empathy is greater than ever. Various studies have indicated a gradual increase in levels of self-absorption and narcissism in young people since the late 1970s, with a much higher spike since 2000. Much of this can be attributed to technology and the internet. People simply spend less time in social interactions and more time socializing online, which makes it increasingly difficult to develop empathy and sharpen social skills. Like any skill, empathy comes through the quality of attention. If your attention is continually interrupted by the need to look at your smartphone, you are never really gaining a foothold in the feelings or perspectives of other people. You are continually drawn back to yourself, flitting about the surface of social interactions, never really engaging. Even in a crowd, you remain essentially alone. People come to serve a function—not to bond with but to placate your insecurities.

Our brains were built for continual social interaction; the complexity of this interaction is one of the main factors that drastically increased our intelligence as a species. At a certain point, involving ourselves less with others has a net negative effect on the brain itself and atrophies our social muscle. To make matters worse, our culture tends to emphasize the supreme value of the individual and individual rights, encouraging greater self-involvement. We find more and more people who cannot imagine that others have a different perspective, that we are all not exactly the same in what we desire or think.

You must try to run counter to these developments and create empathic energy. Each side of the spectrum has its peculiar momentum. Deep narcissism tends to sink you deeper, as your connection to reality lessens and you are unable to really develop your work or your relationships. Empathy does the opposite. As you increasingly turn your attention outward, you get constant positive feedback. People want to be around you more. You develop your empathic muscle; your work improves; without trying, you gain the attention that all humans thrive on. Empathy creates its own upward, positive momentum.

The following are the four components that go into the empathic skill set.

The empathic attitude: Empathy is more than anything a state of mind, a different way of relating to others. The greatest danger you face is your general assumption that you really understand people and that you can quickly judge and categorize them. Instead, you must begin with the assumption that you are ignorant and that you have natural biases that will make you judge people incorrectly. The people around you present a mask that suits their

purposes. You mistake the mask for reality. Let go of your tendency to make snap judgments. Open your mind to seeing people in a new light. Do not assume that you are similar or that they share your values. Each person you meet is like an undiscovered country, with a very particular psychological chemistry that you will carefully explore. You are more than ready to be surprised by what you uncover. This flexible, open spirit is similar to creative energy—a willingness to consider more possibilities and options. In fact, developing your empathy will also improve your creative powers.

The best place to begin this transformation in your attitude is in your numerous daily conversations. Try reversing your normal impulse to talk and give your opinion, desiring instead to hear the other person's point of view. You have tremendous curiosity in this direction. Cut off your incessant interior monologue as best you can. Give full attention to the other. What matters here is the quality of your listening, so that in the course of the conversation you can mirror back to the other person things they said, or things that were left unsaid but that you sensed. This will have a tremendous seductive effect.

As part of this attitude, you are giving people the same level of indulgence that you give yourself. For instance, we all have a tendency to do the following: When we make a mistake, we attribute it to circumstances that pushed us into doing it. But when others make a mistake, we tend to see it as a character flaw, as something that flowed from their imperfect personality. This is known as the *attribution bias*. You must work against this. With an empathic attitude, you consider first the circumstances that might have made a person do what they did, giving them the same benefit of the doubt as you give yourself.

Finally, adopting this attitude depends on the quality of your self-love. If you feel terribly superior to others, or gripped by insecurities, your moments of empathy and absorption in people will be shallow. What you need is a complete acceptance of your character, including your flaws, which you can see clearly but even appreciate and love. You are not perfect. You are not an angel. You have the same nature as others. With this attitude, you can laugh at yourself and let slights wash over you. From a position of genuine inner strength and resilience, you can more easily direct your attention outward.

Visceral empathy: Empathy is an instrument of emotional attunement. It is hard for us to read or figure out the thoughts of another person, but feelings and moods are much easier for us to pick up. We are all prone to catching the emotions of another person. The physical boundaries between us and other people are much more permeable than we realize. People are continually

affecting our moods. What you are doing here is turning this physiological response into knowledge. Pay deep attention to the moods of people, as indicated by their body language and tone of voice. When they talk, they have a feeling tone that is either in sync or not in sync with what they are saying. This tone can be one of confidence, insecurity, defensiveness, arrogance, frustration, elation. This tone manifests itself physically in their voice, their gestures, and their posture. In each encounter, you must try to detect this before even paying attention to what they are saying. This will register to you viscerally, in your own physical response to them. A defensive tone on their part will tend to create a like feeling in you.

A key element you are trying to figure out is people's intentions. There is almost always an emotion behind any intention, and beyond their words, you are attuning yourself to what they want, their goals, which will also register physically in you if you pay attention. For instance, someone you know suddenly shows unusual interest in your life, gives you the kind of attention you've never had before. Is it a real attempt to connect or a distraction, a means of softening you up so they can use you for their own purposes? Instead of focusing on their words, which show interest and excitement, focus on the overall feeling tone that you pick up. How deeply are they listening? Are they making consistent eye contact? Does it feel like even though they are listening to you, they are absorbed in themselves? If you are the object of sudden attention but it seems unreliable, they are probably intending to ask something of you, to use and manipulate you in some way.

This kind of empathy depends largely on mirror neurons—those neurons that fire in our brain when we watch someone do something, such as picking up an object, just as if we were doing it ourselves. This allows us to put ourselves in the shoes of others and to feel what it must be like. Studies have revealed that people who score high on tests of empathy are generally excellent mimics. When someone smiles or winces in pain, they tend to unconsciously imitate the expression, giving them a feel for what others are feeling. When we see someone smiling and in a good mood, it tends to have a contagious effect on us. You can consciously use this power in trying to get into the emotions of others, either by literally mimicking their facial gestures or by conjuring up memories of similar experiences that stirred such emotions. Before Alex Haley began writing *Roots*, he spent some time in the dark interior of a ship, trying to re-create the claustrophobic horror slaves must have experienced. A visceral connection to their feelings allowed him to write himself into their world.

that people evoke in you, which is continually shifting. As you get better at this, you will discover more and more cues that people give as to their psychology. You will notice more. Continually mix the visceral with the analytic.

Seeing improvement in your skill level will excite you greatly and motivate you to go deeper. In general you will notice a smoother ride through life, as you avoid unnecessary conflicts and misunderstandings.

> The deepest principle of Human Nature is the craving to be appreciated.
>
> —*William James*

Four Examples of Narcissistic Types

1. The Complete Control Narcissist. When most people first met Joseph Stalin (1879–1953) in the early part of his reign as premier of the Soviet Union, they found him surprisingly charming. Although older than most of his lieutenants, he encouraged them all to address him with the familiar "you" form in Russian. He made himself completely accessible even to junior officials. When he listened to you, it was with such intensity and interest, his eyes boring into you. He seemed to pick up your deepest thoughts and doubts. But his greatest trait was to make you feel important and part of the inner circle of revolutionaries. He would put his arm around you as he accompanied you out of his office, always ending the meeting on an intimate note. As one young man later wrote, people who saw him were "anxious to see him again," because "he created a sense that there was now a bond that linked them forever." Sometimes he would turn slightly aloof, and it would drive his courtiers crazy. Then the mood would pass, and they would bask again in his affection.

Part of his charm lay in the fact that he epitomized the revolution. He was a man of the people, rough and a bit rude but someone an average Russian could identify with. And more than anything, Joseph Stalin could be quite entertaining. He loved to sing and to tell earthy jokes. With these qualities it was no wonder that he slowly amassed power and assumed complete control of the Soviet machinery. But as the years wore on and his power grew, another

side to his character slowly leaked out. The apparent friendliness was not as simple as it had seemed. Perhaps the first significant sign of this among his inner circle was the fate of Sergey Kirov, a powerful member of the Politburo and, since the suicide of Stalin's wife in 1932, his closest friend and confidant.

Kirov was an enthusiastic, somewhat simple man who made friends easily and had a way of comforting Stalin. But Kirov was starting to become a little too popular. In 1934, several regional leaders approached him with an offer: they were tired of Stalin's brutal treatment of the peasantry; they were going to instigate a coup and wanted to make Kirov the new premier. Kirov remained loyal—he revealed the plot to Stalin, who thanked him profusely. But something changed in his manner toward Kirov from then on, a coldness that had never been there before.

Kirov understood the predicament he had created—he had revealed to Stalin that he was not as popular as he had thought, and that one person in particular was more liked than him. He felt the danger he was now in. He tried everything he could to assuage Stalin's insecurities. In public appearances he mentioned Stalin's name more than ever; his expressions of praise became more fulsome. This only seemed to make Stalin even more suspicious, as if Kirov were trying too hard to cover up the truth. Now Kirov remembered the many rough jokes he had made at Stalin's expense. At the time, it had been an expression of their closeness that Kirov dared to laugh at him, but now Stalin would certainly see these jokes in a different light. Kirov felt trapped and helpless.

In December 1934, a lone gunman assassinated Kirov outside his office. Although no one could directly implicate Stalin, it seemed almost certain that the killing had his tacit approval. In the years after the assassination, one close friend of Stalin after another was arrested, all of this leading to the great purge within the party during the late 1930s, in which hundreds of thousands lost their lives. Almost all of his top lieutenants caught up in the purge were tortured for a confession, and afterward Stalin would listen eagerly as those who had conducted the torture would tell him of the desperate behavior of his once-brave friends. He laughed at the accounts of how some got down on their knees and, weeping, begged for an audience with Stalin to ask for forgiveness of their sins and to be allowed to live. He seemed to relish their humiliation.

What had happened to him? What had changed this once so congenial man? With his closest friends he could still show unadulterated affection, but in an instant he could turn against them and send them to their deaths. Other odd

traits became apparent. Outwardly Stalin was extremely modest. He was the proletariat incarnate. If someone suggested that he be paid some public tribute, he would react angrily—one man should not be the center of so much attention, he would proclaim. But slowly his name and image began to appear everywhere. The newspaper *Pravda* ran stories on his every move, almost deifying him. At a military parade, planes would fly overhead in a formation spelling the name *Stalin*. He denied having any involvement in this growing cult around him, but he did nothing to stop it.

He increasingly spoke of himself in the third person, as if he had become an impersonal revolutionary force, and as such he was infallible. If he happened to mispronounce a word in a speech, every subsequent speaker from then on would have to pronounce it that way. "If I'd said it right," confessed one of his top lieutenants, "Stalin would have felt I was correcting him." And that could prove suicidal.

As it seemed certain that Hitler was preparing to invade the Soviet Union, Stalin began to oversee every detail of the war effort. He continually berated his lieutenants for slackening their efforts: "I am the *only* one dealing with all these problems. . . . I am out there by *myself*," he once complained. Soon many of his generals felt like they were in a double bind: if they spoke their mind he could be terribly insulted, but if they deferred to his opinion he would fly into a rage. "What's the point of talking to you?" he once shouted to a group of generals. "Whatever I say, you reply, 'Yes Comrade Stalin; of course, Comrade Stalin . . . wise decision, Comrade Stalin.'" In his fury at feeling alone in the war effort, he fired his most competent and experienced generals. He now oversaw every detail of the war effort, down to the size and shape of bayonets.

It soon became a matter of life or death for his lieutenants to accurately read his moods and whims. It was critical to never make him anxious, which made him dangerously unpredictable. You had to look him in the eye so that it did not seem like you were hiding something, but if you looked for too long, he became nervous and self-conscious, a very risky blend. You were supposed to take notes when he talked but not write down everything, or you would seem suspicious. Some who were blunt with him did well, while others ended up in prison. Perhaps the answer was to know when to mix in a touch of bluntness but to largely defer. Figuring him out became an arcane science that they would discuss with one another.

The worst fate of all was to be invited to dinner and a late-night movie at his house. It was impossible to refuse such an invitation, and they became more and

more frequent after the war. Outwardly it was just like before—a warm, intimate fraternity of revolutionaries. But inwardly it was sheer terror. Here, during all-night drinking bouts (his own drinks were heavily diluted), he would keep a watchful eye on all of his top lieutenants. He forced them to drink more and more so they would lose their self-control. He secretly delighted in their struggles to not say or do anything that would incriminate them.

The worst was toward the end of the evening, when he would pull out the gramophone, play some music, and order the men to dance. He would make Nikita Khrushchev, the future premier, do the *gopak*, a highly strenuous dance that included much squatting and kicking. It would often make Khrushchev sick to his stomach. The others he would have slow dance together while he smiled and laughed uproariously at the sight of grown men dancing as a couple. It was the ultimate form of control: the puppet master choreographing their every move.

Interpretation: The great riddle that Joseph Stalin and his type present is how people who are so deeply narcissistic can also be so charming and, through their charm, gain influence. How can they possibly connect with others when they are so clearly self-obsessed? How are they able to mesmerize? The answer lies in the early part of their careers, before they turn paranoid and vicious.

These types generally have more ambition and energy than the average deep narcissist. They also tend to have even greater insecurities. The only way they can mollify these insecurities and satisfy their ambition is by gaining from others more than the usual share of attention and validation, which can really only come through securing social power in either politics or business. Early on in life, these types stumble upon the best means for doing so. As with most deep narcissists, they are hypersensitive to any perceived slight. They have fine antennae attuned to people to probe their feelings and thoughts—to suss out if there is any hint of disrespect. But what they discover at some point is that this sensitivity can be tuned to others to probe *their* desires and insecurities. Being so sensitive, they can listen to people with deep attention. They can mimic empathy. The difference is that from within, they are impelled not by the need to connect but by the need to control people and manipulate them. They listen and probe you in order to discover weaknesses to play on.

Their attention is not all faked or it would have no effect. In the moment, they can feel camaraderie as they put their arm around your shoulder, but afterward they control and stifle its blossoming into anything real or deeper. If

they did not do so, they would risk losing control of their emotions and opening themselves up to being hurt. They pull you in with a display of attention and affection, then lure you in deeper with the inevitable coldness that follows. Did you do or say something wrong? How can you regain their favor? It can be subtle—it can register in a glance that lasts a second or two—but it has its effect. It is the classic push and pull of the coquette that makes you want to reexperience the warmth you once felt. Combined with the unusually high levels of confidence displayed by this type, this can have a devastatingly seductive effect on people and attract followers. Complete control narcissists stimulate your desire to get closer to them but keep you at arm's distance.

All of this is about control. They control their emotions, and they control your reactions. At some point, as they get more secure in their power, they will resent the fact that they had to play the charm game. Why should they have to pay attention to others when it should be the other way around? So they will inevitably turn against former friends, revealing the envy and hatred that was always just below the surface. They control who is in and who is out, who lives and who dies. By creating double binds in which nothing you say or do will please them, or by making it seem arbitrary, they terrorize you with this insecurity. They now control *your* emotions.

At some point, they will become total micromanagers—whom can they trust anymore? People have turned into automatons, incapable of making decisions, so they must oversee everything. If they reach such extremes, these types will end up destroying themselves, because it is actually impossible to rid the human animal of free will. People rebel, even the most cowed. In Stalin's last days he suffered a stroke, but none of his lieutenants dared to help him or call for a doctor. He died from their neglect, as they had come to both fear and loathe him.

You will almost inevitably encounter this type in your life, because through their ambition they tend to become bosses and CEOs, political figures, cult leaders. The danger they represent to you is in the beginning, when they first apply their charm. You can see through them by employing your visceral empathy. Their show of interest in you is never deep, never lasts too long, and is inevitably followed by a coquettish pullback. If you stop being distracted by the outward attempt at charm, you can sense this coldness and the degree to which the attention inevitably flows to them.

Look at their past. You will notice that they do not have one single deep and intimate relationship in which they exposed any vulnerability. Look for signs

hair. Then Saint Joseph himself came to her and touched her side, where she felt the greatest pain, and anointed her with a fragrant oil. She recovered, and the oil left a mark on her chemise in the form of five clear drops. The demons were now gone, to Surin's enormous relief. The story was over, but Jeanne surprised him with a strange request: she wanted to go on a tour of Europe, displaying these miracles to one and all. She felt it was her duty to do so. It seemed oddly contradictory to her modest character and ever so slightly worldly, but Surin agreed to accompany her.

In Paris, enormous crowds filled the streets outside her hotel, wanting to catch a glimpse of her. She met Cardinal Richelieu, who seemed quite moved and kissed the fragrant chemise, now a saintly relic. She showed her stigmata to the King and Queen of France. The tour moved on. She met the greatest aristocrats and luminaries of her era. In one town, every day crowds of seven thousand people would enter the convent where she was staying. The demand to hear her story was so intense that she decided to issue a printed booklet in which she described in great detail her possession, her most intimate thoughts, and the miracle that had occurred.

At her death in 1665, the head of Jeanne des Anges, as she was now known, was decapitated, mummified, and placed in a silver-gilt box with crystal windows. It was displayed next to the anointed chemise for those who wanted to see it, at the Ursuline house in Loudun, until its disappearance during the French Revolution.

Interpretation: In her earliest years, Jeanne de Belciel displayed an insatiable appetite for attention. She wearied her parents, who finally got rid of her by sending her to a convent in Poitiers. There she proceeded to drive the nuns insane with her sarcasm and incredible air of superiority. Sent off to Loudun, it seemed she decided to try a different approach to gaining the recognition she so desperately needed. Given books on spirituality, she determined she would excel all others in her knowledge and pious behavior. She made a complete show of both and gained the good favor of the prioress. But as head of the house, she felt bored, and the attention she now received inadequate. Her dreams of Grandier were a mix of fabrication and autosuggestion. Soon after the exorcists arrived, she was given a book on demonology, which she devoured, and knowing the various ins and outs of devil inhabitation, she proceeded to give herself all of the most dramatic traits, which would be picked up by the exorcists as sure signs

of possession. She became the star of the public spectacle. While possessed, she went further than all others in her degradation and lewd behavior.

After Grandier's gruesome execution, which profoundly affected the other nuns, who certainly felt guilt at the part they had played in the death of an innocent man, Jeanne alone felt the sudden lack of attention as unbearable and so she upped the ante by refusing to let go of the demons. She had become a master at sensing the weaknesses and hidden desires of those around her—first the prioress, and then the exorcists, and now Father Surin. He wanted so badly to be the one to redeem her that he would fall for the simplest of miracles. As for the stigmata, some later speculated that she had etched these names with acid, or traced them through colored starch. It seemed odd that they appeared only on her left hand, where it would be easy for her to write them out. It is known that in extreme hysteria the skin becomes particularly sensitive, and a fingernail can do the trick. As someone who had long experimented in concocting herbal remedies, it was easy for her to apply fragrant drops. Once people believed in the stigmata, it would be hard for them to doubt the anointment.

Even Surin found the need for a tour dubious. At this point, she could no longer disguise her true appetite for attention. Years later, Jeanne wrote an autobiography in which she admitted to a completely theatrical side to her personality. She was continually playing a part, although she maintained that the final miracle was sincere and real. Many of the sisters who dealt with her on a daily basis saw through the façade and described her as a consummate actress addicted to attention and fame.

One of the strange paradoxes about deep narcissism is that it often goes unnoticed by others, until the behavior becomes too extreme to ignore. The reason for this is simple: deep narcissists can be masters of disguise. They sense early on that if they revealed their true selves to others—their need for constant attention and to feel superior—they would repel people. They use their lack of a coherent self as an advantage. They can play many parts. They can disguise their need for attention through various dramatic devices. They can go further than anyone in seeming moral and altruistic. They never just give or support the right cause—*they make a show of it*. Who wants to doubt the sincerity of this display of morality? Or they go in the opposite direction, reveling in their status as a victim, as someone suffering at the hands of others or neglected by the world. It is easy to get caught up in the drama of the moment, only to suffer later as they consume you with their needs or use you for their purposes. They play on *your* empathy.

Your only solution is to see through the trick. Recognize this type by the

fact that the focus always seems to be on them. Notice how they are always superior in supposed goodness or suffering or squalor. See the continual drama and the theatrical quality of their gestures. Everything they do or say is for public consumption. Do not let yourself become collateral damage in their drama.

3. **The Narcissistic Couple.** In 1862, several days before thirty-two-year-old Leo Tolstoy was to wed Sonya Behrs, only eighteen years old at the time, he suddenly decided that there should be no secrets between them. As part of that, he brought her his diaries, and to his surprise, what she read made her weep and get quite angry as well. In these pages he had written about his many previous love affairs, including his ongoing infatuation with a nearby peasant woman with whom he had had a child. He also wrote about the brothels he frequented, the gonorrhea he had caught, and his endless gambling. She felt intense jealousy and disgust at the same time. Why make her read this? She accused him of having second thoughts, of not really loving her. Taken aback by this reaction, he accused her of the same. He wanted to share with her his old ways, so that she would understand he was happily forsaking them for a new life, with her. Why should she rebuke his attempt at honesty? She clearly did not love him as much as he had thought. Why was it so painful for her to say good-bye to her family before the wedding? Did she love them more than him? They managed to reconcile and the wedding took place, but a pattern was set that would continue for forty-eight years.

For Sonya, despite their frequent arguments, the marriage eventually settled into a relatively comfortable rhythm. She had become his most trusted assistant. Besides bearing eight children in twelve years, five of whom survived, she carefully copied out his books for him, including *War and Peace* and *Anna Karenina*, and managed much of the business side of publishing his books. Everything seemed to be going along well enough—he was a rich man, from both the family estates he had inherited and the sales of his books. He had a large family who doted on him. He was famous. But suddenly, at the age of fifty, he felt immensely unhappy and ashamed of the books he had written. He no longer knew who he was. He was undergoing a deep spiritual crisis, and he found the Orthodox Church too strict and dogmatic to help him. His life had to change. He would write no more novels, and henceforth he would live like a common peasant. He would give up his property and renounce all copyrights on his books. And he asked his family to join him in this new life devoted to helping others and to spiritual matters.

To his dismay the family, Sonya leading the way, reacted angrily. He was

asking them to give up their style of living, their comforts, and the children's future inheritance. Sonya did not feel the need for any drastic change in their lifestyle, and she resented his accusations that she was somehow evil and materialistic for resisting. They fought and fought, and neither budged. Now when Tolstoy looked at his wife, all he could see was someone who was using him for his fame and his money. That was clearly why she had married him. And when she looked at him, all she could see was a rank hypocrite. Although he had given up his property rights, he continued living like a lord and asking her for money for his habits. He dressed like a peasant, but if he fell ill he would travel to the South in a luxury private railway coach to a villa in which he could convalesce. And despite his new vow of celibacy, he kept making her pregnant.

Tolstoy craved a simple, spiritual life, and she was now the main stumbling block to this. He found her presence in the house oppressive. He wrote her a letter in which he finished by saying, "You attribute what has happened to everything except the one thing, that you are the unwitting, unintentional cause of my sufferings. A struggle to the death is going on between us." Out of his increasing bitterness at her materialistic ways, he wrote the novella *The Kreutzer Sonata*, clearly based on their marriage and painting her in the worst light. For Sonya, the effect of all this was that she felt like she was losing her mind. Finally, in 1894, she snapped. Imitating one of the characters in a Tolstoy story, she decided to commit suicide by walking out into the snow and freezing herself to death. A family member caught up with her and dragged her back to the house. She repeated the attempt twice more, with no better effect.

Now the pattern became sharper and more violent. Tolstoy would push her buttons; she would do something desperate; Tolstoy would feel remorse for his coldness and beg for her forgiveness. He would give in to her on some issues, for instance, allowing the family to retain the copyrights on his earlier books. Then some new behavior on her part would make him regret this. She constantly tried to pit the children against him. She had to read everything he wrote in his diaries, and if he hid them, she would somehow find them and read them on the sly. She watched his every move. He would berate her wildly for her meddling, sometimes falling ill in the process, which made her regret her actions. What was holding them together? Each one craved the acceptance and love of the other, but it seemed impossible to expect that anymore.

After years of suffering through this, in late October of 1910, Tolstoy finally had had enough: in the middle of the night he stole away from the house with a doctor friend accompanying him, determined to finally leave Sonya. He was

trembling all the way, in terror of being surprised and overtaken by his wife, but finally he boarded a train and got away from her. When she got the news, Sonya attempted suicide yet again, throwing herself in the nearby pond, only to be rescued just in time. She wrote Tolstoy a letter, begging him to come back. Yes, she would change her ways. She would renounce all luxuries. She would become spiritual. She would love him unconditionally. She could not live without him.

For Tolstoy, his taste of freedom was short-lived. The newspapers were now full of accounts of his running away from his wife. Everywhere the train stopped, reporters, devoted fans, and the curious mobbed him. He could not take anymore the packed and freezing conditions on the train. Soon he fell deathly ill and had to be carried to a stationmaster's cottage near the railway tracks in some out-of-the-way village. In bed, it was clear now he was dying. He heard that Sonya had arrived in town but could not bear the thought of seeing her now. The family kept her outside, where she continued to peer through the window at him as he lay dying. Finally, when he was unconscious, she was allowed in. She knelt beside him, kissed him continually on the forehead, and whispered into his ear, "Forgive me. Please forgive me." He died shortly thereafter. A month later, a visitor to the Tolstoy house reported the following words from Sonya: "What happened to me? What came over me? How could I have done it? . . . You know I killed him."

Interpretation: Leo Tolstoy displayed all of the signs of the deep narcissist. His mother had died when he was two and left a giant hole in him that he could never fill, although he tried to do so with his numerous affairs. He behaved recklessly in his youth, as if this could somehow make him feel alive and whole. He felt continually disgusted with himself and could not figure out who exactly he was. He poured this uncertainty into his novels, assuming different roles in the characters he created. And by the age of fifty, he finally fell into a deep crisis over his fragmented self. Sonya herself rated high on the self-absorption scale. But in looking at people we tend to overemphasize their individual traits and not look at the more complex picture of how each side in a relationship continually shapes the other. A relationship has a life and personality all its own. And a relationship can also be deeply narcissistic, accentuating or even bringing out the narcissistic tendencies of both sides.

What generally makes a relationship narcissistic is the lack of empathy that makes the partners retreat deeper and deeper into their own defensive

campground. At the end of the day, they could sit around the campfire feeling they had done something to make their lives a little easier.

As the days wore on, he developed an increasingly sharp attunement to the men's shifting moods. Around the campfire, he would walk up to each man and engage him in a conversation. With the scientists he talked science; with the more aesthetic types he talked of his favorite poets and composers. He got into their particular spirit and was especially attentive to any problems they were experiencing. The cook seemed particularly aggrieved that he would have to kill his pet cat; they were out of food to feed it. Shackleton volunteered to do it for him. It was clear that the physicist on board was having a difficult time with the hard labor; at night he ate slowly and sighed wearily. When Shackleton talked to him, he could feel that his spirit was lowering by the day. Without making him feel like he was shirking, Shackleton changed the roster around to give him lighter but equally important tasks.

He quickly recognized a few weak links in the group. First there was Frank Hurley, the ship's photographer. He was good at his job and never complained about doing other chores, but he was a man who needed to feel important. He had a snobbish bent. So on those first days on the ice, Shackleton made a point of asking Hurley for his opinion on all significant matters, such as food stores, and complimenting him on his ideas. Furthermore he assigned Hurley to his own tent, which both made Hurley feel more important than the others and made it easier for Shackleton to keep an eye on him. The navigator, Huberht Hudson, revealed himself to be very self-centered and a terrible listener. He needed constant attention. Shackleton talked with him more than with any of the others and also brought him into his tent. If there were other men he suspected of being latent malcontents, he spread them around in different tents, diluting their possible influence.

As the winter wore on, he doubled his attentiveness. At certain moments, he could feel the boredom of the men in how they carried themselves, in how they talked less and less to one another. To combat this, he organized sporting events on the ice during the sunless days and entertainments at night—music, practical jokes, storytelling. Every holiday was carefully observed, with a large feast set out for the men. The endless days of drifting somehow were filled with highlights, and soon he began to notice something remarkable: the men were decidedly cheery and even seemed to be enjoying the challenges of life on a drifting ice floe.

At one point the floe they were on had become dangerously small, and so

he ordered the men into the three small lifeboats they had salvaged from the *Endurance*. They needed to head for land. He kept the boats together and, braving the rough waters, they managed to land on the nearby Elephant Island, on a narrow patch of beach. As he surveyed the island that day, it was clear the conditions on it were in some ways worse than the ice floe. Time was against them. That same day, Shackleton ordered one boat to be prepared for an extremely risky attempt to reach the most accessible and inhabited patch of land in the area—South Georgia Island, some eight hundred miles to the northeast. The chances of making it were slim, but the men could not survive long on Elephant Island, with its exposure to the sea and the paucity of animals to kill.

Shackleton had to choose carefully the five other men, besides himself, for this voyage. One man he selected, Harry McNeish, was a very odd choice. He was the ship's carpenter and the oldest member of the crew at fifty-seven. He could be grumpy and did not take well to hard labor. Even though it would be an extremely rough journey in their small boat, Shackleton was too afraid to leave him behind. He put him in charge of fitting out the boat for the trip. With this task, he would feel personally responsible for the boat's safety, and on the journey his mind would be continually occupied with keeping track of the boat's seaworthiness.

At one point during the voyage, he noticed McNeish's spirits sinking, and suddenly the man stopped rowing. Shackleton sensed the danger here—if he yelled at McNeish or ordered him to row, he would probably become even more rebellious, and with so few men crowded together for so many weeks with so little food, this could turn ugly. Improvising in the moment, he stopped the boat and ordered the boiling of hot milk for everyone. He said they were all getting tired, including himself, and they needed their spirits lifted. McNeish was spared the embarrassment of being singled out, and for the rest of journey, Shackleton repeated this ploy as often as necessary.

A few miles from their destination, a sudden storm pushed them back. As they desperately looked for a new approach to the island, a small bird kept hovering over them, trying to land on their boat. Shackleton struggled to maintain his usual composure, but suddenly he lost it, standing and swinging wildly at the bird while swearing. Almost immediately he felt embarrassed and sat back down. For fifteen months he had kept all of his frustrations in check for the sake of the men and to maintain morale. He had set the tone. Now was not the time to go back on this. Minutes later, he made a joke at his own expense and vowed to himself never to repeat such a display, no matter the pressure.

After a journey over some of the worst ocean conditions in the world, the tiny boat finally managed to land at South Georgia Island, and several months later, with the help of the whalers who worked there, all of the remaining men on Elephant Island were rescued. Considering the odds against them, the climate, the impossible terrain, the tiny boats, and their meager resources, it was one of the most remarkable survival stories in history. Slowly word spread of the role that Shackleton's leadership had played in this. As the explorer Sir Edmund Hillary later summed it up: "For scientific leadership give me Scott; for swift, efficient travel, Amundsen; but when you are in a hopeless situation, when there seems no way out, get down on your knees and pray for Shackleton."

Interpretation: When Shackleton found himself responsible for the lives of so many men in such desperate circumstances, he understood what would spell the difference between life or death: the men's attitude. This is not something visible. It is rarely discussed or analyzed in books. There are no training manuals on the subject. And yet it was the most important factor of all. A slight dip in their spirit, some cracks in their unity, and it would become too difficult to make the right decisions under such duress. One attempt at getting free of the floe, taken out of the impatience and pressure from a few, would certainly lead to death. In essence, Shackleton was thrown back into the most elemental and primal condition of the human animal—a group in danger, dependent on one another for survival. It was in just such circumstances that our most distant ancestors evolved superior social skills, the uncanny human ability to read the moods and minds of others, and to cooperate. And in the sunless months on the ice floe, Shackleton himself would rediscover these ancient empathic skills that lie dormant in us all, because he had to.

How Shackleton went about this task should serve as the model for all of us. First, he understood the primary role that his own attitude would play in this. The leader infects the group with his mind-set. Much of this occurs on the nonverbal level, as people pick up on the leader's body language and tone of voice. Shackleton imbued himself with an air of complete confidence and optimism and watched how this infected the men's spirit.

Second, he had to divide his attention almost equally between individuals and the group. With the group he monitored levels of chattiness at mealtimes, the amount of swearing he heard during work, how quickly the mood elevated when some entertainment had begun. With individuals he read their emotional

states in their tone of voice, how quickly they ate their food, how slowly they rose out of bed. If he noticed a particular mood of theirs that day, he would try to anticipate what they might do by putting himself in a similar mood. He looked for any signs of frustration or insecurity in their words and gestures. He had to treat each person differently, depending on his particular psychology. He also had to constantly adjust his readings, as people's moods shifted quickly.

Third, in detecting any dips in spirit or negativity, he had to be gentle. Scolding would only make people feel ashamed and singled out, which would lead to contagious effects down the road. Better to engage them in talk, to enter their spirit, and to find indirect ways to either elevate their mood or isolate them without making them realize what he was doing. As Shackleton practiced this, he noticed how much better he became at it. In one quick glance in the morning, he could almost anticipate how the men would act during the entire day. Some fellow crew members thought he was psychic.

Understand: What makes us develop these empathic powers is necessity. If we feel our survival depends on how well we gauge the moods and minds of others, then we will find the requisite focus and tap into the powers. Normally we do not feel the need for this. We imagine that we understand quite well the people we deal with. Life can be harsh and we have too many other tasks to attend to. We are lazy and prefer to rely upon predigested judgments. But in fact it *is* a matter of life and death and our success *does* depend on the development of these skills. We simply are not aware of this because we do not see the connection between problems in our lives and our constant misreading of people's moods and intentions and the endless missed opportunities that accrue from this.

The first step, then, is the most important: to realize you have a remarkable social tool that you are not cultivating. The best way to see this is to try it out. Stop your incessant interior monologue and pay deeper attention to people. Attune yourself to the shifting moods of individuals and the group. Get a read on each person's particular psychology and what motivates them. Try to take their perspective, enter their world and value system. You will suddenly become aware of an entire world of nonverbal behavior you never knew existed, as if your eyes could now suddenly see ultraviolet light. Once you sense this power, you will *feel* its importance and awaken to new social possibilities.

> I do not ask the wounded person how he feels. . . . I myself become the wounded person.
>
> —*Walt Whitman*

3

See Through People's Masks

The Law of Role-playing

People tend to wear the mask that shows them off in the best possible light—humble, confident, diligent. They say the right things, smile, and seem interested in our ideas. They learn to conceal their insecurities and envy. If we take this appearance for reality, we never really know their true feelings, and on occasion we are blindsided by their sudden resistance, hostility, and manipulative actions. Fortunately, the mask has cracks in it. People continually leak out their true feelings and unconscious desires in the nonverbal cues they cannot completely control—facial expressions, vocal inflections, tension in the body, and nervous gestures. You must master this language by transforming yourself into a superior reader of men and women. Armed with this knowledge, you can take the proper defensive measures. On the other hand, since appearances are what people judge you by, you must learn how to present the best front and play your role to maximum effect.

The Second Language

One morning in August 1919 seventeen-year-old Milton Erickson, future pioneer in hypnotherapy and one of the most influential psychologists of the twentieth century, awoke to discover parts of his body suddenly paralyzed. Over the next few days the paralysis spread. He was soon diagnosed with polio, a near epidemic at the time. As he lay in bed, he heard his mother in another room discussing his case with two specialists the family had called in. Assuming Erickson was asleep, one of the doctors told her, "The boy will be dead by morning." His mother came into his room, clearly trying to disguise her grief, unaware that her son had overhead the conversation. Erickson kept asking her to move the chest of drawers near his bed over here, over there. She thought he

was delusional, but he had his reasons: he wanted to distract her from her anguish, and he wanted the mirror on the chest positioned just right. If he began to lose consciousness, he could focus on the sunset in the reflected mirror, holding on to this image as long as he could. The sun always returned; maybe he would as well, proving the doctors wrong. Within hours he fell into a coma.

Erickson regained consciousness three days later. Somehow he had cheated death, but now the paralysis had spread to his entire body. Even his lips were paralyzed. He could not move or gesture, nor communicate to others in any way. The only body parts he could move were his eyeballs, allowing him to scan the narrow space of his room. Quarantined in the house on the farm in rural Wisconsin where he grew up, his only company was his seven sisters, his one brother, his parents, and a private nurse. For someone with such an active mind, the boredom was excruciating. But one day as he listened to his sisters talking among themselves, he became aware of something he had never noticed before. As they talked, their faces made all kinds of movements, and the tone of their voices seemed to have a life of its own. One sister said to another, "Yes, that's a good idea," but she said this in a monotone and with a noticeable smirk, all of which seemed to say, "I actually don't think it's a good idea at all." Somehow a *yes* could really mean no.

Now he paid attention to this. It was a stimulating game. In the course of the next day he counted sixteen different forms of *no* that he heard, indicating various degrees of hardness, all accompanied by different facial expressions. At one point he noticed one sister saying yes to something while actually shaking her head no. It was very subtle, but he saw it. If people said yes but really felt no, it appeared to show up in their grimaces and body language. On another occasion he watched closely from the corner of his eye as one sister offered another an apple, but the tension in her face and tightness in her arms indicated she was just being polite and clearly wanted to keep it for herself. This signal was not picked up, and yet it seemed so clear to him.

Unable to participate in conversations, he found his mind completely absorbed in observing people's hand gestures, their raised eyebrows, the pitch of their voices, and the sudden folding of their arms. He noticed, for instance, how often the veins in his sisters' necks would begin to pulsate when they stood over him, indicating the nervousness they felt in his presence. Their breathing patterns as they spoke fascinated him, and he discovered that certain rhythms indicated boredom and were generally followed by a yawn. Hair seemed to play an important role with his sisters. A very deliberate brushing back of