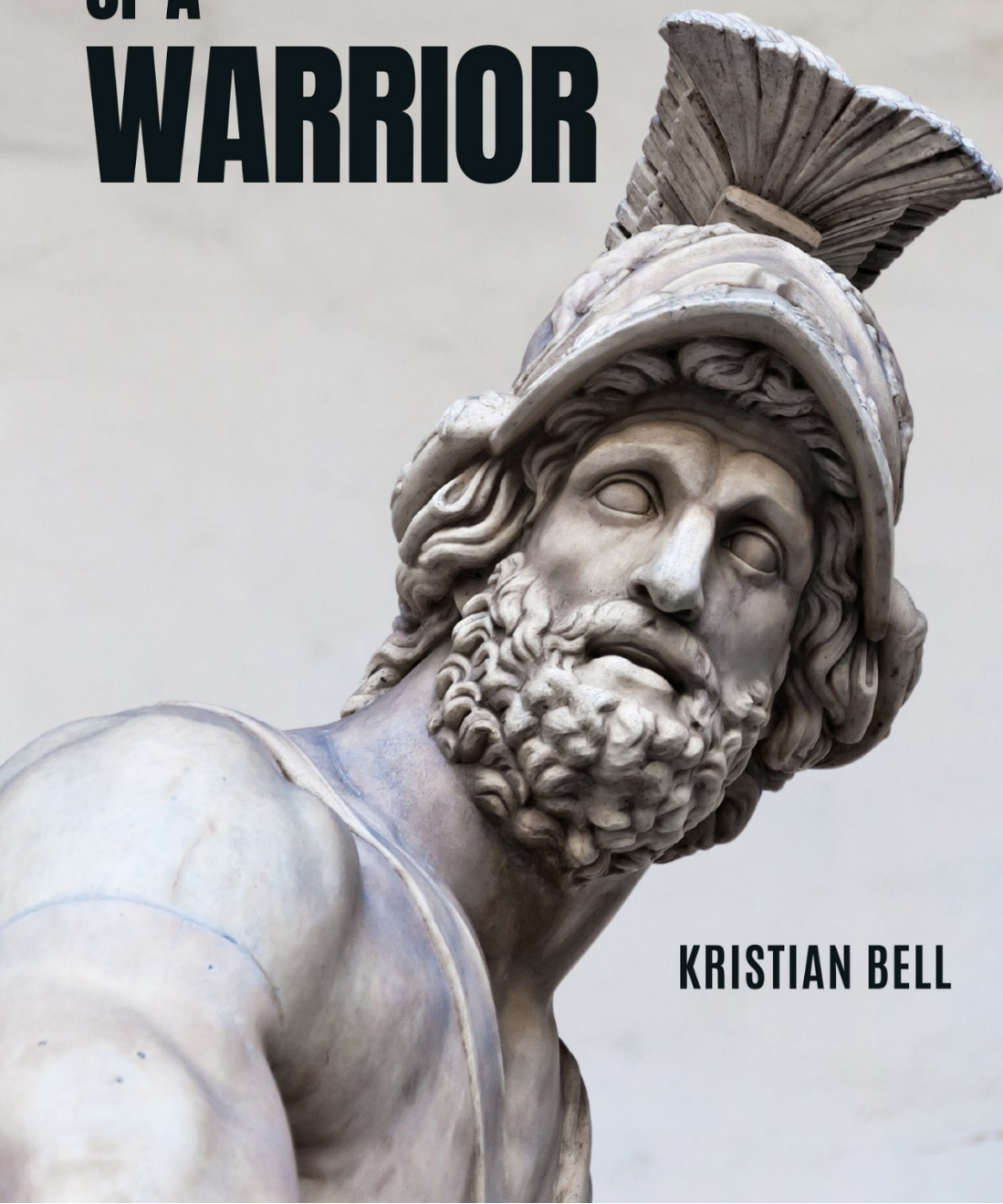


MENTAL HABITS OF A WARRIOR



KRISTIAN BELL

THE MENTAL HABITS OF A WARRIOR

Kristian Bell

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The Mental Habits Of A Warrior

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The Removed Chapter

This short ebook is “the removed chapter” of my main work *The Psychology of Slaying Dragons*. It is a guide to embodying the way of the warrior and navigating hard times of anxiety and change. Here, you will learn to apply principles from Yoga, Stoicism, and ancient traditions to win your strongest life.

“It is philosophy that has the duty of protecting us...
without it no one can lead a life free of fear or worry.”

— Seneca, Letters from a Stoic

Watch the video essay for this guide:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PNUEYRula9A>

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INTRO

What makes Qui-Gon Jinn from *Star Wars*, and Tyler Durden from *Fight Club* so enigmatic? What qualities do ancient heroes like Leonidas, the Spartan king, and Marcus Aurelius, the Stoic emperor of Rome, share with spiritual gurus like Yogananda and even Christ? What separates these lofty characters from the average man?

They have overcome fear and the restlessness of an immature mind. To some degree, each of them has woken up and risen above base consciousness into a higher condition.

Let's look at Qui-Gon Jinn, my favorite Jedi from the first Star Wars movie. He is unbothered by misfortune. He doesn't give a damn about what is unimportant. He is faithful in uncertainty, focused in battle, and relaxed in life. He is content with little and serene even in the face of death.

Of all the people you know, how many resemble his character? How many are steady, happy, strong, and free?

Very few.

Look out across the ocean of humanity and you'll find everyone lost in their own reality. Their thoughts, attachments, beliefs, fears, and desires hang over them like a fog, dictating their existence. They are slaves to their mental patterns. "Oh, what to eat? What to fear? What to seek? This makes me happy, that makes me sad. This makes me worried, that makes me mad..."

Life is a knee-jerk reaction for most. The mind is often like a monkey that has been stung by a scorpion. It blunders through a jungle of desires and aversions, leaping to and fro haphazardly. It reacts harshly, and loves to worry and chase. In peace, the mind is restless. In pleasure, it is indulgent. In fear, it is unhinged. Unless trained, the monkey mind will always lead to suffering and dissatisfaction.

Can you relate? I know I can.

My mind has always jumped at shadows on the wall and obsessed over pleasures. I've dealt with anxiety, addictions, and bouts of melancholy for most of my life. But I'm finally reigning it in. Making my mind more of a friend.

Perhaps you are facing hard times, and want to cultivate a stronger mind. Maybe you want more serenity and less stress. Or perhaps you are sick of the anxiety and dissatisfaction that follows you everywhere. It's time to get off the hamster wheel and put that monkey mind on a leash. It's time to train as a warrior, and a warrior possesses impeccable mental habits. He is the steward of his mind and inner world, and they support him in return.

The warrior's way is concerned with habits of being; physical habits and mental habits. The mental habits are more subtle to master, yet more impactful because they influence your dominant thoughts, feelings, and actions. The principles and techniques I share here help you retrain your relationship to fear, misfortune, challenge, change, and all good or bad experiences. They lay the foundation for a life of peace and strength rather than anxiety and weakness.

So what exactly are mental habits? Mental habits are mechanisms you build into your mind and character. They are repeated attitudes and ways of thinking that transform your demeanor and responses to life.

For instance, one man constantly dwells on worries while another dwells on love and beauty. The latter practices devotion until devotion is his natural state. One man immediately runs from change, while another responds with grace and courage. The latter has built a better relationship to fear of the unknown. One man lets himself get distracted, while another stays focused. One man wakes up and thinks miserable thoughts, while another thinks positive. One man is emotionally crippled by a small failure, while another is unbothered by a storm of them. One man is unsatisfied with everything, while another is content with nothing. What is a man but the sum of his habits? Consider your own mental patterns. What is your programming like?

On the rare occasion everything is going right for you, you may enjoy contentment for a time. This may last for a day, a week, a month, or

even a year (if the gods love you), but inevitably, the tides turn. The honeymoon phase ends. Something changes, hardship arrives, and you get unsettled. As a result, your mind returns to being a hurricane of fretting, overthinking, longing, criticizing... you name it.

“Only during hard times do people come to understand how difficult it is to be master of their feelings and thoughts.”

—— Anton Pavlovich Chekhov

Our poor mental habits become most apparent in times of trouble, loss, or uncertainty. This short book is here to prepare you for both war and peace, and help you become master of your own destiny. Rewiring your mental patterns is a rigorous discipline, not for the faint of heart, but it is essential to becoming a truly liberated human being. Acquiring positive mental habits is like elevating your consciousness from lead to gold, and it takes much work and fire. A wise man once said, “Bad thoughts are easy, but good ones take effort.”

On your journey, fear and suffering are inevitable. There is always going to be another problem, challenge, failure, or tragedy. Some people try to build up external walls of security to protect themselves from the nature of life, but warriors build up inner security. They learn to accept life as it is and flow with it in the best way possible.

All experiences, especially the hard ones, gift you the opportunity to forge better mental habits. Use them. Here are the 7 principles for creating the mind of a warrior.

A NOTE ON SELF-AWARENESS

To change our mental habits we must start by paying careful attention to our thoughts and feelings. Transformation begins with awareness. We cannot hope to change something that we are not first aware of.

A whole book could be written about self-awareness, but all I want to do here is invite you into curiosity. Be curious about yourself. Why are you the way you are? What is that thought? What feeling is underneath it? Get curious about your own mind and its mysterious ways.

Practicing self-awareness looks like taking a step back and checking in with yourself. Take note of your triggers, attitudes, and reactions throughout the day. Observe. It's best to be gentle here instead of harsh. You must be curious and detached if you wish to truly understand yourself.

Self-awareness is a buzzword today, and people like to show how “self-aware” they are. That's cool and all, but realize, this relationship to self we are building does not end with naming feelings and weaknesses like every 15-year-old in therapy can do. We are here to recognize and then respond. Self-awareness deepens through experimentation and self-control, especially in the heat of things. A person becomes a warrior through ordeals, and it is within the fire of challenge that you have the rare opportunity to meet your soul. That is where truth is found and new mental habits are forged. Ease is great, but it is pressure and heat that make diamonds.

At a recent festival, I was in my element dancing through the crowd. Whenever I would find someone I knew and loved, I'd stop to dance or talk for a bit. On that night, a friend I admire seemed cold and unwelcoming. I moved on, but a nagging thought came after me, “Why doesn't he like me anymore?”

I got caught up in my own head until I realized I was triggered by

him. I saw that I was taking his actions and lack of presence personally. *He lives in his own reality of his mind, who knows what's going on up there.* I reminded myself. Once I caught myself and saw the truth, I quickly let it go and got back to dancing.

Later that night, I saw him cuddling and kissing a new woman. *Abh,* I thought to myself, *he was looking for her.*

And that's the way of things. There's a monkey in my mind, and it's my job to catch its faulty perceptions and patterns and rewire them.

— KB, Unison Fest, 9/2023

MEMENTO MORI

“Memento Mori” was an ancient stoic saying that means *remember you will die*. The contemplation of death was a common practice to many philosophers, monks, and warriors of the distant past. They believed it was important that man remembers his impending death so that he doesn’t forget to live. This remembrance is not supposed to be morbid, but rather, awakening. It gives you perspective. Memento Mori is designed to remind you that you don’t have forever and that this life is a precious gift.

The mindfulness of death is the first mental habit to cultivate. It is counterintuitive because we often try to avoid thoughts of mortality, but without awareness of it, we often fail to live fully. We waste our time, act timidly, and don’t cherish what we have. Being mindful of death opens your heart and eyes, and instructs all other habits to come. It is essential for a warrior to build a relationship with death and to let it imbue his life with power.

Since we have thoroughly explored Memento Mori in *Part II* of *The Psychology of Slaying Dragons*, I shall keep it short here.

“Know eternity at all cost,” David Deida advised in *The Way of the Superior Man*. Recognize the small place you occupy in the grand scheme of things. This is another way to interpret memento mori—remember that this blink of a life will come to an end, and you will return to eternity’s embrace. So, in the meantime, don’t get too zoomed in and stressed out about petty things. It’s not worth it in the end.

The awareness of eternity can be crushing for the ego, but it is also freeing. It frees you from the everpresent attachments, patterns, and illusions that blind you. Life hypnotizes us, but death awakens. Death is your ally, not your foe. If you are willing to face fear and uncertainty, death will grant power and vitality to your life. The realization of death and eternity initiates you into the warrior’s path. Only when you realize that time is short will you act with spontaneity and power.

Instead of fearing the inevitable end, let it guide your thoughts and actions to a more centered place. Let your mind expand out to eternity, and then return carrying a fire from heaven.

"Live as if this were your last act on earth."

— That is the creed of a warrior.

BE EMPTY

“Empty your mind. Be formless, shapeless... Be water my friends.”

— Bruce Lee

Death is the ally that leads you to the first two pillars of the warrior’s way—be present and be excellent. Here we are looking at the first.

Where does presence come from?

Emptiness.

The more you are filled, the less present you are. Just like when you overeat, the less you taste. The more attachments you have, the more distracted and worried you become. You cannot hope to add more to an overfilled cup, but most try their entire lives.

The whole world sells you the idea of fullness. Get more, do more, be more... The stimulation, pain, and pleasures of life have trained us to be in constant pursuit. We are full of judgments, beliefs, fears, attachments, and desires. Our quest for fullness is insatiable, and yet it doesn’t create happiness, but often, the opposite. Everything we hold onto makes us more dull, anxious, and distracted.

Examine your own mind, even when things are going well, and you will find a quiet seeking, a search for some new worry or desire to occupy yourself with. There is always a void within that wants to be filled—a feeling of lack that wants to be satisfied but never can. Feeding it only makes it grow more ravenous.

The ancient Buddhists and Taoists knew the path to clarity, happiness, and heaven is not through more, but through less. “Be empty” the sages taught. Practice non-doing, non-being. The void is not there to be filled but to be honored as sacred. Observing and emptying the mind was and still is the main Buddhist practice for presence and enlightenment.

This spiritual philosophy holds true in the warrior tradition. You cannot go into battle while overthinking and planning. Everything in

your mind only slows you down. Your patterns make you predictable. The warrior empties himself before a fight. He must be connected to the moment and his instincts. He strives to be formless, open to what comes, and ready to strike. For a warrior, practicing emptiness is what creates presence and the flow state. And is that not the best way to live in general?

PRACTICING EMPTINESS

When we release the constant seeking for gratification, and just accept our current lot whether it's "good" or "bad", the more awake and present we become. This surrendering to emptiness creates the space to feel, be, and receive fully. Emptiness seems unpleasant and dull at first, but you'll find it leads to a state of well-being and presence that you have always secretly craved. When the mind is unruly, let *emptiness* be your mantra.

Take a moment to notice your attachments, feelings, and expectations, and then, let them go. Empty your attachment to feeling any certain way. Empty your resistance to pain, or your quest for some pleasure. Empty your expectations and desires. Soften your reaction to unpleasantness, and *just observe*. Ironically, accepting a "negative" state usually turns into a positive experience. When we let go of attachments and resistance, peace comes of its own accord.

Peace is always just underneath us. We just need to be more self-aware, more surrendered, and more present in order to live in it. To do this, we must learn to accept a sense of lack, and let it be okay. Emptiness is not stimulating or always fun at first, so the monkey mind will want to run. But emptiness is the doorway to the deepest experience of life.

Now emptiness is nuanced. I'm no Buddhist, and I'm not saying to reject all thoughts or strong passions or desires. No, to me, the human passions and drives are beautiful! Ideas are great. Just use emptiness as a tool and a mantra. Ritualistic practice of acceptance, surrender, and emptiness makes life more and more beautiful. It will amplify times of peace, and provide a steady haven in times of trouble.

Throughout each day, make a point of emptying yourself. Make it

reflexive—just something you do for a minute at a time. I like to set up triggers—watching the sunset, getting in the shower, and sitting on my porch—where I remind myself to be empty. Find daily activities you can associate with practicing emptiness and practice until it becomes a habit. The goal is to touch the state of emptiness so often that it becomes a natural and instinctive process for you. In that, you gain a priceless asset for cultivating the garden of your mind.

“If you want to become straight, let yourself be crooked. If you want to become full, let yourself be empty.”

— Lao Tzu

There is great wisdom in allowance. There is sacredness in lack. There is joy in release. But letting go and accepting emptiness can be difficult. Even scary. The monkey mind will fight and do anything to keep you in the rat race. But you are a warrior. Remember that.

BE IMPECCABLE

Being empty is one side of the coin; it is the yin. Being excellent, alive in spirit, is the yang. Excellence is the second pillar of the warrior, and it brings the energy that pierces obstacles and holds integrity.

A warrior is impeccable. He shows up in his mind, heart, and body the best he can. He's not overly hard nor soft, he applies the right amount of pressure to each situation of life. Impeccability means harnessing your mind and energy correctly. That means ceasing in distractions and half-assed efforts. Impeccability is a state of mind that, once again, comes from the awareness of death. This may be your last showing, your last dance on earth, how do you want to go out?

Being impeccable means engaging 100% with the purpose of the present moment. Showing up as the best you. This is the *quintessential* warrior state. This one thing distinguishes the warrior from all other people and archetypes: he is impeccable *right now*. He lives with the warrior spirit and shows up in excellence.

What does showing up in excellence look like for you? I know for me it's awakening to my surroundings. Occupying the moment fully. Relaxing my shoulders. Smiling a bit as I write. Focusing deeper. Playing through the work.

There is an edge to push in every moment. Whether it's moving impeccably into the world, or deepening into more presence and gratitude within, find your edge. Do whatever you are doing to the best of your ability. Even if it's relaxing, bathing, playing, or reading, do it like it was your last act on earth.

Excellence is a very simple idea, but an impossibly deep practice. Every moment is an opportunity for this type of mastery, or "yoga", if you will. Being impeccable is more of an attitude and mindset than anything. And like all attitudes, it can become habitual with practice and even integrate into your character

Choose two or three daily activities where you will cultivate this mental habit. Perhaps stack it with the activities you listed before, or find

more active opportunities to practice excellence. For me, lifting weights, doing martial arts, walking, and writing are all containers to sharpen my mind and spirit. “Practice in excellence,” my martial arts teacher reminds us constantly, and I try to apply his advice to all areas of my life.

Do the best you can with what you’ve got. That is the way of the warrior. It’s the small and repeated internal shifts toward excellence that matter. They rewrite your base programming and reveal the potential hidden within. Train yourself.

Be. Impeccable. Now.

(See relevant chapters in my book: *The Warrior Spirit*, and *Self-Overcoming*)

PAY ATTENTION

"Your focus determines your reality."

— Qui-Gon Jinn

I'm really loving the Jedi references in this one. That's because the Jedi Warrior has always inspired me. They knew a few things about the mind, even if they were fictional.

Your attention is one of the few things you can control in your life. Are you focusing on the positive? On the possibilities? Or on your anxieties and limitations? When you act, are you focused on the present moment, or distracted? Where are you right now?

This principle overlaps with *being present* and *being excellent*, and I have a whole chapter on it in my book, so I shall keep it short here.

All spiritual and warrior traditions hinge on the cultivation of attention. Attention is a muscle that is constantly being trained. Unfortunately, we often train it poorly. In these days of social media and quick fixes, it is common to have a very distracted and weak attention.

Attention is the directing of awareness. Through concentration and mindfulness, the attention grows sharper and stronger. This is essential if you ever wish to cut free of illusions and fears into freedom.

For all these habits we discuss here, it's important to have containers for practice. Martial arts, the gym, walks, and work are all triggers to cultivate your attention. Notice your thoughts and shepherd them to focus solely on what is before you. When they wander, reset again. When you take a morning walk, be present with the beauty around you instead of worries. When you study and train, let your attention burn. Bring the full force of your being to bear on the task before you. PAY ATTENTION. That is the essence of meditation.

Attention is your most valuable asset. Every moment you are paying it to something. Be aware of how you train it and what you invest in. That is your *choice*, and it's time to reclaim it.

Jedi-level mastery of attention is a high order, and you may feel far from that attainment. It's hard for me to discipline my thoughts for more than a minute at a time, and I bet you feel similar. But do not be discouraged. This is a marathon we are walking. Just get 1% better today.

(For more exercises, see the chapters *Attention*, *Meditation*, and *Training the Mind, Body, and Spirit* in my book.)

BE CONTENT NOW

“Be happy now, without reason—or you never will be at all.”

— Dan Millman, *Way of the Peaceful Warrior*

To be content now is to no longer wait; to no longer wait for some destination or success to be happy. There may never be a greener pasture for you! Don't reserve your peace and contentment for a heaven that may never come! You simply don't have time for that. And even if you do find yourself in greener pastures one day, inevitably, the highs will wear off. You will return to this mediocre baseline you have set for yourself. You are the product of your habitual ways of being and the only heaven is the one you chisel out within.

The “finish line” is an illusion that leads to shortcuts, shallowness, and mediocrity. Every “arrival” is only a false summit. Stop racing toward success and become a craftsman in the art of living. Every success and challenge will pass, and one day you'll realize that the destination is not much different from where you are now. So, enjoy the journey.

The keys to the kingdom of heaven are within your own mind. Your habitual patterns of feeling and thought either propel you upward or downward. Misery creates more of itself, but so does contentment. The question is, what are you cultivating in your garden? Weeds or flowers? One grows naturally while the other must be tended.

The first obstacle in the practice of contentment is often a sense of lack. A feeling that you aren't there yet, that life is inadequate, or that you need something more to be happy. This is false. Happiness is an inner power of the soul. To be content now, you must resolve to enjoy what you have and even, what you don't have. You must create a relationship with the void because lack will always be there in some way. The want for more, or new, or different is a main program you must overcome to attain a higher way of being. You will never have enough, until you make *this* enough; until you make lack sacred. So practice being

with the sacred lack, instead of fixing it.

Whenever I talk with a friend, walk the river trail, or sit on my porch, I remind myself to be content now. To listen to the birds or the water, and let the moment be enough. Even if it's just for a few minutes, I practice emptiness, release my expectations, and I breathe deeply into what is. Life is constantly passing on by, and one day I will long to be back where I am now—a broke writer and creator slowly finding his way through the unending problems of life. I don't want to miss this day chasing “happiness” around the next corner. It is a joy and a privilege to sense, to feel, to live, and to love. *Let me be here now.*

It's important to set up triggers throughout your day that remind you to practice these mental habits. Fortunately, they all stack on top of each other. When you sit down in the morning or at the end of the day, remember death, practice emptiness, and let your worries go for a minute. See if you can create the space to be grateful for the lack and fullness of life as it is. Say to yourself: “I refuse to be a master of misery, I choose to be a master of peace. Who knows how many breaths I have left, let me enjoy this one! Let me be content now.”

ACCEPT LIFE WITH EQUANIMITY

Peace comes from radical acceptance. It comes from accepting the negative and the positive as both necessary and beautiful. This level of acceptance requires seeing things from a higher perspective and embracing life with the heart of a warrior. All things have a rhythm, a rise and fall, and it's important to recognize this cycle. Money, relationships, moods, success, health... all of it ebbs and flows, comes and goes. Acceptance is about welcoming the lows of life just like the highs, and realizing there is nothing wrong with this moment. The only thing wrong is your resistance to it.

Equanimity is maintained through controlling your reactions, softening resistance, and letting go of attachments to all things outside of your control. Equanimity and acceptance go hand in hand. They support one another. Together, they create the demeanor of the enlightened warrior.

Qui-Gon Jinn, the jedi-sage from *Star Wars* embodies this quality perfectly. He goes through life with a beautiful grace and serenity that is unshaken even by death. He's unbothered by misfortunes and cool in adversity. In my favorite scene, he sits in quiet meditation right before meeting his demise at the hands of Darth Maul. He represents the ideal that all these mental habits seek to foster—a peaceful warrior aligned in mind, body, and character.

“Accept whatever comes to you woven in the pattern of your destiny, for what could more aptly fit your needs?”

— Marcus Aurelius

This quote from Aurelius comes to me often in times of trouble and change. It reminds me that life is happening *for* me, and that it's going to be okay if I face it well. *This suffering is an opportunity.*

You may not like it, but can you accept loss? Can you accept pain and misfortune with equanimity? Acceptance through times of trouble may be one of the more difficult tests of life, but it is what makes a warrior. Unlike the immature boy who reacts with harsh feelings and actions, a warrior accepts life with grace, strength, and non-resistance. Where most people try to force their might onto the world, a warrior accepts the world with all his might.

Acceptance does not mean stuffing emotions or being completely stoic. It means facing the truth, and surrendering to it, even if it breaks your heart. Grief and tears are actually signs of acceptance. On a smaller scale, it looks like maintaining your equilibrium through the daily challenges and setbacks—accepting life with grace.

The ebb and flow of money and relationships tend to disrupt our peace the most; hence, they are the best training grounds. For instance, I've been getting more into the dating scene, which honestly sucks. It takes a lot of energy, and the successes, doubts, and failures easily steal my peace. Being ghosted by someone is never easy. At every step through this world of dating, I've had to practice acceptance and equanimity. Acceptance of all things I cannot control—which is most of it. Acceptance of the eb and flow. Acceptance of myself and other people just as we are.

Anxiety is usually a lack of acceptance compounded by attachment to outcomes. It comes from fighting life, usually on a very subtle and unconscious level. Anxiety is a sense that something is wrong and that things should be a certain way. 99% of the time it's your own attachments and faulty perceptions that are wrong, not reality. The best way to deal with anxiety is to first recognize it, change the things you can change, and accept the things you cannot. The philosophy of acceptance is not about being passive, it is simply about accepting the rhythms of life and all the things you cannot control.

Accepting life with equanimity often looks like breathing, releasing attachments, and zooming out. How can you create the space to accept the negative aspects of life? It's important to see the greater rhythms at work, and recognize that suffering and pain are meaningful. The

warrior's act is to embrace all of it as perfect. All of it. Just let life be and breathe.

Again, easier said than done. Every challenge is there to lead you to a deeper and more unshakable sense of peace. That victory lies on the other side of much turmoil, insight, and practice. The more you can accept the good and bad with resolve, and maintain your equilibrium, the more harmony you will reap. I think that is where a lot of wisdom comes from, surrender and integrity.

Exercises in acceptance and equanimity:

- Practice non-reaction to gain or loss. The yogis call this even-mindedness, which is the central theme of many Eastern meditation practices. It means maintaining your balance through the throws of this world and the rise and fall of all things. Earned money suddenly? smile and enjoy it. Lost money suddenly? Can you smile and enjoy that too? Learn to zoom out and stay balanced. Rest assured, the pendulum always swings back.
- *Amor Fati* the Stoics said, love your fate. Love both the highest joys and the deepest lows. It is all there *for* you. Your fate may seem cruel or random, but it is merely another test of your integrity. Life is an endless series of tests and celebrations. Can you make peace with that? Even love it?
- Ask yourself: is this inside or outside of my control? If it is outside of your control, release it. For instance, the stock market, women, other people, and circumstances, are not in your control, but they often control you. Releasing the attachments to the outside world is scary because we feel vulnerable and dependent. To be blunt, letting go is fucking hard. The world is here to challenge you, and many things are not going to go according to plan. The warrior's art is to accept all things with equanimity. You can control your attitude, your breath, your perspective, your attention, and your actions. That's about it. Beyond that, be more like Qui-Gon Jinn and just let life do its thing.

- Be Heroic. To practice acceptance is a heroic, monumental act, especially in times of acute turmoil. The best approach is to see all of life as training. When misfortune strikes, find the courage to accept it with the heart of a warrior. Next time your harmony is disrupted, release your attachments to outcomes and find your center. Heroism is what protects the garden of your mind.

MAKE NO ASSUMPTIONS

Fear is the mind-killer. "Be not afraid," the Bible repeats 365 times. Once for each day of the year it seems.

One of the highest purposes of spirituality and philosophy is the conquering of fear. That is the source of lasting freedom and happiness. Unshakable faith in a higher power and calm understanding are indispensable tools for the warrior. But he must also learn to guard the gates of his mind.

F.E.A.R. is False - Evidence - Appearing - Real. In other words, fear is usually an assumption. We naturally create assumptions about anything potentially unsafe or unknown. Consider the last time loss threatened you or your path was changing—perhaps during a layoff or heartbreak—I bet your mind looped every possible catastrophe imaginable. Assumptions are how the mind makes sense of the future and tries to keep you safe, but assumptions unchecked inevitably lead to suffering and anxiety.

“There are more things... likely to frighten us than there are to crush us;
we suffer more often in imagination than in reality.”

— Seneca, the ancient stoic philosopher.

How often have your worries never come to pass? How often have you fretted endlessly about some potential loss or turmoil that turned out to be a pure illusion? How often have you worried about some potential future, some potential loss or discord, that never actually takes shape? We must recognize that we are totally blind and the mind is a very fallible instrument. 99% of the time; what we think will happen never does.

Unfortunately, much of our lives are spent in a world of assumptions and illusions. Unchecked assumptions steal our joy in the best of times, and build to world-crushing torment in the worst. This is a pattern we must break if we wish to actualize the strength and harmony of a warrior.

Rampant assumptions must be leashed in.

In 2020 I decided to go solo backpacking in the high peaks of the San Juan Mountains in southwest Colorado. It was my first real backpacking experience and I was excited to summit one of the highest peaks in the area and spend a few nights under the stars. The plan was to hike five miles up from Lizard Head Pass and set up base camp near the treeline.

It was an exhausting hike up fairly steep terrain, but well worth it. I was out there, deep in the wilderness, alone. I unpacked and set up my meager camp, consisting of a small burner, hammock, tarp, and sleeping bag. I had elected to ditch the tent to save space, figuring my 15-degree bag would be plenty for the chilly but mild July nights. I cooked some soup, watched the sunset, and got into my hammock as the darkness descended.

Shit. I forgot a bear bag... I thought to myself after snuggling in. *I have to do something with my food.* So I got back up and put my stuff a good distance away. I went to sleep praying the bears wouldn't bother me.

Perhaps an hour later, I awoke, freezing. It was cold. Not dangerously cold, but cold enough. Damn. I could feel the wind and cold air blowing beneath me, stealing my heat. I needed to get up and get my long johns on, but it was cold and dark. Very dark without a moon up there. I started to notice the sounds of the night, and there were many of them. Sparks of fear started to float in my mind, *you're all alone out here...* but I didn't want to go there. I rolled out of my hammock unwillingly, quickly dressed in my long johns, and grabbed my knife and bear spray as an afterthought before climbing back into my sleeping bag. I curled up in a ball, pulled the hood tight until only a small breathing hole remained, and tried to go back to sleep.

Hours went by but no sleep came. I remained wide awake, shivering in silence. I felt so exposed hanging there, in the middle of the dark forest hours from civilization. The mountains were alive with sound all around me, and even more alive in my mind. It's amazing what a sleep-deprived, scared brain can conjure out of the rustles, creaks, and groans of the forest. Unfortunately, I also had a very real concern about

hanging out 25 feet away from a jar of peanut butter in bear country. This only exacerbated my boyhood fear of the dark woods.

Perhaps near midnight, I started hearing rustling sounds moving through my camp area. *Shit*. A little while later, I swore I heard heavy breathing just feet away. I froze in terror. Hulking bears and monsters played out across my mind's eye, looming over my hammock. With each sound I heard, the more intense I listened, trying to discern what it was. After some time battling with my own mind, I summoned the courage to sit up and face the demons of the night. Gripping the bear spray in one hand, and a flashlight and knife in the other, I popped out of my bag and looked around.

Nothing.

The withered trees of the high alpine swayed in the breeze. Relieved, I tucked myself back in and continued the weary struggle with the cold. In the wee hours of the night, frozen and teetering in and out of nightmares, I was alerted by a rummaging sound near my hiking bag. My heart rate immediately spiked. *It's here, the bear has found me*. There was no doubt this time that some kind of animal was right there making noise. I stayed still and prayed it would just leave me alone. I heard more rummaging and what I perceived as heavy steps nearby for the next hour. My camp was being raided I presumed. *GREAT. This night just couldn't get any better.*

I must have drifted off a while after that encounter to the most outlandish nightmares, and I awoke in the crack of dawn relieved. I was alive, and the light was returning. I got up, frozen to the bone, and started a fire. Warmth, *finally*.

A little while later, when putting on my pants, I discovered my leather belt had nearly been chewed through. Mice. It was MICE! Laughing to myself, I reflected on all the racket I had heard coming from my pack and around my hammock. I was convinced it was a bear all along, but it was just the scampering critters of the night.

Years later, as I reflect on this story, I find it amazingly accurate for describing the process of fear in the mind. What our imaginations perceive to be hulking monsters in the night, are just nibbling mice in

the light of day. Most of the time, our assumptions, even if they have some basis in reality, are terribly wrong. Fear creates more fear, and the more escalated we become, the more illusions we create. In many ways, we are all swinging between two trees within the great mystery of life. We are uncertain of our path, of what dangers may lurk, and of what lies ahead. But don't be fooled. There are few bears, but many mice.

The mind often mistakes mice for bears. I have observed this reaction in almost every confrontation with danger or uncertainty that I've ever had. My mind loops stories and catastrophes that are usually wrong. If I fail to be a warrior, and nip the assumptions immediately, they can turn into a storm.

Personally, I'm so fed up with overthinking and worrying about things unworthy of my attention. So rarely do any of my worries come true. I have realized again and again the sheer folly in projecting the future as an overreaction to the present. No more. I'm here to slay assumptions at their root, protect my peace, and discipline my attention.

Will you join me?

Make no assumptions. That is how the warrior guards the gates of his mind. He notices and snuffs out assumptions before they can spiral into an inferno. Through this mental stewardship, he lives with more harmony, peace, and strength.

Start monitoring your mind, especially when faced with change, danger, or the unknown. Notice your assumptions. The most common ones are assumptions about a future loss, future pain, or assumptions about other people and what they think. Stay on guard for them. Find the fear lurking in your thoughts and cast it away. Learn to work through your anxiety. Easier said than done, I know, but you have to start somewhere. And trust me, your mind can be a lot stronger if you train it to not dwell on illusions.

When you find yourself assuming some negative future, come back to the present. Don't give energy to ungrounded fears, they will multiply, instead, focus on the beautiful things within your control. Move your body. That is so important. Don't just fight the mind with the mind

when you're anxious, but move it out of you. It's hard to shake off fear until you shake it out of your body.

Be especially careful with catastrophizing and creating horror stories. This is almost always unproductive. We often do this as a reaction to heavy and dark emotions in intense times of uncertainty (aka. breakups and transitions). We allow our minds to take a little bit of information and run rampant. "Oh, she's probably doing this and thinking this, and these terrible things are going to happen! Blah, blah, blah." We've all been there.

The better path is to feel the emotions directly. To surrender to what is and find the courage to accept things you cannot change. Unprocessed feelings and lack of acceptance will result in mental masturbation of the worst kind. In times of peril and emotional distress, reign in your monkey mind and face the feelings with the heart of a warrior. Be with the pain, instead of creating futures with it. Be with the feelings, instead of lying and trying to protect yourself with your mind. (See relevant chapters in my book: *The Dragon of Fear*, and *Surrendering into the Heart of the Warrior*.)

Making no assumptions is a difficult rule to follow, but a life-changing practice. It has been my guiding light through the hardest times. The demons upstairs can get so loud, even unbearable, in times of change. They have crippled me with fear more than once, but I have slowly learned from these encounters. I've realized that small assumptions can escalate into a living hell. So, I strive to slay them from the start. Every day, I work to build a better relationship with fear and the unknown, and so can you.

Whenever you check in with yourself, especially when you're feeling turmoiled, note the small assumptions running around stealing your peace. When times are hard, do everything in your power to cease in assuming anything. Feel your feelings directly, laugh at assumptions as ridiculous illusions, move your body out of fight or flight, find your faith, and focus on what you can control. It may save your life, or at least, your sanity.

THE PATH - CONCLUSION

The ideal master stands like a mountain, unmoved by rain, snow, or sun, rejoicing in all that life has to offer. He has experienced the lowest valleys and highest peaks, and found himself through the process. Tragedy and majesty both now pass beneath him. Liberated from fear and illusions, he is free to plunder the treasures of life.

“A spiritual warrior is someone who goes through life aggressively and purposefully, whether climbing mountains or wallowing through swamps. They take the natural ups and downs in stride, and see painful circumstances as challenges to work through, not as bad luck to lament.”

— Carlos Castaneda

Times of trouble, are times for training. Arm yourself with potent mantras and mental habits, and meet yourself through the ordeals of life. Growth happens at the decision points where every part of you wants to revel in your own misery and continue in error, but a better part of you says “No. I choose to be better than that.”

Remember death, Be empty, Be impeccable, Pay attention, Be content now, Accept life with equanimity, and Make no assumptions... these are the mental habits of a warrior. They transform your relationship to peace and suffering and pave the way to a flourishing inner life. May you lead yourself like a loving father to the doors of freedom.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Kristian Bell is a life coach who helps young men hone in on their vision, deepen their relationships, and transform themselves through their work. He lives in Durango, Colorado, and has a passion for philosophy, martial arts, and building brotherhood.

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