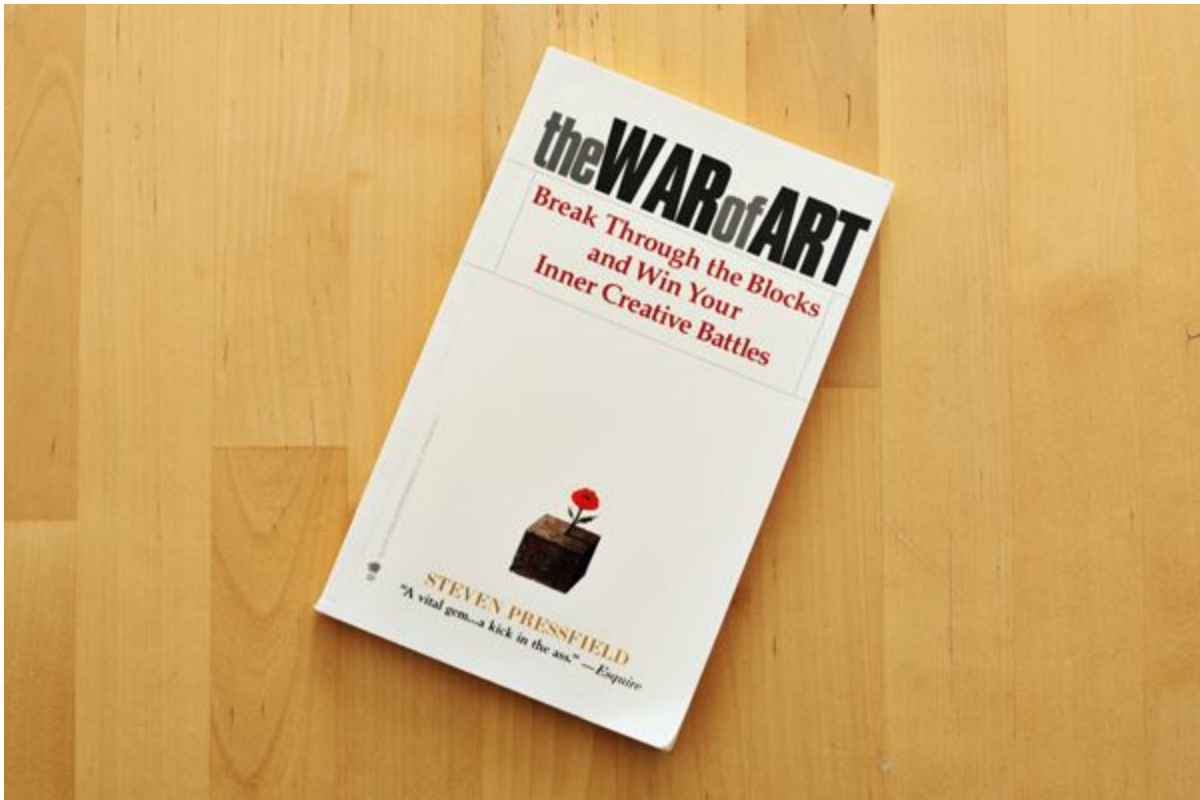


The War of Art

Steven Pressfield



“In the end the question can only be answered by action. Do it or don’t do it.”

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Foreword by the legendary [Robert McKee](#)

- “Steve packs a discipline forged of Bethlehem steel.”
- “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.”
 - *Sidenote:* I love how McKee *disagrees* with the author in his foreword. So solid. McKee views the cause or source of creativity to be the unconscious mind of talented people. The author views the source of creativity to be the divine.
- “When inspiration touches talent, she gives birth to truth and beauty.”

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Introduction: What I Do, What I Know, The Unlived Life

Overview: The author humbly introduces and defines key concepts like “Resistance”: the evil force that stops you from doing what that thing in your heart—your inner genius—is calling you to do.

Quotes

- “Resistance is the most toxic force on the planet. It is the source of unhappiness and poverty, disease, and erectile dysfunction.”
- “Every sun casts a shadow, and genius’s shadow is Resistance.”

Notes

- It’s worth noting the hook of this book. Chapter is titled “What I Do” and the opening lines are: “I get up, take a shower, have breakfast.” As a professional writer, that is what he decided to be the hook for the entire book.
- Writing isn’t the hard part. Sitting down to write is the hard part.
- Resistance: a negative force that exists between the life we live, and the unlived life within us.
- I disagree with the author’s Hitler reference and argument: Hitler found a new source of inspiration instead of his creative pursuits: hatred.

Book One: Resistance—Defining the Enemy

Overview: the author describes the many ways Resistance infiltrates our consciousness.

Favorite Quotes

- “The enemy is a very good teacher.” - The Dalai Lama
- “Resistance is the enemy *within*.”
- “The warrior in the artist live by the same code of necessity, which dictates that the battle must be fought anew every day.”
- “There’s a lot of acting fascinated.” - Jerry Seinfeld on dating
- “What makes it tricky is that we live in a consumer culture that’s acutely aware of our unhappiness and has massed all its profit-seeking artillery to exploit it by selling as a product, drug, a distraction.”
- “The opposite of love isn’t hate. It’s indifference.”
- “Rationalization is Resistance’s spin doctor.”

Notes

- What elicits Resistance? Anything that invites immediate gratification in favor of long-term growth, health, or integrity.
- Resistance is invisible and prevents us from doing our work.
- Resistance is internal: it is not a peripheral opponent, it rises from *within*. It is self-generated and self-perpetuated.

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- Resistance is insidious and implacable. It will never quit.
- We can use Resistance as a compass: **whatever it is pointed at with the most force is likely the thing we absolutely should be doing.**
- Resistance is fueled by fear. It has no strength of its own.
- The danger is greatest when the finish line is in sight. Be wary at the end.
- The resistance will recruit allies. Even your closest friends and family will act strange upon your newfound ambitions. Keep going.
- Symptoms of Resistance:
 - Procrastination
 - Vice: sex, drugs, alcohol, junk food, TV



- Trouble: chronic lateness, desiring attention, acting as such.
 - The urge for trouble must be harnessed and transformed in her work
- Drama
- Self-medication
- Victimhood
 - A victim and act is a form of passive aggression. It seeks to achieve gratification not by doing honest work or a contribution made out of one's experience or insight or love, but by the manipulation of others through silent threat.
- Codependent relationships; disfigured love
- Unhappiness
 - Misery, bored, restless, guilt
 - Self hate, disgust
 - Then: Vice kicks in. Dope, adultery, web surfing.
- **Criticism: usually due to envy of others being their authentic selves**
- Enact an internal revolution to free yourself from the tyranny of consumer culture.
- “We unplug ourselves from the grid by recognizing that we will never cure our restlessness by contributing our disposable income to the bottom line of Bullshit Inc., but only by doing our work.”
- Thoughtful dialogue about fundamentalism: the paradox that the truly free individual is free only to the extent of his own self mastery.
- Unique perspective: self doubt is an indicator of aspiration. Counterfeit innovator is wildly self-confident. The real one is scared to death.
- Resistance and fear: fear is an indicator and tells us what we have to do.
 - The professional tackles the project that will make him stretch. He takes on the assignment that will bear him into uncharted waters, compel him to explore unconscious parts of himself.

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- Resistance and isolation: due to our tribal ancestry, we are fearful of leaving the comfort of the tribe. But here's the trick: we're never alone. As soon as we step outside the campfire glow, our muse lights on our shoulder like a butterfly.
- **In order for a book or any project or enterprise to hold our attention for the length of time it takes to unfold itself, it has to plug into some internal perplexity or passion that is of paramount important to us.**
- Resistance and healing: Pressfield argues that the majority of the "healing" cultures in places like Sante Fe, NM and Ojai and Santa Barbara, CA are all a form of Resistance.
 - What needs healing is our personal lives, not our work.
 - The belief that one needs to complete his healing before he is ready to do his work is false.
 - Resistance knows that the more psychic energy we expend dredging and re-dredging the tired, boring injustices of our personal lives, the less juice we have to do our work.
- Story of the author hitting rock bottom in New York and finally pulling out his Smith-Corona:



- Resistance and "support": author argues workshops are colleges that should hand out PhDs in Resistance. In fact, all support is accepted weakness which makes us less capable to do our work.
 - Story of the friend who had a dream that Bruce Springsteen was driving a bus and asks her to take the wheel, the metaphorical command of her own life.
 - Epic dream! If you have a dream like this, don't share it. Harness it. A gift from your Muse.
- **Resistance is fear.**
- What's tricky is most rationalizations are true - they're valid. But they don't mean anything other than an excuse to not do your work.
 - There will always be an excuse
 - Tolstoy had 13 kids and wrote War and Peace.
- Resistance can be beaten.

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Book Two: Combating Resistance—Turning Pro.

Overview: the author describes various tactics to overcome Resistance.

Favorite Quotes

- “It is one thing to study war and another to live the warrior's life.” - Telamon of Arcadia c. 500 BC
- “I write only when inspiration strikes. Fortunately it strikes every morning at 9 o'clock sharp.”
- “A professional does not take failure (or success) personally.”
- “No matter what, I will never let resistance beat me.”
- “Tomorrow morning the critic will be gone, but the writer will still be there facing the blank page. Nothing matters but that he keep working.”

Notes

- The author introduces the concept of “professional”, in contrast to the amateur. We explore what professional means as an ideal.
- The principle of priority states that 1) you must know the difference between what is urgent and what is important, and 2) you must do what's important first. I imagine this was inspired, or influenced, by Stephen Covey.
- Great analogy for doing your work: the author tells a story about waking up early and going for a hunt, enduring the hardship, embracing persistence, and finally getting a kill.
 - After earning your keep for the day, what you feel and say will not be coming from any disowned or unresolved part of me, any part corrupted by Resistance.
- **In other words, once you do your work for the day you can live the rest of the day free from the tyranny of resistance. You've earned it. At least for today...**
- Pressfield really hammers home the distinction between *professionals* and *amateurs*.
 - Professionals: show up, work all day, get paid, stakes are high and real, receive praise & blame from the real world
 - Amateurs often don't do most if not all of the above. They're too busy being cautious and avoiding failure due to FEAR
- Professionals are patient: they understand that greatness is only achieved through pain and persistence.
- The Professional does not tolerate disorder and eliminates chaos from daily life.
- The sign of an amateur is over glorification of, and preoccupation with, the mystery [of inspiration]”
- The professional respects Resistance. He knows if he caves in today, no matter how plausible of the pretext, he'll be twice as likely to cave in tomorrow.
- Tiger Woods is an example of a consummate professional that knows when to ask for help and seeks teachers to learn from like Butch Harmon

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- **On ego and failure:** thick skin means someone who has seeded their professional consciousness in a place other than their personal ego. It takes tremendous strength of character to do this, because our deepest instincts run counter to it. Evolution has programmed us to feel rejection in our guts. This is how the tribe enforced Obedience via the threat of expulsion.
- Fear of rejection isn't just psychological; it's biological.
- The Bhagavad-Gita tells us that we have a right only to our labor, not to the fruits of our labor.
- An amateur lets the negative opinion of others affect him. He takes external criticism to heart, allowing it to trump his own believe in himself and his work. Resistance loves this.
- A professional recognizes their limitations: get a lawyer, get an accountant.

Book Three—Beyond Resistance: The Higher Realm.

Overview: we explore higher levels of consciousness and the role of the Divine in creativity.

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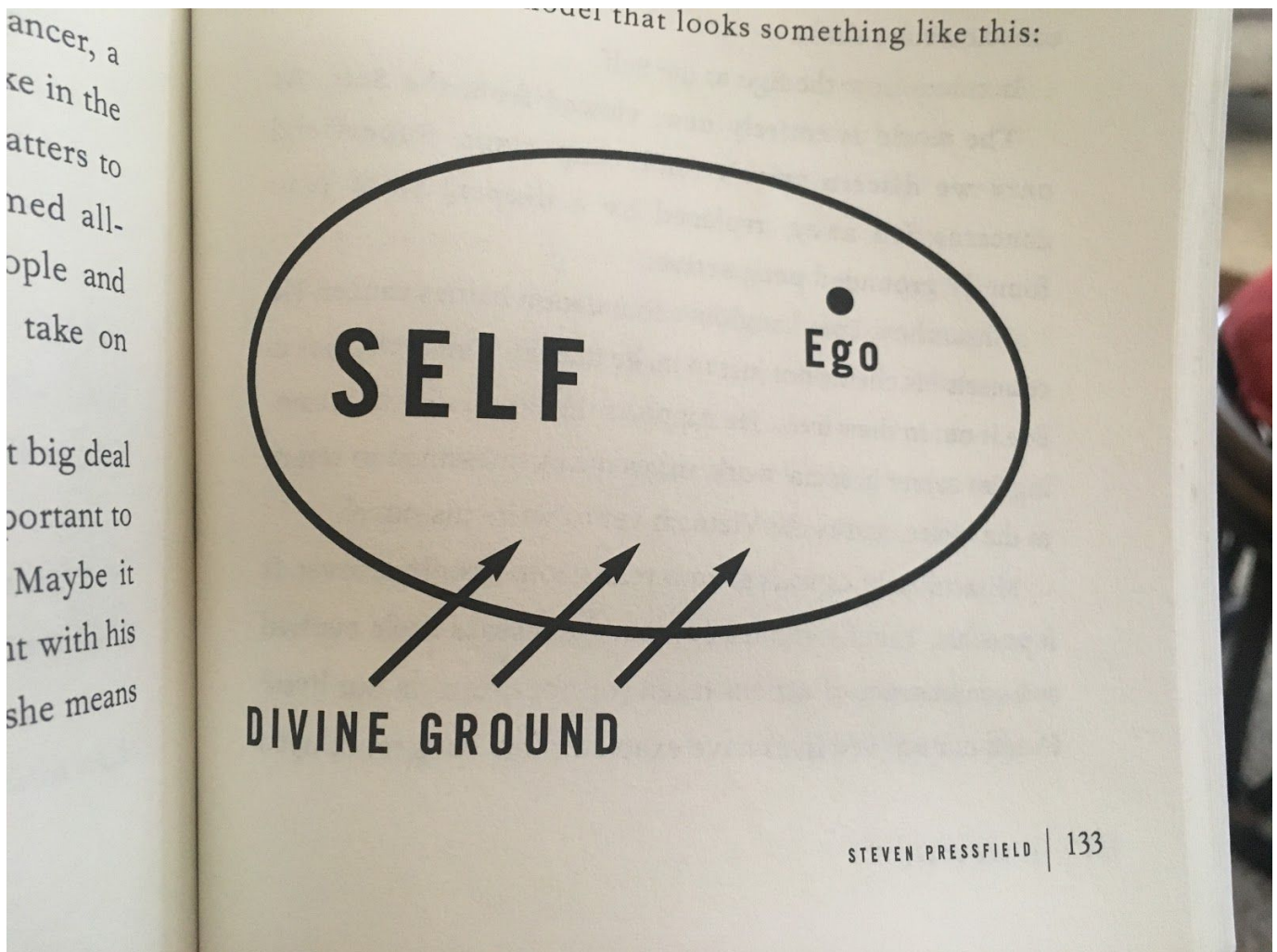
Favorite Quotes

- “Eternity is in love with the creations of time.” - William Blake
- “Nothing else matters except sitting down every days and trying.”
- “Whatever you can do, or dream you can, begin it. Boldness has genius, magic, and power in it. Begin it now.” - Goethe (or WH Murray)
- “We’re all creative.”
- “Forge in the smithy of my soul the uncreated conscience of my race.” - James Joyce
- “To labor in the arts for any reason other than love is prostitution.”
- “In the end the question can only be answered by action: do it or don’t do it.”

Notes

- When we work: unseen forces enlist in our cause; serendipity reinforces our purpose. Ideas come. Insights accrete.
- Look up: the TE Lawrence translation of *Invocation of the Muse* from Homer’s *Odyssey*
- Story of Pressfield retreating to a little house in Northern California as a forcing function to finally finish his book. It took 26 months! No one bought the book. Or the next one. In fact, it’d be another 10 years before someone bought his writing, and later achieved widespread success via *The Legend of Bagger Vance*.
 - But the point is: he slayed the first dragon.
- The Muses can impress upon a person the spirit of an **inspired madman**.
- On Muse: “the timeless communicating with the timebound.”
 - Conduit or Catalyst: genius, soul, or “animating spirit”
- **Takeaway: before you sit down to work, pay your respects to the Muse and hope for their inspiration with humble gratitude**
- Note: Homer does not ask for brilliance or success. He simply asks to “sustain for me” - to keep things going. Persistence.
- “More than make it great, make it live.”
- “Clearly some intelligence is at work, independent of our conscious mind yet in alliance with it, processing our material for us and alongside us.”
- On the dream of Largo, the salty sarge in the aircraft carrier stuck on dry land: “Again, we all have dreams like that. Again, their common as dirt. So is the sunrise. That doesn’t make it any less a miracle.”
- On the dream of becoming an eagle and feeling the firm air’s support: “you’re supposed to learn that things you actually think are nothing, as weightless as air, are actually powerful substantial forces, as real and as solid as earth.”
- Pressfield highlights the tendency for recently-diagnosed terminal patients to question all assumptions and reprioritize what’s important.
 - Jung (more Freud, but let’s go with it): the Ego is a small part of the larger self which includes:
 - Personal unconscious
 - Collective unconscious

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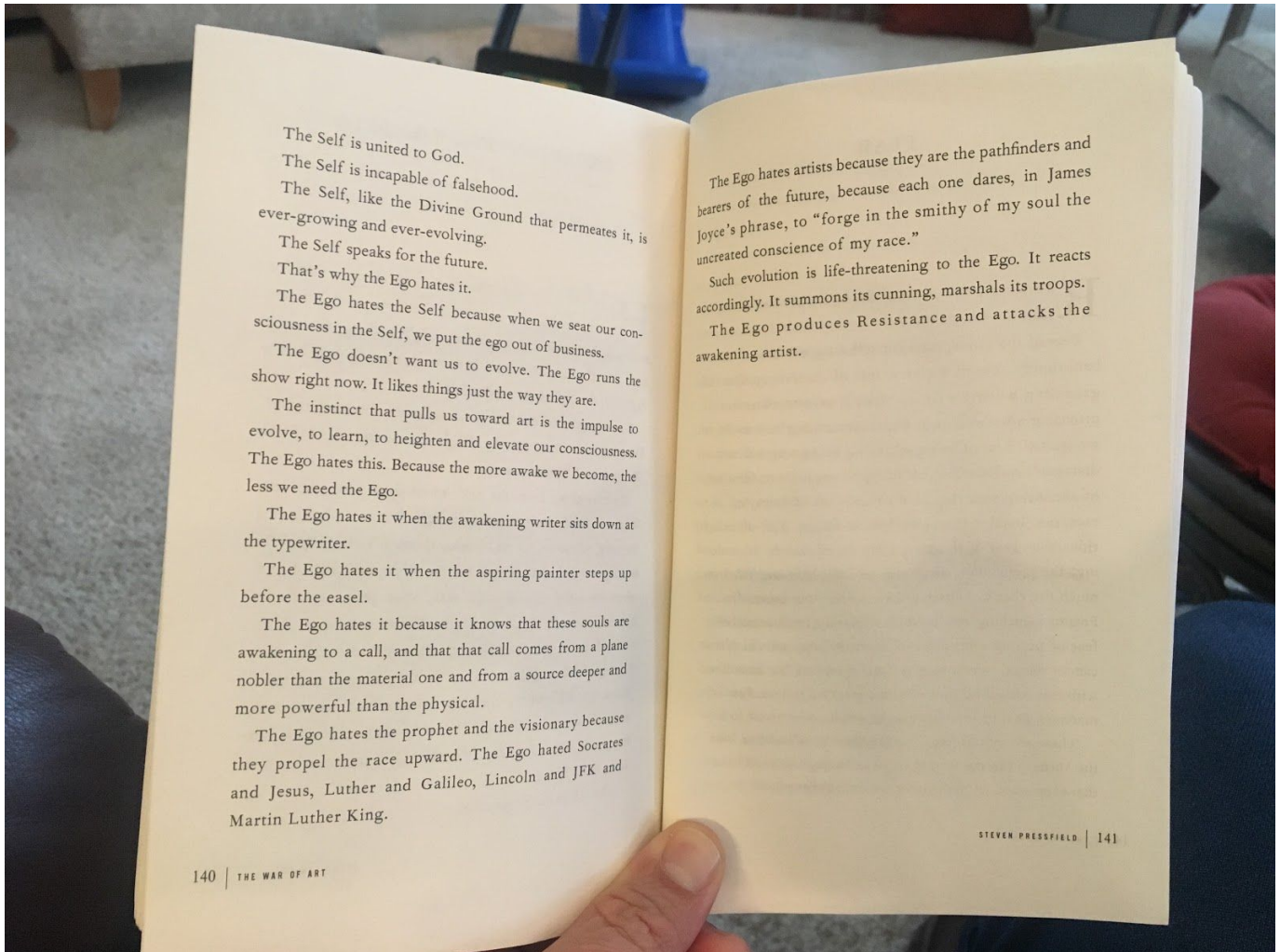
- An actor, Tom Laughlin, actually teaches psychology to terminal patients and counsels them to pursue their dreams.
 - Remarkably, cancer goes into remission. As if we were being punished by *not* leading our authentic lives.
- For me, the conceptual dichotomy of **the ego** vs **the self** is one of the most fascinating ideas offered in this book. It's not just "me". . . It's "me" + "what I'm actually meant to be."

what the ego believes	what the Self believes
death is real	death is an illusion
time and space are real	time and space are illusions
every individual is different and separate from every other	all beings are one
the predominant impulse of life is self-preservation	the supreme emotion is Love
there is no God	God is all there is

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These are the two best pages in the book:



- "The Ego produces Resistance and and attacks the awakening artist."

Arguably the most important chapter in this book. Sidenote: I'm curious if this book inspired 'Ego is the Enemy'.

FEAR

Resistance feeds on fear. We experience Resistance as fear. But fear of what?

Fear of the consequences of following our heart. Fear of bankruptcy, fear of poverty, fear of insolvency. Fear of groveling when we try to make it on our own, and of groveling when we give up and come crawling back to where we started. Fear of being selfish, of being rotten wives or disloyal husbands; fear of failing to support our families, of sacrificing their dreams for ours. Fear of betraying our race, our 'hood, our homies. Fear of failure. Fear of being ridiculous. Fear of throwing away the education, the training, the preparation that those we love have sacrificed so much for, that we ourselves have worked our butts off for. Fear of launching into the void, of hurtling too far out there; fear of passing some point of no return, beyond which we cannot recant, cannot reverse, cannot rescind, but must live with this cocked-up choice for the rest of our lives. Fear of madness. Fear of insanity. Fear of death.

These are serious fears. But they're not the real fear. Not the Master Fear, the Mother of all Fears that's so close to us that even when we verbalize it we don't believe it.

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- The authentic self was a promising chapter that ultimately didn't deliver. Instead of exploring the key concepts of identity and vocation, Pressfield decides to take the "fate" route, arguing that our destiny is decided at birth and "we can't be anything we want to be."
 - Side note: research the etymology of "individual"
- Hierarchy vs Territory
 - This chapter alludes to Dunbar's number and that hierarchical systems don't scale, eg high school works, Manhattan doesn't
 - We subscribe to the hierarchy and flash our badge of status only to find out no one gives a shit.
 - Enter: Mass Society
- Hierarchy is bullshit, and can cause one to "**Act for others, dress for others, speak for others, think for others.**"
- It seems that the authentic self and a lot of his philosophy was influenced by Robert McKee, who also influences his view of a "hack" who writes inauthentically and condescends to the audience
 - A hack panders. A hack writes what's hot. Demagogue.
- If he had listened to what the market wanted, Pressfield would've never written [The Legend of Bagger Vance](#). He trusted what he wanted. He did what he himself thought was interesting, and left it's reception to the gods.
- Pressfield defines **territory** as a cognitive workspace that is fair and provides sustenance.
- "What do I feel growing inside me? Let me bring it forth, if I can't, for its own sake and not for what I can do for me or how I can advance my standing."
- Tests to figure out your orientation?
 - What do you do when you're anxious?
 - Would you still do it if you were the last person on earth?
 - If yes, congrats: you are operating territorially vs hierarchically
- Reference to Spartan king Leonidas who said the supreme warrior virtue was: **contempt for death.**
 - "We must do her work for its own sake, not the fortune or attention or applause."
- Everything comes from infinite intelligence. To acknowledge the reality, to face all ego, to let the work come through us and give it back to relate to its source, that, in my opinion, is as true to reality as it gets."
- **The ending to this book is fucking awesome:**

THE ARTIST'S LIFE

Are you a born writer? Were you put on earth to be a painter, a scientist, an apostle of peace? In the end the question can only be answered by action.

Do it or don't do it.

It may help to think of it this way. If you were meant to cure cancer or write a symphony or crack cold fusion and you don't do it, you not only hurt yourself, even destroy yourself. You hurt your children. You hurt me. You hurt the planet.

You shame the angels who watch over you and you spite the Almighty, who created you and only you with your unique gifts, for the sole purpose of nudging the human race one millimeter farther along its path back to God.

Creative work is not a selfish act or a bid for attention on the part of the actor. It's a gift to the world and every being in it. Don't cheat us of your contribution. Give us what you've got.