

SUMMARY

THE ICARUS DECEPTION

SETH GODIN



Summary of “The Icarus Deception” by Seth Godin

Written by Lea Schullery

How High Will You Fly?

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Introduction

As you go through life you're constantly told: "Get your résumé in order, punch your ticket, fit in, and follow life's instructions." If you simply swallow your pride and do as you're told, you'll be rewarded with trinkets, prizes, even riches! All you have to do is "suck it up and be part of the system." Conform to society and you'll be rewarded is the lie each of us is told. Conforming is the key to success, right? Wrong. Following instructions is not the secret to success. Instead, following the rules only limits you from unleashing your creative potential. It's time to reject everything you know about your corporate, comfortable life and follow your passion. In other words, it's your turn. How often do you sit in meetings in which the moderator asks, "Does anyone have any suggestions?" The response is always the same. The room fills with silence, people glance at one another, perhaps some papers are shuffled. Overall, the silence is all the same. The meeting is adjourned, but a few people stay behind. Eventually, one person speaks up. If that person's idea isn't immediately squashed, someone else speaks up. Then more people. Finally, the room is buzzing and humans are doing what they are meant to do: sharing their best work. This shows that "everyone is capable of seeing, analyzing, and solving. Everyone is capable of passion. Everyone in the room can care enough to do something." But why did we suffer from the uncomfortable silence earlier? The majority of society is brainwashed or seduced into being invisible. But "a revolution is here, our revolution, and it is shining a light on what we've known deep down for a long time - you are capable of making a difference, of being bold, and of changing more than you are willing to admit. You are capable of making art."

The Icarus Deception

As our world becomes increasingly automated, machines are taking over the administrative tasks that humans once relied on for steady jobs. As people continue to lose their jobs to machines, they begin to think: “Now what?” What can *we* do? According to Seth Godin, it’s time to unleash the skills we humans have that computers don’t: artistry. Humans have something far more powerful than machines and that is passion, creativity, and ingenuity.

But how have we ignored this problem for so long? We can look at the mythology that has taught us about the dangers of hubris. As the myth goes, Icarus and his father, Daedalus, were banished to a prison on the Greek island of Samos after sabotaging the work of King Minos. While imprisoned on the island, Daedalus devised a brilliant escape plan. He fashioned a set of wings for himself and his son using wax to hold the wings together. Daedalus warned his son not to fly too high so the sun wouldn’t melt the wax. Mesmerized by his ability to fly, Icarus craved the freedom of flying higher and disobeyed his father. As a result, the wax melted and Icarus tumbled into the sea and died.

“The lesson of this myth: Don’t disobey the king. Don’t disobey your dad. Don’t imagine that you’re better than you are, and most of all, don’t ever believe that you have the ability to do what a god might do.” In other words, you can fly, but *you can’t fly too high*. However, we ignore the other part of the myth in which Daedalus instructed his son not to fly too low. Flying too close to the sea would saturate his wings and become just as dangerous. Instead, society alters the myth to focus on the dangers of standing up and standing out. We forget that having hubris is just as dangerous as settling for too little.

When you settle for too little, you fly too low and you stay inside your comfort zone. Throughout our lives, we have made the false assumption that what makes us comfortable also makes us safe. Today, a revolution has

hit that has now turned the economy upside down. Now, the rules have changed and we are forced to accept that those places that once felt safe, the corner office, the prestigious college, the secure job, are no longer safe. The new safety zone is art. When you think about art, you likely think about Salvador Dalí, Jackson Pollock, or even Johnny Depp! But art is not a painting, a sculpture, or an actor. It's an attitude. It's about "Seizing new ground, making connections between people or ideas, working without a map - these are works of art, and if you do them, you are an artist, regardless of whether you wear a smock, use a computer, or work with others all day long."

The New Connected Economy Opens Up Doors For Everyone

When a kitten is in trouble, his mother comes and gently picks him up by the neck, rescuing him and taking him to safety. On the other hand, when a baby monkey finds himself in trouble, he must grab onto the back of his mother to escape. The kitten is rescued; the monkey rescues himself. In Japanese, *tariki* is the term for choosing to be helped. *Tariki* is when you seek a higher authority to select you, move you forward, and endorse you. *Jiriki*, however, is self-selection, self-authorized art. In other words, *tariki* is the helpless kitten and *jiriki* is the monkey who saves himself, and the connection economy of today is meant for monkeys.

What exactly is the connection economy? Today, everyone is on the internet. But while you may have thousands of followers on platforms like Facebook and Twitter, those aren't your true followers. Instead, the connection economy involves opening yourself up to others and becoming vulnerable. "It requires humanity and generosity, not the rearranging of digital bits." Additionally, the connection economy comes with an abundance of choice, connection, and knowledge. People can leverage their skills more quickly and at a higher level than ever before. It's time to take advantage.

Since everyone is connected through the internet, there are fewer gatekeepers left to make the rules. There is no more authority. "Oprah has left the building. She can't choose you to be on her show because her show is gone. YouTube wants you to have your own show now, but they're not going to call you." Similarly, you can't rely on someone to give you a record deal; instead, iTunes and hundreds of other outlets allow you to start your own gig. Of course, they aren't going to call you either. Today, people have the opportunity to take their careers into their own hands making it more difficult for gatekeepers to stay in control.

While our cultural instinct is to wait and get picked, we must cast aside the myth that the CEO is going to discover us and create something for us. Take Sarah, for example, who loves to perform musical theater. Her downfall, however, is that she spends 98 percent of her time trying to be picked. Going to casting calls, sending out headshots, following every lead she gets. She must deal with rejection when she ends up *not getting picked*. If only top reviewers like Ben Brantley from the *Times* could be there to mention her in his reviews! As a result, Sarah's joy for performing is stripped away from the pressure of being picked. Instead, she should follow Banksy's lead and take her art to the streets! Or perform for unconventional audiences, like in classrooms or prisons!

Today, there are no rules and there are many avenues and platforms that creatives can use to showcase their skills and abilities. With platforms like YouTube, iTunes, Podcasts, and more, creatives open themselves up to endless opportunities. Of course, you don't have to be a musician or dancer to reap the benefits of this new connected economy. Anyone can set up an online business, a personal website, or a social media platform that can easily reach millions of people around the world.

Become Godlike and Fully Commit to Your Art

Think about the deities humanity has created. We have Hercules, the son of Zeus, who represents the idealized man. We also have Superman, Thor, Moses, Athena, Thomas Edison - each representing a part of what it means to be human. Each of these heroes or gods are inside of us, we too are capable of expressing godlike abilities. It's time to unleash those abilities, for those who succeed in the future, will be those willing to act like the gods of our myths.

The Japanese even have a term for this. They call it *kamiwaza* which translates to "godlike." And while this may seem a bit arrogant, that's only because our society has warned us about hubris. But according to Godin, "Hubris makes us godlike, and being godlike makes us human." We tend to reject this type of thinking because of our own understanding of humility. For instance, how often do we see the student who doesn't ask difficult questions? Or the artist who hides her art out of fear of offending someone? Even Orwell was embarrassed by the egoism in his writing.

The result is that we fly too low. "We're so afraid of demonstrating hubris, so afraid of the shame of being told we flew too high, so paralyzed by the fear that we won't fit in, that we buy into the propaganda and don't do what we are capable of." When you can finally commit to your art and find joy in what you are doing without fear of judgment, then you have found true humility. Additionally, art requires a commitment to *kamiwaza*, you mustn't be afraid of hubris. You must take your art and dive in headfirst with faith and passion. This commitment requires the confidence to step into the journey wholeheartedly without fear.

Unfortunately, a timid step into the world of art won't produce the results you seek. Therefore you must commit to a lifetime of *kamiwaza* and be bold. Of course, there's the fear of "What if this doesn't work?" Well, "When a work of art fails, don't question your commitment to art. You can question

how you see, how you make, how good (in quotes) your art was, but the artist in you won't waste time questioning the commitment to art. When your art fails, *make better art.*" To make better art, you must fly closer to the sun, become naked and vulnerable in front of those you give your art to, and seek to make a connection.

To Be An Artist, You'll Need Grit

When you choose your art, you begin to cast aside fears of judgment and forget extrinsic awards and payment. Instead, you make art to satisfy your intrinsic needs. To do this, it takes risk and “grit.” What is grit? It’s not what you find in a batch of spinach leaves! To fully understand it, we’ll need to learn from psychologist Angela Duckworth, the author of *Grit*.

The first key element of grit is *perseverance*. Unfortunately, many people mistake perseverance for grit. However, they are not the same thing. Instead, grit must first begin with goals and a passion for those goals. You see some people strive for success simply because their boss tells them to or because they need the money. Instead, you should persevere because you feel passionate about creating. Next, you’ll need *hardiness*. The sailor who survives a long journey despite many sleepless nights and incredible danger and the programmer who makes deadlines by chugging Red Bulls have hardiness. But do they have grit? The one with grit has the determination to make a difference and to make a bigger impact.

Next, you’ll need *resilience*. The process of overcoming adversity by doing it again and again. The marketplace continues to create obstacles, but someone with resilience turns those obstacles into a learning process. It demands flexibility, to find your mistakes, and change what you are doing. Those with grit overcome setbacks and move forward, knowing that ongoing changes bring growth and opportunity. Then there is *ambition*. Ambition is the desire for accomplishment, power, or superiority - all of which have nothing to do with grit. Instead, your ambition should come from the desire to create your art in the way you want without focusing on external successes, like money or fame.

Finally, grit requires both *commitment* and *flow*. People with grit consciously set long-term goals that may be difficult to accomplish, but they do not waver from those goals regardless of the short-term feedback. Today, we receive feedback every day in the form of criticism in emails,

meetings, etc. Those with grit and commitment, however, move forward in the face of criticism and never stop. Lastly, those with flow experience something extraordinary when they are swallowed up in their passions, deep into something they care about. For instance, best-selling author Michael Lewis found his passion for writing when writing his thesis at Princeton on a now-forgotten topic. To him, the content didn't matter, he simply did it. "While he was writing, the lizard quieted, the resistance disappeared, and time slowed down. He was in it, unafraid, unimpeded, and truly alive. What you are engrossed in isn't nearly important as the fact of being engrossed."

When you begin practicing your art, you'll find that the journey is not easy. You'll need to go at your own pace, persevere through the hardships, and eventually, your creations will meet your expectations. In other words, you'll need *grit*.

As An Artist, You'll Need to Learn How to Handle Shame and Criticism

Everyone has their weaknesses, even Superman. When exposed to Kryptonite, Superman's armor is pierced and he is left vulnerable and helpless. When you begin to pursue your art, you open yourself up to criticism, defeat, and humiliation. It exposes your Kryptonite, your weaknesses, and many artists are held back because of shame. The prospect of shame paralyzes us and society has long used it as a tool for control. What's the easiest way to get kids to do their homework? Publicly shame the one who didn't do it. How do employers ensure their employees obey and conform to the company's rules? By shaming those who disobey or do something out of line.

The cycle of shame starts at a young age and follows us into adulthood. This cycle makes it hard to go against the status quo or to pursue your passions. When you do so, you receive comments from others, like "How dare you?" and "Who do you think you are?" People want to change you by delivering shame, but you must learn to ignore the criticism. Instead, you should understand that you don't work for the applause. When you read the anonymous comments on Amazon, when you receive a lousy review on Yelp, or when a stranger yells something out the window, they are simply trying to quiet you down and convince you to conform.

The person with *kamiwaza*, however, says in response to those people, "This is me." When you open yourself up, you open the door to discovering valid human connections with the people who wish to receive it. However, when you allow shame to be part of your vulnerability, you allow it to destroy your work. That's because shame is the fatal black hole that no one wants to enter. The thing is, shame is a choice. Shame cannot be forced on you; it must be accepted. When you refuse to accept shame, you can begin to create art for you and the people who wish to accept it.

Everyone is vulnerable to shame, even Seth Godin. He once let reviews and comments destroy his work. He was so worried about feedback and the need to reach everyone, that he became paralyzed. A few years ago, he gave a speech to twelve thousand people. To prepare for the speech, he spent the previous year finding new material to present on a topic that meant a lot and was important to him. It ended with a huge standing ovation, and he received great feedback from the people he cared about. Later that day, he checked Twitter to see what people thought. Already, more than a hundred people were tweeting about his presentation. And one, just one, was negative. Guess which one he spent the whole flight home thinking about?

As a writer, Godin frequently used to check reviews on Amazon and *Publishers Weekly*, he even read comments on blog posts and perused Twitter. As he read reviews, twenty-nine out of thirty would be positive. But that one negative review would be a “brutal takedown” of who he was and who he was trying to be. He allowed his brain to think about the bad one and no writing ever got done. He allowed one review to affect his work. Nowadays, he hasn’t sought out or read a review or tweet since. “This is not cowardice; it’s the act of someone who wants to keep writing and is determined to do it for an audience of his choosing.”

The First Component of Being an Artist is Seeing

Author James Elkins believes there are three components for someone to become an artist, and the first is the ability to *see*. You'll need to learn to see the world as it is, without labels. One of the traps that creatives find themselves stuck in is the trap of their own minds. Therefore, you'll need to adopt the Buddhist term *prajna*, which means accepting reality as it occurs instead of interpreting it as your own narrative.

Everyone, for example, views technology differently. While some people embrace the opportunities that technology provides, others fear how technology will change and impact the world. It's important to cast your fears and opinions aside and see technology for what it is. Let's take a look at Fred Wilson, one of the most successful venture capitalists because of his ability to *see*. He saw the future commercial potential of companies like Delicious and Twitter and invested wisely. He saw the market and the technology for what it was, not for what he wanted or feared it to be. Another example is that of Alan Weber and Bill Taylor, who were among a dozen talented editors who worked at the *Harvard Business Review*. However, the two editors were the only ones who saw the business revolution of internet start-ups and launched *Fast Company*, a magazine that covered this new sector, in 1995. Since then, it's become a commercial success.

Of course, being successful by being able to see takes practice. Begin by making predictions based on what you see and writing them down. "Someone is going to make an app that lets people share pictures." "The Yelp IP is going to be successful." "This new employee is going to break all her sales targets within two months."

You can also practice by simply noticing things in your everyday life. For instance, every time Seth Godin walks into a bookstore, he takes note of typography, pricing, the thickness of books, and the type of cover stock

being used. He even notices where the salespeople are standing and how smart they are. He notices the guy on the couch and what he's reading. He eavesdrops on conversations and listens in on what is being sold. Paco Underhill turned his ability to notice things into art. His company, Envirosell, monitors tens of thousands of hours of silent retail-store security footage. Throughout all that footage, Underhill noticed that women don't like it if another shopper brushes against them while they're browsing. He persuaded a client to simply widen the aisles to see how it would impact sales. The result? Increased revenue without buying more inventory!

Learn How to Make Art

The second component of being an artist is learning to make.

Unfortunately, we tend to grow up with parents who prohibit us from *making* art. How often were you told to color inside the lines? Or to play with your video game when it was too hot to play outside? Or bought a new game or console when it broke? We tend to think it's easier to buy a new console rather than fixing the current one. I mean, do you even own a soldering iron? Or know what one is? As a result, we have learned to become spectators of life. "If you are afraid to write or edit or assemble or disassemble, you are merely a spectator. And you are trapped, trapped by the instructions of those you've chosen to follow. Twenty people in the field and eighty thousand in the stands. The spectators are the ones who paid to watch, but it's the players on the field who are truly alive."

According to Godin, everyone should learn to code. Not because there is a shortage of coders but because once you know how to make something, it changes the way you see everything else. "Once you know how to set lead type, typography looks different. Once you know how to assemble an electronic device, every computer seems a bit less mysterious. Once you know how to give a speech, you see things in the speeches others give." Turn yourself from a spectator into a participant, learn how to make things, to fail more often, and to get better at making.

The three useless questions people ask are: "Where do you get your ideas?" "What sort of software do you use to do your writing?" and "What should I do next?" These answers don't matter. In fact, the tools for your art don't matter. The method doesn't matter either. All you need to begin making successful art is experience. And to get experience, you need to experience repeated failure. When you fail, you begin to discover what works and what doesn't. For example, the movie *John Carter* is terrible. It was so terrible, that it caused Walt Disney to lose money. In Russia, however, the movie set box-office records. If Russia were the intended audience, it wouldn't have

been terrible at all! But how could someone like Andrew Stanton who made fantastic films like *Finding Nemo* get *John Carter* so wrong?

As it turns out, Andrew Stanton failed to see what his Disney colleagues did. In the end, he learned an expensive lesson. While the movie cost roughly a quarter of a billion dollars, everyone has lessons they can learn no matter how successful they are, or think they are. So embrace the failures. All you can do is see, make, then repeat.

Overcome Writer's Block and Become a Better Boss

Ever hear the term *talker's block*? Probably not. That's because no one wakes up in the morning and discovers he has nothing to say! No one stays quiet for days, weeks, or months, just waiting for the right muse to begin talking. So if talker's block doesn't exist, why is that writer's block is so prevalent? The main reason we don't get talker's block is that talk is a habit. We talk on and on without concern if what we say will come back to haunt us. "Talk is cheap. Talk is ephemeral. Talk can be easily denied."

In other words, if we practiced writing the way we practice talking, then we would cure writer's block. Just write. It doesn't matter if you write poorly, just continue to write until you can write better. According to Godin, everyone should learn to write in public. You can do this by starting a blog, or using Squidoo or Tumblr, or another microblogging site. Use an alias if you need, turn off comments, and just write every single day. You may be thinking, "But what do I write about?" Don't use your platform as a diary or fiction. Instead, write an analysis. "Clear, crisp, honest writing about what you see in the world. Or want to see. Or teach (in writing). Tell us how to do something." Additionally, you should write like you speak, which means doing it every day. If you can write something every day, even just a paragraph, then your writing will improve.

When you begin to produce art, you begin to work for the world's worst boss: yourself. When you go out on your own, there are fewer boundaries and people find it's much more difficult than working for someone else. "If you had a manager who talked the way you talked to you, you'd quit. If you had a boss who wasted as much of your time as you do, she'd be fired." So pay attention to the way you talk to yourself. Instead of being critical, give yourself encouraging and constructive advice. When you accomplish something, even if it's one small thing, praise yourself!

Lastly, stop convincing yourself that you can't do it. All too often we are surprised to find someone who figures out a way to work from home, then spend two years exploring the world while still doing his job. We are shocked to hear someone using his evenings and weekends to get a second education or start a new side business. We are envious when we encounter others who have managed to create a happy life for themselves. So if you find that you're working for the world's worst boss, you only have yourself to blame. Instead, the future belongs to individuals who decide to become great bosses (and teachers). So start doing your art, pursue your passion, and become a better boss and teacher!

Final Summary

Now when you think about art, you'll no longer think of Vincent Van Gough, Jackson Pollock, or even Shakespeare. Instead, you'll think about the creativity and ingenuity that you can apply to any field that interests you. After reading this, however, you may still feel skeptical about taking the plunge. You want the guaranteed prize at the end before you go all in. But the best art is made by those who don't know how it's going to work out in the end. The rest of the world is stuck in their culture of fear and compliance. But that culture is a choice. You don't have to accept the culture of fear or failure. In fact, right now, down the street is another artist filled with hope and excitement. Right down the hall is an artist choosing a different culture. And when you begin your art, you'll fail before you succeed. "That's what art is. Art is a leap into the void, a chance to give birth to your genius and to make magic where there was no magic before. You are capable of this... The very fact that it might not work is precisely why you should and must do this." Sure, you might not receive that standing ovation in the end. That's okay. At least you can say that you've lived.



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