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Inside The War Room

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Table of Contents

Preface.....7

Introduction.....13

The Battle of Asking or
Becoming our Most Resourceful Self19

The Battle of Giving or
Staying Independent49

The Battle of Taking or
Connecting to Our Values.....73

The Battle of Sharing or
Cultivating Resilience to Challenges.....97

The Battle of Receiving or
Setting Meaningful Goals.....121

The Battle of Refusing or
Making Better Choices.....139

The Battle of Imagining or
Tapping Into our Inner Resources.....157

Notes.....171

Preface

They say love is a battlefield. I think all human relations are a battlefield. And that, to be honest, means that life is a battlefield.

As a student of political science and geopolitics and, more recently, as a strategy consultant for the German Ministry of Defence, reading the works of military theorist Carl von Clausewitz is one of my favourite pastimes. Strategy excites me like nothing else about my work, and war and human relations are two equally intriguing arenas to employ strategy in. I like Clausewitz's take on the military and war a great deal because he has a unique way to factor in the *psychology* of actors and the peculiarities of politics. A theory of his that I find particularly interesting is 'the trinity'¹. This concept explores how different forces, three to be exact, drive the trajectory of a battle. Clausewitz advises military actors to view their battles through the prism of his proposed trinity and to devise their strategies with the purpose of balancing its three forces.

I don't want to bore anyone with war theory, but Clausewitz's thoughts really resonate with me, and I find that his trinity is incredibly applicable to my understanding of interpersonal relations. So let me just give you a quick introduction.

The trinity consists of the following three realms: first, the blind force of passion or the inherent (psychological) dispositions of the parties that partake in a battle. Second, there is the way that creative genius and skill interact with chance and probability to execute a chosen strategy. Third, the larger (political) context and reason that dominates even the most perfected skills and the wittiest of strategies. In the original application of ‘the trinity’, that is in war, the first realm concerns the people. The second realm concerns the commander and his army, and the third realm concerns the government. In my application of the theory, for interpersonal relationships, the trinity concerns the different influences on our actions that are manifested in each of us and that affect our thoughts and decision making. The three realms are deeply rooted in all of us but can vary in their relationship with one another. We can look at all of them distinctly, but together, they make up each of our individual characteristic wholeness. Every decision we make may have a dominant influence from one of the realms – inherent passions and values, skill and chance or reason and context – but they will never be completely separate from the other elements in the other realms. For example, we can make decisions that are based solely on our skillset, and the odds may be in our favour so that the use of our skills makes us successful

in completing a task. But our decision to make use of our skills will undeniably include considerations from past experiences, our values, our understanding of the context we find ourselves in and so forth.

In that way, the three realms can be thought of as our *why*, our *how* and our *what* in decision making. Getting to know ourselves at the deepest level and understanding the three realms for our individual case allows us to predict, understand, respect, appreciate and cherish ourselves and our actions.

Of course, the expression of our three realms interacts with and affects other actors' expression of their expressions of their realms. Our actions permeate each other's environments and contexts, making human interaction incredibly complex and complicated. The more we aim to align our realms with those of other people, the more complex and complicated it becomes and the more energy it takes for this combination of two or more peoples' realms to first occur and then be successful. It can be pretty easy to share a worldview with someone else and make circumstantial decisions together based on this worldview. But it requires a lot more effort to share a worldview, have the same understanding of what actions are

‘the right’ ones based on this worldview and also share our inherent values that inform this understanding with another person.

Passions. People. Context.

Values. Experiences. Skills. Circumstance.

So many things come together as we try to navigate our day-to-day battles of human interaction – our day-to-day battles of life. Looking at this subject, we’ll go on to talk about innate preferences, inherent behaviours and habits, mental models, becoming aware of them through introspection, consciously acting on them or against them by taking responsibility and constantly outgrowing ourselves and replenishing our personal resources by committing to and respecting ourselves.

This book is a collection of reflections on interpersonal effectiveness that I put together as the story of my ‘becoming’. It’s at once a memoir, a meditation and a treatise. It’s an exploration of my progress and growth, and I want to share the way in which I built a mental culture around self-awareness, a sense of agency, self-regulation, self-motivation and social awareness, at the core of which lies a profound sense of belonging and serving something larger than the self. This exploration takes place through my take on seven actions – or battles – that

I view as paramount in human interaction: asking, giving, taking, sharing, receiving, refusing and imagining.

In the battle of asking, we'll discuss forming a relationship with ourselves and looking for our own self-worth and identity in ourselves to unlock our inner resources. We'll talk about respecting ourselves, knowing ourselves deeply and accepting those deepest parts of our self before being able to enter into relationships that are sustainable. We'll then go on to discussing expectations and investments in relationships in the battle of giving. I'll lead into the idea of what and how much we should give, dealing with deficiencies in our relationships and knowing what to give, when to give it - and when we can't or shouldn't give. In the battle of taking we'll discuss basic human needs, individual priorities and how to deal with conflicts that arise based on them. We'll talk about values that are attached to our needs and decipher the mental code that drives each of our behaviour. In the battle of sharing, we'll go on to explore the positive effects of opening up to other people and resonating with their reactions to us. We'll discuss how being open to challenge will strengthen our resilience and emotional groundedness and how we should all develop the courage to share ourselves with others to question potentially harmful mindsets we hold on to and flourish optimally. In the battle of

receiving, I'll lead into the concept of attachment styles. We'll discuss how our upbringing and early parental care influence our relationships, motivation and goal setting later in life. By understanding how we're wired based on this, we'll discuss setting meaningful goals and being driven to realise our ambitions by finding the reasons why we commit to things. Going from setting meaningful goals to making better, more meaningful choices, we'll discuss healthy boundaries and the benefits of rejection in the battle of refusing. In the final chapter, the battle of imagining, we'll discuss tapping into our inner resources and cashing in on the edifice built by conquering the previous six battles. We'll talk about using the imagination to open up new possibilities and harness our full potential.

So you are now welcomed into my personal war room, my metaphorical place of tactical and operational art, where I strategise and process and analyse and retreat from the everyday battles of the interpersonal.

Introduction

Around this time last year, my boyfriend of one and a half years broke up with me. The reasons for his decision had nothing to do with me or our love, really. It was more something along the lines of him needing to find his way back to himself and sorting his life out before he could properly commit to someone in a long-term relationship. One and a half years aren't that long in the grand scheme, but that breakup really through me for a loop. We had been through quite some messed up stuff together.

When we met, he was not in a good place career-wise and, hence, financially. This resulted in many dependencies and relationships that weighed on him and caused him to feel an overall fatigue or desperation about how the labour market treated him, about how the educational system didn't easily grant him access to better opportunities and how the political system of his home country caused a lot of damage to him and his life. The work he found to finance at least the basic practicalities of life was characterised by, in my opinion, inhumane working hours and hard physical labour. As a result, his social life was not exactly flourishing. Overall, he had had it tough and was

lonely over the years. Imagine all the baggage he brought into our relationship.

Two weeks into our being together, something life-changing happened to him, and it was heavy, both on him and on our relationship. Our little romantic bud was fragile at that point; I didn't know whether it would ever come to blossom – the odds were that we'd spend a few weeks together and then realise this whole thing could never work out.

Spoiler alert: things turned out very differently. Our feelings for one another became very deep and genuine; I had never experienced something like it before. I had never seen someone whose sole experience in life was to be abandoned and let down still had so much love to give. Maybe that's what made me love him so deeply – and what made the breakup so hard for me. That's my pathetic attempt to distil some words from all the layers of passion, intimacy and love there were between us – just to say that yes, one and a half years is not a long time, but I was at an incredible loss when he left me. After all, it's not the length of time we know someone that makes them special to us. It's what they brought into our lives.

Anyway, what I set out to say here is not about him – it's about me. It's about a journey that I embarked on; it's about

my growth and what I learned about myself and for myself that I want to share here.

I was scheduled to take a short business trip to Brussels about a week after we broke up. I actually felt surprisingly ok. I ate more or less, I slept normally, I laughed, and I kept myself busy. I have a great support system, both within myself and from the people around me – we'll get to that more later.

I felt no resentment towards him, and I began to see the rational sides about his decision to end it. At that point, I was even glad that he made a decision after such a long time of going back and forth between 'yes, we can make this work' and 'no, I need to be alone'. I started seeing that he did need to work some things out before any relationship of his could properly function. Maybe I was getting it completely wrong, but as far as I could tell, he was in a dark place all throughout our relationship and was not emotionally available to cater to what a relationship needs. I think I was able to shed a little light on his darkness, and that's why for the good part of those twenty months or so, the relationship seemed to work just fine for the both of us. But after all the conversations we had, I understood his decision.

Despite all that, I have no words to describe the pain and the sheer magnitude of devastation I felt over the fact that I lost him as my life partner.

I had so many questions.

Was there anything I could have done to prevent this from happening? Was there anything I could do now to salvage what was broken?

What did he think he'd gain out of this? Could he explain to me what the reasons for his decision were?

Did he have an idea plan for how he'd go on from here?

How did he see this break up? Was it a necessary step that he simply needed to take, and did he still hope for something to happen between us in the future?

As I was on the plane home from my business trip in Brussels, I listened to a podcastⁱⁱ that I follow regularly. The podcast is hosted by a life coach of some sort who touches on all different kinds of subjects with all different kinds of people to speak about their success stories, life lessons and advice they want to share. In this particular episode, the host was talking to a couples therapist who shared her views on 'the good relationship' and what it means to be faithful in a world where romance is run by the 'swiping culture'.

To be honest, the content of the podcast itself wasn't revolutionary. But man how her words triggered a revolution inside my brain – a beautiful unravelling inside of me. As I sat there, strapped into my seat on the plane with the lights of Berlin appearing as a sparkle against the night sky some 800 feet below me, I felt as though I had reached the epitome of enlightenment on what it means to love, to be loved, to commit, to accept, to respect – and to surrender.

The Battle of Asking or Becoming our Most Resourceful Self

Make no mistake, these insights didn't drop on me over the duration of a continental flight. The groundworks were years in the making. I'll include all of that later. For now, let's start with the fundamentals: Why did I reminisce so much about my ex-boyfriend and how I made peace with his decision to leave me? Didn't I say I was going to talk about me? **My** journey? **My** growth? Well, yes. But here's the thing: the quality of our relationships – of any kind, either with family, friends, or partners – defines the quality of our life. And vice versa. As a result, if we're not happy in our intimate relationships, it's hard to find sustainable happiness in the other parts of our lives. At the same time, if we're not happy *without* our intimate relationships, we can never have happy intimate relationships. Cool, huh? So all we must do to reach eternal bliss is to be happy when we're alone...happy when we're not alone...and happy when being on our own while not being alone.

Let's unpack this. What is it that we assign to the term 'relationship'? What attributes define what we call a romantic

partnership? Love. Sexuality. Passion, compassion. Understanding. Support. Intimacy. Friendship. Home. Family. Knowing someone to their core. Going beyond what the rest of the world knows about and shares with our partner. A unique and in-depth connection with someone that is translated into sharing one's hopes, dreams, fears, bodies, emotions, possessions and futures.

What this means is that we are asking our partner to provide us with what entire social structures once used to provideⁱⁱⁱ. What people once found in their tribe, their village, their community is what a single person is now expected to provide to us in a faithful, monogamous and loving tandem. In fact, not only do we expect our partners to provide us with compassion, reassurance, a financial partnership, sexual and emotional fulfilment and everything else that is supposed to come with a relationship, but we *rely* on them for those emotional and physical resources.

And here's the crux of the matter: Is it any wonder that in asking of our partners the provision of our entire wholeness, we end up seeking identity and self-worth in our relationships, ergo in others, instead of in ourselves? Not only is it unsustainable over the long run, robs us of our entire independence and