

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 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.

RESISTANCE'S GREATEST HITS

The following is a list, in no particular order, of those activities that most commonly elicit Resistance:

- 1) The pursuit of any calling in writing, painting, music, film, dance, or any creative art, however marginal or unconventional.
- 2) The launching of any entrepreneurial venture or enterprise, for profit or otherwise.
- 3) Any diet or health regimen.
- 4) Any program of spiritual advancement.
- 5) Any activity whose aim is tighter abdominals.
- 6) Any course or program designed to overcome an unwholesome habit or addiction.
- 7) Education of every kind.
- 8) Any act of political, moral, or ethical courage, including the decision to change for the better some unworthy pattern of thought or conduct in ourselves.

9) The undertaking of any enterprise or endeavor whose aim is to help others.

10) Any act that entails commitment of the heart. The decision to get married, to have a child, to weather a rocky patch in a relationship.

11) The taking of any principled stand in the face of adversity.

* In other words, any act that rejects immediate gratification in favor of long-term growth, health, or integrity. Or, expressed another way, any act that derives from our higher nature instead of our lower. Any of these will elicit Resistance.

Now: what are the characteristics of Resistance?

RESISTANCE IS INVISIBLE

Resistance cannot be seen, touched, heard, or smelled. But it can be felt. We experience it as an energy field radiating from a work-in-potential. It's a repelling force. It's negative. Its aim is to shove us away, distract us, prevent us from doing our work.

RESISTANCE IS INTERNAL

Resistance seems to come from outside ourselves. We locate it in spouses, jobs, bosses, kids. "Peripheral opponents," as Pat Riley used to say when he coached the Los Angeles Lakers.

Resistance is not a peripheral opponent. Resistance arises from within. It is self-generated and self-perpetuated. Resistance is the enemy within.

RESISTANCE IS INSIDIOUS

Resistance will tell you anything to keep you from doing your work. It will perjure, fabricate, falsify; seduce, bully, cajole. Resistance is protean. It will assume any form, if that's what it takes to deceive you. It will reason with you like a lawyer or jam a nine-millimeter in your face like a stickup man. Resistance has no conscience. It will pledge anything to get a deal, then double-cross you as soon as your back is turned. If you take Resistance at its word, you deserve everything you get. Resistance is always lying and always full of shit.

RESISTANCE IS IMPLACABLE

Resistance is like the Alien or the Terminator or the shark in *Jaws*. It cannot be reasoned with. It understands nothing but power. It is an engine of destruction, programmed from the factory with one object only: to prevent us from doing our work. Resistance is implacable, intractable, indefatigable. Reduce it to a single cell and that cell will continue to attack.

This is Resistance's nature. It's all it knows.

RESISTANCE IS IMPERSONAL

Resistance is not out to get you personally. It doesn't know who you are and doesn't care. Resistance is a force of nature. It acts objectively.

Though it feels malevolent, Resistance in fact operates with the indifference of rain and transits the heavens by the same laws as the stars. When we marshal our forces to combat Resistance, we must remember this.

RESISTANCE IS INFALLIBLE

Like a magnetized needle floating on a surface of oil, Resistance will unfailingly point to true North—meaning that calling or action it most wants to stop us from doing.

We can use this. We can use it as a compass. We can navigate by Resistance, letting it guide us to that calling or action that we must follow before all others.

Rule of thumb: The more important a call or action is to our soul's evolution, the more Resistance we will feel toward pursuing it.

RESISTANCE IS UNIVERSAL

We're wrong if we think we're the only ones struggling with Resistance. Everyone who has a body experiences Resistance.


RESISTANCE NEVER SLEEPS

Henry Fonda was still throwing up before each stage performance, even when he was seventy-five. In other words, fear doesn't go away. The warrior and the artist live by the same code of necessity, which dictates that the battle must be fought anew every day.

RESISTANCE PLAYS FOR KEEPS

Resistance's goal is not to wound or disable. Resistance aims to kill. Its target is the epicenter of our being: our genius, our soul, the unique and priceless gift we were put on earth to give and that no one else has but us. Resistance means business. When we fight it, we are in a war to the death.

RESISTANCE IS FUELED BY FEAR

 Resistance has no strength of its own. Every ounce of juice it possesses comes from us. We feed it with power by our fear of it.


Master that fear and we conquer Resistance.


RESISTANCE ONLY OPPOSES IN ONE DIRECTION

Resistance obstructs movement only from a lower sphere to a higher. It kicks in when we seek to pursue a calling in the arts, launch an innovative enterprise, or evolve to a higher station morally, ethically, or spiritually.

So if you're in Calcutta working with the Mother Teresa Foundation and you're thinking of bolting to launch a career in telemarketing. . . relax. Resistance will give you a free pass.

RESISTANCE IS MOST POWERFUL AT THE FINISH LINE

 Odysseus almost got home years before his actual homecoming. Ithaca was in sight, close enough that the sailors could see the smoke of their families' fires on shore. Odysseus was so certain he was safe, he actually lay down for a snooze. It was then that his men, believing there was gold in an ox-hide sack among their commander's possessions, snatched this prize and cut it open. The bag contained the adverse Winds, which King Aeolus had bottled up for Odysseus when the wanderer had touched earlier at his blessed isle. The winds burst forth now in one mad blow, driving Odysseus' ships back across every league of ocean they had with such difficulty traversed, making him endure further trials and sufferings before, at last and alone, he reached home for good.

 The danger is greatest when the finish line is in sight. At this point, Resistance knows we're about to beat it. It hits the panic button. It marshals one last assault and slams us with everything it's got.

The professional must be alert for this counterattack. Be wary at the end. Don't open that bag of wind.

RESISTANCE RECRUITS ALLIES

Resistance by definition is self-sabotage. But there's a parallel peril that must also be guarded against: sabotage by others.

When a writer begins to overcome her Resistance—in other words, when she actually starts to write—she may find that those close to her begin acting strange. They may become moody or sullen, they may get sick; they may accuse the awakening writer of “changing,” of “not being the person she was.” The closer these people are to the awakening writer, the more bizarrely they will act and the more emotion they will put behind their actions.

They are trying to sabotage her.

The reason is that they are struggling, consciously or unconsciously, against their own Resistance. The awakening writer's success becomes a reproach to them. If she can beat these demons, why can't they?

Often couples or close friends, even entire families, will enter into tacit compacts whereby each individual pledges (unconsciously) to remain mired in the same slough in which she and all her cronies have become so comfortable. The highest treason a crab can commit

is to make a leap for the rim of the bucket.

△ The awakening artist must be ruthless, not only with herself but with others. Once you make your break, you can't turn around for your buddy who catches his trouser leg on the barbed wire. The best thing you can do for that friend (and he'd tell you this himself, if he really is your friend) is to get over the wall and keep motating.

* The best and only thing that one artist can do for another is to serve as an example and an inspiration.

Now, let's consider the next aspect of Resistance: symptoms.

RESISTANCE AND PROCRASTINATION

Procrastination is the most common manifestation of Resistance because it's the easiest to rationalize. We don't tell ourselves, "I'm never going to write my symphony." Instead we say, "I am going to write my symphony; I'm just going to start tomorrow."

RESISTANCE AND PROCRASTINATION, PART TWO

The most pernicious aspect of procrastination is that it can become a habit. We don't just put off our lives today; we put them off till our deathbed.

Never forget: This very moment, we can change our lives. There never was a moment, and never will be, when we are without the power to alter our destiny. This second, we can turn the tables on Resistance.

This second, we can sit down and do our work.

RESISTANCE AND TROUBLE

W e get ourselves in trouble because it's a cheap way to get attention. Trouble is a faux form of fame. It's easier to get busted in the bedroom with the faculty chairman's wife than it is to finish that dissertation on the metaphysics of motley in the novellas of Joseph Conrad.

Ill health is a form of trouble, as are alcoholism and drug addiction, proneness to accidents, all neurosis including compulsive screwing-up, and such seemingly benign foibles as jealousy, chronic lateness, and the blasting of rap music at 110 dB from your smoked-glass '95 Supra. Anything that draws attention to ourselves through pain-free or artificial means is a manifestation of Resistance.

Cruelty to others is a form of Resistance, as is the willing endurance of cruelty from others.

The working artist will not tolerate trouble in her life because she knows trouble prevents her from doing her work. The working artist banishes from her world all sources of trouble. She harnesses the urge for trouble and transforms it in her work.

RESISTANCE AND SELF-DRAMATIZATION

Creating soap opera in our lives is a symptom of Resistance. Why put in years of work designing a new software interface when you can get just as much attention by bringing home a boyfriend with a prison record?

Sometimes entire families participate unconsciously in a culture of self-dramatization. The kids fuel the tanks, the grown-ups arm the phasers, the whole starship lurches from one spine-tingling episode to another. And the crew knows how to keep it going. If the level of drama drops below a certain threshold, someone jumps in to amp it up. Dad gets drunk, Mom gets sick, Janie shows up for church with an Oakland Raiders tattoo. It's more fun than a movie. And it works: Nobody gets a damn thing done.

Sometimes I think of Resistance as a sort of evil twin to Santa Claus, who makes his rounds house-to-house, making sure that everything's taken care of. When he comes to a house that's hooked on self-dramatization, his ruddy cheeks glow and he giddy-ups away behind his eight tiny reindeer. He knows there'll be no work done in that house.

RESISTANCE AND SELF-MEDICATION

Do you regularly ingest any substance, controlled or otherwise, whose aim is the alleviation of depression, anxiety, etc.? I offer the following experience:

I once worked as a writer for a big New York ad agency. Our boss used to tell us: Invent a disease. Come up with the disease, he said, and we can sell the cure.

Attention Deficit Disorder, Seasonal Affect Disorder, Social Anxiety Disorder. These aren't diseases, they're marketing ploys. Doctors didn't discover them, copywriters did. Marketing departments did. Drug companies did.

Depression and anxiety may be real. But they can also be Resistance.

When we drug ourselves to blot out our soul's call, we are being good Americans and exemplary consumers. We're doing exactly what TV commercials and pop materialist culture have been brainwashing us to do from birth. Instead of applying self-knowledge, self-discipline, delayed gratification, and hard work, we simply consume a product.

Many pedestrians have been maimed or killed at the intersection of Resistance and Commerce.

RESISTANCE AND VICTIMHOOD

Doctors estimate that seventy to eighty percent of their business is non-health-related. People aren't sick, they're self-dramatizing. Sometimes the hardest part of a medical job is keeping a straight face. As Jerry Seinfeld observed of his twenty years of dating: "That's a lot of acting fascinated."

The acquisition of a condition lends significance to one's existence. An illness, a cross to bear. . . Some people go from condition to condition; they cure one, and another pops up to take its place. The condition becomes a work of art in itself, a shadow version of the real creative act the victim is avoiding by expending so much care cultivating his condition.

A victim act is a form of passive aggression. It seeks to achieve gratification not by honest work or a contribution made out of one's experience or insight or love, but by the manipulation of others through silent (and not-so-silent) threat. The victim compels others to come to his rescue or to behave as he wishes by holding them hostage to the prospect of his own further illness/meltdown/mental dissolution, or simply by threatening to make their lives so miserable that they do what he wants.

Casting yourself as a victim is the antithesis of doing your work. Don't do it. If you're doing it, stop.

RESISTANCE AND UNHAPPINESS

What does Resistance feel like?

First, unhappiness. We feel like hell. A low-grade misery pervades everything. We're bored, we're restless. We can't get no satisfaction. There's guilt but we can't put our finger on the source. We want to go back to bed; we want to get up and party. We feel unloved and unlovable. We're disgusted. We hate our lives. We hate ourselves.

Unalleviated, Resistance mounts to a pitch that becomes unendurable. At this point vices kick in. Dope, adultery, web surfing.


Beyond that, Resistance becomes clinical. Depression, aggression, dysfunction. Then actual crime and physical self-destruction.

Sounds like life, I know. It isn't. It's Resistance.

What makes it tricky is that we live in a consumer culture that's acutely aware of this unhappiness and has massed all its profit-seeking artillery to exploit it. By selling us a product, a drug, a distraction. John Lennon once wrote:

Well, you think you're so clever
and classless and free
But you're all fucking peasants
As far as I can see

As artists and professionals it is our obligation to enact our own internal revolution, a private insurrection inside our own skulls. In this uprising we free ourselves from the tyranny of consumer culture. We overthrow the programming of advertising, movies, video games, magazines, TV, and MTV by which we have been hypnotized from the cradle. 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.



RESISTANCE AND CRITICISM

If you find yourself criticizing other people, you're probably doing it out of Resistance. When we see others beginning to live their authentic selves, it drives us crazy if we have not lived out our own.

Individuals who are realized in their own lives almost never criticize others. If they speak at all, it is to offer encouragement. Watch yourself. Of all the manifestations of Resistance, most only harm ourselves. Criticism and cruelty harm others as well.

RESISTANCE AND SELF-DOUBT

Self-doubt can be an ally. This is because it serves as an indicator of aspiration. It reflects love, love of something we dream of doing, and desire, desire to do it. If you find yourself asking yourself (and your friends), "Am I really a writer? Am I really an artist?" chances are you are.

The counterfeit innovator is wildly self-confident. The real one is scared to death.



RESISTANCE AND FEAR

Are you paralyzed with fear? That's a good sign.

Fear is good. Like self-doubt, fear is an indicator. Fear tells us what we have to do.

Remember our rule of thumb: The more scared we are of a work or calling, the more sure we can be that we have to do it.

Resistance is experienced as fear; the degree of fear equates to the strength of Resistance. Therefore the more fear we feel about a specific enterprise, the more certain we can be that that enterprise is important to us and to the growth of our soul. That's why we feel so much Resistance. If it meant nothing to us, there'd be no Resistance.

Have you ever watched *Inside the Actors Studio*? The host, James Lipton, invariably asks his guests, "What factors make you decide to take a particular role?" The actor always answers: "Because I'm afraid of it."

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.

Is he scared? Hell, yes. He's petrified.

(Conversely, the professional turns down roles that he's done before. He's not afraid of them anymore. Why waste his time?)

So if you're paralyzed with fear, it's a good sign. It shows you what you have to do.