

## LAW 30

### MAKE YOUR ACCOMPLISHMENTS SEEM EFFORTLESS

#### JUDGMENT

*Your actions must seem natural and executed with ease. All the toil and practice that go into them, and also all the clever tricks, must be concealed. When you act, act effortlessly, as if you could do much more. Avoid the temptation of revealing how hard you work—it only raises questions. Teach no one your tricks or they will be used against you.*

#### KANO TANNYU, MASTER ARTIST

*Date Masamune once sent for Tannyu to decorate a pair of gold screens seven feet high. The artist said he thought black-and-white sketches would suit them, and went home again after considering them carefully. The next morning he came early and made a large quantity of ink into which he dipped a horseshoe he had brought with him, and then proceeded to make impressions of this all over one of the screens. Then, with a large brush, he drew a number of lines across them. Meanwhile Masamune had come in to watch his work, and at this he could contain his irritation no longer, and muttering, “What a beastly mess!” he strode away to his own apartments. The retainers told Tannyu he was in a very bad temper indeed. “He shouldn’t look on while I am at work, then,” replied the painter, “he should wait till it is finished.” Then he took up a smaller brush and dashed in touches here and there, and as he did so the prints of the horse-shoe turned into crabs, while the big broad strokes became rushes. He then turned to the other screen and splashed drops of ink all over it, and when he had added a few brush-strokes here and there they became a flight of swallows over willow trees. When Masamune saw the finished work he was as overjoyed at the artist’s skill as he had previously been annoyed at the apparent mess he was making of the screens.*

CHA-NO-YU: THE JAPANESE TEA CEREMONY A. L. SADLER, 1962

## OBSERVANCE OF THE LAW I

The Japanese tea ceremony called Cha-no-yu (“Hot Water for Tea”) has origins in ancient times, but it reached its peak of refinement in the sixteenth century under its most renowned practitioner, Sen no Rikyu. Although not from a noble family, Rikyu rose to great power, becoming the preferred tea master of the Emperor Hideyoshi, and an important adviser on aesthetic and even political matters. For Rikyu, the secret of success consisted in appearing natural, concealing the effort behind one’s work.

One day Rikyu and his son went to an acquaintance’s house for a tea ceremony. On the way in, the son remarked that the lovely antique-looking gate at their host’s house gave it an evocatively lonely appearance. “I don’t think so,” replied his father, “it looks as though it had been brought from some mountain temple a long way off, and as if the labor required to import it must have cost a lot of money.” If the owner of the house had put this much effort into one gate, it would show in his tea ceremony—and indeed Sen no Rikyu had to leave the ceremony early, unable to endure the affectation and effort it inadvertently revealed.

On another evening, while having tea at a friend’s house, Rikyu saw his host go outside, hold up a lantern in the darkness, cut a lemon off a tree, and bring it in. This charmed Rikyu—the host needed a relish for the dish he was serving, and had spontaneously gone outside to get one. But when the man offered the lemon with some Osaka rice cake, Rikyu realized that he had planned the cutting of the lemon all along, to go with this expensive delicacy. The gesture no longer seemed spontaneous—it was a way for the host to prove his cleverness. He had accidentally revealed how hard he was trying. Having seen enough, Rikyu politely declined the cake, excused himself, and left.

Emperor Hideyoshi once planned to visit Rikyu for a tea ceremony. On the night before he was to come, snow began to fall. Thinking quickly, Rikyu laid round cushions that fit exactly on each of the stepping-stones that led through the garden to his house. Just before dawn, he rose, saw that it had stopped snowing, and carefully removed the cushions. When Hideyoshi arrived, he marveled at the simple beauty of the sight—the

perfectly round stepping stones, unencumbered by snow—and noticed how it called no attention to the manner in which Rikyu had accomplished it, but only to the polite gesture itself.

After Sen no Rikyu died, his ideas had a profound influence on the practice of the tea ceremony. The Tokugawa shogun Yorinobu, son of the great Emperor Ieyasu, was a student of Rikyu's teachings. In his garden he had a stone lantern made by a famous master, and Lord Sakai Tadakatsu asked if he could come by one day to see it. Yorinobu replied that he would be honored, and commanded his gardeners to put everything in order for the visit. These gardeners, unfamiliar with the precepts of Cha-no-yu, thought the stone lantern misshapen, its windows being too small for the present taste. They had a local workman enlarge the windows. A few days before Lord Sakai's visit, Yorinobu toured the garden. When he saw the altered windows he exploded with rage, ready to impale on his sword the fool who had ruined the lantern, upsetting its natural grace and destroying the whole purpose of Lord Sakai's visit.

When Yorinobu calmed down, however, he remembered that he had originally bought two of the lanterns, and that the second was in his garden on the island of Kishu. At great expense, he hired a whale boat and the finest rowers he could find, ordering them to bring the lantern to him within two days—a difficult feat at best. But the sailors rowed day and night, and with the luck of a good wind they arrived just in time. To Yorinobu's delight, this stone lantern was more magnificent than the first, for it had stood untouched for twenty years in a bamboo thicket, acquiring a brilliant antique appearance and a delicate covering of moss. When Lord Sakai arrived, later that same day, he was awed by the lantern, which was more magnificent than he had imagined—so graceful and at one with the elements. Fortunately he had no idea what time and effort it had cost Yorinobu to create this sublime effect.

## THE WRESTLING MASTER

*There was once a wrestling master who was versed in 360 feints and holds. He took a special liking to one of his pupils, to whom he taught 359 of them over a period of time. Somehow he never got around to the last trick. As months went by the young man became so proficient in the art that he bested everyone who dared to face him in the ring. He was so proud of his*

*proWess that one day he boasted before the sultan that he could readily whip his master, were it not out of respect for his age and gratitude for his tutelage.*

*The sultan became incensed at this irreverence and ordered an immediate match with the royal court in attendance.*

*At the gong the youth barged forward with a lusty yell, only to be confronted with the unfamiliar 360th feint. The master seized his former pupil, lifted him high above his head, and flung him crashing to the ground. The sultan and the assembly let out a loud cheer. When the sultan asked the master how he was able to overcome such a strong opponent, the master confessed that he had reserved a secret technique for himself for just such a contingency. Then he related the lamentation of a master of archery, who taught everything he knew. "No one has learned archery from me," the poor fellow complained, "who has not tried to use me as a butt in the end."*

A STORY OF SAADI, AS TOLD IN THE CRAFT OF POWER, R.G. H. SIU, 1979

## Interpretation

To Sen no Rikyu, the sudden appearance of something naturally, almost accidentally graceful was the height of beauty. This beauty came without warning and seemed effortless. Nature created such things by its own laws and processes, but men had to create their effects through labor and contrivance. And when they showed the effort of producing the effect, the effect was spoiled. The gate came from too far away, the cutting of the lemon looked contrived.

You will often have to use tricks and ingenuity to create your effects—the cushions in the snow, the men rowing all night—but your audience must never suspect the work or the thinking that has gone into them. Nature does not reveal its tricks, and what imitates nature by appearing effortless approximates nature's power.

## OBSERVANCE OF THE LAW II

The great escape artist Harry Houdini once advertised his act as “The Impossible Possible.” And indeed those who witnessed his dramatic escapes felt that what he did onstage contradicted commonsense ideas of human capacity.

One evening in 1904, an audience of 4,000 Londoners filled a theater to watch Houdini accept a challenge: to escape from a pair of manacles billed as the strongest ever invented. They contained six sets of locks and nine tumblers in each cuff; a Birmingham maker had spent five years constructing them. Experts who examined them said they had never seen anything so intricate, and this intricacy was thought to make them impossible to escape.

The crowd watched the experts secure the manacles on Houdini’s wrists. Then the escape artist entered a black cabinet on stage. The minutes went by; the more time passed, the more certain it seemed that these manacles would be the first to defeat him. At one point he emerged from the cabinet, and asked that the cuffs be temporarily removed so that he could take off his coat—it was hot inside. The challengers refused, suspecting his request was a trick to find out how the locks worked. Undeterred, and without using his hands, Houdini managed to lift the coat over his shoulders, turn it inside out, remove a penknife from his vest pocket with his teeth, and, by moving his head, cut the coat off his arms. Freed from the coat, he stepped back into the cabinet, the audience roaring with approval at his grace and dexterity.

Finally, having kept the audience waiting long enough, Houdini emerged from the cabinet a second time, now with his hands free, the manacles raised high in triumph. To this day no one knows how he managed the escape. Although he had taken close to an hour to free himself, he had never looked concerned, had shown no sign of doubt. Indeed it seemed by the end that he had drawn out the escape as a way to heighten the drama, to make the audience worry—for there was no other sign that the performance had been anything but easy. The complaint about the heat was equally part of the act. The spectators of this and other Houdini performances must have

felt he was toying with them: These manacles are nothing, he seemed to say, I could have freed myself a lot sooner, and from a lot worse.

Over the years, Houdini escaped from the chained carcass of an embalmed “sea monster” (a half octopus, half whalelike beast that had beached near Boston); he had himself sealed inside an enormous envelope from which he emerged without breaking the paper; he passed through brick walls; he wriggled free from straitjackets while dangling high in the air; he leaped from bridges into icy waters, his hands manacled and his legs in chains; he had himself submerged in glass cases full of water, hands padlocked, while the audience watched in amazement as he worked himself free, struggling for close to an hour apparently without breathing. Each time he seemed to court certain death yet survived with superhuman aplomb. Meanwhile, he said nothing about his methods, gave no clues as to how he accomplished any of his tricks—he left his audiences and critics speculating, his power and reputation enhanced by their struggles with the inexplicable. Perhaps the most baffling trick of all was making a ten-thousand-pound elephant disappear before an audience’s eyes, a feat he repeated on stage for over nineteen weeks. No one has ever really explained how he did this, for in the auditorium where he performed the trick, there was simply nowhere for an elephant to hide.

The effortlessness of Houdini’s escapes led some to think he used occult forces, his superior psychic abilities giving him special control over his body. But a German escape artist named Kleppini claimed to know Houdini’s secret: He simply used elaborate gadgets. Kleppini also claimed to have defeated Houdini in a handcuff challenge in Holland.

Houdini did not mind all kinds of speculation floating around about his methods, but he would not tolerate an outright lie, and in 1902 he challenged Kleppini to a handcuff duel. Kleppini accepted. Through a spy, he found out the secret word to unlock a pair of French combination-lock cuffs that Houdini liked to use. His plan was to choose these cuffs to escape from onstage. This would definitively debunk Houdini—his “genius” simply lay in his use of mechanical gadgets.

On the night of the challenge, just as Kleppini had planned, Houdini offered him a choice of cuffs and he selected the ones with the combination lock. He was even able to disappear with them behind a screen to make a quick test, and reemerged seconds later, confident of victory.

Acting as if he sensed fraud, Houdini refused to lock Kleppini in the cuffs. The two men argued and began to fight, even wrestling with each other onstage. After a few minutes of this, an apparently angry, frustrated Houdini gave up and locked Kleppini in the cuffs. For the next few minutes Kleppini strained to get free. Something was wrong—minutes earlier he had opened the cuffs behind the screen; now the same code no longer worked. He sweated, racking his brains. Hours went by, the audience left, and finally an exhausted and humiliated Kleppini gave up and asked to be released.

The cuffs that Kleppini himself had opened behind the screen with the word “*C-L-E-F-S*” (French for “keys”) now clicked open only with the word “*F-R-A-U-D*.” Kleppini never figured out how Houdini had accomplished this uncanny feat.

*Keep the extent of your abilities unknown. The wise man does not allow his knowledge and abilities to be sounded to the bottom, if he desires to be honored by all. He allows you to know them but not to comprehend them. No one must know the extent of his abilities, lest he be disappointed. No one ever has an opportunity of fathoming him entirely. For guesses and doubts about the extent of his talents arouse more veneration than accurate knowledge of them, be they ever so great.*

BALTASAR GRACIÁN. 1601-1658

## Interpretation

Although we do not know for certain how Houdini accomplished many of his most ingenious escapes, one thing is clear: It was not the occult, or any kind of magic, that gave him his powers, but hard work and endless practice, all of which he carefully concealed from the world. Houdini never left anything to chance—day and night he studied the workings of locks, researched centuries-old sleight-of-hand tricks, pored over books on mechanics, whatever he could use. Every moment not spent researching he spent working his body, keeping himself exceptionally limber, and learning how to control his muscles and his breathing.

Early on in Houdini's career, an old Japanese performer whom he toured with taught him an ancient trick: how to swallow an ivory ball, then bring it back up. He practiced this endlessly with a small peeled potato tied to a string—up and down he would manipulate the potato with his throat muscles, until they were strong enough to move it without the string. The organizers of the London handcuff challenge had searched Houdini's body thoroughly beforehand, but no one could check the inside of his throat, where he could have concealed small tools to help him escape. Even so, Kleppini was fundamentally wrong: It was not Houdini's tools but his practice, work, and research that made his escapes possible.

Kleppini, in fact, was completely outwitted by Houdini, who set the whole thing up. He let his opponent learn the code to the French cuffs, then baited him into choosing those cuffs onstage. Then, during the two men's tussle, the dexterous Houdini was able to change the code to "*F-R-A-U-D*." He had spent weeks practicing this trick, but the audience saw none of the sweat and toil behind the scenes. Nor was Houdini ever nervous; he induced nervousness in others. (He deliberately dragged out the time it would take to escape, as a way of heightening the drama, and making the audience squirm.) His escapes from death, always graceful and easy, made him look like a superman.

As a person of power, you must research and practice endlessly before appearing in public, onstage or anywhere else. Never expose the sweat and labor behind your poise. Some think such exposure will demonstrate their diligence and honesty, but it actually just makes them look weaker—as if

anyone who practiced and worked at it could do what they had done, or as if they weren't really up to the job. Keep your effort and your tricks to yourself and you seem to have the grace and ease of a god. One never sees the source of a god's power revealed; one only sees its effects.

*A line [of poetry] will take us hours maybe;  
Yet if it does not seem a moment's thought,  
Our stitching and unstitching has been naught.  
Adam's Curse, William Buller Yeats, 1865-1939*

## KEYS TO POWER

Humanity's first notions of power came from primitive encounters with nature—the flash of lightning in the sky, a sudden flood, the speed and ferocity of a wild animal. These forces required no thinking, no planning—they awed us by their sudden appearance, their gracefulness, and their power over life and death. And this remains the kind of power we have always wanted to imitate. Through science and technology we have re-created the speed and sublime power of nature, but something is missing: Our machines are noisy and jerky, they reveal their effort. Even the very best creations of technology cannot root out our admiration for things that move easily and effortlessly. The power of children to bend us to their will comes from a kind of seductive charm that we feel in the presence of a creature less reflective and more graceful than we are. We cannot return to such a state, but if we can create the appearance of this kind of ease, we elicit in others the kind of primitive awe that nature has always evoked in humankind.

One of the first European writers to expound on this principle came from that most unnatural of environments, the Renaissance court. In *The Book of the Courtier*, published in 1528, Baldassare Castiglione describes the highly elaborate and codified manners of the perfect court citizen. And yet, Castiglione explains, the courtier must execute these gestures with what he calls *sprezzatura*, the capacity to make the difficult seem easy. He urges the courtier to “practice in all things a certain nonchalance which conceals all artistry and makes whatever one says or does seem uncontrived and effortless.” We all admire the achievement of some unusual feat, but if it is accomplished naturally and gracefully, our admiration increases tenfold—“whereas ... to labor at what one is doing and ... to make bones over it, shows an extreme lack of grace and causes everything, whatever its worth, to be discounted.”

Much of the idea of *sprezzatura* came from the world of art. All the great Renaissance artists carefully kept their works under wraps. Only the finished masterpiece could be shown to the public. Michelangelo forbade even popes to view his work in process. A Renaissance artist was always

careful to keep his studios shut to patrons and public alike, not out of fear of imitation, but because to see the making of the works would mar the magic of their effect, and their studied atmosphere of ease and natural beauty.

The Renaissance painter Vasari, also the first great art critic, ridiculed the work of Paolo Uccello, who was obsessed with the laws of perspective. The effort Uccello spent on improving the appearance of perspective was too obvious in his work—it made his paintings ugly and labored, overwhelmed by the effort of their effects. We have the same response when we watch performers who put too much effort into their act: Seeing them trying so hard breaks the illusion. It also makes us uncomfortable. Calm, graceful performers, on the other hand, set us at ease, creating the illusion that they are not acting but being natural and themselves, even when everything they are doing involves labor and practice.

The idea of *sprezzatura* is relevant to all forms of power, for power depends vitally on appearances and the illusions you create. Your public actions are like artworks: They must have visual appeal, must create anticipation, even entertain. When you reveal the inner workings of your creation, you become just one more mortal among others. What is understandable is not awe-inspiring—we tell ourselves we could do as well if we had the money and time. Avoid the temptation of showing how clever you are—it is far more clever to conceal the mechanisms of your cleverness.

Talleyrand's application of this concept to his daily life greatly enhanced the aura of power that surrounded him. He never liked to work too hard, so he made others do the work for him—the spying, the research, the detailed analyses. With all this labor at his disposal, he himself never seemed to strain. When his spies revealed that a certain event was about to take place, he would talk in social conversation as if he sensed its imminence. The result was that people thought he was clairvoyant. His short pithy statements and witticisms always seemed to summarize a situation perfectly, but they were based on much research and thought. To those in government, including Napoleon himself, Talleyrand gave the impression of immense power—an effect entirely dependent on the apparent ease with which he accomplished his feats.

There is another reason for concealing your shortcuts and tricks: When you let this information out, you give people ideas they can use against you. You lose the advantages of keeping silent. We tend to want the world to

know what we have done—we want our vanity gratified by having our hard work and cleverness applauded, and we may even want sympathy for the hours it has taken to reach our point of artistry. Learn to control this propensity to blab, for its effect is often the opposite of what you expected. Remember: The more mystery surrounds your actions, the more awesome your power seems. You appear to be the only one who can do what you do—and the appearance of having an exclusive gift is immensely powerful. Finally, because you achieve your accomplishments with grace and ease, people believe that you could always do more if you tried harder. This elicits not only admiration but a touch of fear. Your powers are untapped—no one can fathom their limits.

Image: The Racehorse. From up close we would see the strain, the effort to control the horse, the labored, painful breathing. But from the distance where we sit and watch, it is all gracefulness, flying through the air. Keep others at a distance and they will only see the ease with which you move.

Authority: For whatever action [nonchalance] accompanies, no matter how trivial it is, it not only reveals the skill of the person doing it but also very often causes it to be considered far greater than it really is. This is because it makes the onlookers believe that a man who performs well with so much facility must possess even greater skill than he does. (Baldassare Castiglione, 1478-1529)

## REVERSAL

The secrecy with which you surround your actions must seem lighthearted in spirit. A zeal to conceal your work creates an unpleasant, almost paranoiac impression: you are taking the game too seriously. Houdini was careful to make the concealment of his tricks seem a game, all part of the show. Never show your work until it is finished, but if you put too much effort into keeping it under wraps you will be like the painter Pontormo, who spent the last years of his life hiding his frescoes from the public eye and only succeeded in driving himself mad. Always keep your sense of humor about yourself.

There are also times when revealing the inner workings of your projects can prove worthwhile. It all depends on your audience's taste, and on the times in which you operate. P. T. Barnum recognized that his public wanted to feel involved in his shows, and that understanding his tricks delighted them, partly, perhaps, because implicitly debunking people who kept their sources of power hidden from the masses appealed to America's democratic spirit. The public also appreciated the showman's humor and honesty. Barnum took this to the extreme of publicizing his own humbuggery in his popular autobiography, written when his career was at its height.

As long as the *partial* disclosure of tricks and techniques is carefully planned, rather than the result of an uncontrollable need to blab, it is the ultimate in cleverness. It gives the audience the illusion of being superior and involved, even while much of what you do remains concealed from them.