

On
Confidence

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On Confidence

The School of Life

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Contents

I Introduction	Page 7
II Idiocy and Confidence	Page 13
III Impostor Syndrome	Page 21
IV Trust in the System	Page 31
V History is Now	Page 39
VI Experience	Page 47
VII Death	Page 57
VIII Enemies	Page 65
IX Self-Sabotage	Page 79
X Confidence in Confidence	Page 89

VIII
Enemies

Learning that someone hates us deeply, even though we have done nothing ostensibly to provoke them, can be one of the most alarming situations we face. At a bar after work, we might be told, via a malevolent third party, that two people in the office deem us arrogant and disrespectful and that, for the last few months, they haven't lost a chance to do us down behind our backs. Or we might learn that a friend of a friend, a senior professor, has forceful objections to a paper of ours; they called it 'naive' and 'stuck in the 1970s' and made sarcastic jokes at our expense at a conference. Furthermore, because of technology, we're now aware of a vast new range of potential enemies scattered around the digital universe. We are only ever a few seconds of online searching away from pitiless, personally targeted assessments of all that we are.

For the underconfident among us, enemies are a catastrophe. In our psychological make-up, the approval of the world effectively supports our approval of ourselves. Consequently, when enemies agitate against us, we lose faith not in them (they continue to exert a mesmeric authority over us), but, more alarmingly, in ourselves. We may, when with our friends, casually profess to hate the haters (and curse their names with bravado), but in

private, over the ensuing months, we simply cannot dismiss their judgements, because we have accorded them a status logically prior to our own in our deep minds. Their objections may feel unbearable, like a physical discomfort we cannot correct, but we can't reject them as unwarranted either. In despair, it feels as if we do not know how to carry on, not only because we've been called idiots or egotists, but because, as a result, we must simply be idiots and egotists.

The judgements of others have been given a free pass to enter all the rooms of our minds. There is no one manning the border between them and us: the enemies are freely in us, wandering wildly and destructively through the caverns of our inner selves, ripping items off the shelves and mocking everything we are. In our distress, we may keep harping back to the idea (it brings tears to our eyes) that the situation is profoundly 'unfair': we did nothing especially wrong, our intentions are benevolent and our work is acceptable. Why, therefore, has our name been trampled upon and our reputation trashed? Either because we truly are fools (which is an unendurable truth) or because we're not fools (in which case the hatred is an unendurable error). Whatever is right, we can't just walk away and get on with our lives. We feel compelled to

take some kind of corrective action to scrub away the stain our enemies have applied. In the middle of the night, we contemplate a range of responses: angry, passive-aggressive, self-harming, charming, begging... Our partner might implore us to drop it and return to bed. We cannot: the enemy refuses to leave our heads.

Where does such underconfidence around enemies come from? We should, as ever, begin with parents and sketch an imaginary portrait of types who could unwittingly create such tortured mindsets. However ostensibly loving these parents might have been, they are also likely to have felt a high degree of trust in the system. If the police were investigating one of their friends, their guess would be that the authorities were correct in their suspicions. When reading a newspaper, if they were to read a destructive review of a novel, even one by an author whose work they'd much enjoyed in the past, it would seem evident that the author had lost his talent and was now kidding the public. If the parents were friends with an architect who was up for a major prize that was then awarded to somebody else, they'd feel the friend – whose buildings they admired – must have lacked talent in comparison with the winner, whose dark asymmetrical structures they would vow at once to take a second, more respectful, look at.

When it came to their own children, these underconfidence-generating parents would have applied a similar method of judgement: the issue of how much and where to love would have been to a large extent determined externally. If the world felt the baby was adorable, they probably were (and if not, then not so much). Later, if the child won a maths prize, it was a sign not just of competence at algebra but of being, far more broadly, a love-worthy person. Conversely, if the school report described the child as an easily distracted dreamer who looked as if he would flunk his exams, that might mean the offspring didn't quite deserve to exist. The lovability of the child in the eyes of the parents rose and fell in accordance with the respect, interest and approval of the world.

To be on the receiving end of such parenting is a heavy burden. We, the recipients of conditional love, have no option but to work manically to fulfil the conditions set up by parental and worldly expectations. Success isn't simply a pleasant prize to stumble upon when we enjoy a subject or a task interests us; it is a psychological necessity, something we must secure in order to feel we have the right to be alive. We don't have any memories of success-independent affection and therefore constantly

need to recharge our batteries from the external power source of the world's flickering and wilful interest. Unsurprisingly, when enemies come on the horizon, we are quickly in deep trouble, for we have no ability to hold in our minds the concept that they might be wrong and we right; that our achievements are not our being, and that the failure of our actions does not presuppose failure of our entire selves. Rendered defenceless by our upbringing, we have no border post between inside and out. We are at the mercy of pretty much anyone who might decide to hate us.

Contrast this with the blessed childhood of the confident. Their parents would have maintained a vigorously sceptical relationship to the system. The world might sometimes be right, but then again, on key occasions, it could be gravely and outrageously wrong. Everyone was, in their eyes, endowed with their own capacity to judge. It is not because the crowd is jeering that the accused is guilty, or vice versa. The chief of police, the lead reviewer of *The Times*, or the head of the Pritzker Architecture Prize might well be idiotic; these things happen. In their role as parents, the messages of the confidence-inducing were no less generous in their scepticism: 'You are loved in and of yourself because of what you are, not what you do.'

You aren't always admirable or even likeable, but you are always deserving of affection and charity of interpretation. It doesn't matter to me if you end up the president or the street cleaner. You will always be something more important: my child. If they don't have the wisdom to be kind, fuck them!'. Without necessarily intending this, the parents set up a soothing voice that still plays on a loop in the recesses of the mind, especially at moments of greatest challenge. It is the voice of love.

We cannot go back and change the past that made us. However, by understanding the structure of what we are missing, we may at least strive to integrate emotionally healthier voices into our agitated interiors. The verdict of the system is never totally wrong, but nor is it ever more than occasionally right: police forces get muddled; reviewers redirect their disappointments onto innocent targets; prize committees fall under the sway of fashion. The world doesn't reliably 'know'. We cannot change the presence of an enemy, but we can change what an enemy means to us. These figures can shift from being devoted, impartial agents of truth about one's right to exist to being – more sanely – people who have an opinion, probably only ever a bit right, about something we once did, and never about who we are (that is something we decide).

Panicking about having acquired a few enemies can be a symptom of a dangerous trust in human beings as a whole. Underconfident types work with the assumption that almost everyone they encounter will be sane, measured, intelligent, judicious, and in command of themselves. If, despite these attributes, certain people still write nasty things online or describe us as a nuisance, the attacks simply have to be true. Yet the more psychologically robust are saved from such dispiriting assumptions by a highly useful skill: fierce pessimism. They assume from the start that most people, even grand and supposedly intelligent ones, are riddled with prejudice, beset by low motives, and capable of deliberate cattiness and meanness better suited to a playground of the under-fives. They lie, they slander, they project, they say things to make themselves feel better, they are envious and inadequate, cruel and close to evil. Why should we be surprised and disturbed if a few people happen to be nasty to us, given that nastiness is more or less the fundamental truth of human nature? The benefit of thinking a lot less of everyone can be a calmer attitude towards the specific meanness of a few.

Armed with darker thoughts, the confident know that every decent and interesting person is going to accumulate a string of enemies as they make their way

through life. It would be impossible for it to be otherwise, given human nature. The specific reasons will be varied and somewhat random: some of these enemies will flare up because they have vested interests in a status quo we are challenging; some may be uncomfortably reminded of their own renounced ambitions when they encounter our skills; some may find our achievements humiliating to their sense of self-worth; some are people who might have wanted to be our friends or even our lovers, and then turned sour when this proved impossible. We will constantly be the target of anger, but we don't have to believe ourselves to be its true cause.

In the 17th century, the Dutch developed a tradition of painting ships in violent storms. These works, which hung in private homes and in municipal buildings around the Dutch republic, were not mere decoration. They had an explicitly therapeutic purpose: they delivered a moral to their viewers, who lived in a nation critically dependent on maritime trade, about confidence in seafaring and life more broadly. The sight of a tall sailing ship being tossed to a twenty-degree angle in a rough sea looks like a catastrophe to an inexperienced person. But there are many situations that look and feel much more dangerous than they really are, especially when the



Ludolf Bakhuizen, *Warships in a Heavy Storm*, c. 1695.

crew is prepared and the ship internally sound. Consider Ludolf Bakhuysen's work *Warships in a Heavy Storm*. The scene looks chaotic in the extreme: how could they possibly survive? But the ships were well designed for just such situations. Their hulls had been minutely adapted through long experience to withstand the tempests of the northern oceans. The crews practised again and again the manoeuvres that could keep their vessels safe: they knew how to take down sails at speed and ensure that the wind would not shred the mast. They understood about shifting cargo in the hull, tacking to the left and then abruptly to the right, and pumping out water from the inner chambers. They knew how to remain coolly scientific in responding to the storm's wilful, frantic motions. The picture pays homage to decades of planning and experience. One can imagine the older sailors on the ship saying to a terrified novice, with a laugh, that just last year off the coast of Jutland there was an even bigger storm – and slapping him on the back with paternal playfulness as the youth was sick overboard. Bakhuysen wanted us to feel proud of humanity's resilience in the face of apparently dreadful challenges. His painting enthuses us with the message that we can all cope far better than we think; that what appears immensely threatening may be highly survivable.

What is true of storms in the North Sea may be no less true of enemies at the office. Their aggression can be terrifying, like the giant waves off Den Helder, yet in reality – with deft emotional skill and internal reorganisation – can prove eminently manageable. The storms are not really about us, and we can survive them by refusing to let the verdicts of others become our verdicts on ourselves. We should keep in mind a confident distinction between the hater and the critic, aim to correct our genuine flaws, and otherwise forgive the injured, roaring winds that seek to punish us for pressures that have nothing to do with us. The storms will die down, we will be battered, a few things will be ripped, but eventually we will return to safer shores – as the sun rises over the spires of Alkmaar.