

STILLNESS IS THE KEY

By Ryan Holiday

Part I - MIND

THE DOMAIN OF THE MIND

Our job is not to “go with our gut” or fixate on the first impression we form about an issue. No, we need to be strong enough to resist thinking that it is too neat, too plausible, and therefore almost always wrong. Because if the leader can't take the time to develop a clear sense of the bigger picture, who will? If the leader isn't thinking through all the way to the end, who is?

It used time as a tool.

BECOME PRESENT

As her former lover and collaborator Ulay said when he was asked what he thought of the possibility, “I have no thoughts. Only respect.”

“People don't understand that the hardest thing is actually doing something that is close to nothing,” Amramovic said about the performance.

As we stand on the podium, about to give a speech, our mind is focused not on our task but on what everyone will think of us.

In short, did they do exactly what all of us do most of every single day?

We do not live in *this* moment. We, in fact, try desperately to get out of it—by thinking, doing, talking, worrying, remembering, hoping, whatever. We pay thousands of dollars to have a device in our pocket to ensure that we are never bored. We sign up for endless activities and obligations, chase money and accomplishments, all with a naive belief that at the end of it will be happiness.

Who is so talented that they can afford to bring only part of themselves to bear on a problem or opportunity? Whose relationships are so strong that they can get away with not showing up? Who is so certain that they'll get another moment that they can confidently skip over this one? The less energy we waste regretting the past or worrying about the future, the more energy we will have for what's in front of us.

We want to learn to see the world like an artist: while other people are oblivious to what surrounds them, the artist really sees. Their mind, fully engaged, notices the way a bird flies or the way a stranger holds their fork or a mother looks at her child.

LIMIT YOUR INPUTS

There is way too much coming at us. In order to think clearly, it is essential that each of us figures out how to filter out the inconsequential from the essential. It's not enough to be inclined toward deep thought in sober analysis; a leader must create time in space for it.

“If you wish to improve,” Epictetus once said, “be content to appear clueless or stupid in extraneous matters.”

Indeed, the first thing great Chiefs of Staff do—whether it's for a general or president or the CEO of a local bank—is limit the amount of people who have access to the boss. They become gatekeepers: no more drop-ins, tidbits, and stray reports. So the boss can see the big picture. So the boss has time and room to think.

We are afraid of the silence. We are afraid of looking stupid. We are afraid of missing out. We are afraid of being the bad guy who says, “Nope, not interested.”

We'd rather make ourselves miserable than make ourselves a priority, than be our best selves.

SLOW DOWN, THINK DEEPLY

In the intro sequence of the beloved children's show *Mr. Rogers Neighborhood*, the first interior shot does not show the host. Instead, in the beat before Fred Rogers appears on the screen singing his cheerful song about being a good neighbor, viewers see a traffic light, blinking yellow.

For more than thirty years and for nearly a thousand episodes, this subtle piece of symbolism opened the show. If as a hint, it went over the heads of most people watching, viewers still primed to get the message. Because whether Fred Rogers was speaking on camera, playing in the neighborhood of Make-Believe with King Friday the Puppet, or singing one of his trademark songs, just about every frame of the show seemed to say: *Slow down. Be considered. Be aware.*

Your job, after you have emptied your mind, is to slow down and think. To really think, on a regular basis.

- ...Think about what's important to you.
- ...Think about what's actually going on.
- ...Think about what might be hidden from view.
- ...Think about what the rest of the chess board looks like.
- ...Think about what meaning of life really is.

START JOURNALING

He called the journal a “weapon for spiritual combat,”

SEEK WISDOM

Socrates so wise was that “he knew nothing except just the fact of his ignorance.” Better still, he was aware of what he did *not* know and was always willing to be proven wrong.

Indeed, the core of what we now call the Socratic method comes from Socrates's real and often annoying habit of going around asking questions. He was constantly probing other people's views. *Why do you think that? How do you know? What evidence do you have? But what about this or that?*

The fact that you are sitting here reading a book is a wonderful step on the journey to wisdom. But don't stop there—this book is only an introduction to classical thinking and history. Tolstoy expressed his exasperation at people who didn't read deeply and regularly. “I cannot understand,” he said “how some people can live without communicating with the wisest people who ever lived on earth.” There's another line now cliché that is even more cutting: people who don't read have no advantage over those who cannot read.

FIND CONFIDENCE, AVOID EGO

Confident people know what matters. They know when to ignore other people's opinion. They don't boast or lie to get ahead (and then struggle to deliver). Confidence is the freedom to set your own standards

and unshackle yourself from the need to prove yourself. A confident person doesn't fear disagreement and doesn't see change—swapping an incorrect opinion for correct one—as an admission of inferiority.

Part II - SPIRIT

Most of us would be seized with fear if our bodies went numb, and we do everything possible to avoid it, yet we take no interest at all in the numbing of our souls. – Epictetus

BEWARE DESIRE

The person enslaved to their urges is not free—whether they are a plumber or the president.

How many great men and women end up losing everything—end up, in some cases, literally behind bars—because they freely chose to indulge their endless appetites, whatever they happen to be?

There's also a “have your cake and eat it too” immaturity to envy. We don't simply want what other people have—we want to keep everything we have *and* add theirs to it, even if those things are mutually exclusive (and on top of that, we also want them to not have it anymore). But if you had to trade places entirely with the person you envy, if you had to give up your brain, your principles, your proudest accomplishments to live in their life, would you do it? Are you willing to pay the price they paid to get what you covet?

ENOUGH

Most people *never* learn that their accomplishments will ultimately fail to provide the relief and happiness we tell ourselves they will. Or they come to understand this only after so much time and money, so many relationships and moments of inner peace, or sacrifice on the altar of achievement. We get to the finish line only to think. *This is it? Now what?*

The need for of progress can be the enemy of enjoying the *process*.

They can also take the joy out of the thing we used to love to do. *More* does nothing for the one who feels *less than*, who cannot see the wealth that was given to them at birth, that they have accumulated in their relationships and experiences.

We were not put on this planet to be worker bees, compelled to perform some function over and over again for the cause of the hive until we died. Nor do we “owe it” to anyone to keep doing, doing, doing—not our fans, not our followers, not our parents who provided so much for us, not even our families. Killing ourselves does nothing for anybody.

It's perfectly possible to do and make good work from a good place. You can be healthy and still *and* successful.

What we want more of in life? That's the question. It's not accomplishment. It's not popularity. It's moments when we feel like we are enough.

More presence. More clarity. More insight. More truth.

More stillness.

BATHE IN BEAUTY

The term for this is *exstasis*—the heavenly experience that lets us step outside of ourselves. And these beautiful moments are available to us whenever we want them. All we have to do is open our souls to them.

ACCEPT A HIGHER POWER

If we told Zen Buddhist from Japan in the twelfth century that in the future everyone could count on greater wealth and longer lives but that in most cases those gifts would be followed by a feeling of utter purposeless and dissatisfaction, do you think they would want to trade places with us?

Part III – Body

SAY NO

The Delayer.

He was special for what he didn't do—for what he *waited* to do—and has stood as an important example to all leaders since. Especially the ones feeling pressure from themselves or their followers to be bold or take immediate action.

The green light is a powerful symbol in our culture. We forget what Mr. Rogers was trying to make us see—that the yellow light and the red light are just as important. Slow down. *Stop*. One recent study found that subjects would rather give themselves an electric shock than experience boredom for even a few minutes. Then we wonder why people do so many stupid things.

We should look fearfully, even sympathetically, at the people who have become slaves to their calendars, who require a staff of ten to handle all their ongoing projects, whose lives seem to resemble a fugitive fleeing one scene for the next. There is no stillness there. It's servitude.

Always think about what you're really being asked to give. Because the answer is often *a piece of your life*, usually in exchange for something that you don't even want. Remember, that's what time is. It's your life, it's your flesh and blood, that you can never get back.

BUILD A ROUTINE

A master is in control. A master has a system. A master turns the ordinary into the sacred.

GET RID OF YOUR STUFF

, but we should constantly question what we own, why we own it, and whether we could do without it.

Have you ever seen a house torn down? A lifetime of earning and savings, countless hours of decorating and accumulating until it was arranged just right, the place of so much living—and in the end it is reduced to a couple dumpsters full of debris. Even the incredibly wealthy, even the heads of state showered with gifts throughout their life, would only fill a few more bins.

Yet how many of us collect and acquire as if the metric tonnage of our possessions is a comment on our worth as individuals? Just as every hoarder becomes tracked by their own garbage, so too are we tied down by what we own. Every piece of expensive jewelry comes with an insurance bill, every mansion with the staff of groundskeepers, every investment with obligations and monthly statements to review, every exotic pet and plant with a set of responsibilities. F. Scott Fitzgerald said that the rich are different than us, and his novels portray them as free and without care.

SEEK SOLITUDE

While Leonardo was working on *The Last Supper*, he would get up early and arrive at the monastery before any of his assistants or spectators, so he could be alone, in silence, with his thoughts and the mammoth creative challenge in front of him. He was also notorious for leaving his studio and going for long walks by

himself, carrying a notebook and simply looking and watching and really seeing what was happening around him.

It is difficult to think clearly in rooms filled with other people. It's difficult to understand yourself if you are never by yourself. It's difficult to have much in the way of clarity and insight if your life is a constant party and your home is a construction site.

“If I was to sum up the single biggest problem of senior leadership in the Information Age,” four- star Marine Corps general and former Secretary of Defense James Mattis has said, “it's lack of reflection. Solitude allows you to reflect while others are reacting. We need solitude to refocus on prospective decision making, rather than just reacting to problems as they arise.”

BE A HUMAN BEING

Work is what horses die of. Everybody should know that. - Aleksander Solzhenitsyn

The moral of the American tall tale about the rail worker John Henry is often lost on people. He challenges the steam powered drilling machine, and through sheer strength and inhuman will, he beats it. It's great. Inspiring. Except he dies at the end! Of exhaustion! “In real life,” George Orwell observed, “it is always the anvil that breaks the hammer.”

The email you think you need so desperately to respond to can wait. Your screenplay does not need to be hurried, and you can even take a break between it and the next one. The only person truly requiring you to spend the night at the office is yourself. It's okay to say no. It's okay to opt out of that phone call or that last-minute trip.

Good decisions are not made by those who are running on empty. What kind of interior life can you have, what kind of thinking can you do, when you're utterly and completely overworked? It's a vicious cycle: we end up having to work more to fix the errors we made when we would have been better off resting,

Handwritten Notes

P45 – Mr. Rogers Yellow

Wow – Socratic Method

215 – Solitude