



Piero Ferrucci. **Your Inner Will**. New York: Tarcher, 2014.

EXCERPTS

Each of us is faced with a basic dilemma: Are the events of my life the result of forces over which I have no say, or can I in some way mold my existence? If I can see that my life is not governed by factors extraneous to me, but is, at least in part, decided in my

inner world, I will find a surprising new strength. And I will realize that this strength originates in a faculty that is too often forgotten—a central function, often confused with thinking or impulse or emotion, but having its own distinct existence. This function is the will.

Let us see how this is so. The will chooses between right and wrong—thus is born responsibility. The will allows us to risk and to renew ourselves; to hold a thought through time, and realize a project. The will enables us to face difficulties and hardships without giving up straightaway. It gives us discipline. It makes our relationships with others truer and stronger. And it leads us toward freedom.

But if we delve into this subject long enough, we meet a paradox: The will is invisible, and for this reason we have been arguing for centuries. Is it real or not? It is at the source of our efficacy and our every decision. It constitutes our identity. Yet we do not know if it exists! And, depending on our conclusions, we read the world around us in completely different ways.

If we believe the will is an illusory idea, then everything obeys a script already written: how we behave in each situation, how we live our life. The delinquent who has just snatched a bag has a faulty brain; the student with poor results has no future; how and when we get sick has nothing to do with us; the thoughts that run through our head are just electrochemical processes for which we are not responsible. In short, we are made this way, and that is the

end of the story.

If we believe instead in free will, we have, to be sure, many limitations, but ultimately our life is in our own hands; the thief can decide not to steal; the student can learn to use the skills he has; our health will be, to a fair extent, the result of our choices; the thoughts in our head we can manage ourselves; our harmful dependencies and habits are perhaps not as inevitable as they seem. And if we are “made that way,” we can decide to change.

Not to acknowledge the will impoverishes and weakens us. To discover and cultivate it can offer huge advantages and produce great personal and social changes—with one caveat: The will is not a given. We do not start out strong and free. Countless factors condition us: our genetic makeup, our life circumstances, our history, other forces unknown to us, our own brain. The will is a conquest.



The will is for everybody. At certain times life may seem unfriendly to us. We may feel it has awarded others, and not us, with the most desirable gifts: health and wealth, talent and privilege; maybe contacts in high places. Mostly there is nothing we can do: what is, is, and what is not, is not. Yet one element surely depends on us, and it is the will. Even if we do not have it, we can generate it. We can learn to use it to our own and other people’s advantage, turn it into an effective and creative tool. What others seem to have

received for nothing, we can gain for ourselves bit by bit—then we shall feel it truly ours: not a lucky gift, but our very own victory. Nothing can be more democratic. With the will, we give shape to our lives.

It makes sense to speak of the dangers as well. The idea of the will is often associated with clumsy effort, pedantic discipline, or bullying. Even with feelings of omnipotence. But those are caricatures. True, this is a risky business: like all effective tools, inner strength might be applied in vile ways or for foul purposes. Anything worthwhile carries dangers. Recovering one's strength, however, is worth a try. In fact, it may be an impelling necessity for many. We need not remain passive, fearful, and confused. We need not be fragile. Inner strength simply means developing the resources needed for facing the hurdles and traps we are confronted with every day. From my forty years' experience as a psychotherapist, from a great amount of research-based knowledge in the fields of psychology and neuroscience, as well as from the inspiration offered by the myths and stories of diverse civilizations, I feel ready to say that this urgent task is workable for everyone.



We all have physical autonomy, except newborn babies, some of the elderly, and the disabled. But not all of us have emotional autonomy. Many people depend on other people's approval. They need others to lead them, help them, and hold their hand. They

cannot be alone. Or perhaps they are dependent on a substance, gambling, the Internet, or alcohol; or they are compulsive shoppers. Just think of those who feel uneasy if their smartphone is turned off, or cannot leave the house without taking a drug, or need a drink to function in society, or must check their e-mails several times a day: people like us, maybe even ourselves, because we all have our weak points. Dependence is part of the human predicament.

Sometimes we say that a car has good autonomy. It means the gas tank is big and guarantees that the car can travel many miles. So it is with each of us. Our tank holds experiences, knowledge, resources, talents—and self-esteem. How big is it? Autonomy may be very limited—our mileage is low. It may seem to us that we cannot achieve much by ourselves; we think someone else ought to fill us up—imbue us with confidence, point the way, protect us, lead and advise us, even tell us how to think and which color tie to wear or what food to eat—as though we ourselves did not know.

Those who are instead more autonomous feel more at ease. They are able to think for themselves. They find within a *raison d'être*, so they are in touch with their own values and motivations. They do not need to consult an expert to know what they like or do not like. They do not pick up ideas as they come, but forge them with their thought. Often they appreciate solitude, because the time when they are alone is when they get their best insights.

All this is particularly true these days, in our extroverted society,

which is vastly built on dependence. True, many people are recharged by others and get their best insights in collaboration and in the company of others. However, more than ever we neglect our need for silence and solitude—the best conditions for allowing original ideas to flower and for building inner strength. Go to a shopping mall and you will see crowds of people wandering in a sub-hypnotic state, looking for this or that stimulus: gadgets, clothing, food, music, films, anything at all to take them out of themselves. A harmless pastime, if it is counter-balanced by travel in inner space. We could almost say that the shopping mall is the materialized unconscious, a surreal world in which we roam around, ever distracted from ourselves, so near and yet so far from that sphere, which is really ever so close: our inner universe.



Depth is a quality that is hard to define or quantify. In it there is a healthy dose of persistence and passion and the capacity for not giving up when the going gets rough. It involves every aspect of our existence: work, relationships, intellectual and spiritual life. To have a unifying center in our life has a beneficial effect, because it organizes all the components of our psyche, which would otherwise be dissipated chaotically. As when a magnet, placed over iron filings, creates orderly patterns, so does a unifying center give cohesion and strength to our personality. In a disorderly and distracted psyche, pathology can much more easily put down roots.

Often the most effective remedy for depression, anxiety, obsessions, and phobias, is not reached through elaborate techniques, but in pursuing a strong interest that can act as unifying theme. Depth heals us and regenerates us. Superficiality, scatteredness, and emptiness, instead, open the doors to pathology. In working with my psychotherapy clients, I have ascertained time and again that to immerse ourselves in a new project—doing volunteer work, learning to play a musical instrument, starting a commercial activity, a new relationship, even simply reading a book—can have far more beneficial effects than some specific medicine or technique.

The secret is just that: instead of skimming the surface, we dig deep. When we find stones, we do not stop there. Continuing to dig, we will discover the vein of gold.



Resilience is often seen as an example of adaptation: like the metal that returns to its former shape after being struck, the injured human being adapts to new circumstances and returns after the trauma to his or her former self. Here we can feel hovering a framework that has powerfully and consistently steered our thought, particularly during last century: the concept of homeostasis, the idea that our whole being is bent on the conservation of the preexisting state— with the corollary that our

greatest aspiration is to regain and preserve equilibrium. This is evident at the physical level, where the various systems tend to oscillate in a range of minimum variations, in order to maintain the balance that supports life. The fasting blood glucose, for instance, should oscillate between 70 and 130 mg/liter. The homeostatic model has been applied to all our elementary needs. I am hungry, I eat. I am cold, I cover myself. I am sleepy, I sleep. And so forth. Obviously this is true at the physical level. But it is questionable whether the same criterion can be applied to all human predicaments—including our most passionate dreams, our bravest endeavors, our most thrilling encounters and projects. This could be the tyranny of reductionism. In this perspective our supreme happiness would be a regular and predictable existence. But is that really so? In truth, our life is an adventure: We want what we do not have, we endeavor to understand what we do not know, we seek sensations we have never felt before. We want to love more, and be creative. It is the new that interests us.

The homeostatic view of human existence is misleading, because it cancels any narrative. In fact, it regards each human act as an attempt to return to a condition of perennial, nondescript tranquillity. Our life would then be a series of deficits, followed by the attempts to eliminate those deficits. And that would be all.

Actually, we are what we are as a result of our ups and downs, our defeats, our various hurdles, even our illnesses. A series of events have molded us, have helped us understand and grow— they are

not just stimuli that have disturbed a preexisting balance.

Seen this way, resilience is not merely adaptation. It is the way of strength. And resilient people who survive a misfortune do not remain the same. After the trauma, they do not only resume strength and return to their original way of functioning. They have grown stronger. They have a richer notion of their own powers. They have developed new faculties. They have seen a different dimension of life—and they are wiser. This is a whole lot more than mere adaptation.