How To CONQUER YOURSELF

DISCIPLINE & WILLPOWER FOR THE CONSCIOUS, CREATIVE THINKER

BY BRYAN OGILVIE OF DOTHEKNOWLEDGE.COM
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“Knowing others is intelligence, but to know yourself is true wisdom.
Conquering others is strength, but to conquer yourself is true power.”
~ Lao Tzu

“The two strongest predictors of success are intelligence and self-control.”
~ Roy Boymister
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION 3

CH. 1: THE CONQUER YOURSELF FRAMEWORK 5
   THE 2 KEY ASPECTS TO CONQUER 6
   WILLPOWER IS AN INDIRECT GAME (INTERNAL CONCERNS) 6
   THE SUBTLE CONSPIRACY AGAINST SELF-DISCIPLINE (EXTERNAL) 11
   REFERENCES AND FURTHER CONCERNS... 14

CH. 2: HOW TO OVERCOME PROCRASTINATION 16
   THE PROCRASTINATOR’S DILEMMA (VISUALIZATION) 17
   THE PROCRASTINATOR’S DILEMMA (EXPLAINED) 18
   PROCRASTINATION AS A COPING MECHANISM 20
   REFERENCES AND FURTHER CONCERNS... 22

CH. 3: HOW TO ATTAIN DISCIPLINE 27
   DISCIPLINE BEGINS AS A DESIRE FOR MASTERY 28
   RESULTS AREN’T DIRECTLY PROPORTIONAL TO EFFORT 31
   BECOMING DISCIPLINED IN AN “ANTI-DISCIPLINE” WORLD 35
   REFERENCES AND FURTHER CONCERNS... 39

CH. 4: HOW TO BUILD MOTIVATION 41
   75% OF MOTIVATION IS NON-MOTIVATIONAL 42
   BE THE SUN, NOT THE PLANET 44
   REFERENCES AND FURTHER CONCERNS... 46
CH. 5: HOW TO RAISE PRODUCTIVITY

Our entire world suffers from Attention-Deficit Disorder

Time-management is "played out"

Principle #1: Eliminate Distraction

Principle #2: Stop Multitasking

Principle #3: Disregard the Nonesential

Principle #4: Close Open Circuits

References and Further Concerns...

CH. 6: HOW TO DEVELOP SYSTEMS

A system is like a skeletal structure

Understand your work as a process

Use measurement like a mirror-reflection

References and Further Concerns...

CH. 7: HOW TO CULTIVATE WILLPOWER

The origins of "willpower"

Willpower is a source of energy, not a virtue

Willpower applications

References and Further Concerns...

Conclusion

Higher productivity leads to a stronger identity

Complete list of references (by order of mention)
INTRODUCTION

I believe that life is meant to be conquered and that a creative, intelligent psyche - a self-aware, self-directed thinker - is an unconquerable force. I also believe in the power of self-control; specifically, that self-control is the pathway through which this force is discovered.

To see this force in action, to grasp this creative strength and wield its power in actual life, requires one to think and act in a disciplined way: to both see the world through a disciplined frame of mind as well as construct one's goals with a disciplined style of behavior. The strength to conquer one's creative potential, therefore, first begins with the strength to conquer one's self.

This book will outline such a process: it's a strategic guide to cultivating willpower for the conscious, creative thinker, and aims to help those who see themselves as knowledgeable but yet idle, or inactive; talented but yet lethargic and lax in terms of their actual behavior. This book intends to help creative individuals who suffer from chronic procrastination and lack self-control, hoping to thus terminate the anxiety and confusion such poor habits entail.

For definition purposes, a conscious, creative thinker is an intelligent, independent-minded person who tends to express himself through an artistic activity, or any set of activities which could be deemed so…

A conscious-creative is someone you meet who makes you think, "Wow, that's a really cool, interesting person." Technically, they may be anything from a photographer, songwriter or actress to a stand-up comedian or video-game programmer; but the emphasis here is on their identity - on the unique, creative perspective they take towards (and provide) the world.

Examples include:

- screenwriters
- writers of all sorts
- filmmakers
- photographers
- graphic designers
- social activists

- musicians of all sorts (composers, engineers, percussionists, etc.)

- actors and actresses (voice-actresses or voice-actors)

- painters

- consultants and personal coaches

- spoken-word artists, MC’s or street performers

- healthcare practitioners (masseuses, nutritionists, etc.)

…and so on. Although, technically speaking, anyone could perform some of the above work - anyone can, for instance, simply say they’re a painter, poet or filmmaker and then perform the mechanical acts these professions involve - again, the emphasis here is on identity: on the creativity and awareness that emanates from an individual’s personality alongside their artistic talent and skill.

If this person is you, and if the desire to conquer yourself is a pivotal concern, then this book is yours. "Yours" not simply in the sense of possession of course, but yours in that it exists for you, was written with you in mind and may mark a key transitory shift in your creative career. Enjoy it in good health, and make use of its contents.¹

For any questions - if any passages are unclear, if you have any suggestions or would like to speak with me directly about any of the subject matter contained herein - contact me, bryan@dotheknowledge.com

¹ NOTE: To disclaim, nothing that follows is to be construed as medical, legal or psychiatric counsel, nor to be taken as professional advice of any sort whatsoever. For such concerns, seek help from a licensed practitioner whom you trust.

This book began as a compendium of notes for myself; as a way of getting my own act together personally. It’s therefore shared as opinion and technically classified as entertainment.
CH. 1: THE CONQUER YOURSELF FRAMEWORK

“TO CONQUER YOURSELF IS TO BE AT TACTICAL WAR AGAINST BOTH YOUR INSTINCTS AND YOUR SOCIAL CONDITIONING, SIMULTANEOUSLY.”

“The chains of habit are too light to be felt until they’re too heavy to be broken.”
~ Samuel Johnson

“Society is in constant flux, but the majority conform to whatever is normal for the time and play the role allotted to them.” ~ Robert Greene
THE 2 KEY ASPECTS TO CONQUER

There are two key aspects to conquering yourself. By “aspects,” I mean that there are two key pivotal concerns, two key fundamental ideas, around and upon which the ambition to conquer yourself revolves and rests. The first of these two aspects is “internal” because it represents challenges that are personal, psychological or otherwise found inside you as an individual, whereas the second is “external” because it represents challenges that are social, environmental or otherwise found in our collective world.

In other words, half of conquering yourself is about your own human nature, while the other half to conquering yourself is about our culture; about how culture and civilization then sets the context within which that human nature is made to unfold. We’ll spend this rest of this chapter detailing the specific dynamics that govern each of these halves.

So what at first seems like a complex process - a procedural guide to overcoming procrastination, attaining discipline, cultivating willpower and so on - really breaks down to these two key prepositions. Let’s go further in depth…

WILLPOWER IS AN INDIRECT GAME (INTERNAL CONCERNS)

The first, internal concern, "Willpower is an indirect game," means that the internal aspect to conquering yourself (everything that you can influence and control personally, such as your level of willpower, motivation and productivity) is best handled by methods that are indirect and counter-intuitive, never obvious or straightforward.

“Willpower is an indirect game” because willpower, for the most part, is determined by factors we’re typically unaware of; we have to use an indirect process to attain willpower because it’s governed by dynamics we don’t intuitively understand.

Specifically, willpower is not a direct game because human behavior, as a whole, is not a direct result of conscious will or any rational decision-making process. To the contrary, for the most part, human behavior is an indirect by-product of subconscious emotions and instinctual drives that we tend to remain oblivious to.
Again, almost everything we do as humans is a by-product of instinctual drives and subconscious processes, not conscious "will" or rational thinking, which is why, as you already know, trying to force or compel discipline out of yourself (or out of anyone else for that matter) - trying to coerce yourself to be more productive, have more ambition or stop procrastinating - simply doesn’t work.

Regardless of the stakes involved, and regardless of how important or promising your creative projects may be, direct force is the ineffective and often counter-productive approach to take. For instance…

- simply demanding yourself to wake up earlier won’t get you out of your comfortable bed at the time you’d like to,

- simply forcing yourself to exercise daily won’t motivate you to stay with a routine more then a few weeks (if that), and

- simply deciding, or thinking about, how great it would be to write and direct a screenplay won’t convert itself into a finished short or feature.

In fact, these methods might even be thought of as unsophisticated and naive, because they ignore the subtle dynamics that actually determine human behavior to begin with.¹

Take a look at everything you’ve done for the past twenty-four hours: everything from the time you got out of bed, the way you brushed your teeth, what you ate for breakfast, what happened at work or school, what you did on your lunch break, the time you got home, the music you listened to on your iPod and anything else you did to wind down or replenish yourself.

Now take a look at those same twenty-four hours on an emotional or psychological level: how did you feel and think throughout it? What was your general mood, and if you had several moods, what where they and at what times did you experience them? What was the tone and style of your conversations? The subject matter? Which coworkers, friends, classmates and loved ones did you speak with, what worries and anxieties came to mind, and what did you do to escape or alleviate them?

¹ Most people mistakenly think of willpower and discipline as character traits; as part of their personality they either have or don’t have enough of (no different then honesty or confidence). This mistaken view then takes their attention away from where it should be - away from the real mechanics involved - and places it on their own identity, which can lead to having the negative self-image of an undisciplined or weak-willed person, a much more difficult problem to resolve. In this way, mistaking willpower for a character trait convolutes the entire concern, and can lead people to feel defeated and helpless rather then motivated or encouraged.
Here’s the final question: out of all your actions, experiences, feelings, worries, ideas and decisions, how much of it was willpower, and how much of it was simply habit and routine? How much of it was a logical, conscientious choice to do what was most sensible, productive or aligned with your personal goals and how much of it was simply emotional patterns, social pressure and instinctual responses playing themselves out, superseding your awareness and control?

My point here is that we human beings are essentially organic machines. I’m not saying this to tarnish or revoke the elegance of being human, but to put willpower in its proper frame and perspective. Specifically, you can’t Conquer Yourself until you see that the “self” you’re trying to conquer is an animal first; a creature that acts through routine and responds to animalistic stimuli much more than it does information, reasoning or conscious will (which is why you have such a difficult time conquering it).

In fact, neuroscientist Dr. Paul D. MacLean once developed the “Triune Brain Theory” to help explain this. According to the Triune Brain model, our brain’s evolution can be categorized into three distinct phases, which, in layman’s terms, means that we humans don’t just have one brain, we have three.

These three brains (or phases) each have their own distinct location in the mind, their own distinct evolutionary function and their own distinct series of biological drives, or needs. They therefore, of course, often compete and conflict with one another.

The three brains are, roughly:

1. the Human, “Logical” brain (located in the neocortex)

2. the Mammalian, “Emotional” brain (located in the limbic system), and

3. the Reptilian, “Physical” brain (located in the basal ganglia)

So for instance, whereas our logical brain strives to create and devise order; our emotional brain strives for a sense of belonging while our physical brain strives only for survival and exhibits territorial behavior. That is, whereas your logical brain is what plans your events and understands

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2 As an exercise, do this over an extended trial period for yourself, for anyone close enough to you to observe and then for society as a whole. It’ll both disturb and enlighten you at the same time.

3 Dr. MacLean’s ideas weren’t so well-received, but nevertheless still provide a good framework for us to work from. See The Triune Brain in Evolution for more.
what you’re reading now, your emotional and physical brains are what govern, say, your dietary choices, your confidence level, relationship patterns and so on.

You can think of this as having separate brains for each the mind, heart and body, but the point is, while your goals and decision-making willpower capacity reside in your logical intelligence, the anxieties and apprehensions you have about them reside in more primitive aspects of your evolutionary past.

Remember, the various drives often compete with one another, and each brain evolved subsequently to the brain underneath it, meaning the logical came in after the emotional, and the emotional itself came in after the physical. This is why logic tends to have the weakest leverage and least influence on our overall behavior.

Human reasoning (which includes the ability to will, discipline or "motivate" yourself to do anything) is the new kid on the block, and has trouble exerting itself without the help of unconscious factors anterior to it. Although we like to deceive ourselves and believe that we’re logical creatures guided by will, the reality is that almost everything we do, think and feel is governed by dynamics we don’t intuitively understand and would never naturally detect.

For instance, when young men “sow the wild oats” and pursue women for sex, it’s rarely because they find a girl intelligent, genuinely interesting or to be a healthy, positive influence on their lives - it’s because they have physical desires to sedate and because, emotionally, they want another notch on their belt to bolster their self-esteem.

When advertising companies design their campaigns, it’s rarely based on why their product is technically superior, cost-effective or an otherwise sensible purchase, but on the manipulation of their target audience’s psyche - they use celebrities to lend their merchandise an aura of significance, or fear-based marketing tactics to trigger a sense of anxiety (which their merchandise then proposes to relieve).

Even when individuals are driven to major success, in many cases it’s their need for validation - the attention and acceptance they never got from their parents, for instance - which they then look to unconsciously deduct from society as a whole.

So again, willpower is an indirect game: people act and raise their productivity for reasons they’re typically unaware of. This being so, if you’d like to cultivate willpower, stop thinking through the "direct" lens of motivation, discipline or force and instead, through the indirect, counterintuitive lens of psychology, subconscious processes and instinctual drives. For example...
Broadcast Your Commitments: if you’d like to film a documentary or start a blog, simply make an official event for the film debut or website launch and publicize that date. A public deadline creates social pressure that’ll impel and coerce performance out of you, simply to maintain your image in the public eye…

You may think this unprincipled, but the reality is that it works, and it works because we humans tend to protect our social image better than a comic-book superhero protects his secret identity.

The fear of embarrassment is wired deep into our psyche and may even be related to our fear of social exclusion (for survival purposes) in more tribal, nomadic times. Leverage this dynamic against yourself by broadcasting your commitments publicly.

Conceal Your Diet: if you’d like to eat healthier, if you notice certain foods taking a toll on your creativity, mood or concentration, simply keep healthy choices on display out in visible areas and unhealthy choices concealed in hidden, inconvenient ones. Studies show that when we’re hungry, we unconsciously reach for the most accessible item, so reorganize your kitchen to trick your unconscious…

Put the sweets high up in the cabinet (where they can’t be seen) and leave the apples, almonds, etc. right out on the table. This’ll help make healthy eating more likely, habitual and almost effortless.

The key idea here is to create discipline by reverse-engineering it; by asking, “How can I, given what I know about subconscious drives and human nature, make the result I’m looking for inevitable?” or “How can I structure an environment or a situation that would encourage the result to happen on its own accord?”

Remember, willpower is an indirect game: we’re essentially organic machines in that our biological impulses (physical needs based on the present) and mammalian wiring (emotional responses based on conditioning in the past) are what dominate our decision-making process, not conscious thought (logical reasoning based on, and intended for, the future) or “willpower.”

The strategy to conquer yourself therefore, is to align these forces: to build willpower indirectly by working through these instinctual, lesser-evolved aspects of human nature, rather then erroneously thinking you can simply force yourself to override them.

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4 The solutions we’ll explore later go much deeper than this, but it’s a good way to start conquering the internal frontier. The personal, psychological dynamics inhibiting your creativity demand an approach that runs counter to what you’d naturally think.
Until you become disenchanted with will - until you realize that most of your behavior stems from emotional conditioning and biological impulses (not logical thinking), through a process that happens automatically (not through deliberate choice) - self-discipline will always elude you. You may even come to interpret your lack of willpower as some personal fault or defect of character, rather than merely as a lack of knowledge.

Once more, willpower is an indirect game. Work to build it indirectly through the underlying, counterintuitive factors that determine it, not through the old-fashioned delusion of force.

THE SUBTLE CONSPIRACY AGAINST SELF-DISCIPLINE

Lastly, the second, external frontier, "There's a subtle conspiracy against self-discipline," means that the challenge to conquer yourself is made harder by living in a culture antagonistic to it. "There's a subtle conspiracy against self-discipline" because society itself is structured in ways that impede and sabotage your attempts to attain it; we can think of it as "a conspiracy" because the ways in which it does so are both widespread and systematic, yet subtle and obscure.

Ironically, whereas the American tradition once centered around an ethic of thrift and industriousness, it’s now mutated into one of sloth and indulgence. So becoming privy to this trend, devising means to prevent it from developing within yourself, is as critical to building discipline in the digital age as any of the more personal, internal dynamics involved.

So beyond learning to leverage your unconscious drives in ways that favor willpower, there also lies an additional challenge: shielding such leverage from the social conditioning and societal norms most likely to inhibit it, which include (A) the cultural bias towards entertainment, (B) the cultural bias towards distraction and (C) the cultural bias towards surface level thinking:

Our cultural bias towards entertainment, or "the culture of entertainment" for short, refers to the subtle way in which media-programming has turned us into a society more concerned with entertaining ourselves than we are with getting results…

- our fascination with celebrity gossip,

- reality shows,

- professional wrestling,
- internet memes and
- the gaming apps on our mobile devices

...are all examples of how we're conditioned to orient our lives around diversion and leisure rather then discipline and personal growth.

So we have to train ourselves to not get lost or too absorbed in these amusements, because, "We've transformed our culture into a vast replica of Pinocchio's Pleasure Island, where boys were lured with the promise of no school and endless fun. They were all, however, turned into donkeys - a symbol in Italian culture of ignorance and stupidity."\(^5\)

**Our cultural bias towards distraction**, our culture of distraction, refers to the subtle way in which technology has turned us into a society in which the inability to focus has become the norm...

- our dependence on, and literal obsession with, smartphones,
- text messaging,
- email alerts,
- social network notifications and
- the Skype video-calls that disturb us at any given moment

...are all examples of how we're conditioned for attention-deficit disorder and disorderliness rather then clarity and concentration.

So we have to train ourselves to eliminate and minimize distraction and interruption, because, "As our culture becomes more mobile, high-speed, techno-stressed, information-cluttered and media-saturated, we're getting pushed out of our ability to focus without even noticing it."\(^6\)

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\(^5\) Chris Hedges in his 2010 work, *Empire of Illusion*.

\(^6\) Lucy Jo Palladino in her book, *Find Your Focus Zone*. 
Our cultural bias towards surface-level thinking, the culture of superficiality, refers to the subtle way in which consumerism has turned us into a society that values experiences in only in shallow and artificial form...

- constantly snacking instead of eating full meals,

- downloading individual songs instead of full albums (and switching incessantly through literally thousands of songs on our MP3 players),

- buying books but reading only the first chapter and

- having hundreds of online "friends" but few, if any, meaningful connections in the real world

...are all examples of how we're conditioned to rush impatiently through things rather than finish and process them completely.

So we have to train ourselves to go deeper in order to obtain results and get the full "nutrition" an experience contains because, "If you obsessively snack on things - whether they be food, goals, relationships or even learning, such as in a program like this - you're missing out on eighty to ninety percent of the value." 7

(Here, of course, I only mean conspiracy in the allegorical sense. None of this is to criticize the world, suggest that it intentionally conspires against you or promote a victim mentality, but to simply highlight the specific trends most detrimental to your productivity that - similar to aspects of human nature that supersede will - tend to operate beyond our awareness. It’s simply a framework to help you Conquer Yourself.)

Aside from these three primary biases however, there are many more, such as the cultural bias towards fear, or an unconscious social climate of fear in our modern society as well.

- News media (with its focus on crime, terrorism and natural disasters),

- the cosmetic and pharmaceutical industries (with their focus on disease and physical appearance), and even

7 Eben Pagan in his video-training program, Wake Up Productive.
- religious movements (with their focus on hell, eternal damnation and apocalyptic disaster)

...all center around the promotion of fear, because a person who's horrified or anxious is also far easier to persuade, influence and control.\(^8\)

This subtle environment of fear should be on every conscious and creative individual's radar as another factor to be vigilant against; to mentally "vaccinate" himself from.

Again, there's a subtle conspiracy against self-discipline. Your ability to detect this - to devise means to shielding and counterattacking it's effect on you - is as critical for building discipline in the digital age as any of the more personal, internal dynamics involved.

REFERENCES AND FURTHER CONCERNS...

For more on the cultural biases of entertainment, distraction and superficial thinking, see Empire of Illusion: The End of Literacy and the Triumph of Spectacle by Chris Hedges, Find Your Focus Zone: An Effective New Plan to Defeat Distraction and Overload by Lucy Jo Palladino, and The Hidden Persuaders by Vance Packard (respectively).\(^9\)

For more on the triune model of neurological activity, see The Triune Brain in Evolution: Role of the Paleocerebral Functions by Dr. Paul D. MacLean, or (for a more layman overview of the same) The Dragons of Eden: Speculations on the Evolution of Human Intelligence by Paul Sagan.

Keep this two frontiers in mind as you continue to read and always relate the advice, solutions and strategies back to them. You'll find this reinforces the learning at a deeper level and will lead you to develop insights and practical techniques on your own accord.

Once more, there are two frontiers to conquer - two interacting battlegrounds that all problems with creative self-discipline emanate from...

\(^8\) As a critical thinking exercise, what other "cultural biases" and "conspiracies against self-discipline" you can imagine, given your own experience and outlook towards the world? How do these, along with some of the biases previously mentioned, affect you, limit you or hinder your sense of self-control?

\(^9\) Of all these, I find Hedges's work the most eloquent and far reaching.
1.) **Internal challenges** that are personal or psychological in nature, which are conquered by understanding that *willpower is an indirect game* and

2.) **External challenges** that are social or environmental in scope, which are conquered understanding that *there's a subtle conspiracy against self-discipline*.

As a result, **to conquer yourself is to be at tactical war with both your instincts and your social conditioning, simultaneously.** Just remember that you'll need strategies to address both concerns.

Take a break to reflect and let's continue…
“PROCRASTINATION BEGINS BY CONFUSING YOUR ACCOMPLISHMENTS WITH WHAT YOUR PERSONAL VALUE IS AS A HUMAN BEING...”

“Stop making identity meaning out of external events…” ~ Eben Pagan

“Free yourself from an attitude about your worth and abilities that are no longer appropriate for your current age, intellect and power.”

~ Neil Fiore, PhD
THE PROCRASTINATOR’S DILEMMA (VISUALIZATION)

We’ll start this chapter with a visualization exercise, “The Procrastinator’s Dilemma,” to introduce my framework of how procrastination operates. Afterwards, we’ll dissect the visualization as a metaphor - as an allegory symbolizing the habit of procrastination as a whole - in order to devise strategies that’ll break this habit at its root. As simple as it may seem, follow this process thoroughly to end the procrastination now blocking your creative productivity once and for all.

[SCENARIO A] Imagine I placed a plank on the ground - a wooden board about ten feet long, two feet wide and only a few inches thick - and asked you to walk across it as it laid there.

How would you respond? You’d probably do it without hesitation of course. You might laugh at the whole idea and find it pointless, but as long as there was nothing to suspect you’d perform it effortlessly.

[SCENARIO B] Now imagine I took this same wooden plank but suspended it between two Manhattan high-rises, more than 200 ft. over concrete pavement and then asked you to walk across it.

How would you respond here? What are you saying to yourself this time?

"No thanks…" right?

"I might fall," or;

"The wind might knock me over…"

This time, your feelings about the task have changed because the potential consequences (i.e. falling to your most-certain death) have changed, and this shift in potential consequences has caused you to lose sight of how simple the task actually is.
In this second instance, it’s no longer a playful test or just a game, it’s risking your life. Adrenaline rushes through you as you visualize yourself falling twenty-plus stories down, you’re no longer calm and there’s nothing to laugh at anymore.

Notice how the thought, "If I make a mistake I could die," makes it impossible for you to take action.

**[SCENARIO C]** And lastly, in this same situation (a plank suspended sky-high between towers), imagine that as you stand there paralyzed by the thought of crossing, the building you’re currently standing on catches fire.

How would you respond here? You’re entire focused changed, didn’t it? Now you’re going to find a way to get across no matter what, and the thought of not doing it perfectly never even comes to mind. You may of gotten creative and said:

"I’d just sit down on the board and scoot my behind over to the other end," or

"I’d crawl on my hands and knees if I had to."

But what happened here?? Why did your feelings change so quickly? How did you go from worry, ambivalence and procrastination to productivity and creative problem-solving in mere seconds??

In simple terms, the “possibility” of pain and death became the certainty of pain and death…that’s what impelled you to take action and that’s also precisely what happens when we procrastinate.¹

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**THE PROCRASTINATOR’S DILEMMA (EXPLAINED)**

In our minds, we act out scenario B when we falsely associate our success with our sense of personal value, and in our actual lives, we create scenario C as a result of that initial procrastination.

That is, underlying our procrastination is a mistaken, subliminal connotation between what we do and our value as a human being. On a deeper level, you “raise the plank off the ground” by unconsciously translating a task into a measurement of who you are: into evidence as to whether or not you’re acceptable and into a forecast of who you’ll become in the future. Once you you confuse your identity this…

¹ The formal, complete version of this exercise can be found in Dr. Neil Fiore’s book *The Now Habit*. 
TO BE CONTINUED…

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