

# **THE VOICE IN MY HEAD IS AN ASSHOLE**

---

HOW TO TAME YOUR INNER CRITIC

DARRYL BLAKE

Copyright © 2022 by Darryl Blake

All rights reserved.

No part of this book may be reproduced in any form or by any electronic or mechanical means, including information storage and retrieval systems, without written permission from the author, except for the use of brief quotations in a book review.

Although the publisher and the author have made every effort to ensure that the information in this book was correct at press time and while this publication is designed to provide accurate information in regard to the subject matter covered, the publisher and the author assume no responsibility for errors, inaccuracies, omissions, or any other inconsistencies herein and hereby disclaim any liability to any party for any loss, damage, or disruption caused by errors or omissions, whether such errors or omissions result from negligence, accident, or any other cause.

This publication is meant as a source of valuable information for the reader, however it is not meant as a substitute for direct expert assistance. The content of this book is for informational purposes only and is not intended to diagnose, treat, cure, or prevent any condition or disease. You understand that this book is not intended as a substitute for consultation with a licensed practitioner. Please consult with your own physician or healthcare specialist regarding the suggestions and recommendations made in this book. The use of this book implies your acceptance of this disclaimer.

# CONTENTS

Content Warning	1
PART I	
<b>UNDERSTANDING THE INNER ASSHOLE</b>	
1. A Mutiny of Assholes	5
2. Origin of a Species... Evolution of the Asshole	11
3. I Hear Dead People	18
4. What the F@#k Have I Become?	24
5. Assholes Have a Mind of Their Own	31
6. What's in a Name...	37
7. The Prehistoric Asshole	40
8. The Bullying Asshole	65
9. The Damaged Asshole	70
10. Cognitive Distortions. The Language of Assholes	76
11. Stories Assholes Tell	111
12. Nazi Assholes and the Power of Choice	122
PART II	
<b>TAMING ASSHOLES</b>	
13. You Can't Spell Assassin Without Ass	131
14. Breaking the Asshole Cycle	138
15. Putting Words in Assholes'... err... Mouths	147
16. Visualizing Assholes	159
17. Suffocating Assholes	174
18. Putting Assholes to Sleep	196
19. Hypnotizing Assholes	204
20. Tripping Ass	214
21. Flow, Mindfulness and a Life Well Lived...	225
<i>Acknowledgments</i>	239
<i>About the Author</i>	241

## CONTENT WARNING

**T**his book contains references to self-harm, suicide, depression, anxiety, and other mental health conditions.

A special note to anyone who might be suffering depression, anxiety, or any other mental health challenge. These are real, physical conditions. Please don't try to go it alone. Make sure you are getting help, ideally from a mental health professional. While the information in this book can be a useful resource, it may be extremely difficult to incorporate the concepts on your own, because the condition itself may interfere with your ability to think, feel, and act clearly. If in doubt, please talk to someone. You are not alone.

**PART I**

---

**UNDERSTANDING THE  
INNER ASSHOLE**

## A MUTINY OF ASSHOLES

---

April 14, 1982

Seventy days lost at sea.

An epic story of survival.

---

**T**he crew begs and moans pitifully, “We can’t go on. We need more water.” Barely recognizable, they lay on the decks burned beyond recognition, scarred and shriveled versions of their former selves. They suffer under soul-scorching sun for over seventy days at sea, shipwrecked and lost to the world. Fresh blisters bubble up between layers of earlier burns and abrasions that refuse to heal. Nothing, including skin, has a chance to dry out. Salt, literally rubbing into every wound in a never-ending cycle of soul-destroying wind and waves.

Meanwhile, the decaying rubber life raft taunts them with its written guarantee to stay afloat for forty days. Small comfort as

they approach two months lost at sea, holding their raft together with improvised lashings and plugs of whatever can be scavenged to patch holes and tears. Keeping themselves afloat through constant use of the hand pump in a never-ending battle with the punctured, deflating tubes.

The captain has lost a full third of his body weight—hunger and thirst his constant companions. His tongue has swollen, pressing against the inside of his mouth, and making it painful to speak.

“No, we can’t have more water. We’ve used our ration for the day. We need to save our supplies, or we’ll never make it to landfall.”

“But we’ll never make it if we don’t get water. We can’t last much longer like this, we’re dying,” replies the crew. Indeed, already assumed dead by authorities, no one is searching for them. No one is expecting them to survive being lost at sea for this length of time. They are on their own, abandoned, as the argument rages on.

“We’ve done all we can. Let us have the water.”

“No, we need to save it until we really need it.”

“But we can’t go on without it.”

Like the surrounding ocean, the argument stretches on with no end in sight. The captain wants to agree with the crew, give in, and greedily consume the rest of the water in one last hurrah. Surely that’s better than this agonizing “drip feed,” the measly ration that never comes close to satisfying their aching thirst. But he knows their only chance of rescue is to make the water last. To stay afloat long enough for their decaying life raft to drift its way into the busy shipping lanes they have been limping towards over the previous two months.

How many times has it come down to this? Survival depending on who wins the battle of words. Will it be the captain as he reasons and resists in equal measure, rallying the voices of dissent with stories of hope? Stories of passing ships or landfall if they can make it just another day, perhaps tomorrow, always tomorrow.

Or will it be the crew? The long-suffering crew, the voices of despair and disappointment. Each day bringing fresh disasters both large and small. Another hole in the raft, another battle with sharks, another ship that sails right past without noticing them. Will their voices win out? Will they abandon the effort, giving in to the ever-present anxiety and depression that lurks in the shadowy depths below? Everything rides on this simple choice. A choice that must be remade constantly, as each new challenge throws fresh salt in their wounds. It would be so easy to give up, to lie down, to sleep, and forget. To stop fighting this battle and let the waves roll over them.

---

THE CAPTAIN who inspired this story is Steven Callahan\*. A whale or giant shark sank Steve's boat during a solo crossing of the Atlantic in 1982. But wait a minute, a solo crossing? Didn't I just describe the ongoing battle between Captain Steve and his crew? Yes. The events that inspired the story above happened - with one exception. Steven Callahan was alone when his boat sank, spending the next seventy-six days fighting for his survival in a small, slowly disintegrating rubber life raft. He had arguments with the crew. Just not a real, physical crew. The arguments in his daily fight for survival were all in his head, between the voice he referred to as the captain and other parts of himself that he identified as the long-suffering crew.



The voices he referred to as the crew wanted to give up, surrender to fate, and slip away from all the pain and suffering. To drink all the water and eat all the food. Meanwhile, the captain was the voice within that refused to forget about tomorrow, believing from deep within his soul that victory was possible, that his family was waiting for him, that he could make it. If he stuck to his plan and focused on his goals, tomorrow would be better. And if not, then maybe the next day, or the next. This part of him that focused on hope, not fear, was determined to see him through his challenges.

It is a battle we've all faced. The challenge of choosing hope over fear. Action over distraction. The challenge of moving beyond guilt that binds us to the past and anxiety that torments us with an unknown future. Like Captain Steve, the real battles of our lives are the ones that scratch and claw their way up from within. These are the real enemies, the disowned aspects of the self, the voices of bad habits and disabling beliefs, our fears and our regrets.

The ultimate truth—one each of us must face—is that nobody “out there” can fix our lives for us. Nobody can save us from ourselves. Only *we* can face the inner battles that rage daily between the inner assholes in our heads. The demons that are forever circling just below the surface like sharks beneath the captain's raft, ready to grab and pull us under. The voices that start out small but would swallow us whole if we were to let them.

Can we beat these inner voices of anxiety, fear, and regret that pop up like an insane, never-ending game of whack-a-mole? The voices of lost arguments, insults still felt, and regrets that still hurt. Of parents that bruised, bullies that tormented. Voices that wouldn't die, taking up residence in our heads as if tattooed on our brains.

Can we do better than let the perverse comfort of well-worn patterns justify our habits of avoidance as we stream the latest Netflix series? Are we able to stop numbing ourselves through our addiction to food, social media, and online shopping? Addictions to stories that others construct for us, but *we* end up living. Sure, they may not be working for us anymore, but we do them so well it's hard to give them up.

Our challenge is no different from that faced by Captain Steve. For Captain Steve's ultimate challenge, the one that would determine his success and his very survival is also ours. It is the challenge of overcoming our negative voices and the dark passengers within. The challenge of living our unled life, the life we carry within us as a possibility. The life that is constantly at risk of falling prey to the sharks of the mind and circling voices telling us we are not enough. Not deserving of happiness, of love, or freedom from fear. Voices reminding us of our limitations, our shortcomings. Either we tackle these voices or succumb to them. This is our choice. Captain Steve's epic story of survival reminds us that success over these voices is possible. It is possible to choose which voices we nurture, and which voices we listen to.

This book is a guide to overcoming the inner voices that drag us down. In Part 1, we'll come to understand our inner voices, using the latest evidence-based research as a guide. In Part 2, we'll develop a range of practical tools and approaches for living a life free of the tyranny of the inner asshole. Some ideas are simple and can be implemented straight away. Some take practice. And others are significant interventions that require considerable thought and planning. All can help. Most require some effort and practice, while some are almost too simple to believe.

And any one of the ideas, tools, and strategies can be the one that changes everything.

---

\*FOR A GREAT READ, I recommend Steve's book, *Adrift: Seventy-Six Days Lost at Sea*.

## ORIGIN OF A SPECIES... EVOLUTION OF THE ASSHOLE

---

Circa 50,000BC

---

**B**arry and Forrest Flintrock move quietly and purposefully through the lush grasslands of the East African savanna. The path is one they have used most days over the last month. They walk at a relaxed pace as the morning sun breaks through the steamy mist of dawn, heading towards the fresh blue waters of the lake.

Then Forrest stops. He's heard something in the bushes just off to his left. A slow crunching of grass stalks as they break underfoot, and a low growling noise like a deep purr. The purr kitty makes, but only if she weighs in at 300 pounds. Forrest's heart stops dead, then seemingly at the same time starts racing at an impossible speed, feeling like it is going to jump out of his chest. A lion, or maybe a tiger, is stalking them, tracking their progress just through the screen of grass as they move along

the path. He doesn't make a noise, but he hears a voice inside his head screaming at him, *f\*#k, f\*#k, f\*#k, do something. Run! Now!*

And he does. Faster than he's ever run before. All the way back to the camp where his family and friends are, providing the relative safety of numbers, shelter, and weapons. Meantime Barry, who'd been oblivious to the rustling in the grass, was being torn to bloody shreds by not one but two large, fully mature lions. The lions had been lying in wait on the path all morning, waiting for someone or something to come heading down toward the watering hole.

Antelope, warthogs, and an assortment of other animals, both large and small, often used the track. But this has been a bonus catch for the lions. To have a large, juicy, and relatively defenseless creature like Barry stumble into their ambush. One that can't fight back or make them exert enormous amounts of energy in a chase for miles across endless plains. And Barry would provide enough food to keep them full for two or three days to come. Yes, life must have seemed pretty sweet at that moment for the two lions as they tore into Barry's still living body, fighting to get to the steaming organs in his shredded torso, as Barry's high-pitched screams drifted across the valley floor. Sucks to be Barry . . .

The events described above occurred 50,000 years ago. Approximately. Oh, and Barry and Forrest Flintlock were not their real names—at least I don't think so. But you can bet the scene described occurred many times during the history of early humans as they did their hunter-gatherer thing on the plains of East Africa. Someone eaten by a lion, others getting away. So, let's think about the ones that got away. The ones that lived to tell the tale. To live another day and ultimately mate with someone else, passing on their genetic

material and contributing to the gene pool you and I share today.

Forrest is one of those lucky ones, and we pick up his story just a few weeks later, back out on the trail doing a little more hunting and gathering. Let's say Forrest hears what sounds like the pitter-patter of gigantic paws in the grass to his left. Again, with the man-eating wildlife. His inner voice knows about this. His brain immediately screams at him, *Lion! F\*#king Lion!! Run!!* Or something to that effect. And off he goes, breaking the land speed record for prehistoric man as he races back to camp.

Meantime Jerry, his companion on this expedition, also hears the noises coming from the nearby grass. But Jerry is renowned throughout the tribe as being a bit of a "hippie-type," always seeing the best in situations. You know, that glass-half-full type of hairy little prehistoric man. As the eternal optimist, Jerry pauses, and rather than panicking, he lets his natural curiosity drive his behavior as he cautiously approaches the edge of the grassy trail. He wonders if there really is something in the bushes . . . perhaps if he is lucky, a delicious rabbit or chewy but nutritious little jungle fowl. Mmm, he thinks, *I feel like chicken tonight . . .* That was the last thing Jerry's inner voice would ever say to him.

Suddenly, the same lion that had eaten Barry a few weeks earlier, launches itself from behind some bushes, the impact knocking Jerry to the ground. Immediately clamping its jaws around Jerry's head, it crushes down with enough force to smash the bones of his skull before he can even scream in terror. No more Jerry genes to pass on to the next generation. Less glass-half-full genes, and more of the run-Forrest-run genes getting shared around.

Fast forward another few weeks, and by now, Forrest is getting jumpy about the whole going-for-a-walk-along-the-path type of

scenario. He is worrying a lot about getting eaten, even when he's not out hunting. He's questioning his life choices constantly . . . *maybe I should have been an accountant rather than a hunter . . . ?* His inner voice is in a continuous battle with itself over what to do when he's out hunting. Where should he place himself? Should he walk at the front of the pack or somewhere in the middle? Should he just call in sick for work tomorrow and hang back with the gatherers? Is it all worth the risk? Where does the path end? What is this thing called life, anyway? Okay, maybe that last part is a bit deep for our hairy little ancestor, but you see where I'm going with this.

Forrest's inner voice has been growing into an inner asshole. One that's keeping him awake at night, worrying about stuff. All types of stuff. Picking through the bones of what's gone wrong or what could go wrong. Doubting his ability to get it right. Yet, this type of thinking has saved his life. It's been a helpful attribute. It confers what are known as adaptive advantages to Forrest and those like him, the worriers, the anxious and the hypervigilant. Because in the frightening shit-show of living bare-assed-naked in a jungle full of things that want to eat you, being hyper-sensitive to movement in the bushes and thinking the worst of what might happen can be a positive adaptation. It can keep you alive because anything that frightens you will probably kill you.

### *Living a modern life with a prehistoric mindset*

Our problem as modern humans is that millions of years of natural selection have taken place in a perfect environment for shaping our minds to look for the worst. To be fearful or worry, run away, or get angry fast—fright, flight, or fight. This has led to a bias toward what science would call false positives when assessing the level of danger around us.

A false positive is when we wrongly think a particular situation or condition is present. For instance, assuming there's a lion in the bushes is a false positive for lions when it's just the wind. A dangerous environment can favor these false positives because the alternative, a false negative such as assuming no lion, can get you eaten. It's better to be wrong a hundred times by panicking and running back to camp, but living to see another day, than to be wrong once by assuming there is no lion in the bushes and getting eaten. It makes sense to favor a bias toward false positives, given the risks and rewards involved.

Anyone with a more relaxed attitude about potential dangers simply didn't make it. They might have been right 99% of the time. No lion, just wind blowing the bushes. But it only took one error, one false negative, to be eliminated from the dating pool. This one mistake got them literally torn to shreds.

People ended up becoming attuned to the worst possible outcomes because it kept them alive, with free-floating anxiety becoming hard-wired into the species through generations of living in this type of environment. Eventually, all the owners of easy-going, laid-back, and positive inner voices were eaten. Why? Because they never jumped and were never suspicious, anxious, or prone to worry about the dangers that could have killed them. Their inner voices weren't constantly on their backs winding them up, reminding them how much they were at risk, what they had to lose, and how dangerous the world around them really was.

Ultimately, the people left standing were those that always assumed the unknown was dangerous, and that they always had to be on the defensive. The ones that reminded themselves, it's a scary, uncertain world, and I'm going to make sure I don't fall victim to anyone or anything. The ones with inner voices that became inner assholes.



In today's psychological parlance, the inner asshole, convinced by the experience of thousands of years of prehistoric dangers, has become hypervigilant and hypersensitive. Always on the lookout for danger and sensitive to the tiniest of "threats." Seeing challenges that just aren't there anymore. Getting angry at "that look" someone gives you. Hearing a put-down in every comment. Sensing a challenge in every gesture. And feeling mortal danger in every credit card bill.

In the meantime, the nature of the risks we face within our environment has changed far too rapidly for the scared inner asshole to adapt. The dangers around us were once fatal. The inner asshole got used to seeing its friends dying of hunger, being speared, or torn apart by wild beasts. But the threats of the modern environment, the things that make you pissed, are no longer the same. The driver that won't let you merge. The barista that took too long to make your chai latte. These things we get worked up about are no longer fatal. They won't leave us on the footpath, with our intestines shredded and our faces torn off.

These days, the threats that trigger the inner asshole to protect us don't need a fight, flight, or freeze response. Quite the opposite, they require us to remain calm, take a deep breath and consider the bigger picture. To use our imagination, tap into our inner strength—not our inner asshole. Where most threats in the past could either be run from or speared, neither solution works well when confronted by your boss asking why you were late to work. Try explaining either to HR.

Much of the inner dialog we'll explore in upcoming chapters is driven by this overblown and outdated fear response learned over thousands of years. Today, it may not be hungry lions driving our anxiety. But our inner asshole's fear response isn't that discerning. Its overreaction is just as crippling whether in

anticipation of a lion in the bushes or the nagging fear of never being enough.

As we progress, we'll learn to talk our inner asshole back down off the ledge and rewrite our inner story for a healthier, happier life.

## I HEAR DEAD PEOPLE

**O**k, that chapter heading was just to get your attention. Or was it . . . ?

In a way, I do hear dead people. I can still sometimes hear my deceased mother's voice in her native French, yelling "Basta!" at me when I was misbehaving as a child. She would shout and then get even angrier when I ignored her. When she was angry, she always seemed to forget that I didn't speak French. Which only made her madder because I had no idea what she was telling me to do. But to this day, certain things still trigger that voice in my head. A high-pitched string of crazy French talk, something about "ferme ta gueule!" and "petit merdeux!" I must look those up someday.

I'm sure it was something sweet . . .

We all hear the voices of other people, including those of the dead. Imagine, for instance, you're replaying in your mind Martin Luther King Jr. giving his well-known *I have a dream* speech. I'm betting that when you imagine him speaking, you hear it delivered in that famously rich baritone rhythm, not

your own squirrely high-pitched whine. Or when you replay in your mind your partner's snippy comments made this morning during an argument, it's their voice you imagine. Not your own voice coming out of their mouth, right?

We sometimes carry around these voices of others for our entire lives. Echoes of our past. Dark passengers inspired by parents, schoolyard bullies, or relationships that turn bad. From unkind words to cruel taunts, comments that come back to haunt us in our hours of weakness.

And then there are the voices we generate ourselves.

### *Talking to ourselves*

We all have our own inner dialog. You know the voice I mean. If you're not sure, it's the one that might be talking to you right now. Maybe it's saying something like, sure, I know what he means, or—hopefully not—what the hell is this guy talking about? Why'd I even pick this book? Who's he calling an asshole anyway . . .

Seriously though, it's completely normal to have a bunch of inner voices that seem to be constantly running through your head. It's also normal that these voices sometimes turn into dark forces—unwanted, intrusive, and out of control. But don't sweat it. They are simply a part of who you are and what it means to be human.

They serve a purpose, and we're going to learn how to put them back to work for us.

### *Why have an inner dialog?*

Research on inner dialog points to its development from early childhood as a way of self-regulating thought and behavior.<sup>1</sup>

Essentially, we take over the voices of our parents or caregivers and begin to apply them internally. In this way, our mind provides a way to identify mistakes, advise how to do things “right,” resolve problems and navigate successfully through the day.

Taking over the voices of our parents, stuffing a mini version of them inside our own minds for future reference, starts from an early age. We do this by mimicking the things we hear our parents say, gradually taking these instructions on as if they were our own.

For instance, as a child, we may be heard to quietly sub-vocalize the steps of a task previously taught by a parent. The process is learned and cemented as we repeat the steps or rules.

“First, take the lid off of the toothpaste.”

“Then pick up the toothbrush . . . now go up and down (not across!) each tooth.”

In doing this, we are creating patterns of behavior that will eventually become habitual and somewhat automatic. We are laying down rules that will drive us as adults. Voices that will speak up when we, or others, stray from those rules.

As adults, we do something similar when learning complex routines. For instance, we might repeat sub-vocally to ourselves a set of instructions given by a teacher or an instructor. A learner-driver might run through a mental checklist, telling themselves each step of pulling out from a stationary park. Ok, engage ‘Drive,’ keep my foot on the brake, release my park brake, check my mirrors, indicate, and so on.

This process will continue until the activity has become yet another unconscious pattern capable of guiding our future behavior. Creating a recording. An internal dialog ready to

Speak up when we or others need reminding of how things should be done. Perhaps, when mixed with a bit of impatience, appearing as the voice that screams at the driver in front to *use your f#@king turn signal idiot!* Or any other time our rules and procedures are broken by those around us.

Other research shows that our inner speech develops as a short-term memory strategy.<sup>2</sup> For instance, when repeating in our head a phone number until we can find a pen to write it down. It has also been linked to problem-solving, planning, and similar complex, conscious cognitive functions. In this way, our inner voice serves to assist working memory, keeping the thread of our reasoning, and applying our brain's logic component to process information and make decisions.

A simple example is when you use your inner voice as a kind of mental to-do list. For instance, upon waking, you might list in your head a reminder of the things you need to get done today. In these various ways, your inner voice helps you perceive and make decisions about the world, sorting and categorizing your thoughts, storing and recalling memories and their meanings.

When overused, however, this dialog turns into self-criticism. Intended to protect you from potentially dangerous behaviors and risky mistakes, it becomes controlling in its efforts to keep you safe. This is the dialog that thinks you exist to serve its fears and concerns, rather than the other way around.

In this way, the voice in your head becomes an asshole. And to make matters worse, there are hundreds of these inner voices running around the average person's head. Each with an opinion, lining up for a turn to tell you its problems, utterly oblivious to the other issues you have. Oblivious to how they're making you feel. More focused instead on rehashing the argument you had five years ago, with someone you don't talk to

anymore, than allowing you to get back to sleep because you have work in the morning.

### *When our inner dialog turns into an asshole*

The challenge of overactive inner voices has been with us for a long time. Around 2500 years ago, the Buddha described the actions of the human mind as being like that of a monkey, jumping wildly all over the place, without discipline or purpose. Random thoughts, problems, and anxieties popping out of nowhere, chattering and carrying on like a cage full of stirred-up chimps. Known in psychology as Automatic Negative Thoughts, or A.N.T.'s, these asshole thoughts become so intrusive that they seem to have a mind of their own, showing up out of nowhere and demanding our attention.

These psychological viruses become the back-seat driver of our feelings and moods. After a random minute of swirling thoughts about our credit card bill, we descend from carefree to anxious. Thoughts popping out of nowhere, starting with a mere whisper, and escalating to a roar, remaining stuck on play no matter how much we tell ourselves we've had enough.

Despite their hold on us, these voices and stories need not even make sense—often they are complete rubbish. You might be lying there wishing you could get to sleep, but your mind is busy trying to work out why glue doesn't stick to the inside of the container, or why penguins don't freeze. You know, the big questions in life . . .

Why do we get this nonstop dialog in our heads? Who are we talking to? Who is doing the talking? Have you ever stopped halfway through a running commentary in your head, and wondered just who you're providing the analysis to? And why you're explaining something you already know, back to your-

self. I mean, which part of you thinks it needs to carefully instruct another part of yourself about that thing you should have said differently in an argument with a friend back in 2017?

Who is this helping? Who are you retelling the story to, and for what purpose are you telling it?

Let's look at where all this shit is coming from . . .

---

## References

1. Alderson-Day, B., Fernyhough, C. (2015). Inner Speech: Development, Cognitive Functions, Phenomenology, and Neurobiology. *Psychological bulletin*, 141(5), 931–965.
2. Baddeley A., & Hitch G. (1974). Working memory In Bower G. H. (Ed.), *Psychology of learning and motivation* (pp. 47–89). New York, NY: Academic Press.