

# Calm

Few life skills are as neglected, yet as important as the ability to remain calm. Our very worst decisions and interactions are almost invariably the result of a loss of calm – and a descent into anxiety and agitation. Surprisingly, but very fortunately, our power to remain calm can be rehearsed and improved. We don't have to remain where we are now: our responses to everyday challenges can dramatically alter. We can educate ourselves in the art of remaining calm not through slow breathing or special teas but through thinking. This is a book that patiently unpacks the causes of our greatest stresses and gives us a succession of highly persuasive, beautiful and sometimes dryly comic arguments with which to defend ourselves against panic and fury.

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SCHOOL  
OF LIFE**

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## Chapter Three:

# Work

### i: Capitalism

We deserve a great deal of sympathy for the fact that we are living under capitalism. In terms of human experience, it's a new and very complicated way of organising life. Economists define capitalism in quite technical ways: it means competition between firms for access to investment funds; it means demand is highly mobile, with customers switching from one supplier to another in search of a better deal; capitalism involves a strenuous devotion to innovation, with a constant battle to provide the public with newer and better products at lower prices. In this way, capitalism has brought many good things into people's lives. It has created elegant, exciting cars; delicious sandwiches; charming hotels on remote islands; bright, kindly kindergartens. And – more troublingly – some very anxious citizens.

The essential drive of capitalism is to provide more appealing goods at lower prices. While this is attractive for the customer, it is rather hellish for the producer: which of course means pretty much everyone in some major portion of their lives. The more productive an economy, the more conditions of employment will be less secure, less serene and more agitated than one might ideally like.



Capitalism has major psychological consequences. In the middle of the 19th century, Karl Marx summed up this aspect with a famous phrase, declaring that, in capitalism: ‘All that is solid melts into air’. What he had in mind was that previous societies had been, on the whole, much more stable. They might have been poorer, but they were also in crucial ways more liveable. In a small town, the main streets might stay more or less the same for a hundred years; occasionally a wooden-frame house would be replaced with a stone one; a few trees might be cleared, a new barn erected; but from generation to generation the pattern of life would be strongly recognisable. But, during the 19th century, things started to change dramatically. Huge factories would spring up; there would be vast new housing developments; a railway would transform the economy of a town in a few years; jobs that hadn’t existed would quickly emerge as massive areas of employment; new classes of people would become powerful, only to be displaced by others. People began to dream of past tranquillity and they were not merely being nostalgic.

In more contemporary detail, what capitalism means, in terms of day-to-day experience, is that your sense of your worth as a human being, and your basic sense of what your life is about, will – almost inevitably – become interwoven with how you are doing in your career. One is haunted by the thought: if only I were smarter, more hard-working, then I would achieve more, get larger payments and live a more satisfying life. The line of thought is tantalising because the rewards are continually dangled before one’s eyes. The more comfortable airline seat, the beautiful kitchen units, the happy outings with the family, the feeling of being respected by one’s peers. But these good things are only there if you strive and compete successfully. There is no reassuring guarantee that would allow you to truly relax.

The prospect of failure is always in the wings too. And the fall will be all the more painful and bitter because the meritocratic voice of the competitive economy will deliver the harsh message: outcomes are dependent on you; if you fail it’s mainly your own fault. It’s presented as a verdict on your character.

The economic conditions we sum up as capitalism will create agonising tensions between the demands of home life and the requirements of working life. A sudden shift in a crucial deadline will mean you have to work late just when you were hoping for a quiet time with your partner; you will end up being tired and cranky when you’d like to be warm and engaged. And at the same time you will be continually confronted by images of the very things you seek but are unable to accomplish in your own life – of families holding it together very well, of places where you can be relaxed and energetic and a good partner and glamorous all at the same time.

The harried feeling of being overbusy, and subject to too many demands, is not your own fault. It seems a bit odd to say, but our private agonies are tethered to big historical processes. Pains and troubles, which, seen close up, seem to have no explanation other than our own failings, deserve to be given a bigger context. History depersonalises the blame. It’s not you: it’s the stage of history you happen to be living through.

Depersonalising – and its accompanying passing of the responsibility onto the sweep of history – does not make the difficulty disappear. But the new, more accurate interpretation is a relief all the same. A parent who is struggling with a teenager who is becoming distant and critical might be hugely assisted by the concept of healthy separation. Instead of seeing their child’s behaviour as a response simply to their own failings as a parent

(which is the natural response), there's a more accurate and less distressing idea available: they are going through a process that is inherently quite difficult for all involved but that isn't a reflection on the specific failings of any particular individual. It's still a painful process, but it is relieved of its desperate edge. And with less blame circulating, it is possible to try to manage the process with a little more grace.

By contemplating the forces of capitalism and their impact on our private lives, we are zooming out from the intimate experience to the big explanation. And this takes the burden of guilt to some important extent off our own shoulders. The point isn't to say that capitalism is particularly awful. The fact that work under capitalism is at times very demanding and stressful doesn't entail that it's not worth doing or that there's some nicer alternative just round the corner. We accept, for instance, that bringing up children is often stressful and demanding, but don't think that it is therefore not worth undertaking. It's just that we're a bit better at factoring in the scale of the challenge we're facing. Through no error of our own, or indeed of anyone, we are collectively living through the age of competition and insecurity around work. It's not quite our fault if we often feel very stressed indeed.