

Washington University in St. Louis  
**Washington University Open Scholarship**

---

Neureuther Book Collection Essay Competition

Student Contests & Competitions

---

4-17-2017

# How to Live in a World with Others

Alan Zhang

*Washington University in St. Louis*

Follow this and additional works at: <http://openscholarship.wustl.edu/nbcec>

---

## Recommended Citation

Zhang, Alan, "How to Live in a World with Others" (2017). *Neureuther Book Collection Essay Competition*. 56.  
<http://openscholarship.wustl.edu/nbcec/56>

This Essay is brought to you for free and open access by the Student Contests & Competitions at Washington University Open Scholarship. It has been accepted for inclusion in Neureuther Book Collection Essay Competition by an authorized administrator of Washington University Open Scholarship. For more information, please contact [digital@wumail.wustl.edu](mailto:digital@wumail.wustl.edu).

## How to Live in a World with Others

“The only thing that has kept the race of men from the mad extremes of the convent and the pirate-galley, the night-club and the lethal chamber, has been mysticism — the belief that logic is misleading, and that things are not what they seem.” - G.K Chesterton

My library collection did not amass itself overnight, just as I was not immediately born with my current attitudes on life. My life has matured with direction, and it parallels the sequence in which my books entered my collection.

My first books originated from my dad’s library with titles like *Calculus with Analytic Geometry*, *Statistical Thermodynamics*, *Biophysics of Computation*. He saw the world as a lab, and everyone and everything in it as subject to study and experimentation. Life is logical, governed by natural laws, predictable, unchangeable, and indifferent to individual whims. On my birthday, he gifted me Richard Dawkin’s *The Selfish Gene* as a sort of coming-of-age life manual. It echoed the core of his parenting ethic: the real world is ruthless and everyone competes for survival. And until high school, I lived selfishly, with manipulative intent, insecure, and often quite lonely. I kept to myself and was judgmental of others. In a world governed by natural laws, it seemed best to live reactively. Let others act first to reveal the rules of the game.

My mom collected textbooks on history. They depict a dynamic world, where humans not physics have the star role. Innovation is ceaseless, and social order churns regularly as result. And it is to a collective of humans, not natural laws, that credit is paid for societal progress. I saw evidence of this in Berkin’s *Making America: A History of the United States*, and also back in *The House of Medici: Its Rise and Fall*. The same patterns can be found across oceans, in James Breasted’s *A History of Egypt*, and in Patricia Ebrey’s *History of China*. In all times and places, societies have built monuments, fought wars, fed populations, invent tools, imposed laws, wrote poetry, and healed the sick. This conception of people as actors overtook my earlier view of people as props. These books did not however illustrate the attempts made by ordinary individuals to contribute. What impact could I make, not being as well endowed as the heroes of history?

My attitudes and behaviors changed noticeably in high school when I found books in anthropology and sociology. I was captivated by theories that explained human conditions using features that are often taken for granted, such as the availability of key resources. I found Neil Diamond’s *Guns*

*Germes and Steels* compelling. He portrayed a world where chance, origin, and opportunity can determine fates of successive generations of people. Climate and geography endow different peoples with different advantages in crops, animals, and dispositions toward risks. This starter package accurately predicts complicated economic, social, and military trajectories. Unlike abstract explanations in my dad's books, I saw these processes. And unlike the unique figures heralded in my mom's books, these mechanisms apply to anyone anywhere.

I found sociology books at a convenient time. In high school, I rarely saw my parents. But the parents of the Gilmore family, from my school district, both social workers, treated me with an unfamiliar type of love. They invited me to dinners and picked me up after school. Mr. Gilmore took me to build homes with him and Habitat for Humanity, showing me the impact of community service. On holidays, Mrs. Gilmore hosted parties for the entire community, and it was there that I first met 2 of my closest friends: a boy whose entire childhood passed through foster families, and a girl whose mind was tortured simultaneously by internal mental illness. For the first time, I got to study the face of problems that I will never experience first-hand. I saw the individual. I had so many questions, not all of them appropriate to ask. For context, I turned again to books.

Jacqueline Novogratz described the inspirations that led her to start the Acumen Fund in *The Blue Sweater: Bridging the Gap Between Rich and Poor*. Her reminiscences, along with Liz Murray's in *Breaking Night*, reshaped how I interpreted the Gilmore's charitable intentions. Previously, I had suspicions that the Gilmore's expected something from me, and that made me ungrateful. Then, in *Three Little Words*, Ashley Rhodes-Courter took me into the mind of a foster child. With her account, I could better comprehend the psychological implications of having been grafted and re-grafted on so many family trees, and how a person's self-identity can crumble. And I never before felt, until I read *The Chronology of Water* and *Why be Happy When you Could be Normal* and *Saving Normal* and *Brain on Fire*, the pain of emotions felt by a teenage girl who cannot escape from the punisher in her own head.

Not until I entered my 20's then did I realize that the world is not out to get me. That everybody is struggling together, making decisions one at a time, not always consistently, and not always ideally, but always with a good reason, whether it is known to others or not. These books made me patient, attentive, and receptive. Listening became easy, but knowing how to address the issues I received required experiences I did not yet have.

I was willing to approach strangers, but I was not sure how. Shoving a hand at a stranger and saying “Hello my name is Alan”, without reason, felt inappropriate, un-welcomed, and uncomfortable. Keith Ferazzi guided me. His book *Never Eat Alone* provided networking tactics which I still keep on an index card in my wallet. He showed that networking is difficult for most people, and I related. I overcame my social anxiety when I noticed that making connections was not about self promotion, but about creating mutual opportunities. I then added Dale Carnegie’s *How to Win Friends and Influence People*. I adopted his habit of trying constantly to find genuine interest in the people I met. I then read Adam Grant’s *Give and Take*, and adapted his five-minute favors into my life. Sharing concrete favors appealed to me more than merely sharing smiles and handshakes. His research findings convinced me not to be embarrassed or fearful for wanting to help others. The Survival of the Fittest mentality looked more and more irrelevant to me. Seth Godin offered actionable advice on this in *Linchpin: Are You Indispensable?*, making the case for individual contribution and personal integrity. Progress is made by teams, but teams consist of people. Individuals do their parts well so that the whole system succeeds. I was encouraged that my personal decisions made a difference in a world so much larger and more sensible than me.

Right out of college, I engaged in civic life. I volunteered at the Democratic National Convention, the Clinton Global Initiative Conferences, and various local community non-profit organizations. I read Alinsky’s *Rules for Radicals*, and appreciated his analysis. Psychological barriers hinder efforts of leaders to organize, unite, and unify a collective of individuals. My library grew with books that opened my eyes to the humanity and vulnerability of seemingly indomitable and self-assured leaders. George Mitchell’s memoir, Seneca’s writings, Caro’s study of Robert Moses as the *Power Broker* and Xenophon’s account of *Cyrus the Great*-- all tell of how leaders everywhere have to balance external incentives, internal morals, and social personal responsibilities in every decision. More importantly, they start out as ordinary people to whom history gave mythic reputations only later. So much at the individual level is responsible for collective greatness. Coalition dynamics, rhetoric, persistence, virtue, and sheer luck of time and place, have considerable influence. It is clear that individual decisions matter, and individual actions matter, even where norms, conventions and laws appear to control everything. I was inspired to be proactive.

When I moved to Philadelphia for my first job, I joined the Pennsylvania Dragon Boat Club looking for friends. The team was young, still recruiting, and simultaneously training for competitions. The captain empowered me with the responsibility of building, motivating, and unifying the team. As usual, I looked to books for cautionary tales, perspectives, and explanations. Tim Grover sketched

clearly the attitudes that differentiate high and low performance athletes. He characterizes them as Cleaners, Closers, and Coolers. His book *Relentless: From Good to Great to Unstoppable*, uses personal stories about training Michael Jordan and Dwayne Wade as evidence. Those anecdotes helped me train and inspire my team. Our team won no golds in the first year, and then it won 4 the next. More importantly, we grew a family and created a culture of camaraderie, respect, and hard work. Four members from our team, including myself, went on to compete on Team USA at World Championships. I bought books for that occasion. I read Peter Drucker's *Practice of Management*, Simon Sinek's *Leaders Eat Last*, and Jim Collins' *Good to Great* for leadership insight. I actually read *Boys on a Boat* the week leading up to the championships, and the impact was salient. Every sound I heard on my boat, all the pain I felt, and encouragement I heard-- all of it reminded me of the feelings that I imagine filled Al Ulbrickson's boat back in 1936.

Books offered the mentors I lacked growing up. The authors taught me how to live a better life, not just in service of my own happiness, but in the service of the growth and well-being of others too. I am still learning. My library's most recent additions are on theories of mind and human irrationality, including Steven Pinker, Daniel Kahnemann, Carol Dweck, Dan Ariely, Chip Heath, Douglas Hofstadter, Charles Duhigg, and David Eagleman. It is incredible how constructive my attitudes and behaviors toward people have become after seeing all the ways humans are flawed cognitively but well-intentioned morally. I am more inclined to give the benefit of the doubt, more willing to forgive transgressions and forgotten obligations, and more cautious of assigning malice to intentions.

My library looks randomly collected. In truth, however, each book was added at just the right time, and in sum they trace the development of my morals, values, and attitudes over time. One unifying characteristic of my books is that they all remind me of G.K. Chesterton's observation: "all logic is misleading". Libraries have taught me how to balance the use of logic and reason with empathy, careful interpretation, and intuition. My life is improved because of the library I have kept.

## **Bibliography**

Alinsky, S. (2010). *Rules for radicals: A pragmatic primer for realistic radicals*. Vintage.

Breasted, James Henry. *A history of Egypt*. Cambridge University Press, 2016.

Cahalan, Susannah. *Brain on fire: my month of madness*. Simon and Schuster, 2013.

Carnegie, Dale. *How to win friends and influence people*. Simon and Schuster, 2010.

Caro, R. A. (2015). *The power broker: Robert Moses and the fall of New York*. Random House.

Collins, James Charles. *Good to great: Why some companies make the leap... and others don't*. Random House, 2001.

Daniel, James Brown. *The Boys in the Boat: Nine Americans and Their Epic Quest for Gold at the 1936 Berlin Olympics*. Penguin Books, 2014.

Dawkins, Richard. *The selfish gene*. Oxford university press, 2016.

Diamond, Jared M., and Doug Orduino. *Guns, germs, and steel*. Books on Tape, 1997.

Drucker, Peter Ferdinand. *The practice of management: A study of the most important function in America society*. Harper & Brothers, 1954.

Ebrey, Patricia Buckley. *The Cambridge illustrated history of China*. Cambridge University Press, 2010.

Ferrazzi, Keith, and Tahl Raz. *Never eat alone*. GagasMedia, 2011.

Frances, Allen. *Saving Normal: An Insider's Revolt Against Out-of-control Psychiatric Diagnosis, Dsm-5, Big Pharma, and the Medicalization of Ordinary Life (9780062229274)*. Celia Rivenbark, 2013.

Grant, Adam. *Give and take: A revolutionary approach to success*. Hachette UK, 2013.

Grover, Tim S. *Relentless: From Good to Great to Unstoppable*. Simon and Schuster, 2013.

Hedrick, Larry, ed. *Xenophon's Cyrus the Great: The Arts of Leadership and War*. Macmillan, 2007.

Hibbert, Christopher. *The house of Medici: Its rise and fall*. William Morrow Paperbacks, 1999.

Godin, Seth. *Linchpin: Are you indispensable? How to drive your career and create a remarkable future*. Hachette UK, 2010.

Mitchell, George J. *The Negotiator: A Memoir*. Simon and Schuster, 2015.

Murray, Liz. *Breaking Night*. Random House, 2011.

Novogratz, Jacqueline. *The blue sweater: Bridging the gap between rich and poor in an interconnected world*. Rodale, 2010.

Rhodes-Courter, Ashley. "Three Little Words by Ashley Rhodes-Courter." New York: Atheneum, 2008.

Seneca, Lucius Annaeus, and Moses Hadas. *The stoic philosophy of Seneca: Essays and letters of Seneca*. No. 459. WW Norton & Company, 1968.

Sinek, Simon. *Leaders eat last*. Portfolio Penguin, 2018.

Winterson, Jeanette. *Why be happy when you could be normal?*. Random House, 2012.

Yuknavitch, Lidia. *The chronology of water: A memoir*. Hawthorne Books, 2013.