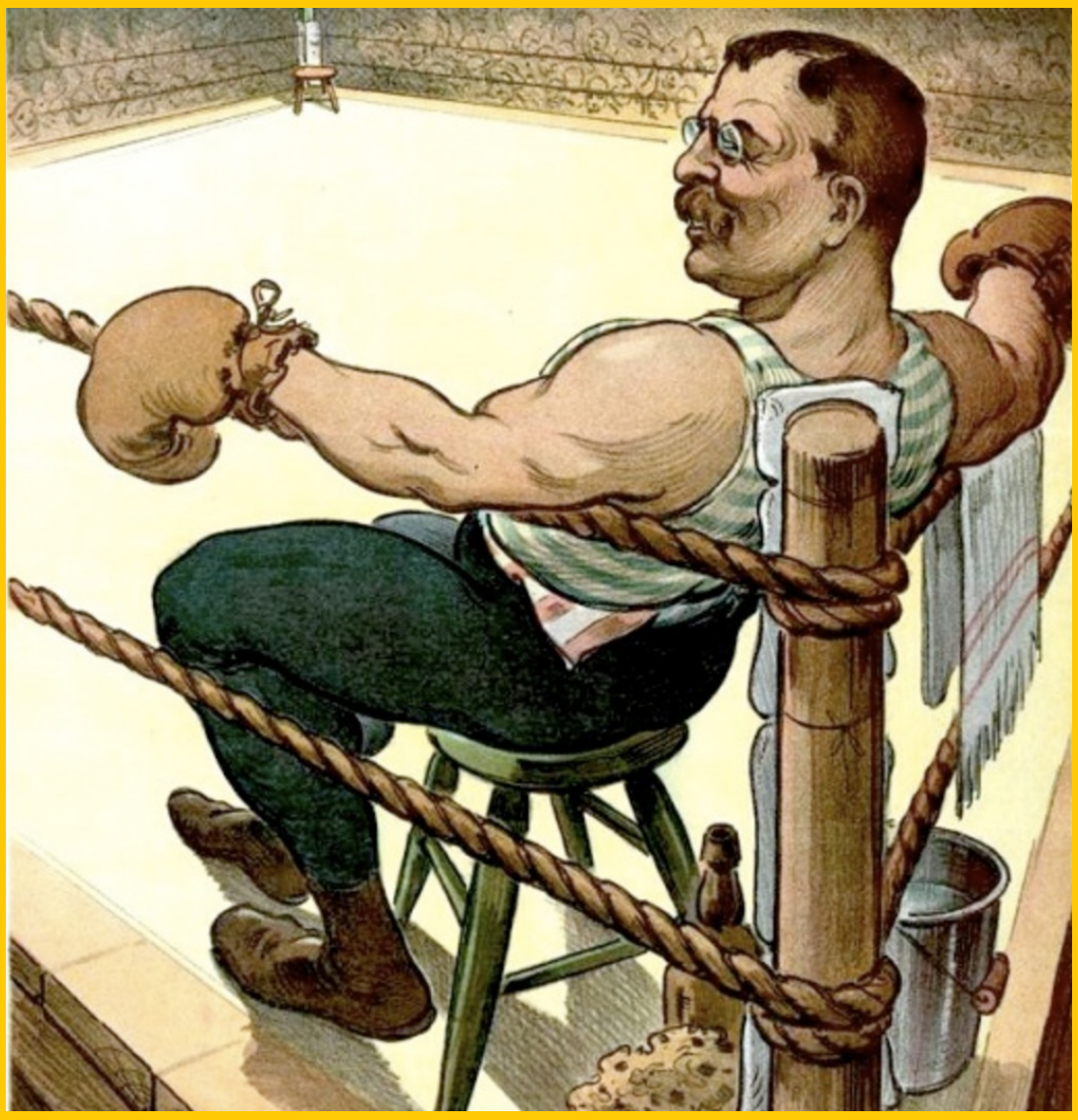
A Call for a New Strenuous Age



by Brett & Kate McKay

Introduction

Note: All quotes, unless otherwise noted, are taken from No Place for Grace: Antimodernism and the Transformation of American Culture, 1880-1920 *by T. J. Jackson Lears.*

> *"Push back against the age as hard as it pushes against you." –Flannery O'Connor*

To look at various metrics of physical and mental health in the world today is to observe a rather gloomy picture.

Life expectancy in the United States, which tends to consistently edge upwards, fell this year. It was the first such decline in over two decades, the last being due to the rise of the AIDS epidemic.

The effects of obesity played a role, but part of the decline is also the result of a striking rise in deaths due to drug overdoses, alcohol abuse, and suicide.

One in six Americans has taken at least one psychiatric drug, usually for depression or anxiety. And the suicide rate in the U.S. has reached its highest level in 30 years. It rose by 24% between 1999 and 2014, and has been accelerating since 2006, doubling the annual increases common 16 years ago. This surge in suicides has cut across nearly every age group, with the highest jump for men — an alarming 43% — found amongst those aged 45-64.

Overdoses, both from illegal and prescription drugs, have risen sharply, especially for white Americans. It's tripled for those 35-44 in this population and hit those 25-34 even harder — going up five times over. As one report on these sobering statistics notes, "The rising death rates for those young white adults…make them the first generation since the Vietnam War years of the mid-1960s to experience higher death rates in early adulthood than the generation that preceded it."

Related to this uptick in substance abuse and suicide is a rise in perceived mental and physical troubles; middle-age white Americans have become increasingly likely to

report pain, mental illness, struggles with socializing, and difficulty walking a quarter mile or up a flight of stairs.

Such issues extend beyond whites, and beyond American shores, however.

The World Health Organization reports that suicide rates have gone up 60% in the last 50 years, with the most marked increase in developed countries. Rates of global depression have risen across nearly every culture and age group as well, so that it is poised to become the second most common health condition in the world, behind only heart disease, by 2020.

And that's just the mental side of things. Physically, health in many developed nations has gone down over the last several decades as obesity has gone up; today 2.1 billion people — almost a third of the world's population — are overweight or obese.

Overall then, the West is less healthy, and less happy than it used to be, and that's just based on those quantifiable factors that have been tracked and studied.

Anecdotally, many people report maladies that are less serious, but still troubling. While they're not clinically depressed, they feel out of sorts. Anxious. Restless. Disoriented. Unmotivated. Something about their life feels off somehow. They're plagued by a malaise that's difficult to describe or datify but is nonetheless experienced as pervasive and entrenched. It's a feeling that life could be better, more fulfilling somehow, but that this potential remains frustratingly ungraspable.

What's behind this seeming decline in quality of life? The state of the economy always comes up in such discussions, and certainly shouldn't be discounted. Yet phenomena like the rise in suicide and depression predate the 2008 recession, and in some cases stretch much further back than that; Americans in fact report greater depressive symptoms now than they did during the 1930s.

So how can it be that we're less happy than those who suffered through the Great Depression, when our overall standard of living is higher — when all kinds of goods are cheaper and more accessible and technology has led to great advancements in science and created more and more conveniences in our daily lives? Today we can map the workings of the brain, order food with a press of a button, make "phone" calls face-to-face, send messages instantly, and hold the world's library in our hands. We're surrounded with gadgets and devices that would have seemed like something straight out a sci-fi novel to our great-grandfathers.

Therein lies the great paradox of the modern age; on paper we've made the kind of technical progress that should lead to life feeling absolutely amazing...

…but it doesn't.

It's the kind of conundrum that feels unique to our modern age. But like all problems, it's actually not without its historical parallels. The closest of which happened around the turn of the 20th century.

To explore this period is to come to see not only how uncannily similar it is to our own, but also to uncover what turned out to be the most effective solution to our shared malaise.

A solution that was for that time, and will have to be for ours, nothing short of a new kind of resistance movement.

Chapter 1: The Problem of "Overcivilization" at the Turn of the 20th Century

Economist Robert J. Gordon argues that there have been three “industrial revolutions” in modern history — movements in which new technologies spurred significant transformations in economies and cultures.

The first and most famous industrial revolution occurred in the second half of the 18th century with the invention of new technologies in cotton spinning, steam power, and iron production.

The second ran through the last quarter of the 19th century and into the beginning of the 20th. It was a period that saw the advent and spread of electrical power, the internal combustion engine, and indoor plumbing.

These technological advancements were no less significant than the shifts that were occurring in the economy and culture, for it was also a time when most aspects of the modern world as we know it today — like mass communication, urban living, consumer culture, and big business — got their start.

People were increasingly moving to the cities from rural areas, giving up farming to take jobs in steadily multiplying factories and the emerging white-collar sector. Railroads and telegraph lines crisscrossed cities and states, shrinking time and space. The number of magazines and newspapers exploded and were published in several editions a day; news stories reached the public not only with unprecedented speed, but also salaciousness — this was a time of ever-blaring headlines and pervasive yellow journalism.

As options for media proliferated, choices in consumer goods and recreational opportunities mushroomed as well. Factory-made household goods, clothes, and foods became cheaper and more accessible. Labor reforms created more leisure time, and vaudeville shows, dance halls, and newly-created theme parks provided avenues in which to spend it.

All in all, life at the end of the 19th century felt faster, more exciting, more connected, and more comfortable. Life seemed to hold a great deal of promise.

Yet reactions to these societal and economic changes were varied, and there existed a deep sense of ambivalence about their rapid pace and the way new technology was quickly transforming culture in the West.

On the one hand, businessmen and politicians hailed the promise of industrialization to deliver prosperity and comfort on a scale never before seen in human history. And the average citizen certainly enjoyed the fruits of the new economy — not just the newfound access to more and more goods and entertainments, but also the feeling that things were *happening*, and they could get in on the action and ride the wave of the new age.

On the other hand, some writers and thinkers saw a dark side in society's increasing reliance on mechanization. For these thinkers, the seeds of technology's promise also contained their peril. They weren't necessarily Luddites, nor anti-progress, but they observed that while technology seemed to be enhancing some human potentialities, it was simultaneously atrophying others.

Reliance on technology and the material prosperity that came with it, they feared, was making individuals softer: mentally, physically, and morally.

The Loss of Skill and Autonomy

> *"Parts, when used, grow; when not used, waste and become small. The conditions of growth are that a part shall be exercised, and shall be supplied with food. This is true not only of every muscle and nerve in our body, but of mental and moral qualities." –Edmund Alexander Parkes, On Personal Care of Health, 1876*

Their first area of concern centered on the effect the new economy was having on individual skill and autonomy. By virtue of their "profession," men who worked the land had been required to be something of a jack-of-all-trades — knowing not only how to plant and harvest but also how to forecast the weather, use and repair tools, hunt, shoot, erect buildings, and so on. The relationship between sweat equity invested, and the fruits of one's labor, could not have been more intimate and direct; sometimes, it was quite literally, fruit. Life was tough for a farmer, but it was self-directed; while he couldn't control the whims of nature, he weathered the storms at

the wheel of his own ship.

But as men's jobs shifted from the fields to factories and offices, their work became less and less skilled and more and more specialized and abstract.

Laboring in a factory might involve simply pulling the same lever day after day. Toiling in an office certainly required learning new skills — softer ones — but the scope of one's work was similarly circumscribed. In either case, employees were increasingly becoming specialists, losing the manual competence in a wide breadth of areas that their forebearers had embodied. Urban living only compounded this loss.

More and more of the tasks that lay outside one's narrow occupational specialty became outsourced to those who specialized in that particular need, so that men felt less independent, and more interdependent — sometimes just plain dependent. As sociologist Edward A. Ross observed in 1905:

> *"Under our present manner of living, how many of my vital interests must I entrust to others! Nowadays the water main is my well, the trolley car my carriage, the banker's safe my old stocking, the policeman's billy club my fist."*

At the same time, the pace and nature of work was directed and dictated by managers, and controlled by decisions that might come not just from a floor above, but from corporate headquarters hundreds of miles away. Work lacked a sense of purpose, as it was not always clear how one's task connected to any kind of tangible result. Especially for those in the white-collar sector, shuffling papers and crunching numbers amounted to the manipulation of abstractions, and "a daily life [that] often became reduced to the quiet desperation of bureaucratic routine."

Workers of the second industrial revolution thus increasingly felt they had lost a vital sense of individual autonomy and self-reliance, becoming a mere cog in a wheel.

Weakening of Physical Strength and Toughness

> *"The destiny of man is not only to exercise his intellectual and moral faculties; he must also act, resist, struggle, through the medium of his body. Our modern civilization, with all its contrivances and instruments, that work and act for us, seems to have caused a great disregard and neglect of the powers of our own limbs. But, if some unforeseen event*

> *throws us out of reach of our appliances; if we have to struggle with physical agencies, as cold and heat, with fatigue, with the elements, with animals, or with our fellow-men; then we lack that courage and confidence which, as Montesquieu says, is but man's consciousness of his strength, and we succumb powerless." –Karl Heinrich Schaible, An Essay on the Systematic Training of the Body, 1878*

The changing nature of work in the late 19th century not only enervated men's physic sense of self, but also their bodies.

Men, especially those employed in offices, seemed to be getting weaker and less hearty as their work became less and less physically demanding. Hands once calloused from pushing a plow grew soft from shuffling paper; skin that had been brown from the sun grew pale in the lamp-illuminated office; shoulders formerly firm from swinging an ax became sloped from slumping over a desk. While factory workers were more physically active than their white-collar brethren, their movements were limited to set, repetitive patterns and far more constrained than they had been on the farm.

And both sets of employees, having traded the fields for factories, the outdoors for offices, were equally cut off from nature. Ensconced in windowless workplaces, men became disconnected from the rhythms of the weather and the changing of the seasons.

It wasn't just the strength of this new indoor race of men that seemed in decline, but their overall toughness as well. The implementation of indoor electricity, central heating, and indoor plumbing increasingly smoothed the roughness of Americans' daily lives. Yet greater and greater comforts and conveniences seem to breed lesser and lesser tolerance for any kind of discomfort. As *Century* magazine opined in 1888, "modern civilized man is squeamish about pain to a degree which would have seemed effeminate or worse to his great-grandfather, or to the contemporary barbarian."

Enervating of Moral Character

We often think of scientific research as changing the course of culture, but it also works the other way around: Sometimes the course of culture influences the thrust of scientific research. That is to say, what emerges from the world of academia and science doesn't arise from an objective, neutral vacuum, but often not so coincidentally matches the tenor of the times.

Such was the case in the late 19th century.

At the same time that men were feeling less manually competent, professionally autonomous, and physically capable, theories in the emerging fields of psychology and sociology brought into question the very existence of free will. There was a growing interest in the nature of the unconscious mind and the way its impulses directed behavior without conscious awareness. Proto-Freudians, and then Freud himself, explored the practice of hypnosis and plumbed the recesses of the subconscious. At the same time, other researchers posited theories of behavior that centered on hereditary psychology — the idea that your genes determined your behavior, and thus your destiny. Things like alcoholism thus came to be seen as inherited diseases, over which victims had limited control. Belief in the primary influence of environmental factors — how an individual was raised — was ascendant as well.

Overall, a more deterministic view of human identity — one in which people were motivated by unconscious impulses, controlled by genes, and products of their environment — permeated the cultural zeitgeist. What the ethnologist Daniel G. Brinton wrote in 1898 was a sentiment voiced not only in academic seminars but by the common man on the street as well: "that master magician Nature practices no greater deception on us than when she persuades us that we are free agents."

As a belief in free will waned, so did the elevation of personal responsibility.

If humans were controlled by unconscious impulses and didn't rationally control their lives, how responsible were they really for their behavior? Was it truly possible to sin, if one's choices were being made outside of conscious awareness? Might some flaws simply be impossible to overcome, and might it just be better to follow one's "natural" motivations and call it good?

On the one hand, such thinking lent itself to greater empathy for those with addictions and other struggles that were difficult to surmount. Yet the seeds of such a philosophy also led to "a general uncoiling of the springs of moral action."

An 1893 *Century* magazine article entitled "Slave or Master?" elucidated the consequences to character of taking "the 'charity,' or the 'science,' that denies human responsibility" too far:

> *"A doctrine that denies free will, and makes of man only a bundle of appetites and impulses and propensities whose law is in themselves, destroys not only religion and morality, it destroys also the foundations of education, and makes discipline a solecism. A logical deduction from it is*

the notion that pupils should study only what they like to study, and when they like to study; and that children should do only what they like to do, and when they like to do it…

It does not take such ideas long to filter down through all the strata of society, and thus to affect, in many ways, the conduct of old and young. Do we not note an increasing tendency to depend on moods and impulses? 'I don't feel like work,' is often proclaimed as the sufficient excuse for idleness. Disrelish for any particular pursuit is mentioned as ample reason for abandoning it…

Of course this plea has always been made, and, so long as the original sin of indolence continues to be so deeply rooted in human nature, it will be made; but it seems that now this vice of human nature is to be well-nigh elevated into the rule of life.

It is a pestilent notion. In it lurks the disorganizing force by which characters and communities are undermined and ruined. There never was a strong character that was not made strong by discipline of the will; there never was a strong people that did not rank subordination and discipline among the signal virtues. Subjection to moods is the mark of a deteriorating morality. There is no baser servitude than that of the man whose caprices are his masters, and a nation composed of such men could not long preserve its liberties."

A philosophy which eroded belief in free will, and thus personal responsibility and moral character, may have begun in the halls of academia, but its effects were compounded by the fact that little else in the culture of the late 19th century worked to counteract it.

It was a time of relative peace and prosperity. In the mid-1880s, the Civil War was twenty years in the past, and the First World War was still several decades hence. In the absence of life and death stakes, men could afford to be complacent about developing the virtues of honor, duty, service, and courage.

The manufacturers of a growing number of consumer goods stood to benefit from an ideology of "if it feels good, do it," and made the most of it to sell their wares. The

proliferating number of magazines and newspapers made their living through the advertisements bought by these companies, and thus were disincentivized from running pieces that critiqued a culture of self-indulgence and called for greater self-control.

Perhaps most crucially, churches, which typically served as last bastions against encroaching moral flaccidity, dropped the ball as well. This was a time in which American Christianity was becoming softer and more feminine and sentimental in its ethos; many ministers eschewed preaching on the "harder" doctrines of good and evil, heaven and hell, and replaced convicting calls to repentance with more affirming platitudes on love, acceptance, and the ways in which living the gospel led to happiness and personal fulfillment. Rather than leading the way towards a revival of character, the Christian religion merely contributed to further spiritual desiccation.

In short, the presence of one's will, and its potential strength, was easily forgotten within a culture in which the media and faith communities flattered instead of countered this descent into complacency, and became lost in a daily routine that ensconced a man at home in comfort, called for the submerging of his autonomy at work, and didn't require pitting himself against nature, testing his strength against physically demanding tasks, or preparing for war.

In the absence of such friction in the environment, the will was coddled and self-mastery shriveled.

Taking these effects all together, some observers of the late 19th century concluded that the rise of technology during the second industrial revolution had the unintended consequence of atrophying men's moral and muscular fiber, eroding skill, weakening grit and character, and enervating their sense of causal potency — the confidence that they could make things happen for themselves.

It was a condition that came to be called "overcivilization."

And it soon started to take a physic toll on the minds of average citizens.

The Plague of Neurasthenia

> *"A permanently successful peace-economy cannot be a simple pleasure-economy." –William James, 1909*

As men "lost touch with the tangible reality of the material world," and became cut off

from nature and "glutted with convenience," the energy and effort of living increasingly moved away from grappling with externalities and into the interior of their heads.

At the same time that people's everyday lives required less and less physical exertion, their minds were taxed with more and more "brainwork."

Rather than wrestling with the soil, men managed abstractions. Rather than experiencing life directly, they read about it secondhand in newspapers and books. Rather than focusing on building character based on action, they worried about developing the right kind of personality based on charm.

The result of this growing sense of disembodiment was a life that began to feel "curiously unreal." People found themselves in a culture that seemed hollowed out, that lacked a vital gravity, and had become, as Nietzsche put it, strangely "weightless."

Instead of countering this sense of vaporous nonexistence in which "inner as well as outer landscapes seemed increasingly ghostlike" by reengaging with concrete action, people retreated further into their heads, descending into what contemporaries called "morbid self-consciousness."

With the faster pace of daily life, the increasing rate at which information was made available, and the ever-proliferating number of choices as to what to do with one's life, each option for media consumption, leisure pursuits, and career tracks had to be weighed and cognitively masticated. Introspective self-analysis (this was a time when journaling was quite popular) seemed to hold the key to deciding how to proceed. But the only decision reached from doing all this thinking was frequently to think it over some more. As an 1896 article in *Scribner's* observed, American youth had become "a generation that is more interested in questions about life than in living."

This "confluence of weightlessness and persistent introspection" spurred the formation of a negative feedback loop. Because life felt insubstantial, people wanted to figure out why that was, and the more they analyzed the problem, the more life seemed to evaporate into unreality. Panged by "unfulfilled longings for 'real life'," yet feeling incapable of acting on them, the output of such a loop was mounting anxiety.

Mental disorders of all kinds proliferated. Occurrences of suicide and insanity went up.

Individuals increasingly complained of feelings of acute restlessness, anxiousness, and depression, or simply a malaise of apathy and fatigue that made them want to lie on the couch and wait for the world to go away.

Neurologist George Miller Beard coined a name for this emerging condition: "neurasthenia." In his 1880 book, *American Nervousness*, Beard described the symptoms of neurasthenia as including "a desire for stimulants and narcotics, fear of responsibility, of open places or closed places, fear of society, fear of being along, fear of fears, fear of contamination, fear of everything, deficient mental control, lack of decision in trifling matters, hopelessness."

Neurasthenia became an umbrella diagnosis for a wide variety of ailments, but "They were unified…by a common effect: a paralysis of the will."

The rise of what journalists called "our neurasthenia epidemic" baffled many observers, who were befuddled by the fact that while life was getting more comfortable, people were growing less happy. As *Munsey's Magazine* asked in 1897 in reference to a rash of suicides, "why, when life is continually made more worth living…so many should be determined to abandon it?"

Hair of the Dog: The Advancement of Ineffectual Cures for Neurasthenia

The most common answer to *Munsey's* query was that contemporary life was just too stressful. There was overpressure at work, at home, and in school. An 1894 edition of *Harper's Monthly* stated it this way: "Something must be done — this is universally admitted — to lessen the strain in modern life."

The cure for neurasthenia, therefore, was simple: more R&R. As the scientist and philosopher Herbert Spencer opined, "I may say that we have had somewhat too much of the 'gospel of work.' It is time to preach the gospel of relaxation."

The human system only had a limited amount of energy, the thinking went, and too much stimuli and brainwork overdrew the account, which led to mental dis-ease. Neurasthenics had to learn to be better managers of their physic resources. To this end, doctors prescribed plenty of bed rest to those suffering from symptoms of restlessness, depression, and anxiety. Physical activities were to be dropped; responsibilities curtailed; decisions delayed. If an individual's system was overtaxed, the cure could only be advanced by a full-scale retreat from the fields of work and play.

When retiring at home wasn't enough to alleviate the symptoms of neurasthenia, middle and upper class sufferers broke entirely away from their daily grind and retreated to sanitariums — health-oriented resorts where guests sought to restore bodily and mental equilibrium through a regimen of sitz baths, enemas, massages,

phototherapy, electric shocks, and specially prepared foods.

Other neurasthenics, who felt that rest and relaxation were not enough to cure what ailed them, turned to self-medication.

Organic chemistry was advancing, narcotics and other drugs became more available to anyone who wanted them, and they were used not only to ameliorate physical and mental pain, but also to alleviate feelings of boredom and anomie:

> *"Before 1914, Americans could buy cocaine, opium, morphine, laudanum, and heroin in patent medicines or soft drinks. Numerous men and women followed the example of Mary Boykin Chesnut, who in 1863 'took opium to relieve the tedium' of a long and uncomfortable carriage ride. The earliest and most successful national advertising campaigns were waged by manufacturers of patent medicines, nearly all of which contained large doses of narcotics. In general, Americans by 1880 were far more able — and eager — than their ancestors to avoid both physical and emotional discomfort."*

In drug use, denizens of the late 19th century could withdraw from the effort of pushing back against unreality, and instead give themselves over to it.

Neither of these common "cures" proved effectual.

Drug use temporarily solved the problem, by temporarily removing it, and all other concerns, from consciousness. But it obviously provided no longer-term relief from the feelings that had driven the user to the substance in the first place, and often left them with a debilitating addiction.

The rest cure actually left people worse off than before as well. Being cooped up in one's bedroom, isolated from the world, left alone with one's thoughts, unsurprisingly led to more introspection, the exacerbation of "morbid self-consciousness," and the perpetuation of a cycle of anxiety and depression. Retreating from the arena of life and further into one's head only served to induce deepening feelings of helpless passivity.

When dealing with a plague of unreality, hair of the dog was not the solution.

Idleness kills manliness, and the rest cure merely got the execution over doubly quick.

Chapter 2: A Protest Against Complacency and the Rise of a Resistance Movement

> *"Where struggle ceases, that family or race is doomed." –John Burroughs, 1896*

There was a group of men during this time that believed the prevailing verdict as to the root of neurasthenia, as well as its common cures, were exactly wrong.

The problem was not overpressure, they argued, but that all the pressure had been concentrated at one point.

The problem was not that there was too much load on the arch of the psyche, but that it consisted almost entirely of a single kind.

The problem was not excess mental strain, but that the brainwork required by modern life was not equally balanced by effort expended by a man's other faculties.

The energy expended by the mind had to be balanced by energy expended by the body. The abstract needed to be balanced by the concrete. Ease had to be balanced with struggle. Convenience with suffering. Pleasure with pain.

Body, mind, and spirit had to be brought back into harmonious proportion.

As did the relationship between thought and action.

If you wanted to get rid of the dissonance created by the contrast between your longings for real life, and your feelings of weightlessness, you didn't suck on more helium. You sought to reengage with "the tangible reality of the material world." You sought to rekindle the intensity and breadth of human potentialities. You sought firsthand experiences over second.

When the pressure inside your head surged, you didn't burrow deeper inside of it. You reached outside yourself.

When society told you that free will was just an illusion, you experimented and found that it did in fact exist, and just couldn't be seen by the average observer because it had grown so thin from disuse.

When you felt a "yearning for authentic experience — physical, emotional, or spiritual," you didn't numb it with drugs, you set about scratching that itch.

When the contemporary culture lacked for challenge and tests, you created them.

When the temper of the times pushed you, you didn't surrender. You pushed back with equal strength.

From this philosophy was born a countercultural movement, one which meant to reassert the will, "revolt against the enervating banality of the age," protest against excess softness, stultifying complacency, and bureaucratic boredom. Its aim was to revive a race of decisive, stoic, men who were strong in body, mind, and soul. Men who loved struggle more than comfort. Who desired boldness over blandness, who held a "fascination with a world beyond the boundaries of modern safety and routine." Men who wished to choose initiative over self-indulgent passivity, independence over dependence, becoming over being, and the "elevation of strenuous effort over self-absorbed thought." Men who would relish obstacles and eschew lopsided development in favor of cultivating the whole man.

Members of a fraternity of Promethean masculinity.

Masters instead of slaves.

This resistance movement born at the end of the 19th century has been described as a form of "antimodern dissent."

While its adherents did warn of the perils of technology, that didn't necessarily mean they didn't also celebrate its promise.

They did cast a skeptical eye on the ability of science to explain the totality of human experience, holding that raw knowledge in and of itself did not create meaning. But that didn't necessarily mean they weren't eager and supportive students of the subject.

Rather, these "antimodern" guerillas celebrated progress while seeking to mitigate its ill effects; they "transformed their nostalgia for the past into a complex movement

toward regeneration in the present." They looked backward in order to move forward.

Their inspiration took the form of four classic masculine archetypes: the craftsman, the saint, the pioneer, and the soldier.

The Craftsman

> *"Every workman should be an artist capable of conceiving the object at whose making he labors, capable also of fashioning its every part. Under such conditions, the workman would take pleasure in his work, since it would so become the product of his brain and skill, his very own, born of his enthusiasm and of his struggles, and for that reason dear and sacred to his heart…these doctrines were received with indifference, ridicule or opposition…[by] representatives of the subdivision of labor, which ensures great and rapid financial returns, while it just as certainly and as quickly causes the degeneration of the workman, by robbing him of his ambition, his hope and his critical faculties, and thus lowering him to the level of an automaton….*
>
> *It is recognized in biology that 'function makes the organ;' furthermore, that a highly specialized function dwarfs and lames the remaining powers of the organism. What then is to be expected from a man, the play of whose intelligence is confined to the endless repetition of a single mental process, and whose physical exercise is restricted to the working of certain unvarying sets of muscles?*
>
> *The question is not difficult to answer. The individual will develop morbidly, and his mind will offer a resting-place for destructive and chaotic ideas, which, like the temptresses in Macbeth, ever float over the wastes of blighted human ambitions." —The Craftsman, 1901*

The archetype of the craftsman represented the reclaiming of skill, autonomy, self-reliance, creativity, and the celebration of tactile values. He symbolized the need to get back to basics, the power of causal potency, and the pride that comes with useful, purpose-driven, self-directed work — particularly that done with one's hands.

An interest in craftsmanship in the late 19th century led to the emergence of what is

known as the "Arts and Crafts" movement. Its adherents critiqued the effects of modern industry — arguing that manufacturing had not only diminished the quality and "soul" of goods, but the worth of craftsmen as well. The factory system had divided labor into narrow, mindless specialties, devaluing the expertise of tradesmen. These contemporary craftsmen championed a revival in the creation of simple, quality goods made with preindustrial techniques.

The Arts and Crafts movement not only created demand for these kinds of goods among consumers, making more viable the work of craftsmen who wished to remain outside the factory system and labor in independent shops, but it also spurred interest among ordinary men in taking up handicraft as a hobby. After a 9-5 shift at the office, white-collar workers would go home to work on their own project, and enjoy the chance to exercise their creativity, practice some hard skills, and manipulate tangible objects.

The Saint

> *"The sick man, wasted by fever, consumed with thirst, dreams in his sleep of a fresh stream wherein he bathes, or of a clear fountain from which he drinks in great draughts. So, amid the confused restlessness of modern life, our wearied minds dream of simplicity.*
>
> *The thing called by this fine name — is it a vanished good? I do not think so. If simplicity depended upon certain exceptional conditions, found only in rare epochs of the past, we must indeed renounce all idea of realizing it again....*
>
> *But simplicity does not belong to such and such economic or social phases: rather, it is a spirit, able to vivify and modify lives of very different sorts. Far from being reduced to vainly regretting it, we may, I affirm, make it the object of resolve, the end of practical effort.*
>
> *Aspire to simple living? That means, aspire to fulfill the highest human destiny. All of men's agitations for greater justice and more light have been also movements toward a simpler life; and the simplicity of olden times, in manners, art, and ideas, still keeps its incomparable value, only because it achieved the setting forth in high relief of certain essential sentiments and certain permanent truths. It is a simplicity to cherish and*

reverence; but he little comprehends it who thinks its peculiar virtue lies in its outward manifestations. In brief, if it is impossible for us to be simple in the forms our fathers used, we may remain simple, or return to simplicity, in their spirit. Our ways are not their ways, but the journey's end remains in truth the same. It is always the polestar that guides the seaman, whether he cruise under sail or on a steamship. To make headway toward this end, with the means at our command, this is the essential thing, to-day as yesterday; and it is by frequent deviations from our route, that we have confused and complicated our life." —The Simple Life, Charles Wagner, 1885

The archetype of the saint was less about religious piety, and more about adopting the ethos of disciplined, purpose-focused, "monastic" living. In the midst of a "flabby commercial age," the saint represented controlled indifference to consumerism, possessiveness, and distraction.

As aforementioned, the 19th century made a proliferating number of consumer goods, media publications, and leisure opportunities available to the masses. Victorian homes became cluttered with manufactured knick-knacks, and men's minds felt similarly encumbered. It was hard to tear oneself away from reading the newspapers which flooded the streets, and if not vigilant, the siren song of information and material consumption easily pacified the impulse for action and real experience. Indeed, the increase in the options for consumption — which in truth only amounted to the opportunity to select from a menu of predetermined choices — often masked the disintegration of true autonomy.

At the same time, unchecked consumption could lead to greater and greater acquisitiveness and a shift in one's attention away from higher purposes, and towards getting gain. As Wagner puts it, "The man who gives himself up entirely to the service of his appetites, makes them grow and multiply so well that they become stronger than he; and once their slave, he loses his moral sense, loses his energy, and becomes incapable of discerning and practicing the good."

For these reasons, a movement celebrating the virtues of simplicity arose at the turn of the 20th century. Its adherents — called "Simple-Lifers" — sought not only to clean out their physical spaces, and adopt more rustic lifestyles, but also to clear out their heads, creating room for the thinking of worthy thoughts, and more importantly, the taking of worthy action. Simple living meant acting with a singularity of purpose, letting all that was superficial and extraneous fall away. Such a task required the

discipline of self-mastery, and the patience of the saints.

The Pioneer

> *"Keep close to Nature's heart... and break clear away, once in a while, and climb a mountain or spend a week in the woods. Wash your spirit clean."*
> *–John Muir, 1915*

The pioneer archetype embodied many of the traits of the craftsman and saint — self-reliance, skill, rusticness — but also evinced his own admirable qualities, like initiative, ruggedness, and hardihood. Pioneers struck out where no one had trod before, blazed new trails, scouted in dangerous territory, and approached life with the heart of an explorer.

Most crucially, the pioneer also represented man as connected to nature.

Those who pushed back on the prevailing zeitgeist of the age typically saw getting reacquainted with one's more "primitive" side as central to this resistance. They broke regularly away from the sallow-skinned indoor dwellers of the cities in order to "recover a primal authenticity of thought, feeling, and action," and, as John Muir put it, wash their spirits clean. Time spent in nature proved the perfect counterbalance to overcivilization and a highly effective antidote to "morbid self-consciousness."

The popularity of camping, hiking, and outdoor activities thus unsurprisingly soared in the late 19th century, as men headed to the woods to not only reacquaint themselves with the wildness of their hearts, but also to practice the kind of "woodcraft" skills their pioneer forebearers had known, and they had lost from disuse. Men wanted to re-learn (or simply learn) how to hunt, fish, canoe, make a campfire, navigate unfamiliar terrain, sleep under the stars, test themselves against nature, and grapple with the most basic of elements.

The Soldier

> *"In our slippered ease, protected by orderly government, by written constitutions, by a police who are always in evidence, we sometimes forget of what perilous stuff we are made, and how inseparable from human life are those elements of tragedy which from time to time startle us in our repose, and make us aware that the most awful pages of history may be rewritten in the record of our own day...*

> *A stable world is essential to progress, but a world without the element of peril would comfort the body and destroy the soul. In some form the temper of the adventurer, the explorer, the sailor, and the soldier must be preserved in an orderly and peaceful society." –Hamilton Wright Mabie, 1895*

At the heart of the late 19th century's rebellion against softness and complacency lay the revival of the warrior ethos.

During the long stretch of peace between the Civil War and WWI (punctured ever so briefly by the Spanish-American War), there arose the viewpoint — which always emerges during these lulls — that war was a thing of the past. It was popularly believed that all societies passed through three stages, from savagery, to barbarianism, to civilization. At the end stage, peace became more or less permanent, and martial virtues obsolete.

With such an outlook, culture became increasingly refined, decorous, and sentimental. Society had become more centralized and more secure. The perimeter between safety and danger had moved farther and farther out. In such an environment, the core virtues of masculinity — strength, honor, courage, mastery — seemed less important, if not a bit archaic, and setting gentlemanliness as the highest standard for manliness was a luxury that could well be afforded.

But there were those who felt the pendulum had swung too far, that a nation of men who could tie an ascot, but not fire a rifle, was vulnerable to an enemy who had not lost their barbarian ferocity.

While the worry of some cultural critics centered on the fact that men were literally unprepared for war, others were simply concerned as to what the loss of martial skill and virtue would mean in peace.

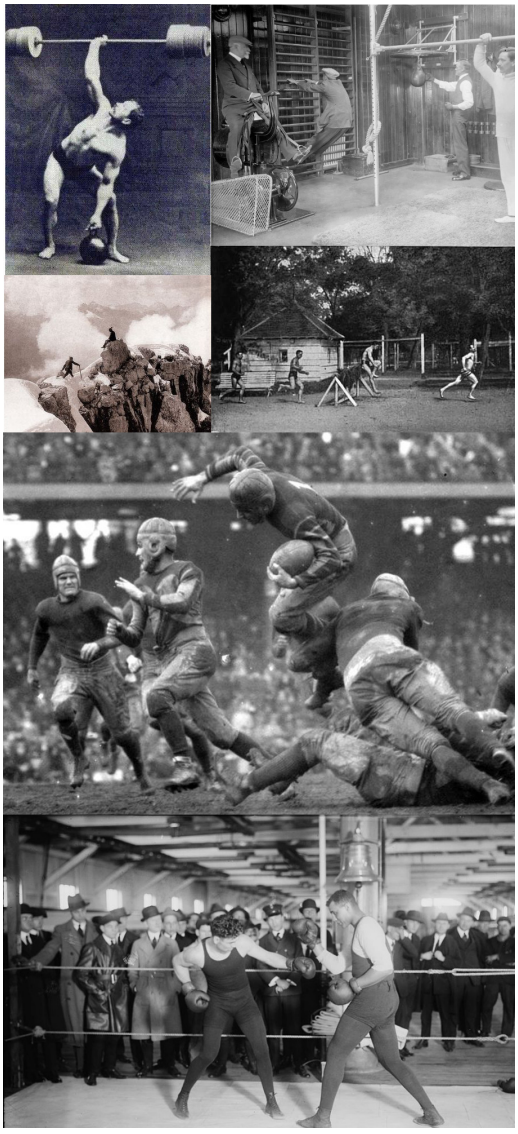
Even ardent pacifists like William James conceded that war, though bloody and costly, activated ingrained qualities of manliness, called forth the capacity for heroism, and tested virtues like hardihood, fidelity, vigor, courage, and inventiveness more acutely than any other challenge or crucible. He thus he felt that you couldn't just get rid of war without it causing the enervation of the qualities that made men, and the country, great.

James therefore advocated for the idea of substituting another great

mission/purpose/challenge in its place — "a moral equivalent of war." He envisioned this alternative as a mandatory program of national service where armies of young men underwent a literally constructive rite of passage by spending a few years fishing, mining, building roads and bridges, etc.

Other cultural observers championed the idea of "moral equivalents for war" as well. Some, like James, hoped these pursuits would keep men sharp through a period of perpetual peace; others saw their value as preparation for inevitable war. All saw them as crucial in preserving the essential traits of manliness in a time that no longer required them.

The most popular of these battlefield simulacrums was athletics. Sports exploded in popularity at the end of the 20th century, as men took up bicycling, basketball, football, and outdoor pursuits in greater and greater numbers. Physical culture — an emphasis on the importance of exercise and fitness — swept the nation, and gymnasiums dedicated to pursuing this new phenomenon were built. Professional strongmen toured the country and became pop culture heroes.



The rise of the popularity of physical culture — from obstacle course training to boxing to outdoor pursuits — was one of the strongest (pun intended) ways men of this time period pushed back against its enervated ennui. Sports and athletics potently fought the ill effects of overcivilization by challenging ordinarily sedentary bodies, requiring the mastery of discipline and tactile skills, and providing an outlet for more primal impulses and the exercise of (controlled) violence.

Athletics were only abstractions of war, of course, but they were far more active and "real" than other passive pursuits. Sporting play was thought to be a worthy outlet for exercising one's physical capacity, and developing martial virtues like competition, camaraderie, self-reliance, toughness, teamwork, resilience, discipline, and stoic endurance; they thus served as a vital bulwark against, as John Burroughs put it in 1894, "fast becoming a delicate, indoor, genteel race."

Combat sports, especially boxing, were particularly popular. The ring was most obviously the closest analog to the battlefield, and the sport's inherent risk, danger, and violence resonated in a culture that felt overly safe, comfortable, circumscribed, and civilized. An attraction to violence was in fact one of the most salient characteristics of the age. Yet "This fascination with aggressive impulses involved more than cheap thrills or an anti-intellectual cult of machismo. It contained a moral critique of modern culture." Violence was seen "as a means of personal regeneration," as "Americans began to hope that the warrior might return to redeem them from enervation and impotence."

A capacity for violence, along with the development of other martial virtues, was not meant to displace gentlemanliness, but complement it. Leaders of the 19th century's resistance to overcivilization urged men to wed a warrior ethos with refinement in manners and character, and looked to the medieval knight as a symbol of ferocity coupled with chivalry. Men were to be upstanding individuals and fierce fighters: gentlemen barbarians.

Ultimately, the archetype of the soldier inspired a man to live bravely, develop physical vigor, and cultivate a warrior ethos; to hope for peace, but prepare for war; to celebrate progress, but be ready for chaos; to develop a body and mind that would allow him to fight on the battlefield should a crisis come, and be a physically fit, mentally alert, and morally upright citizen-leader if it never did.

The thread that ran through these four archetypes, and through the 19thcentury's rebellion against overcivilization, was the desire to choose struggle over comfort, suffering over the pleasure principle. The movement sought to reclaim "pain" from being a four-letter word. Not all pain was bad; often it was redemptive. The pain of meticulously crafting a table, the pain of resisting consumerism, the pain of climbing a tall mountain, the pain of getting hit in the face with a fist — the pain that attends the achievement of mastery of any kind — acted as "a kind of vicarious atonement for

unprecedented physical comfort," a "penitence for material abundance," that "helped sustain a stoical cast of mind amid the evasive banality of modern culture." Such pain had the power to heighten experience and enhance the tang of living. They were birthing pains — giving life to deeper character, confidence, autonomy, and self-worth.

Suffering then, intentionally chosen and productively directed, "was an agency for salvation" — forceful resistance to the physical, mental, and spiritual enervation of the age.

The Vulnerabilities of the Movement

The revolt against overcivilization fomented at the end of the 19th century vigorously pushed back against the soft, anxious, passive inertia which prevailed in the culture.

But it was yet missing an ingredient.

The movement celebrated vital energy and the embrace of "primeval epic life." Certainly good things. But some of its adherents came to delight in taking action merely for its own sake, and sought experiences as their own ends. Suffering was used not as redemption from degeneration, but merely as leaven for boredom. Action was pursued solely as an avenue to greater personal fulfillment.

In the absence of an ethical framework and focused purpose — an overarching *telos* – "Vitalism replaced stoicism."

For some, for example, the desire to push back against overcivilization merely devolved into endless, restless travel, especially to then "exotic" locales like Asia. Such traveling was a form of action, but worked towards no countercultural or character-enhancing purpose, and simply functioned as a temporary escape from the pressure of decision-making and the feeling of aimlessness.

The further vulnerability of an individualistic search for authentic experience in the absence of a greater purpose is that it becomes easily co-opted by the very consumer culture it's aiming to resist.

The Arts and Crafts movement, for example, started out with worthy aims. But craftsmen who hoped to create simple, quality goods accessible to the everyman began catering to the rich upper class, who were willing to pay a premium for "artisanal" wares.

Sports began as groups of ragtag, unpaid amateurs who largely played for the love of

the game, but eventually evolved into a professionalized, billion-dollar, corporate-sponsored business.

Men's desire for greater virility came to be fulfilled by companies pitching "manly" hair tonic and dress shirts.

At the same time, the search for more immediate, intense experiences, if conducted entirely on one's own and without an overarching purpose, is difficult to sustain in the long-term. As Nietzsche famously said, "He who has a why to live can bear almost any how." In the absence of accountability and of such a why, men's commitment to resisting the tenor of the age more easily slackened.

The result was greater ambivalence and a set of constantly warring impulses; "a drive toward autonomous action coexisted with a longing for dependent passivity." Men perpetually vacillated "between manic ambition and depressive withdrawal" — between engagement and retreat, hope and hopelessness.

Chapter 3: The True Strenuous Life

> *"I wish to preach, not the doctrine of ignoble ease, but the doctrine of the strenuous life, the life of toil and effort, of labor and strife; to preach that highest form of success which comes, not to the man who desires mere easy peace, but to the man who does not shrink from danger, from hardship, or from bitter toil, and who out of these wins the splendid ultimate triumph." – Theodore Roosevelt, 1899*

In his research of this time period, historian T. J. Jackson Lears found that among those who remained committed to their protest against overcivilization, refusing to fall victim to consumeristic co-opting or the temptation to give up, there emerged one consistent "key resource to resistance": they "preserved commitments outside the self."

This was a desire for richer experiences, coupled with devotion to duty, honor, and service.

This was a celebration of vital energy, wedded with the commitment to channel that energy in ways that not only benefitted the individual, but also the common good.

This was a dedication to choosing action, with an ethical emphasis.

This was the search for personal fulfillment and a more productive, meaningful life, set against the backdrop of a higher purpose.

This was a resistance movement with sufficient gravity to overcome the specter of weightlessness and manifest its fullest expression and greatest efficacy — both in positively shaping culture and the individual man who adopted it.

This was a movement with a name — the strenuous life — and a patron and prophet who had come up with it: Theodore Roosevelt.

Roosevelt was the very embodiment of the complete potential embedded in the 19th century's revolt against overcivilization. He was hardly anti-science, anti-progress, or anti-technology, maintaining an interest in natural history throughout his life, and becoming the first president to ride in a car, an airplane, and a submarine.

Yet TR recognized that the technological advancements of his day contained both promise and peril, observing that:

> *"The excessive development of city life in modern industrial civilization which has seen its climax here in our own country, is accompanied by a very unhealthy atrophying of some of the essential virtues, which must be embodied in any man who is to be a good soldier, and which, especially, ought to be embodied in every man to be really a good citizen in time of peace."*

From an early age, Roosevelt was inspired by the masculine archetypes of old and set out to vigorously resist the "unhealthy atrophying of some of the essential virtues" of manhood and become a veritable Renaissance man.

As a young man he overcame a sickly childhood to "build his body" and become a boxer, rower, and vigorous outdoorsman.

As a grown man he managed to:

- Work as state legislator, police commissioner, and governor in New York
- Own and work a ranch in the Dakotas
- Serve as Assistant Secretary of the Navy
- Fight as a Rough Rider in the Spanish-American War
- Serve as President for two terms, then run for a third
- Become the first President to leave the country during his term in order to see the building of the Panama Canal
- Write 35 books
- Read tens of thousands of books — several a day in multiple languages
- Explore the Amazonian rainforests
- Discover, navigate, and be named after a completely uncharted Amazonian river over 625 miles long
- Volunteer to lead an infantry unit into WWI at age 59

In addition to all of these tangible accomplishments, Roosevelt infused vitality into every aspect of his life. His hands were constantly coiled up in fists of latent energy,

and he practically bounded from room to room, giving hearty handshakes, slapping backs, and grinning ear to ear. Even as he got involved in politics, he exercised regularly and took up tennis, hiking, rowing, polo, and horseback riding. As president he took visiting leaders and dignitaries on long hikes and up rock faces in the parks around D.C. He started boxing as governor of New York, and continued sparring with partners several times a week in the White House until a blow detached his left retina, leaving him blind in that eye. Thereafter, he practiced jiu-jitsu and continued his habit of skinny-dipping in the Potomac River during winter.

Throughout his entire life, TR maintained his commitment to remaining mentally, physically, and morally fit. He was a reader and achiever, a journaler and doer. He managed to balance all the energies of life into one harmonious whole.

Everything he did, he did for the sheer joy of it — for the charge of putting his causal potency through the paces and manifesting himself actively in the world. He relished life with a boyish gusto.

Yet Roosevelt always directed everything he did in service to a greater purpose — becoming the best possible citizen-leader and encouraging virtuous excellence in others by example.

Roosevelt wanted all of his fellow Americans to make the most of their lives both as individuals and as citizens, knowing that the expansion of drive and initiative in the first realm, would carry over into the second. He vigorously urged people to get "in the arena," continually exhorting them to join him in the strenuous life with maxims such as:

> *"A ton of talk weighs less than nothing if it is not backed by action."*
>
> *"Nothing worth gaining is ever gained without effort."*
>
> *"Happiness and usefulness are largely found in the same soul."*
>
> *"Unless we prepare in advance we cannot, when the crisis comes, be true to ourselves."*

TR also encouraged participation in what was — beyond a purpose outside the self — an additional key to successfully resisting the atrophying effects of overcivilization: structures, organizations, and programs designed around supporting members in

living the strenuous life.

The most obvious examples of such were the many scouting programs that emerged in both England and America in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. While the Boy Scouts are the most famous, the ranks included the Boys' Brigade (founded in 1883), the Woodcraft Indians (1901), and the Sons of Daniel Boone (1905). Roosevelt heartily endorsed them all, and was made "Chief Scout Citizen" by the Boy Scouts of America, a position he held from 1912 until his death in 1919.

Even lesser known is the Lone Scouts of America program which was started to allow rural boys — and city boys whom for whatever reason couldn't join a troop — to work on badges independently. The boys still sometimes formed troops on their own, which were scout-led, and grew to 2,000 in number. The achievement of badges was done on the basis of honor; once a boy had completed one, he requested his badge from the Lone Scout HQ. In operation from 1915-1924, the Lone Scouts enrolled over half a million boys before merging with the BSA.

All of these scouting programs emerged with the aim of preparing boys for any exigency and ensuring they continued to learn and pass down the kind of rugged, outdoor, "pioneer" values and skills their forebearers had embodied. Often organized with a paramilitary ethos, including uniforms, salutes, and badges, they served as a "moral equivalent of war" for young men and instilled principles of discipline, competence, good citizenship, and camaraderie. Troops were intentionally organized around the "gang principle" sociologists of the time had brought to the fore, and boys bonded by working together towards a positive goal. Members of the Boy Scouts pledged an oath perfectly aligned with the aims of the strenuous life movement — promising to keep "physically strong, mentally awake and morally straight" — and the other scouting programs held similar ideals.

Despite these semi-serious aims, Robert Baden-Powell, the founder of the Boy Scouts, described scouting as a "game" and primarily wanted his Scouts to enjoy themselves. As he argued, "one ought to take as much pleasure as one possibly can [in life] because if one is happy, one has it in one's power to make all those around happy."

For grown men, strenuous life-supporting structures took the form of fraternal lodges, which exploded in popularity in the latter third of the 19th and first part of the 20th centuries. During this so-called "Golden Age of Fraternalism" it's estimated that at least 40% of men belonged to at least one fraternal order. The two biggest fraternities were the Odd Fellows and the Freemasons, the latter of which Roosevelt was himself a member.

Fraternal lodges didn't aid men in living the strenuous life by engaging them in active, outdoor, skills-based activities like the scouting programs did, but they countered the deleterious effects of overcivilization in other ways. Their concrete, tangible rituals rooted men back in the realm of reality, while the camaraderie and commitment to higher ideals pulled them outside their heads and towards a greater purpose. Within a lodge, a man also recovered some of the autonomy and sense of self-worth that had gone missing at work.

The period between the late 19th century and the early 20th century wasn't just known as the "Golden Age of Fraternalism." It was also known as the "Heroic Age of Antarctic Exploration." Seventeen major Antarctic expeditions were launched from ten countries during this time, including the famous attempts by Robert Falcon Scott, Roald Amundsen, and Ernest Shackleton to reach the South Pole. These expeditions perfectly encapsulate the strenuous ideal of wedding personal ambition to a greater purpose. Antarctic explorers all wished for the glory of being the first to plant their flag at a certain location, but, at the same time, they aimed at contributing to new scientific and geographic knowledge. Their efforts were "heroic" because of the sheer physical and mental strenuosity and endurance required to cross a bleak, icy, polar landscape in a time before modern technological advancements. But they were also heroic for the romanticism and multi-faceted aptitudes they imbued their adventures with; many antarctic explorers possessed not only the skills of sailors and soldiers, but also the minds of scientists and the artistic sensibilities of photographers and poets. They were true Renaissance men.

Finally, some churches sought to turn the tide of their slide into softer worship, by preaching a gospel that was more "strenuous" and more apt to attract men into their pews. As part of this effort they created their own fraternities for both boys and adult men, which, like the Scouts, were organized with a paramilitary ethos. You can read all about this effort to make Christianity more "muscular" here.

Scouting programs, fraternal lodges, and to a lesser extent faith groups, fulfilled men's

"longing for individual identity and measurable accomplishment." They provided the structure and accountability that kept men on track with resisting the enervating effects of overcivilization and living the strenuous life. They were created on the premise that in a world that lacks inherent tests and challenges, you've got to create them on your own.

A Call for a New Strenuous Age

> *"It is provided in the essence of things that from any fruition of success, no matter what, shall come forth something to make a greater struggle necessary." –John Burroughs, 1896*

The period from the 1880s to the 1920s was animated not only by the likes of Theodore Roosevelt, a slew of polar explorers, troops of energetic scouts, and lodges of devoted brothers, but driven innovators and entrepreneurs like Thomas Edison, Henry Ford, and the Wright brothers, and rugged, action-craving, Romantic adventurers like Jack London. Taken all together, this extraordinary era in history has unsurprisingly come to be known as "The Strenuous Age."

Potent as the period was, however, the strength-celebrating, self-reliance-championing, character-elevating, effort-relishing, passivity-rejecting, overcivilization-resisting ethos of the age eventually waned along with the conditions

that brought it forth.

WWI punctured the period's long stretch of peace, resurrecting the stark stakes of danger and death once more, and restoring the kind of gravity that vaporizes feelings of "unreality" and "weightlessness."

And society simply adjusted to the changes wrought by the second industrial revolution. The arc of the jump forward smoothed out. The new became typical. Human psychology adapted, found equilibrium, at least partly.

TR's "cult of strenuosity" went into hibernation, waiting to reemerge when conditions made its revival necessary.

Those conditions have arrived.

If you've made it this far, you've probably already picked up on the uncanny parallels between the period at the turn of the 20th century and our own (you'll now also know why so many of our "Manvotionals" come from this time period!).

Our country's been at war in the Middle East for many years now, but not in a way that's affected the lives and psyches of more than a tiny fraction of the population.

The economy could be better, and isn't benefitting everyone equally, but it's a relative time of peace and prosperity.

Into this climate, the third industrial revolution arrived. This one propelled by computers, smartphones, and the internet.

These wondrous technological advancements have done powerfully good things for humanity, making communication infinitely easy, democratizing information, and putting scores of new conveniences at the touch of a button.

And yet.

It was another big jump forward and we're still adjusting. Just as in the second industrial revolution, these new technologies both enhance some human potentialities, and atrophy others.

If relied on to excess, they create the same enervating effects experienced at the end of the 19th century.

Men have become further degrees removed from the beating heart of things; think of spectators who watch other people controlling avatars on a video game. An

abstraction, on top of an abstraction, on top of an abstraction. We experience more of life secondhand than first, scrolling through pictures of other people's experiences on Facebook and Instagram.

Mastering concrete, hands-on skills has seemingly become increasingly unnecessary. As specialists we outsource most tasks to other specialists to do. If we need to do something ourselves, we Google the instructions. There's no need to learn how to navigate with a map and compass; GPS will do it for you. Why learn how to cook? Take-out's only a couple swipes away. Memorizing facts? That's so 1995. Google again.

Even if you wish to do something yourself, the interface of modern technology can make it nigh near impossible; want to tinker with your car like the grease monkeys of old? Good luck getting access to your engine's computer.

The insidious thing about modern gadgets is that they offer the *feeling* of greater freedom and autonomy by putting a seemingly infinite number of options at your fingertips. Yet it's only an illusion; the way you interface with the website or device is limited to the parameters set by the programmer; you're merely choosing from a preset menu of choices. In the modern age, if you don't program (a skill you likely don't possess unless it's your occupational specialty), you're being programmed.

If people thought men were getting flabby in the 19th century, one wonders what they'd think of us now. More than 2/3 of Americans are obese or overweight. Little wonder given the amount of time we sit sedentary, hunched over our computers and phones. Even regular gym goers typically repeat the same movement patterns over and over — repetitive routines carried out under fluorescent lighting.

We spend our days migrating between climate-controlled boxes — from the box of our house, to the box of our cubicle, to the box of our gym, to the box of the squat rack, and back home to box sweet box. The average prison inmate gets 2 hours of outside time each day, and yet 1 out of every 2 kids in the world spends less than 60 minutes out of doors. Adults probably even less. We're prisoners in gilded cages of our own design.

The modern enervation of physical fitness, mobility, and strength is matched by a decline in our overall toughness. Every product is designed to create as frictionless an experience as possible. When we can micromanage the level of our mattress' cushioning, our car seats are heated, and media content that is even slightly boring can be swiped away in an instant, our tolerance for even the slightest physical discomfort or mental annoyance has grown razor thin. Enduring 30 seconds of cold air between your car and the entrance to the grocery store can seem like a hardship.

Then there's the state of our moral character. To hear researchers tell it, we're just walking sacs of nerves and cognitive biases. Did you know that MRIs show you've already made a choice before you're even consciously aware of it? It's true! The best we can hope for, it seems, is to stand as passive observers and learn more about the internal machinery over which we exert so little control. Free will's thus on the ropes, and personal responsibility seems down for the count. Taking ownership for one's actions is for suckers who don't care about getting ahead.

Take these effects of contemporary overcivilization together, and what you've got is neurasthenia. Only we don't call it that anymore — we've got a big book of specific diagnoses now. The symptoms remain the same though: anxiety, depression, restlessness, "fear of everything, deficient mental control, lack of decision in trifling matters, hopelessness" — and of course, "paralysis of will." Life seems flimsy, insubstantial, weightless, "curiously unreal."

Initiative seems hard to come by, being a self-starter is a struggle, and causal potency — the feeling you can make things happen for yourself — frustratingly unreachable.

The pace of information (still stubbornly yellow) is infinitely faster than it was a hundred years ago, and wading through it without being sucked in for hours on end takes an ample dose of self-control. And then the question becomes, what to do with it? We're presented with innumerable options for how to live and what products to buy, but it's hard to move on any of it.

Instead, we get stuck in "paralysis by analysis." A loop of introspection. Further descent into "morbid self-consciousness."

The cure for all this mental pressure is commonly presented, as it was a century back, as more rest and relaxation. Get more sleep. Meditate. Go on a retreat. Disengage from responsibilities that are causing you stress.

Those who don't wish to try the rest cure, or don't find it effectual, turn to drugs and alcohol. Narcotics aren't as easy to come by as they were in the 19th century, but they can still be had. Instead of fighting feelings of unreality, you can choose to submerge yourself deeper into them. When temporarily obliterating the self isn't enough, people choose to entirely annihilate it.

It is a strange paradox to grapple with, but as some areas of life get smoother, others get quite a bit rougher.

Looking Back to Move Forward

> *"Specialization is for insects." –Robert A. Heinlein*

Does the litany of woes outlined above seem too pessimistic, too nostalgic for a time that never was?

The descriptions are rooted in objective facts: our lives *are* filled with more comforts and conveniences than ever before; we *are* fatter than we used to be; antidepressant use *has* gone up 400% over the last 30 years.

There are also, of course, stats one could point to to say that life is getting objectively better. But even if that's so, the point remains that for many people, it simply doesn't *feel* that way. And if we've learned anything from this journey, it's that you can't just think your way to a different perspective.

You've got to take a different course of action.

And the motivation to take that course can come from the healthy use of nostalgia.

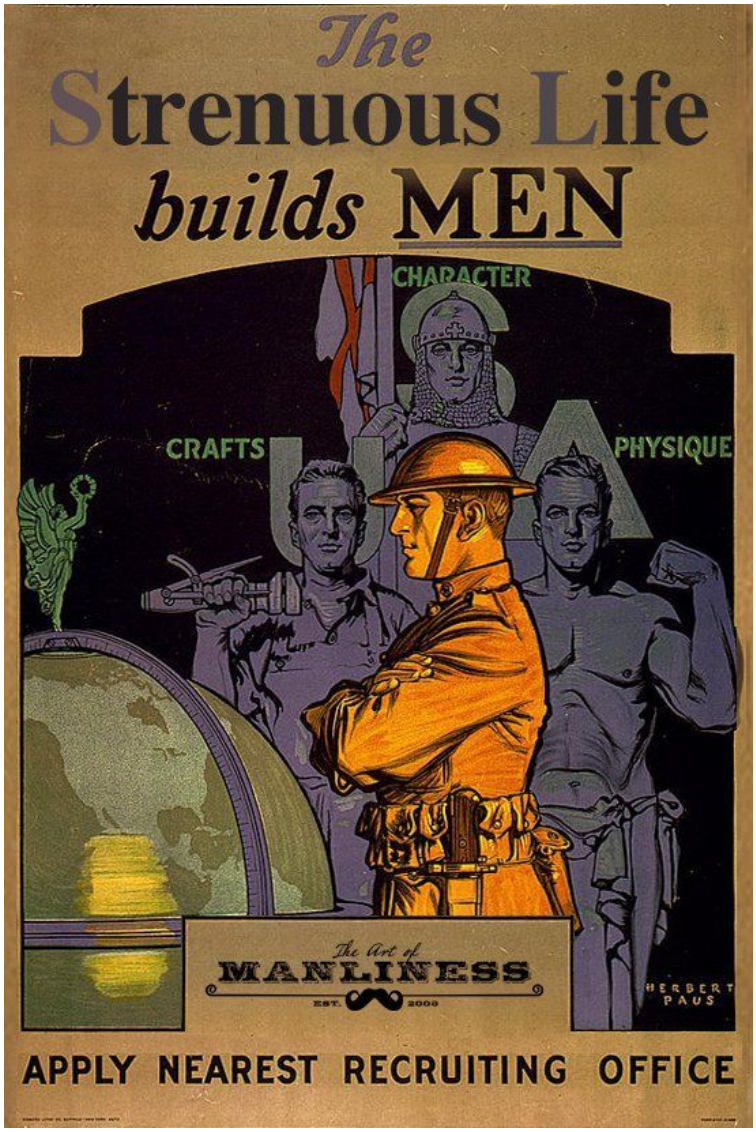
A myth doesn't have to be "true" to be inspiring. The legendary heroes of ancient Greece or Norse lore don't have to have existed just as they're described in stories in order to serve as stirring exemplars.

Similarly, the archetypes of the craftsman, saint, pioneer, and soldier don't have to ever have existed as we imagine them. They can still serve as guides to living the strenuous life.

Drawing inspiration from these nostalgic ideals needn't mean becoming a Luddite or eschewing all technology.

It just means that sometimes looking back is the best way to move forward.

Join the Cult of Strenuousity



> *"To enter life we all need a fearful challenge, something hard to do." – Edward Pearson Pressey, 1909*

The time has come for a new Strenuous Age.

Maybe the enervating effects of modern overcivilization have hit you hard, and you've felt adrift or drowning in the weightlessness of the modern age for a long time. The strenuous life is for you.

Perhaps its effects have left you relatively unaffected. That's great. You've probably already been taking steps to build your resistance.

At the same time, you've probably still got a niggling feeling that life could be even better and more satisfying than it already is — that you'd like to experience life a little less secondhand, a little more firsthand. The strenuous life is for you, too.

Or maybe you're somewhere in-between — a place where you perpetually oscillate between getting really excited to do and learn more, and lapsing back into passive inertia.

For all those who enjoy the fruits of civilization, but feel overly saturated and glutted on them, the strenuous life is calling.

Pockets of men have already been answering its call.

CrossFit, powerlifting, obstacle races, a revived appreciation for craftsmanship, heck, even our cultural fascination with Navy SEALs…these phenomena all represent disparate bands of resistance that have already emerged in response to the malaise of overcivilization.

What hasn't yet appeared is a program that unites the different ways of countering its atrophying effects and living the strenuous life, and does so in a way that provides the structure, accountability, and sense of purpose so necessary for sticking with it — just as the scouting programs and fraternal lodges did a hundred years ago.

Until now.

The Strenuous Life is coming. And you're invited to join.

What does that mean?

It means exploring the possibility that your dissatisfaction with life isn't a result of having too much load on the arch of your psyche, but too much load of only one kind.

It means committing to balancing the abstract and concrete. The mental and physical. Ease and struggle. Convenience and suffering. Pleasure and pain.

It means that rather than letting the modern age shape you, you decide to shape it — that when it pushes, you push back.

It means joining a countercultural movement which aims to reassert the will, "revolt against the enervating banality of the age," protest against excess softness, stultifying complacency, and bureaucratic boredom. Its purpose is to revive a race of decisive, stoic, men who are strong in body, mind, and soul. Men who love struggle more than comfort. Who desire boldness over blandness, who hold a "fascination with a world beyond the boundaries of modern safety and routine." Men who wish to choose initiative over self-indulgent passivity, independence over dependence, becoming over being, and the "elevation of strenuous effort over self-absorbed thought." Men who relish obstacles and eschew lopsided development in favor of cultivating the

whole man.

Members of a fraternity of Promethean masculinity.

Masters instead of slaves.

Adherents of TR's "cult of strenuosity."

Want to be the first to hear about the Strenuous Life program, get a chance to be a beta tester, and receive a free PDF copy of this article? Sign up here.