

# **The Falconer**

What We Wish We Had Learned in School

By Grant Lichtman

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### *Dedication*

The students of The Falconer classes 1999–2003 of Francis Parker School, San Diego, are some of the most remarkably thoughtful, creative, and visionary young people I have ever met. I hope that in some cases our discussions had a fraction of the impact on their lives and thought processes that they had on mine.

## Acknowledgments

This book is the result of conversations, trials, and testing in the classroom ranging over a period of more than twenty years. No doubt I will have forgotten many whose thoughts and input have contributed to the final product, but I hope that the following list comprises most who deserve special note, though not blame, for the model that has evolved.

The students of The Falconer seminar are first in line for thanks. Over a period of five years, more than eighty high school students at Francis Parker School gave up lunch and study times to participate in a college-level course for which most received no credit on their transcript. They gambled that the experience would be worthwhile, and for the most part, I believe, it was. They have gone on to college, graduate programs, and successful careers.

W. Lee Pierson, former headmaster of Francis Parker School, gave me the opportunity to teach this remarkable group of students the first year. Carol Obermeier and Chris Harrington, members of the English faculty at Parker, sat in on a number of seminars, and Ms. Obermeier reviewed and edited a draft of the manuscript. Robert Landis, former student, also reviewed the manuscript and provided substantive comments. Michael Moreno, former student, reviewed the manuscript and provided probably the most compelling reason for me to move forward and publish when he called from the Green Zone in Baghdad and said that he really wanted the Falconer model at hand in a book that he could reach for in time of need. Kevin Yaley allowed me to team teach with him in order to refine some of the subject matter within a broader context of his philosophy and ethics course. Daniel Stuessy, founder and owner of Opterra, Inc., was my coauthor on a series of articles related to alternate dispute resolution that developed the “getting ahead of no” model for proactively seeking solutions to problems before they occur. Brad Lichtman, Dana Shelbourne, and Ted Tibbs are all educators in the San Diego area, and it was discussions with them more than twenty years ago that led to the concept that great teaching arises from leading students to find, not solve, problems in the classroom. Ben Malayang is currently president of Silliman University, Dumaguete City, Philippines, where I taught for a year in 1981 and formulated a number of the concepts of systems analysis while working with Mr. Malayang and others at the Silliman Environmental Center.

The Falconer class and this book draw on the classic book of strategy, *The Art of War* by Sun Tzu, of which there are a number of available translations and interpretations. All direct quotes from *The Art of War* included in this book have been drawn from the 2007 edition published by J.W. Edwards, Inc. and Borders Classics. Permission to use these quotes has been graciously granted and facilitated by J. W. Edwards, Borders Classics and the Ann Arbor Media Group (see References and Suggested Readings for the full reference). For teachers, students, and readers interested in further study of *The Art of War*, this edition is recommended for its clarity, ease of use, and availability.

## Introduction

*School prepares us to be successful. We aspire to be happy.*

Robert Landis, Falconer Class of 2001

We are not teaching our children, our students, and our co-workers what they really need to know. The lessons aren't out there on some shelf or Web site. They won't be found with more money and more programs to push more stuff in more different ways at our kids and our employees. It's not about computer-to-student ratios, distance learning, high-speed links to the Library of Congress, or lecture podcasts. It's not a pricey self-help guru claiming that his "new thing" is new, seven cookbook steps to success, or ten simple mileposts to make a million for your company.

Those tools help, but they are the dressing, like ornaments on a Christmas tree. We need to pay attention to the tree itself. Look at the people who *invented* computers, who *designed* the Internet, who *overcame* the Depression, who *envisioned* the best sellers, who *challenged* racism, who *explored* the ocean depths, who *built* the Panama Canal, who *created* the management-consulting firms that you hire to tell you how to run your business more efficiently. I want my children and my employees and my co-workers and my friends to exhibit qualities like invention, courage, creativity, insight, design, and vision a lot more than I want them to know the capitals of South America or the sequence of presidents and kings, fractions, computer science, art history, running a cash register, or throwing a football.

In short, I want us to spend more time teaching how to generate and recognize elegant solutions to the many problems facing our world.

Why in our great system of child rearing and primary, secondary, college, graduate, and postgraduate education is there no course of study titled something like Strategies for Becoming Who I Want to Be? Is it that our vast machine of education and training, so finely crafted in the industrial and postindustrial age to turn out competent, productive, knowledgeable, and efficient cogs, just hasn't gotten around to it yet? Is it that the search for elegance should be reserved for geniuses? Is there a step in the life-long process of learning that we have overlooked or hidden which can transcend the teaching of competency and knowledge, which can provide us with the additional tools of creation, invention, and wisdom? Can we actually teach these strategies from an early age?

Come along and see.

On this journey, we will ask many, many questions and find some answers, but one thing we accept at the outset is that we never find *valuable* answers without searching for them. That's what real journeys are all about, so be prepared to work a little. Remember Dorothy in Oz? She had the answer all along, but she needed to walk a long road, to overcome humbugs, tornadoes, burning brooms, falling houses, and flying monkeys before her belief in the power of friendship and family showed her the way home. There are just some things that no Good Witch or teacher or boss or parent can discover for us; we have to learn it for ourselves.

I am not alone at the forefront of those calling for a change in how we view the priorities of education and training. Visionary educational leaders agree that we need to teach our students and employees to be more creative, to search for the unknown, to redouble their efforts in the face of failure, to bridge the gaps between disciplines in order to invent. What is perhaps new is that we have actually *done it*. We have created and tested a teaching model with stories and examples that work at the high school and even elementary level. We have taken that first important step of proving that this type of education is both possible and practical. You will find the model and the stories in this book.

Who is this book for? The teachers and students in all of us. Learning takes place in schools and colleges and professional training centers when *every one of us* is either a student or teacher or both. Business leaders learn from their mentors, their investors, and the harsh gods of the market place, and they have a vital need to educate both their employees and their customers. Parents have learned the lessons of their own youth and try to pass those keys along to their children, often in a world where the shape of the locks has changed. We think of children as the ultimate learners, absorbing lessons as they grow, and then in their innocence and with their unique youthful perceptions, they become the instructor.

So who is this book for? It is for all of us who encounter the ultimate task master every day: a life that can ensnare us in tangled brambles, throw us a greasy curveball, jump out at us in the middle of a dark night from behind the closet door when no one else is home. But it is also a life that brings us orange and coral sunsets over a flat lavender sea, Beethoven's Sixth over coffee on Sunday, babies who grow up and graduate with honors, and the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel. This book is for those of us who want to avoid more of the brambles and enjoy more of the sunsets.

A central theme of this book is the critical importance of asking questions and one of the first questions that *I* would ask at the start of a thought journey is "Who am I listening to?" Let me introduce myself.

At various times in my adult life, I have been a scientist, entrepreneur, student, teacher, builder, writer, reader, husband, businessman (generally successful), traveler, and father. After twelve years of public primary and secondary education, six years of undergraduate and graduate work at the University of California and Stanford, and more than fifteen years in business, I asked myself what I had learned that I wished someone had taught me in high school but didn't. I wrote an outline while lying on the couch one afternoon and turned that outline into a seminar course that I taught for five years at a small high school in San Diego, California. We proved that we can overtly teach young people to be more creative, strategic, and inventive in their thinking, to make the leap from a passive learner of previous knowledge to an active creator of new ideas. You will find some of my students' thoughts sprinkled throughout the book. Do they sound wise and prophetic beyond their tender years? Yes, but they were just seventeen-year-old kids who gave up their lunch times for a no-credit seminar and the chance to ask a lot of, and about, themselves.

On any journey it is useful to have guides. We will employ a number, both real and mythical, as their unique expertise is required. The real ones are friends, authors, and students who, over the years, have given me some precious nugget of clarity that made me want to slap my forehead and smile and say, "Yes, now I get it!" The made-up guides

are convenient provocateurs who, like Dorothy's Good Witch, will help us towards our own self-discovery. Why so many guides? Why not one leader at the head of the trail who tells us when to turn and what to look at and where to stand to get the best snapshot? Should not a fundamental truth be simple and easy to see, like " $E=mc^2$ ," "buy low and sell high," or "never draw to an inside straight"? But like a kaleidoscope or a glass bead game or the feathery twirls of Chaos, there are multiple paths through the mosaic, and our guides each have a particular role to play as the paths unfold.

One of our principle guides may be *both* real and fictional. *The Art of War* is one of the most studied and interpreted manuscripts in the history of the world, yet its credited author, Sun Tzu, remains a controversial mystery, perhaps a single author, perhaps a group of scholars. As Mr. Sun will tell us when we meet him, he is surprised that, with all of the standard interpretations of his work related to war and business and conflict and martial arts, no one yet has studied the obvious connection to the pursuit of personal happiness. *The Falconer* weaves the ancient text and this new interpretation together in a way that even my high school students found clear, compelling, and helpful. Who better to act as our principle guide and commentator than Sun Tzu himself, or at least some convenient versions of him?

This book is not a direct path; few problems in life are clean and linear, so why should our solutions be more so? Here are three explicit points that may help the reader as the paths of this journey grow and cross:

1. We all learn by experience better than by instruction. Since the thought journey *is* the experience, there are sections that may not make sense until placed within the context of a later chapter; you just have to have a little faith. But since this book may be used as a text as well as a popular guide, I have extracted key items and placed them in an appendix in the back, the Cheat Sheets. Use them as needed, but like skimming *Cliff's Notes* instead of reading *Moby Dick*, a lot will be lost if used alone.
2. There are two parallel stories here. One major thesis of this book is that the central tenets of strategic and creative thinking are simple enough to teach to a small child. One of the story lines, that of Mr. Usher and the Children, therefore, is written in a *Winnie the Pooh* language that even elementary children can understand. I know because I gave these chapters to my own kids when they were that age and they "got it." This does not mean that the lessons of this story line are inapplicable to adult situations. Far from it. But for those of you who are parents and teachers, who want to help your youngsters get a head start on these lessons, feel free to tear the Mr. Usher chapters out of the book and give them to your young charges. For the older reader, the Mr. Usher chapters will weave together with the more adult-level sections and hopefully make the path more enjoyable for the children in all of us.
3. Please do not worry about the seemingly separate identities of our guides, Sun Tzu (who we refer to as Mr. Sun) and Sunny. They are one and the same, two reflections of the same voice. They are both helping us to convert ancient wisdom into simple and easily applicable pathways of strategic thinking. They come and go also in a nonlinear fashion as we need them, and in the end you will be comfortable with their habit of popping in and out of the lessons as needed.

Most of this journey will be comfortable, like a warm bed on a fall evening, tea and crumpets at five, a gentle stroll, a flat-green three-foot putt. At some point, though, we have to pay the price of our assumptions, of our deliberate arrogance, for setting the bar high. The world is sometimes cruel, and we can't apologize for that; we need to look underground as well as to the heavens. There will come a time when all the theory and stories and hope just won't hold the weight. By that time we pray we have learned and trusted the tools that will allow us to read on, to climb out of the hole, and still have our wholeness. But that is up to each of us. We will test this mettle, without which our path is just a fairy tale. The search for elegance is rarely a smooth curve or a straight line.

So let's go; our guides await. The nearest convenient stepping-in point is at the edge of a dewy meadow, and it is cold.