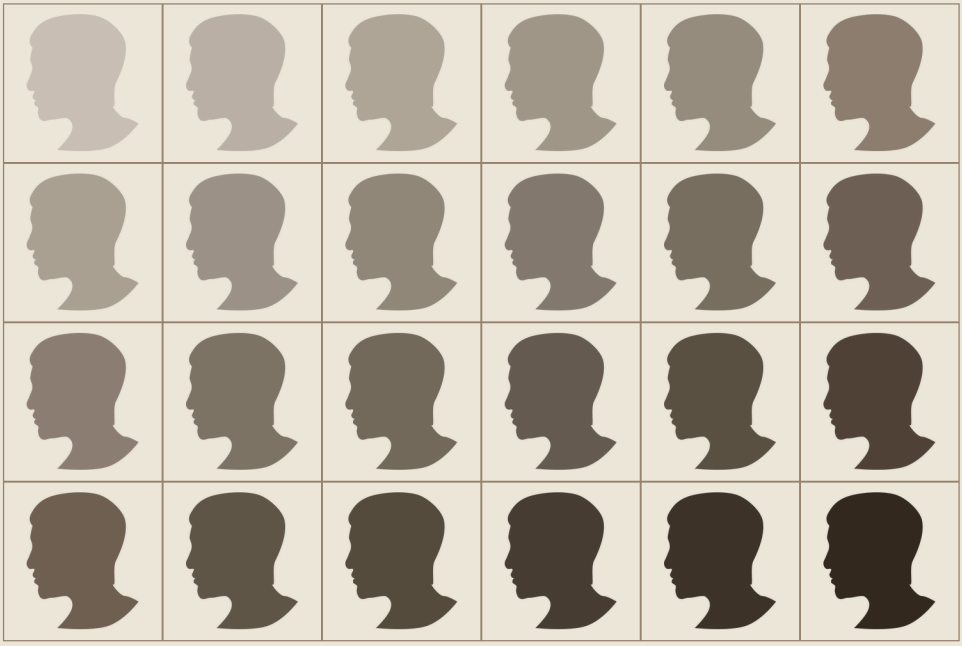


THE REPUBLIC OF SELVES

Why you break every promise you make to yourself — and how to govern the people you'll become

WES HOLLOWAY

ODIN PRESS

The Republic of Selves

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Preface

I spent thirty years in a folding chair, in rooms that smelled of burnt coffee, watching several thousand people fight the same war. It was always, underneath its thousand disguises, the same war: a person had made a promise to himself, in a clear and honest moment, and then some later version of him had broken it. Not because he was weak, though he always thought that was the reason. Because the man who made the promise and the man who broke it were not, in any way that mattered, the same man — and no one had ever told either of them that.

That is what this book is about, and it is why I think it matters more than the shelf of books next to it. Almost everything written about willpower, discipline, and self-control rests on a hidden assumption so obvious no one states it: that there is one of you. One continuous self who wakes up every morning, who wanted the good thing last night and betrayed it this afternoon, and who therefore must be, on the evidence, either weak or hypocritical. Every diet book, every productivity system, every stern lecture about grit is addressed to that single self and asks him to try harder. And it fails, over and over, for a reason none of them will name: the self who reads the book at nine in the morning is not the self who has to keep its promises at eleven at night. You are not one person failing to be consistent. You are many people, spread across time, and no one taught you how to govern them.

So here is the gap I wrote this book to fill. The honest thing — that you are several selves, not one — has been said before, by philosophers and poets who mostly meant it as a melancholy fact or a metaphysical puzzle. And the practical thing — how to actually change your behavior — has been said a thousand times, always on the false premise of the single self. What almost no one has done is put the two together: to take seriously that you are many, and then ask the practical question that follows from it. Not how do I become one consistent person — you will not, ever, and the trying is most of your exhaustion. The real question is

this: how do the many people I am learn to keep faith with one another across time? That is a question of government, not of willpower, and government is a solved problem. We have known for centuries how a collection of different people, who do not agree and cannot be trusted to always behave, can nonetheless live together in a stable and even a decent order. The answer is a republic — a constitution, laws that bind, representation, fairness among the citizens. This book takes that answer, which humanity worked out for nations, and turns it inward, onto the nation you are.

What I found, in thirty years of watching, is the spine of the book, and I will tell you the two findings plainly now so you know where we are going. The first is that the people who lasted were not stronger than the people who failed. Often they were visibly weaker — they knew they could not be trusted, and so they built. The second is the reason the first is true: they took the important decisions away from the self who could not be trusted with them and handed those decisions to structures, promises, and arrangements that did not depend on being strong at the worst hour. They did not win the war inside them. They ended it, by governing. The strong ones, the ones sure they could master themselves by force of will, lost the most reliably, because willpower is by definition absent at exactly the hour it is most needed. Governance works while you sleep. Willpower does not.

The book walks that idea from the ground up. The early chapters make the case that you really are many — that the stranger in an old photograph of yourself is not a figure of speech, that the present self genuinely discounts the future self down to almost nothing and calls the result a free choice. From there it turns constructive. It builds the treaty among your selves, the agreement made in daylight to bind the self who betrays in the dark. It takes up the oldest instrument of self-government, the rope on the mast — the strong self, in a clear moment, protecting the weak self from himself, against his own future protest. It teaches the gentler and in the end more powerful move of making the future self real: writing to him, picturing him, providing for him, until he stops being a stranger you rob and becomes someone you keep faith with. And then, because every corrective can be overshot, it turns and guards the other flank — fairness across time, the justice that keeps you from becoming the tyrant of your own tomorrow, taxing every present self to death for a future none of them lives to spend. The last chapter is the landing, and it does not promise you the unity you came in wanting.

It promises something truer and more durable: a republic that holds.

A word about how this is written. I have no interest in slogans, and I have heard every one of them. I am not going to tell you to be strong, because being strong is the thing that does not work, and telling a person to do the thing that does not work is how most of these books waste a reader's life. I am going to try to show you the mechanism — how the thing actually operates inside you — and then hand you a lever. What you do with the lever is your business. I ran rooms; I did not run lives, including, for a long time, my own.

Which is the last thing you should know before you begin. I am not writing to you from some finished, unified self who solved this and is now looking down at your struggle from a height. I got sober badly, in one of those rooms, at twenty-nine, and I relapsed at four years in and nearly lost everything I had built. I was never one man either. I am as several as you are — a disciplined self and a weak one, a wise one and a fool. What I did, the only thing I did, the only thing this book recommends, was slowly learn to govern the several I was, well enough that the life held. That government has held now for a long time. It is not a cure. There is no cure. But it is enough, and it is the whole of what I have to give you, and it starts, as the book will keep insisting, with one small promise kept to a person you have not met yet.

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Part I

The Many

1

The Stranger in the Photograph

There is a photograph of me at twenty-six that I cannot read. I am standing in front of a car I no longer remember owning, squinting, one hand up against the sun, wearing an expression I could not reproduce now if you paid me. I know the facts of him. I know what he did that year and most of what he was afraid of and how it turned out, because I was there, or somebody was. But when I look at his face I get the same small drop in the stomach you get on a stair that has one more step than you counted. I do not recognize the man. He has my nose and my bad posture and, God help him, my haircut, and he is a stranger. Not a metaphor for a stranger. A stranger.

I kept that photograph for years without understanding why it bothered me, and then for thirty years I sat in rooms full of people who were bothered by the same thing and did not have a name for it either. Church basements, mostly. Bad coffee, folding chairs, the fluorescent light that makes everyone look like they have been up all night, because a lot of them have. This chapter is the name for the thing that bothered us. It is the first thing you have to see before any of the rest of the book can help you, and it is the hardest, because everything in you is built to deny it. You believe you are one person. You have a single name and you answer to it. You woke up this morning feeling continuous with the person who went to sleep in your bed. And it is not true, and the photograph is the proof, and the whole trouble of your life runs downhill from the lie.

The Face That Will Not Answer

Go find one. Everyone has one. A photo, or a journal, or an email you sent, or a voicemail somebody saved without asking. Something with

your own self on it from far enough back. Look at it the way you would look at a document, not the way you look in a mirror, because a mirror shows you the current occupant and a document shows you a previous one. What you are hunting for is the exact moment the face stops answering — the second where you try to feel your way into what he wanted, or why she was smiling like that, and the door is simply shut. You can stand outside it and describe the room. You cannot get in. That shut door is the single most important thing you will notice in this whole book, and most people spend an entire life carefully not noticing it, because it makes the floor tilt, and there is nothing to hold onto.

Mine is a resolution. I found it in an old notebook, eight words, underlined twice, in my own handwriting, about a thing I was going to make of my life. I can read the words fine. I cannot for anything reconstruct the wanting of them. I know he wanted it badly enough to press the pen down twice. I stand on the near side of that want the way a man stands on a dock watching a boat he was supposed to be on pull slowly away from the pilings, close enough to read the name on the stern, too far to jump.

Four hundred years ago a Frenchman named Michel de Montaigne noticed the same thing, looked straight at it instead of away, and spent the back half of his life writing it down. He is the honest patron saint of this whole problem, because he refused the flattering story that a man is one solid thing. He was a magistrate, a serious person, and at thirty-eight he shut himself in a tower and started watching himself the way a naturalist watches an animal, and reporting what he saw with no interest in making himself look good. What he found when he looked inward was not a soul. It was a crowd:

> *"We are all lumps, and of so various and inform a contexture, that every piece plays, every moment, its own game, and there is as much difference betwixt us and ourselves as betwixt us and others"*

Read the last part again, slowly, because the rest of the book hangs off it. *As much difference betwixt us and ourselves as betwixt us and others.* The distance you feel to the stranger in the photograph is not a trick of bad memory or a failure of nerve. It is real, and it is as wide as the distance to any stranger on the street, because in the only sense that finally matters, that is what he is. You are not looking at a younger you. You are looking at a different member of a group you happen to belong

to, and the group is called by your name, and you have mistaken the name for a person. This is the error that runs underneath almost every private misery I ever sat across a table from. A man believes he is one continuous self, and so when the self of last year did something the self of this year would never do, he cannot make it add up, and the failure to make it add up curdles into shame, and the shame convinces him he is rotten at the core, and the conviction of rottenness is itself the thing that sends him back to the very behavior he is ashamed of. The whole doomed loop turns on a false premise sitting right at the start of it: that the one who did the thing and the one who is ashamed are the same man. They are not. They share a name and a nose and a haircut. That is not the same as being one person, and the difference, small as it sounds, is the hinge the rest of the book swings on.

There is a second kind of photograph that unsettles people worse than the first, and it is the one where the expression is simply unreadable — not sad, not happy, just closed, the face of someone in the middle of a thought you no longer have any access to. People bring those to me and say, almost apologizing, *I don't know what I was feeling there.* Of course you don't. You weren't there. Somebody wearing your face was there, thinking a thought that belonged to him, and he did not leave you a copy.

A man came into my program years ago, court-ordered, furious about it, and he carried a booking photograph of himself folded in his wallet. Not for sentiment. He kept it, he told me one Tuesday night under the bad light, so he would remember what he must never let himself become again. He put it on the table between us, face up, and smoothed the fold with his thumb. It was maybe fourteen months old. He looked at it the way you look at a photo of someone who has died, and I watched him try to find the man inside it and fail, and I watched the failing scare him worse than the arrest ever had, because the arrest at least came with a story he could tell at a meeting. This came with no story. It was just a stranger, wearing his exact face, on the worst night of a life, and he could not reach in to ask the stranger what he had been thinking, and he could not throw the photograph away either, because the stranger had his name and his fingerprints and, it was slowly dawning on him, his future, if he wasn't careful.

Here is why the door is shut, mechanically, so you stop treating it as a personal weakness. That earlier self had information you no longer have and lacked information you now take for granted. He wanted

3

The Night Shift

Nothing bad ever happened to me at ten in the morning. I mean that almost literally. In thirty years of watching lives come apart and come back together, I learned that the disasters keep hours, and their hours are late. The relapse, the sent text, the abandoned plan, the drink, the call you can't take back — they cluster in the dark, after the reasonable selves have gone to bed and left the building to someone else. There is a self who works that shift. He clocks in when the defenses are down, and he undoes, quietly and efficiently, the work that the daytime selves spent all their strength on. You know him. You have blamed him for years, and called the blaming self-knowledge, and it has never once helped. This chapter is about who he actually is, and why the word you have been using for him — weakness — is not just wrong but is the very thing that keeps him employed.

The Shift That Undoes

In the last chapter you learned that the microphone changes hands, and that most of the trouble happens at the handoffs. Here is the worst handoff of all, the one that ruins more plans than every other combined: the handoff to the self who takes over late at night, when the morning self who made the plans is nowhere to be found, and the plans are sitting there unguarded, with his name on them and no one who feels bound by them at the controls.

You have lived this a thousand times, so let me just describe it and let you supply your own version. In the morning, or in some clear hour, you decided something with real conviction. You were going to hold the line on the thing — the spending, the eating, the drinking, the scrolling, the staying in when you should stay in. And you meant it. It was not a

weak intention; you could feel how much you meant it, which is exactly what fooled you. And then the day happened, and the evening came, and somewhere after ten o'clock a different version of you looked at that morning decision the way you'd look at a note left by a coworker who has gone home — with mild interest, no sense of ownership, and a quiet certainty that surely, tonight, an exception is reasonable. And the line did not hold. Again.

Let me give it a specific shape. A man decides, over his morning coffee, full of resolve, that tonight he will not open the bottle. He is not white-knuckling; he is genuinely settled about it, the way you are settled about things you have finally understood. He goes through his day. He is tired by six in the particular way that feels like being owed something. By nine he is on the couch, and the morning's decision has thinned to a rumor. By eleven a self is standing in the kitchen who does not feel like he personally agreed to anything, who regards the morning man's resolution as someone else's opinion, sincerely held by someone else, and who pours the drink not in defiance, not in weakness, but with the calm of a man who was simply never party to the contract. That is the night shift. It does not break the promise. It was never in the room when the promise was made.

Now, your whole life you have been told, and have told yourself, that this is a failure of willpower — that the morning man was strong and the midnight man was weak, and that if you could just be stronger at eleven o'clock the line would hold. And I want to stop you there, because that account is not only wrong, it is the single most expensive mistake in this whole territory. If it were weakness, then the same man, twelve hours earlier, would also have been weak. But he wasn't. At ten in the morning he kept the very promise he broke at eleven at night, and he kept it easily, without strain. The thing that changed between ten a.m. and eleven p.m. was not the amount of willpower available. It was which self was holding the microphone. Weakness is the wrong diagnosis, and a wrong diagnosis leads to a wrong cure, which is why "just be stronger" has failed you every single time you have tried it.

I know the shift from the inside, not just the folding chair. I had four years sober once, early on, and I was proud of them in the way that should have warned me, and one November night I lost all four in a matter of hours. I have gone over that night many times, and here is the truest thing I can say about it. The man who drank that night was not weak and was not, in any way he could feel, betraying anyone. The

morning me — the four-years me, the proud one — had simply gone off shift, hours before, and a different me had come on, and that one looked at four years of sobriety the way you look at a stranger's savings account: real, impressive, and none of his business. He did not fight the four years. He did not agonize. He just did not experience them as his to protect. That is the part that is almost impossible to explain to someone who has not felt it, and the part that everyone who has felt it recognizes instantly. There was no dramatic struggle, no dark night of temptation that I heroically lost. There was a quiet, matter-of-fact absence of the person who cared. The four-years man cared enormously; he had built his whole identity on those four years. But he was not there. The man who was there regarded the sobriety the way you might regard a diet you'd read was popular — a fine idea, for other people, no particular claim on him tonight. And I want you to sit with how ordinary that is, because it is the ordinariness that makes it dangerous. We prepare ourselves for temptation as if it will arrive as a great pull, a craving we can brace against and fight. It does not usually arrive that way. It arrives as the simple, unremarkable absence of the self who would have said no, and you cannot brace against an absence. You can only, in advance, make arrangements that do not depend on that self being present — because the terrible discovery of that November night was that he would not be. He had gone off shift at some point in the evening, without announcement, and I never noticed him leave, and by the time it mattered there was no one on duty who had ever cared about four years.

And here is the question I could not answer for a long time, the one that kept me stuck: if it was really me, how could I disown it, and if it was not me, who was it? The answer, which took me years, is that it was neither the true me nor an impostor. It was one real self among several, the eleven-o'clock self, as real as the four-years self and no less mine — and the mistake was ever thinking there was a single true me for one of them to be the counterfeit of. Both were real. Both were me. Neither was the whole of me. That is not a comfortable answer. It is, however, the only one that has ever let anybody actually do something about the problem, because you cannot guard against a self you have declared unreal.

So set the personal story down and let me show you the general machine underneath it, because the machine is the same in the man with the bottle and the woman with the credit card and the person who

You break every promise you make to yourself. Not because you are weak — because the self who makes the promise and the self who breaks it are not the same person. You are not one man failing to be consistent. You are many, spread across time, and no one ever taught you how to govern them.

Drawing on thirty years running addiction-recovery rooms, Wes Holloway offers a quietly radical reframe: stop trying to become one unified self, and start governing the several you already are. The people who lasted, he found, were never the strong ones who fought themselves head-on and lost at the predictable hour. They were the ones who built a government — a treaty among their selves, a way to bind the weak one, a way to make the future one real, a fair hand that robbed none of them.

With no slogans and no uplift, Holloway takes the oldest political idea — that different people who cannot always be trusted can still live together in a stable and decent order — and turns it inward. This is not a book about willpower, the most oversold word in the rooms. It is about the treaty you have not yet signed with yourself. You are a people, not a person. Learn to govern them, and the many of you will hold.

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