

DISCIPLINE IS DESTINY



DISCIPLINE
IS
DESTINY

THE POWER OF SELF-CONTROL



RYAN HOLIDAY

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Two words should be taken to heart and obeyed when exerting ourselves for good and restraining ourselves from evil—words that will ensure a blameless and untroubled life: persist and resist.

EPICETETUS

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The Four Virtues



It was long ago now that Hercules came to the crossroads. At a quiet intersection in the hills of Greece, in the shade of knobby pine trees, the great hero of Greek myth first met his destiny.

Where exactly it was or when, no one knows. We hear of this moment in the stories of Socrates. We can see it captured in the most beautiful art of the Renaissance. We can feel his budding energy, his strapping muscles, and his anguish in the classic Bach cantata. If John Adams had had his way in 1776, Hercules at the crossroads would have been immortalized on the official seal of the newly founded United States.

Because there, before the man's undying fame, before the twelve labors, before he changed the world, Hercules faced a crisis, one as life-changing and real as any of us have ever faced.

Where was he headed? Where was he trying to go? That's the point of the story. Alone, unknown, unsure, Hercules, like so many, did not know.

Where the road diverged lay a beautiful goddess who offered

him every temptation he could imagine. Adorned in finery, she promised him a life of ease. She swore he'd never taste want or unhappiness or fear or pain. Follow her, she said, and his every desire would be fulfilled.

On the other path stood a sterner goddess in a pure white robe. She made a quieter call. She promised no rewards except those that came as a result of hard work. It would be a long journey, she said. There would be sacrifice. There would be scary moments. But it was a journey fit for a god. It would make him the person his ancestors meant him to be.

Was this real? Did it really happen?

If it's only a legend, does it matter?

Yes, because this is a story about us.

About our dilemma. About our own crossroads.

For Hercules, the choice was between vice and virtue, the easy way and the hard way, the well-trod path and the road less traveled. We all face this choice.

Hesitating only for a second, Hercules chose the one that made all the difference.

He chose virtue. "Virtue" can seem old-fashioned. Yet virtue—*arete*—translates to something very simple and very timeless: Excellence. Moral. Physical. Mental.

In the ancient world, virtue was comprised of four key components.

Courage.

Temperance.

Justice.

Wisdom.

The “touchstones of goodness,” the philosopher-king Marcus Aurelius called them. To millions, they’re known as the cardinal virtues, four near-universal ideals adopted by Christianity and most of Western philosophy, but equally valued in Buddhism, Hinduism, and just about every other philosophy you can imagine. They’re called “cardinal,” C. S. Lewis pointed out, not because they come down from church authorities but because they originate from the Latin *cardo*, or hinge.

It’s *pivotal* stuff. It’s the stuff that the door to the good life hangs on.

They are also our topic for this book, and for this series.

Four books.* Four virtues.

One aim: to help you choose . . .

Courage, bravery, fortitude, honor, sacrifice . . .

Temperance, self-control, moderation, composure, balance . . .

Justice, fairness, service, fellowship, goodness, kindness . . .

Wisdom, knowledge, education, truth, self-reflection, peace . . .

These are the key to a life of honor, of glory, of *excellence* in every sense. Character traits that John Steinbeck perfectly described as “pleasant and desirable to [their] owner and makes him perform acts of which he can be proud and with which he can be pleased.” But the *he* must be taken to mean all of humankind.

* This is book 2.

There was no feminine version of the word *virtus* in Rome. Virtue wasn't male or female, it just *was*.

It still is. It doesn't matter if you're a man or a woman. It doesn't matter if you're physically strong or painfully shy, a genius or of average intelligence. Virtue is a universal imperative.

The virtues are interrelated and inseparable, yet each is distinct from the others. Doing the right thing almost always takes courage, just as discipline is impossible without the wisdom to know what is worth choosing. What good is courage if not applied to justice? What good is wisdom if it doesn't make us more modest?

North, south, east, west—the four virtues are a kind of compass (there's a reason that the four points on a compass are called the “cardinal directions”). They guide us. They show us where we are and what is true.

Aristotle described virtue as a kind of craft, something to pursue just as one pursues the mastery of any profession or skill. “We become builders by building and we become harpists by playing the harp,” he wrote. “Similarly, then, we become just by doing just actions, temperate by doing temperate actions, brave by doing brave actions.”

Virtue is something we do.

It's something we choose.

Not once, for Hercules's crossroads was not a singular event. It's a daily challenge, one we face not once but constantly, repeatedly. Will we be selfish or selfless? Brave or afraid? Strong

or weak? Wise or stupid? Will we cultivate a good habit or a bad one? Courage or cowardice? The bliss of ignorance or the challenge of a new idea?

Stay the same . . . or grow?

The easy way or the right way?

Introduction



Would you have a great empire? Rule over yourself.

PUBLILIUS SYRUS

We live in times of plenty and freedom that would have been unfathomable to even our most recent ancestors.

An ordinary person in a developed nation has at their disposal luxuries and opportunities that all-powerful kings were once impotent to acquire. We are warm in the winter, cool in the summer, stuffed full far more often than hungry. We can go where we want. Do what we want. Believe what we want. With the snap of our fingers, pleasures and distractions appear.

Bored where you are? Travel.

Hate your job? Change it.

Crave it? Have it.

Think it? Say it.

Want it? Buy it.

Dream it? Chase it.

Nearly anything you want, whenever you want it, however you'd like it, it's yours.

This is our human right. As it should be.

And yet . . . what do we have to show for all this? Certainly not widespread flourishing. Empowered, unshackled, blessed beyond expectation—why are we so damn unhappy?

Because we mistake liberty for license. Freedom, as Eisenhower famously said, is actually only the “*opportunity for self-discipline.*” Unless we'd rather be adrift, vulnerable, disordered, disconnected, we are responsible for ourselves. Technology, access, success, power, privilege—this is only a blessing when accompanied by the second of the cardinal virtues: self-restraint.

Temperantia.

Moderatio.

Enkrateia.

Sophrosyne.

Majjhimāpaṭipadā.

Zhongyong.

Wasat.

From Aristotle to Heraclitus, St. Thomas Aquinas to the Stoics, from *The Iliad* to the Bible, in Buddhism, in Confucianism, in Islam—the ancients had many words and many symbols for what amounts to a timeless law of the universe: We must keep ourselves in check or risk ruin. Or imbalance. Or dysfunction. Or dependency.

Of course, not everyone's problems are a result of plenty, but *everybody* benefits from self-discipline and self-control. Life is not fair. Gifts are not handed out evenly. And the reality of this inequity is that those of us coming from a disadvantage have to be even more disciplined to have a chance. They have to work harder, they have less room for error. Even those with fewer freedoms still face countless daily choices about which urges to indulge, what actions they'll take, what they'll accept or demand from themselves.



In this sense, we're all in the same boat: The fortunate as well as the unfortunate must figure out how to manage their emotions, abstain from what should be abstained from, choose what standards to observe. We must master ourselves unless we'd prefer to be mastered by someone or something else.

We can say that each of us has a higher and lower self, and that these two selves are in a constant battle with each other. The *can* versus the *should*. What we can get away with, and what's *best*. The side that can focus, and the side that is easily distracted. The side that strives and reaches, the side that stoops and compromises. The side that seeks balance, the side that loves chaos and excess.

The word for this inner battle to the ancients was *akrasia*, but it's really that same Herculean crossroads once again.

What will we choose?

Which side will win?

Who will you be?

THE ULTIMATE FORM OF GREATNESS

In the first book of this series on the cardinal virtues, courage was defined as the willingness to put your ass on the line—for something, for someone, for what you know you need to do. Self-discipline—the virtue of temperance—is even more important, the ability to keep your ass *in line*.

The ability . . .

. . . to work hard

. . . to say no

. . . to practice good habits and set boundaries

. . . to train and to prepare

. . . to ignore temptations and provocations

. . . to keep your emotions in check

. . . to endure painful difficulties.

Self-discipline is giving everything you have . . . and knowing what to hold back. Is there some contradiction in this? No, only *balance*. Some things we resist, some things we pursue; in all things, we proceed with moderation, intentionally, reasonably, without being consumed or carried away.

Temperance is not deprivation but command of oneself physically, mentally, spiritually—demanding the best of oneself, even

when no one is looking, even when allowed less. It takes courage to live this way—not just because it’s hard, but because it sets you apart.

Discipline, then, is both predictive and deterministic. It makes it more likely you’ll be successful and it ensures, success or failure, that whatever happens, *you are great*. The converse is also true: a lack of discipline puts you in danger; it also colors who and what you are.



Let us go back to Eisenhower and his idea that freedom is the opportunity for self-discipline. Does his own life not prove this? He plodded through some thirty years of unglamorous military postings before earning the rank of general and had to watch, stateside, as his colleagues won medals and acclaim on the battlefield. In 1944, when he was appointed Supreme Commander of the Allied Forces in World War II, he suddenly controlled an army of some three million men, the tip of a war effort that ultimately involved more than fifty million people. There, at the head of an alliance of nations totaling upward of seven hundred million citizens, he discovered that far from being exempt from the rules, he had to be stricter with himself than ever. He came to find that the best way to lead was not by force or fiat, but through persuasion, through compromise, through patience, by controlling his temper, and, most of all, by example.

Emerging from the war, he was a victor of victors, having achieved conquest at a level no man-at-arms ever has or hopefully will ever again. Then, as president, overseeing a newfound arsenal of nuclear weapons, he was literally the most powerful human being in the world. There was almost no one or nothing that could tell him what to do, nothing that could stop him, no one who did not look up at him in admiration or away from him in fear. Yet his presidency involved no new wars, no use of those horrible weapons, no escalation of conflict, and he left office with prescient warnings about the machinery that creates war, the so-called military-industrial complex. Indeed, Eisenhower's most notable use of force in office came when he sent the 101st Airborne Division to protect a group of black children on their way to school for the first time.

And where were the scandals? Public enrichment? Broken promises?

There weren't any.

His greatness, like all true greatness, was not rooted in aggression or ego or his appetites or a vast fortune, but in simplicity and restraint—in how he commanded himself, which in turn made him worthy of commanding others. Contrast him with the conquerors of his time: Hitler. Mussolini. Stalin. Contrast him even with his contemporaries: MacArthur. Patton. Montgomery. Contrast him with his peers of the past: Alexander the Great. Xerxes. Napoleon. In the end, what endures, what

we truly marvel at, is not the ambition but the self-mastery. The self-awareness. *The temperance.*

As a young man, Eisenhower's mother had quoted him a verse from the Book of Proverbs, "He that is slow to anger is better than the mighty," she had told him, "and he that ruleth his spirit than he that taketh a city." She taught him the same lesson that Seneca himself tried to instill in the rulers he advised, that "Most powerful is he who has himself in his own power."

And so it goes that Eisenhower quite literally conquered the world by conquering himself first.

Still, there is a part of us that celebrates, perhaps envies, those who let themselves get away with more, who hold themselves to lower standards—the rock stars, the famous, the wicked. It seems easier. It seems like more fun. It might even be the way to get ahead.

Is that right?

No, it is an illusion. Under closer inspection: No one has a harder time than the lazy. No one experiences more pain than the glutton. No success is shorter lived than the reckless or endlessly ambitious. Failing to realize your full potential is a terrible punishment. Greed moves the goalposts, preventing one from ever enjoying what one has. Even if the outside world celebrates them, on the inside there is only misery, self-loathing, and dependence.

With regards to temperance, the ancients were fond of the

metaphor of a charioteer. To win the race, one must not only get their horses to run quickly—but also keep the team under control, calm their nerves and jitters, have such a firm grasp on the reins that they can steer with pinpoint precision in even the most difficult of circumstances. The charioteer must figure out how to balance strictness and kindness, the light and the heavy touch. They have to pace themselves and their animals, and find every ounce of speed when it counts. A driver without control will go fast . . . but they will inevitably crash. Especially around the hairpin turns of the arena and the winding, pockmarked road of life. Especially when the crowd and the competition are rooting for exactly that.

It is through discipline that not only are all things possible, but also that all things are enhanced.

Name someone truly great without self-discipline. Name one calamitous undoing that was not, at least in part, rooted in a lack of self-discipline.

More than talent, life is about temperament. And temperance.

The people we admire most and will explore in this book—Marcus Aurelius, Queen Elizabeth II, Lou Gehrig, Angela Merkel, Martin Luther King Jr., George Washington, Winston Churchill—inspire us with their restraint and dedication. The cautionary tales of history—Napoleon, Alexander the Great, Julius Caesar, King George IV—stun us with their self-inflicted destruction. And because each of us contains multitudes, some-

times we see both excess and restraint in the same person and can learn from both.

Freedom requires discipline.

Discipline gives us freedom.

Freedom and greatness.

Your destiny is there.

Will you grab the reins?

DISCIPLINE IS DESTINY

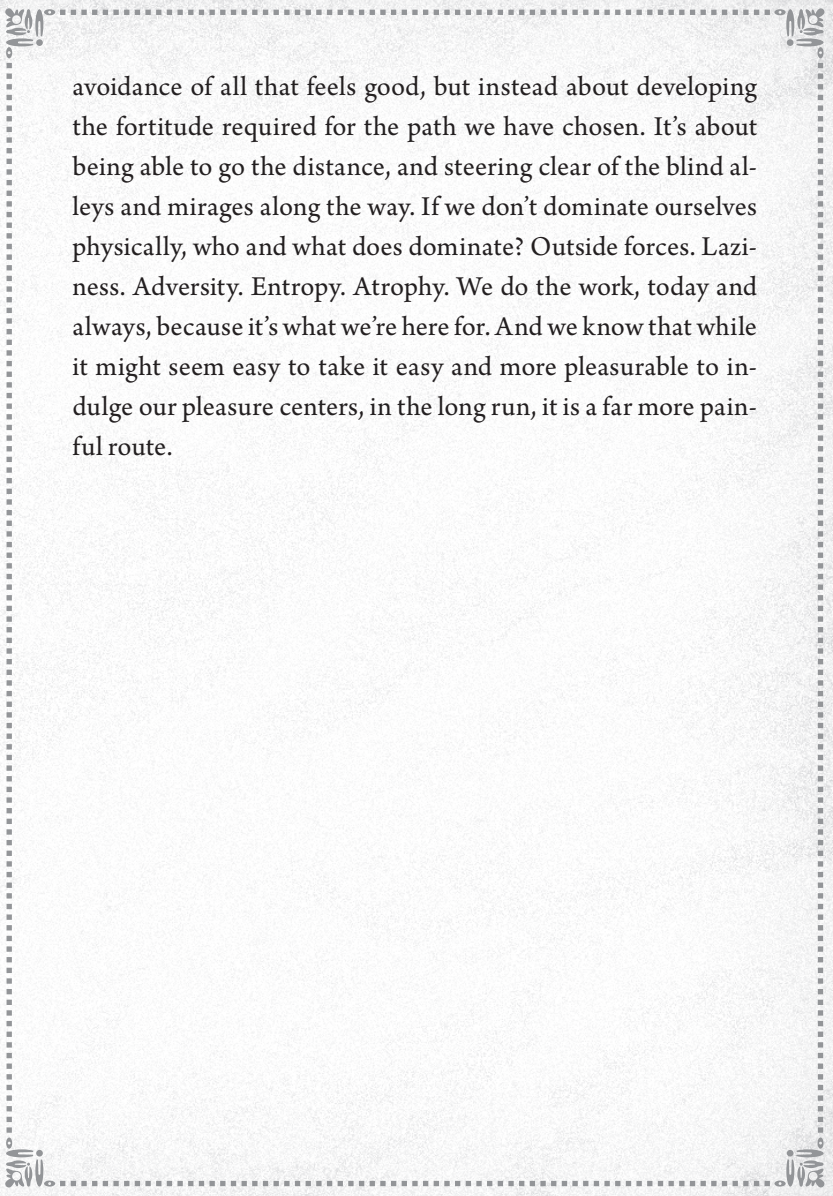
PART I
THE EXTERIOR
(THE BODY)



Our body is our glory, our hazard and our care.

MARTHA GRAHAM

We begin with the self—the physical form. In St Paul’s first letter to the Corinthians, we’re told to keep under the body, and bring it into subjection, so that we will not be made a castaway. The Roman tradition, according to the Stoics, was about “endurance, a frugal diet, and a modest use of other material possessions.” They wore functional clothes and shoes, ate off functional plates, drank moderately out of functional glasses, and committed earnestly to the rituals of ancient life. Do we pity this? Or admire its simplicity and dignity? In a world of abundance, each of us must wrestle with our desires, our urges, as well as the timeless battle to strengthen ourselves for the vicissitudes of life. This is not about six-pack abs or the



avoidance of all that feels good, but instead about developing the fortitude required for the path we have chosen. It's about being able to go the distance, and steering clear of the blind alleys and mirages along the way. If we don't dominate ourselves physically, who and what does dominate? Outside forces. Laziness. Adversity. Entropy. Atrophy. We do the work, today and always, because it's what we're here for. And we know that while it might seem easy to take it easy and more pleasurable to indulge our pleasure centers, in the long run, it is a far more painful route.

Ruling Over the Body . . .



He played through fevers and migraines. He played through crippling back pain; pulled muscles; sprained ankles; and once, the day after being hit in the head by an eighty-mile-per-hour fastball, he suited up and played in Babe Ruth's hat, because the swelling made it impossible to put on his own.

For 2,130 consecutive games, Lou Gehrig played first base for the New York Yankees, a streak of physical stamina that stood for the next five-and-a-half decades. It was a feat of human endurance so long immortalized that it's easy to miss how incredible it actually was. The Major League Baseball regular season in those days was 152 games. Gehrig's Yankees went deep in the postseason, nearly every year, reaching the World Series a remarkable seven times. For seventeen years, Gehrig played from April to October, without rest, at the highest level imaginable. In the off-season, players barnstormed and played in exhibition games, sometimes traveling as far away as Japan to do so. During his time with the Yankees, Gehrig played some 350

doubleheaders and traveled at least two hundred thousand miles across the country, mostly by train and bus.

Yet he never missed a game.

Not because he was never injured or sick, but because he was an Iron Horse of a man who refused to quit, who pushed through pain and physical limits that others would have used as an excuse. At some point, Gehrig's hands were X-rayed, and stunned doctors found at least *seventeen* healed fractures. Over the course of his career, he'd broken nearly every one of his fingers—and it not only hadn't slowed him down, but he'd failed to say a word about it.

In another sense, he's almost unfairly famous for the streak, which overshadows the stats he accumulated along the way. His career batting average was an unbelievable .340, which he topped only when it counted, hitting .361 in his postseason career. (In two different World Series, *he batted over .500.*) He hit 495 home runs, including twenty-three grand slams—a record that stood for more than seven decades. In 1934, he became just the third player ever to win the MLB Triple Crown, leading the league in batting average, home runs, and RBIs (runs batted in). He's sixth all time with 1,995 RBIs, making him, effectively, one of the greatest teammates in the history of the game. He was a two-time MVP, seven-time All-Star, six-time World Series Champion, Hall of Famer, and the first player ever to have his number retired.

While the streak started in earnest in June 1925, when Gehrig replaced Wally Pipp, a Yankees legend, in reality, his Herculean endurance could be seen at an early age. Born to German immigrants in New York in 1903, Gehrig was the only one of four children to survive infancy. He entered the world a whopping fourteen pounds, and his mother's German cooking seems to have plumped him up from there. It was the teasing of school kids that first hardened the determination of the young boy, sending him to his father's *turnverein*, a German gymnastics club where Gehrig began to develop the powerful lower body that later drove in so many runs. Not naturally coordinated, a boyhood friend once joked that Gehrig's body often "behaved as if it were drunk."

He wasn't born an athlete. He made himself one.

Life as a poor immigrant was not easy. Gehrig's father was a drinker, and a bit of a layabout. It's more than ironic to read of his father's chronic excuses and sick days. This example shamed Gehrig, inspiring him to turn dependability and toughness into nonnegotiable assets (in a bit of foreshadowing, he never missed a day of school). Thankfully, his mother not only doted on him, she provided an incredible example of a quiet, indefatigable work ethic as well. She worked as a cook. She worked as a laundress. She worked as a baker. She worked as a cleaning lady, hoping to provide her son a ticket to a better life.

But the poverty, the poverty was always there. "No one who went to school with Lou," a classmate recalled, "can forget the

cold winter days and Lou coming to school wearing [a] khaki shirt, khaki pants and heavy brown shoes, but no overcoat, nor any hat." He was a poor boy, a fate no one would choose, but it did shape him.

There is a story about Cleanthes, the Stoic philosopher, who, as he walked through Athens on a cold day, had his thin cloak blown open by a gust of wind. Observers were stunned to find he had little else on underneath, despite the frigid temperatures. Slowly, they burst into applause at the sheer endurance of it. So it went with Gehrig, who, even as his Yankees salary made him one of the highest-paid athletes in America, was rarely seen in a hat or even a vest in New York winters. Only later, when he married a kind and loving woman, could he be convinced to put on a coat—for her sake.

Most kids like to play sports. Lou Gehrig saw in the game a higher calling. Baseball was a profession that demanded control of, as well as care for, the body—since it was both the obstacle and the vehicle for success.

Gehrig did both.

He worked harder than anyone. "Fitness was almost a religion to him," one teammate would say of him. "I am a slave to baseball," Gehrig said. A willing slave, a slave who loved the job and remained forever grateful at just the opportunity to play.

This kind of dedication pays dividends. When Gehrig stepped up to the plate, he was communing with something divine. He stood, serenely, in a heavy wool uniform that no player today

could perform in. He would sway, trading weight between his feet, settling into his batting stance. When he swung at a pitch, it was his enormous legs that did the work—sending the ball off his bat, deep, deep, out of the ballpark.

Some batters have a sweet spot; Gehrig could hit anywhere, off anyone. And when he did? He *ran*. For a guy who was teased for having “piano legs,” it’s pretty remarkable that Gehrig stole home plate more than a dozen times in his career. He wasn’t all power. He was speed too. Hustle. Finesse.

There were players with more talent, with more personality, with more brilliance; but nobody outworked him, nobody cared more about conditioning, and nobody loved the game more.

When you love the work, you don’t cheat it or the demands it asks of you. You respect even the most trivial aspects of the pursuit—he never threw his bat, or even flipped it. One of the only times he ever got in trouble with management was when they found out he was playing stickball in the streets of his old neighborhood with local kids, sometimes even after Yankees games. He just couldn’t pass up the opportunity to play . . .

Still, there must have been so many days when he wasn’t feeling it. When he wanted to quit. When he doubted himself. When it felt like he could barely move. When he was frustrated and tired of his own high standards. Gehrig was not superhuman—he had the same voice in his head that all of us do. He just cultivated the strength—made a habit—of not lis-

tening to it. Because once you start compromising, well, now *you're* compromised . . .

“I have the will to play,” he said. “Baseball is hard work and the strain is tremendous. Sure, it’s pleasurable, but it’s tough.” You’d think that everyone has that will to play, but of course, that’s not true. Some of us get by on natural talent, hoping never to be tested. Others are dedicated *up to a point*, but they’ll quit if it gets too hard. That was true then, as it is now, even at the elite level. A manager in Gehrig’s time described it as an “age of alibis”—everyone was ready with an excuse. There was always a reason why they couldn’t give their best, didn’t have to hold the line, were showing up to camp less than prepared.

As a rookie, Joe DiMaggio once asked Gehrig who he thought was going to pitch for the opposing team, hoping perhaps, to hear it was someone easy to hit. “Never worry about that, Joe,” Gehrig explained. “Just remember they always save the best for the Yankees.” And by extension, he expected every member of the Yankees to bring their best with them too. That was the deal: To whom much is given, much is expected. The obligation of a champion is to act like a champion . . . while working as hard as somebody with something to prove.

Gehrig wasn’t a drinker. He didn’t chase girls or thrills or drive fast cars. He was no “good-time Charlie,” he’d often say. At the same time, he made it clear, “I’m not a preacher and I’m not a saint.” His biographer, Paul Gallico, who grew up in New

York City only a few years ahead of Gehrig wrote that the man's "clean living did not grow out of a smugness and prudery, a desire for personal sanctification. He had a stubborn, pushing ambition. He wanted something. He chose the most sensible and efficient route to getting it."

One doesn't take care of the body because to abuse it is a sin, but because if we abuse the temple, we insult our chances of success as much as any god. Gehrig was fully ready to admit that his discipline meant he missed out on a few pleasures. He also knew that those who live the fast or the easy life miss something too—they fail to fully realize their own potential. Discipline isn't deprivation . . . it brings rewards.

Still, Gehrig could have easily gone in a different direction. In the midst of an early career slump while playing in the minor leagues, Gehrig went out one night with some teammates and got so drunk that he was still boozed up at first pitch the next day. Somehow, he didn't just manage to play, but he played better than he had in months. He found, miraculously, that the nerves, the overthinking, had disappeared with a few nips from a bottle between innings.

It was a seasoned coach who noticed and sat Gehrig down. He'd seen this before. He knew the short-term benefits of the shortcut. He understood the need for release and for pleasure too. But he explained the long-term costs, and he spelled out the future Gehrig could expect if he didn't develop more sustainable coping mechanisms. That was the end of it, we're told, and

“not because of any prissy notions of righteousness that it was evil or wrong to take a drink but because he had a driving, non-stop ambition to become a great and successful ball player. Anything that interfered with that ambition was poison to him.”

It meant something to him to be a ballplayer, to be a Yankee, to be a first-generation American, to be someone who kids looked up to.

Gehrig, as it happened, continued to live with his parents for his first ten seasons, often taking the subway to the stadium. More than financially comfortable, he later owned a small house in New Rochelle. To Gehrig, money was at best a tool, at worst a temptation. As the Yankees reigned over the game, the team was treated to an upgraded dugout, with padded seats replacing the old Spartan bench. Gehrig was spotted by the team’s manager tearing off a section. “I get tired of sitting on cushions,” he said of the posh life of an athlete in his prime. “Cushions in my car, cushions on the chairs at home—every place I go they have cushions.”

He knew that getting comfortable was the enemy, and that success is an endless series of invitations to get comfortable. It’s easy to be disciplined when you have nothing. What about when you have everything? What about when you’re so talented that you can get away with not giving everything?

The thing about Lou Gehrig is that he *chose* to be in control. This wasn’t discipline enforced from above or by the team. His temperance was an interior force, emanating from deep within

his soul. He chose it, despite the sacrifices, despite the fact that others allowed themselves to forgo such penance and got away with it. Despite the fact that it usually wasn't recognized—not until long after he was gone anyway.

Did you know that immediately after Ruth's legendary "called" home run that Lou Gehrig hit one too? Without any dramatic gestures either. Actually, it was his *second* of the game. Or that they have the same number of league batting titles? Or that Ruth struck out almost twice as many times as Gehrig? Lou not only kept his body in check in a way that Ruth didn't (Ruth ballooned to 240 pounds), but Gehrig checked his ego too. He was, a reporter would write, "unspoiled, without the remotest vestige of ego, vanity or conceit." The team always came first. Before even his own health. Let the headlines go to whomever wanted them.

Could he have done otherwise? Yes, but then again, also no. He could never have tolerated it in himself.

Even his trainer once complained, in jest, "If all ballplayers were like Gehrig, there wouldn't be any job for trainers on ball clubs." Gehrig did his own prep, took care of his own training—just as religiously in the off-season as well—and rarely needed rubdowns or rehab. The only thing he asked of the staff was that a stick of gum be put out for him in his locker before a game, two if they were going into a doubleheader. Gehrig wore his fame lightly, an observer once noted, but took the obligations of it seriously.

But sports is more than just muscle and talent. Nobody plays that many games in a row without being a tough son of a bitch. A bad throw from his third baseman forced Gehrig to grab for the ball in the dirt, where he jammed his thumb into the ground. In the dugout, his teammate thought he'd be in for a cursing out. "I think it's broken," was all Gehrig said. "You didn't hear a peep out of Lou," the teammate recounted in amazement. "Never a word of complaint about my rotten throw and what it did to his thumb." And of course, he was back in the lineup the following day.

"I guess the streak's over," a pitcher joked after knocking Gehrig unconscious with a pitch in June 1934. For five terrible minutes, he lay there, unmoving, dead to the world—death being a real possibility in the era before helmets. He was rushed to the hospital, and most expected he'd be out for two weeks even if the X-ray for a skull fracture came back negative. Again, he was back in the batter's box the next day.

Still, you might have expected a hesitation, a flinch when the next ball came hurtling toward him. That's why pitchers will bean a batter from time to time—because it makes them cautious, the batter's instinct for self-preservation causes them to step back, in a game where a millimeter may make all the difference. Instead, Gehrig leaned in . . . and hit a triple. A few innings later, he hit another. And before the game was rained out, he hit his third . . . while recovering from a nearly fatal blow to the brain. "A thing like that can't stop us Dutchmen," was his only postgame comment.

What propels a person to push themselves this way? Sometimes, it's simply to remind the body who is in charge. "It's just that I had to prove myself right away," he said. "I wanted to make sure that big whack on my head hadn't made me gun-shy at the plate."

Gehrig may not have been after personal sanctification, but the truth was that he achieved it anyway. "There was no finer man that walked the Earth," one of his teammates observed. "He didn't drink, chew or smoke. And he was in bed by nine thirty or ten each night." Perfectly reachable habits, and yet it earned him incredible respect. Why? "When a man can control his life, his physical needs, his lower self," Muhammad Ali would later say, "he elevates himself."

There's an old story about Gehrig's first game with the Yankees, when he started his streak. He was supposedly hit with a ball that day too. "Do you want us to take you out?" the manager asked. "Hell no!" Gehrig was said to have exclaimed. "It's taken me three years to get into this game. It's going to take more than a crack on the head to get me out."

Seventeen years later, something finally did take him out and it was far more serious than a wild pitch. For someone who had so long been used to being in control, it must have been bewildering to Gehrig when his body stopped responding as it always had. Slowly but noticeably, his swing wasn't as fast. He struggled to pull on his mitt. He fell down while putting on a

pair of pants. He dragged his feet when he walked. Yet his sheer will kept him together to a degree that few suspected anything was wrong. For a while, he fooled even himself.

Just a sample of Gehrig's schedule in August 1938: The Yankees played thirty-six games in thirty-five days. Ten games were doubleheaders; in one case, there were five consecutive days of them. He traveled to five cities, covering thousands of miles by train. He hit .329 with nine home runs and thirty-eight RBIs.

For an athlete to do this without missing a game, without missing an inning, in their midthirties, is impressive. But Lou Gehrig did it as the early stages of ALS ravaged his body, slowing his motor skills, weakening his muscles, and cramping his hands and feet.

It would be nearly a full additional season before Gehrig's body fully gave out. The streak had taken on a life of its own. It kept going, Gehrig gutting out hits and runs, despite the occasional but uncharacteristic error on the field.

But a man who knows his body, even as they push and push and push past their limitations, also has to know when to stop.

"Joe," he said to the Yankees manager on an ordinary May day in 1939. "I always said that when I felt I couldn't help the team anymore I would take myself out of the lineup. I guess that time has come."

"When do you want to quit, Lou?" McCarthy replied. *Quit.* That horrible word burned. His manager, still thinking they

were talking about some date in the future, hoped they'd have more time together. But his body was too far gone. "Now," Gehrig replied with certainty. "Put Babe Dahlgren in."

What had changed? After weeks of inconsistent play, Gehrig had fielded a ground ball and made a solid out. It was a play he'd made thousands of times in his career. But his teammates had celebrated like it was one of his Series-winning homers. In that moment, he knew. He was holding them back. He was lying to himself.

It was Churchill who told the young boys at Harrow School to "Never give in, never give in, never, never, never, never—in nothing, great or small, large or petty . . . Never yield to force; never yield to the apparently overwhelming might of the enemy." For all his life, Gehrig had resisted in similar fashion. Poverty hadn't held him back. Nor had injuries or the sheer odds of making it in professional sports. He had resisted temptation, he had refused to give in to complacency or even fatigue. And yet here he was at one of the two exceptions that Churchill would lay out—"never give in except to convictions of honour and good sense"—now, at the end of the road, all Gehrig could do was exit with the same poise and control he had played with.

The streak that began back in the heady days of the Roaring Twenties, soldiered on through the Great Depression, and peaked with the 1938 World Series ended as inauspiciously as it began. Somebody new was getting their shot at first base. It came as a complete surprise to Dahlgren, his replacement. He

was stepping into very big shoes. “Good luck,” was all Gehrig could say.

As the starting lineup was called over the loudspeakers to some twelve thousand people in Detroit, the announcer was just as stunned. For the first time in 2,130 games, Gehrig’s name was not to be called. Still, the announcer couldn’t help himself, “How about a hand for Lou Gehrig, who played 2,130 games in a row before he benched himself today.” The crowd, which included a friend of Gehrig’s in town on business—the one and only Wally Pipp, whom Gehrig had first replaced fourteen years earlier—struggled to register what it meant. Then the crowd broke out in a sustained applause.

Gehrig waved and retreated to the dugout. His teammates watched in silence as the Iron Horse broke down and wept.

You have to do your best while you still have a chance. Life is short. You never know when the game, when your body, will be taken away from you. Don’t waste it!

On July 4, 1939, he entered Yankee stadium for the final time in uniform. Stripped now of the muscles that had long served him, all that was left was the man himself, his courage and his self-mastery. Yet, it was in another sense, the same old battle against his body as it ever was—the battle against fatigue, the battle to push himself. He tried to beg off speaking, but the crowd chanted, “We want Lou! We want Lou!” Struggling to hold himself off, the words he would utter would prove Ali’s point—that when we master the lower self, we elevate ourselves

to a higher plane. “For the past two weeks you have been reading about a bad break,” he said as he tried to keep himself together. “Yet today I consider myself the luckiest man on the face of the earth.”

But eventually this luck would run out, as it does for us all.

“Death came to the erstwhile ‘Iron Man’ at 10:10 o’clock,” the *New York Times* wrote in 1941. “The record book is liberally strewn with his feats at the plate.” Yet it was not what was written about him, in the record books or elsewhere, that truly captured his legacy.

The funeral lasted just eight minutes. Looking out over the man’s friends and teammates, the priest found a flowery eulogy unnecessary. “We need none,” the preacher said of the man, “because you all knew him.” No tribute was needed, his life, his example, spoke for itself.

Like Lou Gehrig, each of us is in a battle with our physical form. First, to master it and bring it to its full potential. Second, as we age or get sick, to arrest its decline—to quite literally wrest the life from it while we can. The body, you must understand, is a metaphor. It’s a training ground, a proving ground for the mind and the soul.

What are you willing to put up with?

What can you do without?

What will you put yourself through?

What can you produce with it?

You say you love what you do. Where's your proof? What kind of streak do you have to show for it?

Most of us don't have millions of fans watching. Or millions of dollars incentivizing us. We don't have a coach or a trainer monitoring daily progress. There is no fighting weight for our profession. This actually makes our jobs, our lives harder—because we have to be our own manager, our own master. We're responsible for our own conditioning. We have to monitor our own intake, decide our own standards.

Good.

The truly dedicated are harder on themselves than any outside person could ever be. *Temperance* is not a particularly sexy word and hardly the most fun concept, but it can lead to greatness.

Temperance, like a tempered sword. Simplicity and modesty. Fortitude and self-control in all things—except our determination and toughness.

We owe it to ourselves, to our goals, to the game, to keep going. To keep pushing. To stay pure. To be tough.

To conquer our bodies before they conquer us.