



### CHAPTER THREE

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# Ivan Ilyich, John Dean, and I

## How We Deceive Ourselves

### DEAN AND ILYICH

In Leo Tolstoy's *The Death of Ivan Ilyich*, the protagonist, a successful lawyer and respected federal judge in Czarist Russia, is a man nearing the peak of his powers, when he is suddenly confronted with the imminence of his own death at the age of forty-five. Months of painful reflection forced on him by his circumstances reveal that the life he had built for himself is a lie, an illusion—a potential life rather than an actual one. The question that tortured him time and again, until it finally coerced him to face the truth about his life, is a variation on the students' concern about how they can discover what

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they really want: “What if my entire life, my entire conscious life,” Ilyich asks himself, “simply was not the real thing?”

But what does Tolstoy mean when he speaks of a life that is “real”? He doesn’t say, at least not directly. He simply describes the last moments of Ilyich’s life and his sudden deliverance from illusion to reality. As Ilyich thrashed his arms in pain, he unexpectedly caught hold of his son’s hand, and immediately his preoccupation with his own pain dissolved. He was delivered from himself and from the unreality of his former life. He would not live to act on this revelation, but the deathbed conversion is enough, and Ilyich’s life is redeemed. The story ends powerfully: “Instead of death there was light. . . . ‘It is all over,’ said someone standing beside him. He heard these words and repeated them in his soul. ‘Death is over,’ he said to himself. ‘There is no more death.’”<sup>1</sup>

We are moved by the beauty of Tolstoy’s story, though opinions may vary about Ilyich’s deathbed conversion. Perhaps it sets a bad precedent. But what we really want to know is how Ilyich got himself so confused in the first place. Why didn’t he know what he really wanted? What was his problem anyway? For Tolstoy, the answer is straightforward enough: worldly ambition is Ilyich’s problem. It was Ilyich’s fevered attachment

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to and preoccupation with specific images of success that closed him off to intimations of a better way.

Two clusters of images and events reveal the nature of Ilyich's attachments. The first of these speaks of Ilyich's fascination with the power of his office. The pleasure he derived from his power is the pleasure of invidious comparison, an almost magical sense that in exercising power that diminishes others, the self is somehow enhanced. Of course, Ilyich would not have admitted to such a thing. Perhaps he did not admit it to himself. He was an evenhanded, mildly progressive, and thoroughly professional judge; he saw himself this way and was confident that his colleagues did as well. Yet Ilyich secretly reveled in his power and its potential to control and diminish others. He could call anyone before his bench and see to it that their reputations were ruined. He might even imprison them. The pleasures of invidious comparison were especially sweet when defendants appeared before him in court. "He loved to treat these people courteously, almost as comrades, loved to make them feel that he who had the power to crush them was dealing with them in such a friendly, unpretentious manner."<sup>2</sup>

The second cluster of images concerns Ilyich's social ambitions. If there were anything that could give

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Ilyich's life even greater reality and substance than the pleasures of invidious comparison, it would be his acceptance by the social elite of St. Petersburg. He longed for the intoxicating sense of his own significance that easy familiarity with those-who-count would bestow. To this end, Ilyich bought a spacious new home and furnished it with the best of everything: antique furniture, Japanese plates to hang on the wall, new damask draperies, and a footman in a white tie to open the front door. Convinced that his new home had finally achieved an aristocratic air, he sought the opinions of others, who without exception praised its quiet elegance. But Tolstoy (himself a member of minor royalty) wishes us to see through the illusion that Ilyich has created for himself: "In actuality, it was like the homes of all people who are not really rich but who want to look rich, and therefore end up looking like one another."<sup>3</sup>

What is most telling about Ilyich's pantings after social approbation is how quickly he jettisons his former moral code. Ilyich had always regarded his own heavy drinking and occasional philandering as vile behavior. But when he saw "people of high standing" doing such things, though he did not immediately dismiss his own misgivings he felt considerably less perturbed. Soon he was not bothered at all. How could anything be

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wrong? After all, “it was all done with clean hands, in clean shirts, and with French phrases, and, most importantly, among people of the best society.”<sup>4</sup>

Ilyich’s strained efforts at achieving a relaxed sense of familiarity with his social superiors seemed to inspire increasing impatience with those he regarded as his social inferiors. Once Ilyich’s new home was finished, efforts were made to discourage relatives and former friends, now regarded as shabby, from calling on him. Soon the shabby ones disappeared, and only the best and the brightest kept company with the Ilyiches.

What is to be learned from the fictional case study of Ivan Ilyich? More precisely, what is it that is unmasked? Clearly, Tolstoy, who is unashamedly didactic in many of the short stories and parables written in his later years, wishes his reader to identify with Ilyich’s condition, to see that worldly ambition, at least inordinate worldly ambition, leads to moral insensitivity; more important, it gives birth to fundamental confusion about what makes life worthwhile, about what it is that each of us truly wants. The question Ilyich’s own soul poses to him is this: “What do you want?” But Ilyich’s heart is so painted over by images drawn from the social script, that is, from the ethos of the Russian upper classes and minor royalty, that any response other than the scripted one is unlikely.

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But things are not so simple as they might seem. Tolstoy is not suggesting that Ilyich's investment in the ethos of the upper classes and his intoxicated attachment to the pleasure of invidious comparison alone account for Ilyich's self-deception. There is a deeper problem. Ilyich's inability to attend to the voice of his soul has a more willful element to it. Ilyich not only wishes to enjoy the fruits of worldly success but also intends to do so while protecting his own understanding of himself as morally sensitive, of "having lived," that is, as he "should have lived."

In fact, so overwhelming is his need for moral self-justification that even after all is lost—career, power, social approbation—and death is imminent, Ilyich still refuses to consider that he might have lived differently and better. "The voice of his soul" proposes the question to him three times: "What do you want?" The first time, Ilyich is caught off guard but is able to dismiss it as a "bizarre idea." The question is posed more powerfully a second time. Ilyich senses that, were he able to admit his folly, he could surrender peacefully to death. Yet he cannot. The prospect of admitting that his life has not been all it might have been is met with anger and obstinacy: "But if only I could understand the reason for this agony. Yet even that is impossible. It would make

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sense if one could say I had not lived as I should have. But such an admission is impossible,' he uttered inwardly, remembering how his life had conformed to all the laws, rules, and proprieties. 'That is a point I cannot grant,' he told himself, smiling ironically, as though someone could see that smile of his and be taken in by it."<sup>5</sup>

Only the third time that the voice of his soul poses the question to him can he bring himself to consider the unimaginable. He thought that, as he moved closer to positions of power and social distinction, he would also move incrementally closer to happiness. Now he knows better: "It occurred to him that what had seemed utterly inconceivable before—that he had not lived the kind of life he should have—might in fact be true. It occurred to him that those scarcely perceptible impulses of his to protest what people of high rank considered good, vague impulses which he had always suppressed, might have been precisely what mattered, and all the rest not been the real thing."<sup>6</sup>

In addressing the question put to him repeatedly by the voice of his soul, Ilyich offers an answer to what appears to be one of Tolstoy's most pressing questions: "Why didn't Ilyich know what he really wanted, and why don't we?" Ilyich couldn't know because he was caught in a lie, a ubiquitous and all but irresistible lie. Among all of Tolstoy's characters, only Gerasim, who is

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a peasant, and Ilyich's young son, not yet fully socialized into upper-middle-class proprieties, are not caught up in it. But the lie is not a simple one; it cannot be identified with the particularities of the social script itself, the idiosyncratic content of Ilyich's facsimile world. The lie consists rather in falsifying our internal conversation: a lie constructed by our strategic inattention.

If Ilyich wished to follow the script of his time, place, and social class, all the while maintaining a sense of moral rectitude, he would have to work at it. He would need to learn what to do with those vague impulses that called everything into question. He would need to learn how to repress them, project them, delay them, soften them, redefine them, ignore them.

It's not easy to adjudicate the inevitable tension between the self perceived as morally responsible and the self perceived as successful or potentially successful. The Ilyich case study alerts us to the all-too-human tendency to repress knowledge of the incompatibility between these two types of self-perception, or self-regard: perception of the self as morally responsible on the one hand and as truly successful on the other.

Building on our reading of *The Death of Ivan Ilyich*, and mindful of Ilyich's recollection of those scarcely perceptible impulses that warned him of his own dissimulation, it helps to offer a metaphor that describes the

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nature of these vague impulses that warn of alienation in the midst of growing success. It is the metaphor of a ringing bell. What kind of bell? It might be the *inkin*, a bell used in Zen practice to announce the start of a period of silent attentiveness, or perhaps the tocsin, or alarm bell, that warns of imminent danger.

Though all of us have resilient and impressive skills at redefining a situation to fit our own interests, or better, our perceived and immediate interests, it is also true that each time we invest ourselves in dissimulation, we do so with a degree of dis-ease. We hear a bell ring. We may not think we hear it, or we may hear it and misinterpret it. We may even claim that it is ringing for someone else. Nevertheless, the bell rings. But can we hear it?

Ilyich's tendency toward dissimulation, his willingness to remold moral and spiritual self-understanding to the exigencies of the self perceived as successful, his inattentiveness to the voice of his own deepest longings—all this is familiar enough to each of us, once we pause long enough to take a look, or better to listen, a little more carefully. Still, the capacity of Tolstoy's story to evoke sympathetic identification on the reader's part is limited. We tend to see Ilyich's dissimulation as the kind of thing that other people are likely to do if they're not careful. We do not deny the implications of Tolstoy's classic story for our own lives so much as we keep them at arm's

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length. When all is said and done, Ilyich remains other, the deceived one who should have known better.

Such is decidedly not the case with the second lawyer called to the stand. In reading John Dean's *Blind Ambition*, many find it easier to identify with the former counsel to President Nixon than with Tolstoy's fictional judge and bureaucrat.<sup>7</sup> Of course, no one much doubts that the bells rang loudly enough for Dean to hear. That time in the park across from the White House, when G. Gordon Liddy gave Dean permission to have him shot if this would help with the cover-up—that was a bell. Then there was the day that he and Fred Fielding (Dean's assistant in the White House Counsel's office) rifled through Howard Hunt's safe, donning surgical gloves to avoid leaving fingerprints. That was another bell. There were many others.

Nonetheless, we are not without sympathy for Dean. We may not excuse him, but we do understand. After all, Dean was barely out of law school when he went to work for the Justice Department and only a little older when offered the new job as counsel to the president. Not only that, but they flew him to the West Coast, first-class; sent a helicopter to fetch him; gave him the rooms at the summer White House usually reserved for John Ehrlichman and family; and even arranged for a conversation with the president. What was he supposed to do?

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As the scandal escalated and White House colleagues fell one by one, it is easy to see how Dean—moving ever closer to the center of power—managed to deceive himself into thinking that he was merely a defense lawyer for the whole crew, that he was just doing his job. John Dean did not hear the bells ring. He just had too much to lose. Many of us might not have heard the bells either, or would have attended to them only after we felt too deeply involved to extricate ourselves. This frightens us.

When the two cases are placed side by side, a second metaphor presents itself. It is a metaphor of movement. The first metaphor, that of a ringing bell, calls attention to the tendency to turn a deaf ear to the experiences that warn us of our moral evasiveness. The second expresses the confusion that follows on our evasion. It refers to the confusion (experienced by both Ilyich and Dean) of up with down, and of forward with backward, due to the absence of a moral compass, due, that is, to each man's sometimes willful repression of the felt tension between the self perceived as moral and the self perceived as successful. Dean: "In the Nixon White House, these upward and downward paths diverged, yet joined, like prongs of a tuning fork pitched to a note of expediency. Slowly, steadily, I would climb toward the moral abyss of the President's inner circle until I finally fell into it, thinking

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I had made it to the top just as I began to realize I had actually touched bottom.”<sup>8</sup> Ilyich: “It’s as though I had been going steadily downhill while I imagined I was going up. . . . In public opinion I was moving uphill, but to the same extent life was slipping away from me.”<sup>9</sup>

## THE ERASER AND THE MENDACIOUS MANTRA

Richard Johnson sat right in front of me in first grade. Richard wore white shirts with dark ink stains on them. Our teacher was Miss Sullivan—not the Miss Sullivan who taught third grade who I had a crush on, who later became managing editor of *Ellery Queen Mystery Magazine*, and who was left-handed and for that reason encouraged me in my own sinisterism, but the Miss Sullivan who was the first-grade teacher near retirement at the time and who had reputedly once pulled down some unfortunate kid’s pants and whacked him with a hairbrush and who, worse than that, kept moving my pencil from my left hand to my right. These days, however, Miss Sullivan the elder seemed somewhat less daunting. A harsh but finally ineffectual disciplinarian, she had trouble bringing anyone to justice. It was no secret that Miss Sullivan had trouble hearing; nor were the implications of the fact lost on us. When she turned her back to us to

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write on the board, she was oblivious to what went on in class.

Richard and I had devised a game. We played it when Miss Sullivan went to the board. The game was called “hide the eraser.” Each of us had about half of one of those large gum-colored erasers. They were called Jiffy erasers, I think, and each had the likeness of a knight riding a stallion imprinted on it. I recall being pleased that you could see considerably more than half of the stallion and rider on the half I received.

Anyway, the idea behind the game is obvious enough. Richard would hide the eraser somewhere on his person, or more rarely in his desk, and I would have to guess where it was. There really weren’t too many possibilities, and to tell the truth I don’t remember whether we played this game for just a few days or weeks or only on this one day. In any case, I was behind in this day’s contest. Richard had cleverly hidden the eraser in his shoe or someplace, and it had taken me sixteen guesses to figure it out. I had already challenged both my own and Richard’s sense of propriety by hiding it in my underpants in an earlier round—a good inning, by the way—but was now left high and dry.

Then it came to me. It couldn’t miss. Brilliant! Richard would never get this one. Who would believe I possessed the courage and skill to stick the eraser up my

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nose? To my surprise, it fit quite comfortably. That is, it took a little work—anything worthwhile does—but there was a lot more room up there than I expected.

Failing to impute anything from my slightly congested tone as I responded to his queries (“No, it’s not inside my right sock” or “No, it’s not inside my Chip Hilton baseball novel, or inside my desktop ink-pen holder”), Richard became increasingly frustrated and confused. He guessed dozens of times without success, and I forged into the lead. Finally, as Miss Sullivan turned to write some sort of phonetic formula on the board, Richard turned to me and said, “All right, all right, I give, produce it.” He meant by this, of course, that he thought I was lying and that I needed to demonstrate that it was not someplace he’d already guessed. Happy to oblige my vanquished adversary, I delicately placed my middle finger up my nose to retrieve the Jiffy eraser, smirking at Richard triumphantly as I did so. Only, the Jiffy eraser failed to respond properly. In fact, I had the sickly sense that it might even have gone up a little further, drawn by a gentle suction phenomenon of some kind. “Produce it,” Richard repeated. “You can’t produce it, can you?”

Having no notion of nasal passages, or where they led, I thought that the eraser was moving toward my brain, was already quite near it in fact. Concerned, but thus far fighting off panic, I enlisted my pinky finger,

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thinking the task demanded a more delicate instrument than I had at first supposed. The results were even worse, and I was sure this time that the Jiffy eraser—stallion, knight, and all—was slowly but inevitably being sucked into my brain. By this time, Richard was a blur and “Produce it, produce it” a distant echo. I was overwhelmed by a sense of cold panic; my life was freeze-framed and my mouth hung wide open. An eraser lodged in my brain suggested terrifying possibilities. One last try resulted in what I most feared: the total disappearance, as I saw it, of the eraser into my brain.

I was terrified, stunned, paralyzed, and, above all, alone. Miss Sullivan would not sympathize. Richard would not sympathize, and my father . . . oh, dear God! But then something occurred to me—a miraculous way out. It came to me in a flash, and I knew just what I had to do. I said firmly to myself and I meant it with all my heart: “This did not happen; it did not happen. I certainly did not stick an eraser up my nose.” I felt an immediate sense of relief, despite occasional tremors. I found to my surprise that I could chase away my fears, my shame, by simply repeating my mendacious mantra as often as necessary.

The strategy worked for a couple of days. Unfortunately, the left side of my face began to swell, and one eye closed. So it was off to Harvard Square to see Dr.

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Vogel, whom I had always admired, at least until recently, when I heard him call another boy “Chief” as I waited outside his office.

“Take it easy, Chief,” he said to me as he peered up my nose with a tiny light. “Say, Chief,” Dr. Vogel inquired nonchalantly, “did you stick anything up your nose recently—something pretty big?”

“No, Dr. Vogel, I did not,” I replied with conviction and mock confusion. A moment later I was being hoisted onto the examining table. Out came the tweezers, or something like tweezers.

“I’ve got something here, Betty,” he told my anxious mother. “Therrrrre it is.” He brought the disgusting thing over to the sink and washed it off. Maybe it was a “growth,” I thought. Dr. Vogel had said something about a growth to my mother earlier, and I could tell that a growth wasn’t my fault. I held my breath.

“My, my, Chief, what have we here? It’s a . . . it’s a . . . hmmm? Why, look at that, it’s a Jiffy eraser with a picture of a knight on it. I wonder how that ever got up there? Do you think, maybe, they rode up your nose when you weren’t looking?”

I was, of course as incredulous as he, as incredulous as my poor mother who looked plaintively into my eyes and said, “But Brian, you’ve always been such an honest little guy.” Ouch.

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But all was not lost. After all, Doctor Vogel had “produced it.”

**PRACTICE: RATIONALIZATION: A USER’S GUIDE**

It occurred to Ilyich “that those *scarcely perceptible impulses* of his to protest what people of high rank considered good, vague impulses which he had always suppressed, might have been precisely what mattered, and all the rest had not been the real thing” (*italics mine*).

On rereading this short passage from *The Death of Ivan Ilyich*, I was reminded of one of the Buddha’s discourses, in which he speaks about four kinds of horses: the excellent horse, the good horse, the poor horse, and the really bad horse. Pema Chödrön, a Tibetan Buddhist teacher in Nova Scotia, in explicating the sutra notes that “the excellent horse . . . moves before the whip even touches its back; just the shadow of the whip or the slightest sound from the driver is enough to make the horse move. The good horse runs at the lightest touch of the whip on its back. The poor horse doesn’t go until it feels pain, and the very bad horse doesn’t budge until the pain penetrates to the marrow of its bones.”<sup>10</sup>

Chödrön happily confesses her special affinity with the very bad horse. I’m with her. My own most penetrating insights almost invariably present themselves for

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consideration just after I get back on my feet, still dusting myself off after another full-speed collision with yet another wall.

From the perspective of the Absolute (to continue the Buddhist idiom), this is just fine, and both Chōdrōn and I can take comfort. There is no better or worse in how we learn what we learn. Zen teacher Shunryu Suzuki, commenting on the same text, says that the bad horse actually enjoys a certain advantage: “When you are determined to practice zazen with the great mind of Buddha, you will find the worst horse is the most valuable one. In your very imperfections you will find the basis for your firm, way-seeking mind.”<sup>11</sup> Some of us, it appears, just pick up the cues, the bells, the emerging signals, those scarcely perceptible impulses a little more quickly and astutely than others.

With a respectful bow to the worst horse, most of us think it is a good thing, all in all, to pick up on the signals, to hear the bells, and do so at least a moment or two before we run head first into an immovable object, or feel the whip penetrate to the marrow of our bones, or find ourselves in jail or on our deathbed. No doubt there is “more rejoicing in heaven over one sinner repenting than over ninety-nine upright people who have no need of repentance,”<sup>12</sup> but your friends and neighbors, your coworkers and relatives will tend to see things

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a little differently. So maybe it would be best to take the initiative ourselves in this matter. Perhaps we can begin with a simple admission and an axiom that flows from it: All of us are very good at rationalizing, and it would be worthwhile to keep this in mind as we make our decisions about work, marriage, and what to have for dinner tonight.

I sometimes tell my students that I am concerned about their limited capacity for rationalization. It's not their ability to rationalize in their written assignments that concerns me; given sufficient time, it is relatively easy to create and defend an experiential falsification of great magnitude. No, my concern is with a kind of stalwart honesty that tends to creep into all too many of our in-class conversations—the kind of damaging integrity that slips out in an unguarded aside, in a gut reaction, in a moment when things bubble up from somewhere we are not familiar with. If you are to be armed for success in the real world, the capacity to rationalize on your feet, extemporaneously and with conviction is not optional; it is required.

*First, Meet the Press*

You are John Dean's press secretary. You are about to represent Dean in what promises to be a hostile news conference. Reread the Dean segment. List three or four

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“bells” Dean missed; redefine, reframe, and in short rationalize away the signifying character of these experiences by putting a new spin on things.

I’ll prime the pump for you.

PAUL SNIDEFEST, *UPI*: Ah, Mr. Mahan, we understand that Mr. Dean at one point donned surgical gloves to remove money from a safe in the White House. Can you comment on this? Doesn’t this look bad, perhaps even illegal?

BRIAN MAHAN: I have spoken to Mr. Dean about this, Paul, and as you might imagine he is both embarrassed and concerned. Mainly, he’s embarrassed. [Uneasy laughter.] It may seem odd, on first appearance, Paul—and I understand that—but Mr. Dean’s deepest motivation was to save the White House, and for that matter the American people, any further embarrassment about this whole unfortunate episode. His donning the gloves in question was—oh, and, Paul, they were actually not surgical gloves per se but, strictly speaking, these were the type of gloves routinely used for, ah . . . testing for prostate problems and—but what I’m saying is that the wearing of these gloves testifies not to Mr. Dean’s moral insensitivity but to his hypersensitivity around issues of this kind, these moral and ethical issues.

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Mr. Dean is aware of the necessity of not only behaving properly in such matters but also avoiding even the appearance of impropriety. If fingerprints had been found on those documents, especially his own—remember, Mr. Dean is the president’s lawyer—it would have been hard to avoid the appearance of impropriety, despite Mr. Dean’s perfectly legitimate motivations in the matter.

NADINE SLIGHTMEYER, *BOSTON GLOBE*: Mr. Mahan, when G. Gordon Liddy said, for want of a better phrase, that he was willing to have Dean “take him out,” didn’t Mr. Dean sense that perhaps things were getting a little out of control? That he ought to bring this to the president or someone else in authority?

BRIAN MAHAN: Ms. Slightmeyer, have you listened to Mr. Liddy’s talk show? He advertises calendars featuring seminude women holding firearms as a great Christmas gift. He did a lecture tour with Timothy Leary, for God’s sake. He has taken every opportunity to denigrate Mr. Dean’s character and impugn his motives. He brags about being able to kill with a pencil, and he likes to hold his hand over a flame for entertainment purposes.

I just don’t think it’s all that farfetched to say that Mr. Dean had written Mr. Liddy off before that bizarre encounter. Mr. Dean, remem-

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ber, did not hire Mr. Liddy and had little in the way of control over his actions, let alone his words.

You get the idea. Have fun.

*Then, Face the Nation*

Recall some situation in your life (perhaps it concerns a relationship gone bad, or some regrettable decisions you have made at the workplace) where you are ready to admit that you engaged in acts of self-deception with some frequency.

Next, take some time (I am speaking here of hours rather than minutes) to review the emerging signals, the bells, to which you turned a deaf ear at the time. (It may be best to work backward, first studying your present public stance on the events in question and then moving back a step at a time.) Attend to the echoes of these experiences as they reverberate in your memory. Doing your utmost to put aside any guilt, embarrassment, or shame, try to cultivate a sense of curiosity about the particulars of your techniques for ignoring the bells. What were your favored avoidance techniques? Are they still in play? Are there friends or relatives who can help you with this practice by reminding you of particular events, words, and actions you'd rather not hear about?



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Finally, hold your own press conference. Ask tough questions. Drawing on what you've just learned, write out your grade-A rationalizations in response. Study them. Look for patterns in your responses.

