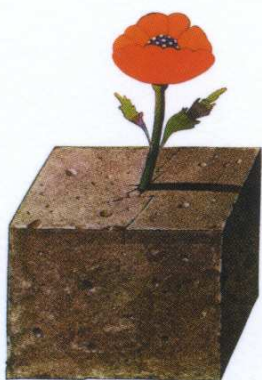


the WAR of ART

Break Through the Blocks
and Win Your
Inner Creative Battles



STEVEN PRESSFIELD

“A vital gem...a kick in the ass.” —*Esquire*

the **WAR** of **ART**

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theWARofART

FOREWORD

by Robert McKee

Steven Pressfield wrote *The War of Art* for me. He undoubtedly wrote it for you too, but I know he did it expressly for me because I hold Olympic records for procrastination. I can procrastinate thinking about my procrastination problem. I can procrastinate dealing with my problem of procrastinating thinking about my procrastination problem. So Pressfield, that devil, asked me to write this foreword *against a deadline*, knowing that no matter how much I stalled, eventually I'd have to knuckle down and do the work. At the last possible hour I did, and as I leafed through Book One, "Defining the Enemy," I saw myself staring back guilty-eyed from every page. But then Book Two gave me a battle plan; Book Three, a vision of victory; and as I closed *The War of Art*, I felt a surge of positive calm. I now know I can win this war. And if I can, so can you.

To begin Book One, Pressfield labels the enemy of creativity Resistance, his all-encompassing term for what Freud called the Death Wish—that destructive force inside human nature that rises whenever we consider a tough, long-term course of action that might do for us or others something that's actually good. He then presents a rogue's gallery of the many manifestations of Resistance. You will recognize each and every one, for this force lives within us

all—self-sabotage, self-deception, self-corruption. We writers know it as "block," a paralysis whose symptoms can bring on appalling behavior.

Some years ago I was as blocked as a Calcutta sewer, so what did I do? I decided to try on all my clothes. To show just how anal I can get, I put on every shirt, pair of pants, sweater, jacket, and sock, sorting them into piles: spring, summer, fall, winter, Salvation Army. Then I tried them on all over again, this time parsing them into spring casual, spring formal, summer casual... Two days of this and I thought I was going mad. Want to know how to cure writer's block? It's not a trip to your psychiatrist. For as Pressfield wisely points out, seeking "support" is Resistance at its most seductive. No, the cure is found in Book Two: "Turning Pro."

Steven Pressfield is the very definition of a pro. I know this because I can't count the times I called the author of *The Legend of Bagger Vance* to invite him for a round of golf, and although tempted, he declined. Why? Because he was working, and as any writer who has ever taken a backswing knows, golf is a beautifully virulent form of procrastination. In other words, Resistance. Steve packs a discipline forged of Bethlehem steel.

I read Steve's *Gates of Fire* and *Tides of War* back-to-back while traveling in Europe. Now, I'm not a lachrymose guy; I hadn't cried over a book since *The Red Pony*, but these novels got to me. I found myself sitting in cafes, choking

back tears over the selfless courage of those Greeks who shaped and saved Western civilization. As I looked beneath his seamless prose and sensed his depth of research, of knowledge of human nature and society, of vividly imagined telling details, I was in awe of the work, the work, all the work that built the foundation of his riveting creations. And I'm not alone in this appreciation. When I bought the books in London, I was told that Steve's novels are now assigned by Oxford history dons who tell their students that if they wish to rub shoulders with life in classical Greece, read Pressfield.

How does an artist achieve that power? In the second book Pressfield lays out the day-by-day, step-by-step campaign of the professional: preparation, order, patience, endurance, acting in the face of fear and failure—no excuses, no bullshit. And best of all, Steve's brilliant insight that first, last, and always, the professional focuses on mastery of the craft.

Book Three, "The Higher Realm," looks at Inspiration, that sublime result that blossoms in the furrows of the professional who straps on the harness and plows the fields of his or her art. In Pressfield's words: "When we sit down each day and do our work, power concentrates around us... we become like a magnetized rod that attracts iron filings. Ideas come. Insights accrete." On this, the *effect* of Inspiration, Steve and I absolutely agree. Indeed, stunning images and ideas arrive as if from nowhere. In fact, these seemingly spontaneous flashes are so amazing, it's hard to believe that

our unworthy selves created them. From where, therefore, does our best stuff come?

It's on this point, however, the *cause* of Inspiration, that we see things differently. In Book One Steve traces Resistance down its evolutionary roots to the genes. I agree. The cause is genetic. That negative force, that dark antagonism to creativity, is embedded deep in our humanity. But in Book Three he shifts gears and looks for the cause of Inspiration not in human nature, but on a "higher realm." Then with a poetic fire he lays out his belief in muses and angels. The ultimate source of creativity, he argues, is divine. Many, perhaps most readers, will find Book Three profoundly moving.

I, on the other hand, believe that the source of creativity is found on the same plane of reality as Resistance. It, too, is genetic. It's called talent: the innate power to discover the hidden connection between two things—images, ideas, words—that no one else has ever seen before, link them, and create for the world a third, utterly unique work. Like our IQ, talent is a gift from our ancestors. If we're lucky, we inherit it. In the fortunate talented few, the dark dimension of their natures will first resist the labor that creativity demands, but once they commit to the task, their talented side stirs to action and rewards them with astonishing feats. These flashes of creative genius seem to arrive from out of the blue for the obvious reason: They

come from the unconscious mind. In short, if the Muse exists, she does not whisper to the untalented.

So although Steve and I may differ on the cause, we agree on the effect: When inspiration touches talent, she gives birth to truth and beauty. And when Steven Pressfield was writing *The War of Art*, she had her hands all over him.

the WAR of ART

WHAT I DO

I get up, take a shower, have breakfast. I read the paper, brush my teeth. If I have phone calls to make, I make them. I've got my coffee now. I put on my lucky work boots and stitch up the lucky laces that my niece Meredith gave me. I head back to my office, crank up the computer. My lucky hooded sweatshirt is draped over the chair, with the lucky charm I got from a gypsy in Saintes-Maries-de-la-Mer for only eight bucks in francs, and my lucky LARGO nametag that came from a dream I once had. I put it on. On my thesaurus is my lucky cannon that my friend Bob Versandi gave me from Morro Castle, Cuba. I point it toward my chair, so it can fire inspiration into me. I say my prayer, which is the Invocation of the Muse from Homer's *Odyssey*, translation by T. E. Lawrence, Lawrence of Arabia, which my dear mate Paul Rink gave me and which sits near my shelf with the cuff links that belonged to my father and my lucky acorn from the battlefield at Thermopylae. It's about ten-thirty now. I sit down and plunge in. When I start making typos, I know I'm getting tired. That's four hours or so. I've hit the point of diminishing returns. I wrap for the day. Copy whatever I've done to disk and stash the disk in the glove compartment of my truck in case there's a fire and I have to run for it. I power down. It's three, three-thirty. The office is closed. How many pages have I produced? I

don't care. Are they any good? I don't even think about it. All that matters is I've put in my time and hit it with all I've got. All that counts is that, for this day, for this session, I have overcome Resistance.

WHAT I KNOW

There's a secret that real writers know that wannabe writers don't, and the secret is this: It's not the writing part that's hard. What's hard is sitting down to write.

What keeps us from sitting down is Resistance.

THE UNLIVED LIFE

Most of us have two lives. The life we live, and the unlived life within us. Between the two stands Resistance.

Have you ever brought home a treadmill and let it gather dust in the attic? Ever quit a diet, a course of yoga, a meditation practice? Have you ever bailed out on a call to embark upon a spiritual practice, dedicate yourself to a humanitarian calling, commit your life to the service of others? Have you ever wanted to be a mother, a doctor, an advocate for the weak and helpless; to run for office, crusade for the planet, campaign for world peace, or to preserve the environment? Late at night have you experienced a vision of the person you might become, the work you could accomplish, the realized being you were meant to be? Are you a writer who doesn't write, a painter who doesn't paint, an entrepreneur who never starts a venture? Then you know what Resistance is.

One night I was layin' down,
I heard Papa talkin' to Mama.
I heard Papa say, to let that boy boogie-woogie.
'Cause it's in him and it's got to come out.

—John Lee Hooker, "Boogie Chillen"

Resistance is the most toxic force on the planet. It is the root of more unhappiness than poverty, disease, and erectile dysfunction. To yield to Resistance deforms our spirit. It stunts us and makes us less than we are and were born to be. If you believe in God (and I do) you must declare Resistance evil, for it prevents us from achieving the life God intended when He endowed each of us with our own unique genius. *Genius* is a Latin word; the Romans used it to denote an inner spirit, holy and inviolable, which watches over us, guiding us to our calling. A writer writes with his *genius*; an artist paints with hers; everyone who creates operates from this sacramental center. It is our soul's seat, the vessel that holds our being-in-potential, our star's beacon and Polaris.

Every sun casts a shadow, and genius's shadow is Resistance. As powerful as is our soul's call to realization, so potent are the forces of Resistance arrayed against it. Resistance is faster than a speeding bullet, more powerful than a locomotive, harder to kick than crack cocaine. We're not alone if we've been mowed down by Resistance; millions of good men and women have bitten the dust before us. And here's the biggest bitch: We don't even know what hit us. I never did. From age twenty-four to thirty-two, Resistance kicked my ass from East Coast to West and back again thirteen times and I never even knew it existed. I looked everywhere for the enemy and failed to see it right in front of my face.

Have you heard this story: Woman learns she has cancer, six months to live. Within days she quits her job, resumes the dream of writing Tex-Mex songs she gave up to raise a family (or starts studying classical Greek, or moves to the inner city and devotes herself to tending babies with AIDS). Woman's friends think she's crazy; she herself has never been happier. There's a postscript. Woman's cancer goes into remission.

Is that what it takes? Do we have to stare death in the face to make us stand up and confront Resistance? Does Resistance have to cripple and disfigure our lives before we wake up to its existence? How many of us have become drunks and drug addicts, developed tumors and neuroses, succumbed to painkillers, gossip, and compulsive cell-phone use, simply because we don't do that thing that our hearts, our inner genius, is calling us to? Resistance defeats us. If tomorrow morning by some stroke of magic every dazed and benighted soul woke up with the power to take the first step toward pursuing his or her dreams, every shrink in the directory would be out of business. Prisons would stand empty. The alcohol and tobacco industries would collapse, along with the junk food, cosmetic surgery, and infotainment businesses, not to mention pharmaceutical companies, hospitals, and the medical profession from top to bottom. Domestic abuse would become extinct, as would addiction, obesity, migraine headaches, road rage, and dandruff.

Look in your own heart. Unless I'm crazy, right now a still small voice is piping up, telling you as it has ten thousand times, the calling that is yours and yours alone. You know it. No one has to tell you. And unless I'm crazy, you're no closer to taking action on it than you were yesterday or will be tomorrow. You think Resistance isn't real? Resistance will bury you.

You know, Hitler wanted to be an artist. At eighteen he took his inheritance, seven hundred kronen, and moved to Vienna to live and study. He applied to the Academy of Fine Arts and later to the School of Architecture. Ever see one of his paintings? Neither have I. Resistance beat him. Call it overstatement but I'll say it anyway: it was easier for Hitler to start World War II than it was for him to face a blank square of canvas.

BOOK ONE

RESISTANCE

Defining the Enemy