



Epsilon Theory

NARRATIVE | BY RUSTY GUINN

The Two Churchills



This is my favorite street art in the world.

It adorns a rail bridge that soars above I-45 in Houston. More than 300,000 cars pass by it every day. It has been modified a couple times by other street artists, but every time it goes back.

It's a complicated statement, and I suspect people read it different ways. To most, it means to Be Someone Important. To matter. It's an external way of reading it: to have an impact. To be engaged. To have your contributions to the world, or humanity or some other measure weighed and acknowledged as a net positive. To be known and well-thought of.

There's another reading that is more internal in perspective: to find the whole person that we are. Not an amalgam of symbols and identities and tribal affiliations, or of words we use to describe those things and hide ourselves behind language. To be a man or woman in full. To be *someone*.

At this moment I'm a man with complete tranquility...I've been a real estate developer for most of my life, and I can tell you that a developer lives with the opposite of tranquility, which is perturbation. You're perturbed about something all the time. You build your first development, and right away you want to build a bigger one, and you want a bigger house to live in, and if it ain't in Buckhead, you might as well cut your wrists. Soon's you got that, you want a plantation, tens of thousands of acres devoted solely to shooting quail, because you know of four or five developers who've already got that. And soon's you get that, you want a place on Sea Island and a Hatteras cruiser and a spread northwest of Buckhead, near the Chattahoochee, where you can ride a horse during the week, when you're not down at the plantation, plus a ranch in Wyoming, Colorado, or Montana, because truly successful men in Atlanta and New York all got their ranches, and of course now you need a private plane, a big one, too, a jet, a Gulfstream Five, because who's got the patience and the time and the humility to fly commercially, even to the plantation, much less out to a ranch? What is it you're looking for in this endless quest? Tranquility. You think if only you can acquire enough worldly goods, enough recognition, enough eminence, you will be free, there'll be nothing more to worry about, and instead you become a bigger and bigger slave to how you think others are judging you.

- *A Man in Full*, by Tom Wolfe

There is nothing wrong with wanting to *Be Someone* in the external sense. But it is perilous. When our engagement with our communities and our societies is driven by a desire to have the greatest possible impact on the world, we are prone to competitive behaviors and to seeing competitive behaviors in others. At a time when we are already being **forced into a Competitive Game**, it isn't a long road from well-intentioned desire to be known for changing the world to existential defensiveness, where we become slaves to how we think others are judging us, or worse, where we impose that slavery on others.



"He was slightly eccentric. He had very unusual taste but was happy so long as he was doing his own thing."

- *Malcolm Churchill, speaking about his father, Lt. Col Jack Churchill*

"I felt as if I were walking with destiny, and that all my past life had been but a preparation for this hour and this trial."

- *Winston Churchill*



'Eggsy' Unwin: 'To Pee or Not to Pee?'

Harry Hart: That was the headline the day after I defused a dirty bomb in Paris.

Eggsy: 'Germany: 1, England: 5'

Harry: Missed that game. I was breaking up an undercover spy ring at the Pentagon.

[Eggsy points at the Charles and Diana wedding cover]

Harry: My first mission. Foiled the assassination of Margaret Thatcher.

Eggsy: Not everybody had thanked you for that one.

Harry: The point is, Eggsy, nobody thanked me for any of them. Front page news and all these occasions are celebrity nonsense. Because it's the nature of Kingsman that our achievements remain secret. A gentleman's name should appear in the newspaper only three times: When he's born, when he marries, and when he dies. And we are, first and foremost, gentlemen.

Kingsman: The Secret Service (2014)

There were two notable men in the Second World War who bore the surname Churchill. Both were British, and both are famous. I'm sure that you know at least one I'm talking about, but maybe not the other. Both were men in full.

Sir Winston Churchill, Prime Minister of the United Kingdom, is regarded by many historians and other chroniclers of the times as the most indispensable man of the 20th Century. More importantly, he is regarded by me that way. As author, orator, humorist, strategist, motivator and statesman, he was a man from another time at a time when the rush of modernity required exactly that.

The other, Lieutenant-Colonel John Malcolm Thorpe Fleming Churchill, was no relation to the prime minister, but had every bit of the more noteworthy Churchill's quirky personality. He was a newspaper editor, actor and male model born in Hong Kong who toured Burma on a motorcycle while stationed by the British Army there during the '20s. When war broke out again in 1939, he joined the British Expeditionary Forces in France. His tenure in Europe was an eventful one.

THE Churchill wanted to Be Someone. His tongue was only planted partially in cheek when he famously (and somewhat apocryphally) said that history would be kind to him because he intended to write it. He cared deeply about how he was perceived and about his reputation. His speeches were famously rich with evocative language and calculated delivery, and he cultivated a preternatural ability to induce emotional response. At that unique point in time, the stalwart British needed a man who would make *himself* great to make his *nation* capable of greatness. To modern sensibilities this carries a whiff of distasteful inauthenticity. Our culture so prizes the trappings of humility that the proud hero who *knows he is a hero* and plays the role willingly is typically considered to be no hero at all. Sir Winston would have reared back his head in laughter at such a heaping load of tosh.

The OTHER Churchill wanted to Be Someone, too. That someone was *Mad Jack*. He was a character straight out of a storybook, and not some soft Caldecott Medal-winning heartwarmer. We're talking one of those German tailor-chopping-off-the-kid's-thumbs-because-he-wouldn't-stop-sucking them storybooks. In some of his early action in May 1940, he signaled the attack on a German position at L'EpINETTE by shooting a barbed arrow from an *English longbow* into a German sergeant. After joining the Commandos, his first campaign brought him to the shores of Norway, where he jumped out of the landing boat, grabbed his bagpipe and blew [The March of the Cameron Men](#) before pulling out a grenade and tossing it at the German position.

Later, he landed in Sicily with his pipes on his back and broadsword in his hand. After that, he moved on to Molina. There, together with a corporal he grabbed for the mission, Churchill captured a German position...along with the 42 Nazi troops manning it. In Yugoslavia he was the last man standing from his unit after heavy mortar fire, and fired every weapon he could find at advancing Germans until he ran out of ammo. What did he do then? Well, obviously, he jumped up, grabbed his pipes and played [Will Ye No Come Back Again](#) until he got knocked out by a grenade.



He was captured and escaped. Captured and escaped again. Walked 100 miles to Italy and lived out the rest of his life in peace. No, I'm kidding. He rescued 700 doctors and patients in Palestine, defended a medical convoy from 250 insurgent fighters, did more acting, designed surfboards, built coal-fired riverboats and rode motorcycles throughout the English countryside until he finally decided the world was too boring in 1996.

There's nothing wrong with wanting to *Be Someone* like Winston Churchill. I think highly enough of him that I named my firstborn son after him (pictured right). There's nothing wrong with aspiring to greatness, or with seeking reputation. The desire to have an impact on the world usually comes from a good place.

But in seeking to promote our brands, in our search for greater impact and influence, we are doing a lot of things that are killing our ability to have real dialogue with one another. As we grapple with how to break ourselves out of the Competitive Game we're being forced into, we must also understand the forces that are keeping us there. Here are some of the ways in which our desire for our small voice to have an impact among 7 billion others is keeping us there instead.

The Principal / Agent Problem in Media

In [Fiat Money, Fiat News](#), Ben discussed how, in the same way that bad money drives good money out of circulation, fake news drives real news out of circulation. Like money, this can manifest itself in two ways: through true counterfeiting of the news itself, or through biased presentations of facts published as advocacy by institutions acting as principals. In other words, *fiat news*. Some of those institutions are sovereign entities – like, say, Russia – that have an interest in promoting their interests through both *fake* and *fiat* channels. But some, probably most, of those in the business of fiat news are the media outlets themselves.

The media's indispensable function is its ability to make available information that *others do not want disseminated*, especially when those others are governments, corporations and other powerful entities and individuals. In this function, journalists act as agents for the public, and do it a significant service. In some cases, that service really changed the world. The intent was to reveal and inform, and the outcome was a shift in the course of history.

This is changing. It has changed. From its historical role as agent, news media has increasingly set itself up as a principal. How? Rather than informing and allowing the dice to fall as they may, the media often now enters the fray with a view on the right outcome for the dice. Most media institutions have the good sense not to include outright lies, of course. But when you have an interest in the outcome of the story rather than its capacity to inform, you end up with fiat news like [this](#), where CNN intentionally cuts off a portion of the video that would ruin the *intent* of their story, which is very obviously not to inform. You end up with fiat news like [this](#), where you must read 7 paragraphs into a story to discover that a man being executed confessed to raping and murdering a 16-year old girl. Even *that* fact is couched in dismissive language that is very obviously intended to guide the reader to a salacious conclusion.

It's not hard to come up with all sorts of explanations for why this is happening, from the consolidating ownership of media outlets, to the democratization of news via cheap internet venues that create a lowest-common-denominator effect, to the infotainment impact of always-on cable

news. I think the root cause is more insidious. Through the feedback processes of each of those things and the resultant ways in which journalism is now taught at universities, a very significant portion of those entering the media want to Be Someone like Winston, not Jack. They are becoming journalists because they want to change the world. And so, in setting out to change the world, to borrow from the Washington Post's insipid masthead postscript ("Democracy dies in darkness!"), they cease to be a light that shines in all dark places, and become instead a hand that guides the light to only those dark places that fit their aims.

Don't believe me? Just take a look at these responses to a question posed by the Future Journalism Project survey from a couple years ago, which asked "Why did you become a journalist?"

"Soon you find out that you can really make a difference."

"It can change the world."

"I've always wanted to change the world."

"I developed a sense of injustice [sic] for the underdog, because the underdog, I felt, was me."

"I learned that injustice is part of our world, but that need not be a hopeless feeling. Not when you're a journalist."

It's not that these are bad sentiments, or that they're coming from bad people. Quite the contrary. But when the institutions that are supposed to act in service to the public start taking sides in the public debate through their news practices, even if it comes from a good-hearted place, from a desire to *Be Someone*, it is a terrible thing. In the same way that our American constitutional experiment is built upon the need for the rule of law despite the theoretical existence of benevolent kings, we should demand a similar standard from our media. When the media acts as principal, they, perhaps more than any other political institution in the world, serve to strengthen the equilibrium of the Competitive Game we are in.

Whataboutism, Grand Narratives and the Hunt for Hypocrisy

The tribal layperson is guilty, too. The same competitive forces that push us into promoting our views and drowning out those we disagree with when we're entrusted with impartiality like the media have similar effects on us in our personal lives. After all, if we are to make ourselves and our tribe great, we can do so by defending ourselves or by tearing others down. The most common form – *whataboutism* – tries to do both. It's a major part of the hunt for hypocrisy that dominates so much of the dialogue of the Competitive Game.

The Soviets made famous and frequent use of it during the Cold War. Václav Havel characterized its most common construction as a debate between two parties:

A: Your subway does not operate according to the timetable.

B: Well, in your country you lynch blacks.

The basic idea is to transition the discussion of an issue that threatens one's tribe from a substantive one to a discussion of *relative credibility*. Sure, you may want to criticize the efficiency of our

implementation of state-run, state-owned transportation, but we refuse to even broach the issue with people who still have racism in their country. Or: I don't need to listen to a Roy Moore argument from the party that defended Bill Clinton. In other words, the *tu quoque* fallacy has taken the place of most every form of debate that used to be common to our national politic.

For a modern perspective, look at the below from Ben Shapiro, who I think is actually a pretty thoughtful conservative. This was his initial take on the day when the claims that Roy Moore assaulted a 14-year old girl some decades ago came to light:

And so the question stands: what would someone of your party need to do in order for you to put your political priorities aside in favor of standing against the immoral behavior of that candidate?

The biggest problem here is that we have a prisoner's dilemma: if only one side is willing to abide by a standard, the other side wins. Imagine Teddy Kennedy running against Roy Moore, and they're both hit with scandals. Now imagine the Republicans pull Moore but the Democrats leave Kennedy. A garbage person still occupies the seat, but the Republicans have forfeited. And it's easy enough to use the lesser-of-two evils logic to justify pretty much anything.

Until people on *all* sides of the political aisle are willing to throw out candidates who act evilly, we're likely to see the moral quality of candidates continue to decline. Opportunists on both sides will bash their opponents for sticking with nasty human beings, then go back to doing the same with their own allies. And the country gets worse and worse. Unless, that is, one party holds to a standard, and the American people *reward* that party for upholding that standard. Then everyone in every party would have an incentive to stand up for decent behavior. In the end, it's not about what the parties are willing to tolerate. It's about what the American people won't. And right now, Americans seem willing to tolerate just about anything.

Now, bear in mind, Shapiro followed this up with a clarifying comment asserting that Moore should step away in shame, full stop. The reality is that there are infinitely worse perpetrators. Paul Krugman, once a legitimate economist (no, really), can now be summoned by sacrificing three unblemished rabbits in a candlelit pentagram and repeatedly chanting "tu quoque" in monotone. But the blurb above is still fascinating – in one fell swoop, it accurately explains and decries the problem created by whataboutism, and in doing so uses that as an opportunity to engage in some hypothetical whataboutism of its own. This is how it works:

- 1.) Someone from our Tribe does or says something dumb or evil.
- 2.) We see a narrative forming ascribing that dumb or evil thing as a trait of our Tribe.
- 3.) We are frustrated by the injustice of that, since the other Tribe is way worse on that dimension.
- 4.) Instead of disavowing that trait in our Tribe without qualification, we say, "Well, **what about** them and **THIS** thing they did."

Sometimes whataboutism isn't just about trying to assault our opponents and weaken their credibility with outright claims of hypocrisy. Sometimes it's demanding that every person we debate with follow our priorities of issues, or that they follow the forms we prefer for discussing them. I think you know what I'm talking about, because we see it all the time:



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In the rare moments when our political and social dialogue isn't "Well, what about what your tribe did", it is often "If you said this, why didn't you say this?" We are endlessly charitable in assuming that our own philosophies are consistent with our words and actions, but we fill in the gaps for others with far less kindness. If someone engaged in a Competitive Game against us doesn't condemn an action as quickly as they ought to, if they don't use the same number of exclamation marks as when they criticized someone else's actions a month before, if they want to discuss or write about X when *much bigger issue* Y just happened, if they don't balance and season every single political or social statement they make with comments on any possible related issue, we attack.

We have no choice, we think. We were destined for this. We have to fight this battle, and we have to win, because it's not acceptable to be the party that is more associated with this Bad Thing. But when we see every battle as existential, when we seek to *purposely dominate* others by inserting meaning they never intended, when we search for every hint of hypocrisy to make ourselves great, to *Be Someone* in the great conversations of our time, we perpetuate the Competitive Game.

'Collective Munchausen Syndrome'

While the ways in which the Competitive Game drives us to dominate and diminish others through language are perhaps most prevalent, so much of what it means to *Be Someone* is still locked up in identity. Lebanese-Canadian evolutionary behavioral scientist Gad Saad coined the above expression to describe how people in large social settings have taken to competitions in (usually imagined) victimhood. From Donald Trump complaining about #FakeNews and the mean jokes of the SNL cast, to the sorts of absurd ethnographic intersectionalist ramblings you'll find coming out of most sociology departments, practically everyone across the sociopolitical spectrum is in on this game. There are few behaviors which are more conducive to maintaining the strong equilibrium of our Competitive Game (and to establishing some strategic dominance within that game) than establishing the strongest victimhood credentials. The reason? Because like the other strategies here, it simultaneously argues that our voice ought to be louder and that other voices ought to be silenced completely. It is a tactic perfectly engineered for this time.

Some will misunderstand my meaning here, I think. It would be stupid to deny that privilege, the word typically used to cast someone as an anti-victim, exists. If you can't accept that certain birth circumstances make your success and ease of navigating our society easier or harder, you're not approaching the question seriously. If you can't accept that certain life experiences will have similar impacts, you're being obtuse. But there's a marked difference between (1) recognizing those truly different starting places and working wherever possible to eliminate them within society, on the one hand, and (2) concluding that they constitute a system of oppression that can only be addressed by empowering those who would silence the views of any they would call privileged, on the other. The prevalence of this approach is a nightmare for any hopes of escaping the Competitive Game. The answer to this, as I argue in [Gandalf, GZA and Granovetter](#), is only for a critical mass of citizens and voters to choose to hear all voices, knowing that no individual may be reduced to her privilege or victimhood.

We respond to symbols and events based on millions of experiences, and no one can tell us what they mean to us.

OK. So now what?

Well, in the last three notes on this topic, including this one, I've written about a range of things I think we can do to hit escape velocity from the Competitive Game equilibrium.

- 1.) [We can stop treating every issue as existential.](#) (Yes, I'm looking at you, 'But Gorsuch' Republicans and 'Trump is the End of the Republic' Democrats)
- 2.) [We can stop telling people what they intended by their words and actions.](#)
- 3.) [We can stop allowing people to tell us what we intended by our words and actions.](#)
- 4.) We can stop looking for hypocrisy everywhere.
- 5.) We can stop using identity to shut out opinions we don't like.
- 6.) We can stop abusing the trust people put in us to represent their interests by promoting our own.

But what else?

For those of us who think about improving civic engagement, who want to be citizens, I have a humble suggestion: stop trying to be Winston Churchill. I recognize that this counsel is likely to be as popular as my advice from [Before and After the Storm](#) (i.e. learn to lose). I'm not saying not to be ambitious. I'm saying that instead of identifying strategies for debate and discussion which elevate us while they demean and debase our opponents, instead of making every matter existential, instead of choosing grand rhetoric, instead be the most independent, extraordinary, true version of who you are. If you can manage to find a truly independent voice in your personal, political and financial life, pursue it with reckless abandon. Don't set it to the side so that you can build a brand or *make an impact*.

Trust me. If you've decided to *Be Someone* like Mad Jack, you're going to have an impact. So get your ass out of the boat, grab your bow, strap on your broadsword and sound the pipes. All that's left is to decide what song you're going to play.

And Ben and I would like to hear it. Send us a note at Rusty.Guinn@EpsilonTheory.com and Ben.Hunt@EpsilonTheory.com telling us what else you think we need to commit to as citizens to break this cycle. Let's continue the dialogue.

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