

PROLOGUE

The Obsessive Innovator

The Archetypal Super-Achiever

When you grow up you tend to get told the world is the way it is and your life is just to live your life inside the world. Try not to bash into the walls too much. Try to have a nice family life, have fun, save a little money. That's a very limited life.... You can change it, you can influence it, you can build your own things that other people can use.

—Steve Jobs

I'm on my way to the factory. Meet me there." *Click.*

It was shortly after 8 a.m. on a Sunday in the fall of 1984. Steve Jobs was about to hop into his black Mercedes sedan to make the forty-minute trek from his home in Woodside to Fremont where Apple was churning out its latest product—the Macintosh computer.

On the receiving end of the phone line was Debi Coleman, the company's head of manufacturing, who had been sitting on her porch in Cupertino, buried in the Sunday paper. After two and a half years at Apple, she was accustomed to her boss's demanding and eccentric behavior—the rage attacks, the intrusions during off-work hours, and the sudden disappearances for days at a time. "I was less surprised by the timing of Steve's call than by what I saw when I got there," recalled Coleman, now a partner at SmartForest, a Portland, Oregon-based venture capital firm.

Eager to build the perfect factory, Jobs had been badgering Coleman for months. After deciding in late 1983 that the initial site—Dallas, Texas—would not do, Jobs became consumed with every detail. He wanted to bring to America the elegantly designed machines that he had seen in Germany such as Braun

appliances and BMW cars. But his focus went way beyond acquiring state-of-the-art equipment. He insisted that the walls all be painted white. "No white was too white for Steve," stated Coleman. Jobs would also don white gloves to do frequent dust checks. Whenever he spotted a few specks on either a machine or on the floor, which he was determined to keep clean enough to eat off, Coleman had to arrange for an instant scrubbing. Despite her frequent exasperation, Coleman did not think about quitting. "I was mesmerized by his genius and charm. And like several other women in the company, I was a little bit in love with him," she added.

When Coleman arrived that Sunday, she noticed a side of Jobs that she had never seen before. "He was particularly reserved and eager to please," Coleman noted. The reason? The normally high-octane entrepreneur, then still several months shy of his thirtieth birthday, had brought along a special guest—his adoptive father, Paul Jobs. From nine to eleven, Coleman escorted father and son around the nearly empty factory; in contrast to a weekday, when two shifts of workers would file in, only a few members of the security staff were present that morning. "The facility was not yet completely finished," added Coleman, "but Steve couldn't wait to show his father what he had created." A master craftsman himself, Paul Jobs, who had supported his family by working as a repo man, liked to build cabinets and fences. The elder Jobs also had a knack for fixing used cars. "While his father was impressed by how everything worked," stated Coleman, "he asked a lot of questions. He, too, paid attention to details."

While Steve Jobs did many great things at both Apple and Pixar, where he revolutionized the animation industry, he also never failed to keep track of the small things. And this intensity rattled many of his employees besides Coleman. Pamela Kerwin was the marketing director at Pixar when Jobs arrived in 1986, as his first stint at Apple was coming to an end. She was terrified whenever she printed anything for him to read, even memos. "He was a control freak and perfectionist in all things," recalled Kerwin, now a principal at the Los Angeles tech firm Luminous Publishing. "He would carefully go over every document a million times and would pick up on punctuation errors such as misplaced commas."

Commas. Cleanliness. Jobs could obsess and go ballistic about minutiae that would not even register on the radar screens of most CEOs. A tad mad, Jobs suffered from what psychiatrists call obsessive-compulsive personality disorder (OCPD). Though little studied, this condition affects as much as 8 percent of the U.S. population, according to a survey of more than forty thousand Americans

published in 2012 in the *Journal of Psychiatric Research*. The current edition of psychiatry's bible, the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual*, defines OCPD as a “preoccupation with orderliness . . . and mental and interpersonal control” and lists a total of eight common symptoms, four of which need to be present to reach the diagnosis. The key ones are:

- preoccupation with details, rules, order, lists, organization, or schedules
- perfectionism
- excess devotion to work
- inflexibility about matters of morality, ethics, or values
- reluctance to delegate tasks unless others submit to exactly his way of doing things
- rigidity and stubbornness

But for Jobs, these emotional difficulties didn't just impede his ability to get along with others; paradoxically, they also emerged as assets—the very skill set that enabled him to create the behemoth that is now Apple. After all, in our fiercely competitive culture, being results oriented rather than relationship oriented has its advantages.

And Jobs is just one in a long ticker-tape parade of American icons—beginning with Founding Fathers such as Thomas Jefferson and continuing through Pittsburgh entrepreneur Henry J. Heinz and Boston Red Sox star Ted Williams—whose obsessions and compulsions have fueled their stratospheric success. This list includes librarian Melvil Dewey, author of the pioneering search engine the Dewey Decimal Classification System, sexologist Alfred Kinsey, aviator Charles Lindbergh, and cosmetics tycoon Estée Lauder, all of whom also led the way in their chosen fields. Like Jobs, the author of the Declaration of Independence kept sweating the small stuff. The man who gave us the penny—his 1784 paper “Notes on the Establishment of a Money Unit, and of a Coinage for the United States” organized our national currency—couldn't help but keep track in his copious account books of every cent that he ever spent. And Jefferson's attention to detail was also responsible for the better-known chunks of his legacy—his brilliant writing, his pioneering architecture, and the University of Virginia, the exemplary public institution of higher learning that he founded. Like Jefferson, Heinz, who turned ketchup into our national sauce at the dawn of the twentieth century, had an obsession with counting, which he used to create

one of the most successful slogans in advertising history, “57 Varieties.” Slavishly devoted to his craft, Ted Williams was also an order and cleanliness nut. When visiting the Red Sox spring training facility in the late 1970s, the retired Hall of Famer would pester the clubhouse attendant about why he used Tide on the team’s laundry. This ballplayer didn’t hit to live, he lived to hit; and until the day he died, he loved nothing more than talking about the perfect swing.

To describe this exclusive group of archetypal super-achievers, of whom Jobs is the most prominent recent example, I prefer to use a term of my own coinage: “obsessive innovator.” Current nomenclature can be misleading because we tend to associate obsessives solely with careful, plodding performance. While the consultant Jim Collins, author of the megaselling *Good to Great: Why Some Companies Make the Leap . . . and Others Don’t* (2001), puts obsessives at the top of his leadership pyramid, he contends that these “Level 5 Leaders” are mild-mannered, self-effacing types and not creative trailblazers. Making the same assumption about those suffering from OCPD, authors who have recently explored the link between madness and greatness assign other psychiatric maladies to our biggest movers and shakers. For example, in *The Hypomanic Edge: The Link Between (a Little) Crazy and (a Lot of) Success in America* (2005), a study of a half dozen American leaders including Alexander Hamilton and Andrew Carnegie, Johns Hopkins psychologist John D. Gartner argues that hypomania, a mild form of bipolar disorder, “helped make America the richest nation on Earth.” Likewise, in *Narcissistic Leaders* (2007), management guru Michael Maccoby lumps Jobs together with his fellow techie Oracle’s Larry Ellison, calling them “productive narcissists.” According to Maccoby, who notes that “productive obsessives” make excellent middle managers or CFOs rather than CEOs, the highest rung to which an obsessive can aspire is to play a fastidious Sancho Panza to a visionary Don Quixote. To make his case, Maccoby cites the steady Ray Lane, Larry Ellison’s longtime number two at Oracle. But Apple’s stupendous growth in the first decade of the twenty-first century occurred precisely because Steve Jobs was both an obsessive like Ray Lane and a narcissist like Larry Ellison; he was a two-for-one. While obsessive innovators also possess the grandiosity and self-absorption characteristic of narcissists, they are driven primarily by their particular obsessions and compulsions; and it is precisely this connection between unremitting internal pressures and extraordinary external achievements that has received surprisingly little attention.

To illustrate the distinction between obsessive innovators and narcissists, con-

sider how Larry Ellison stacks up against his contemporary and close friend Jobs. While the two tech titans had similar early histories and shared several common behavioral traits, their internal preoccupations appear to have been quite different. In her unauthorized biography, *Everyone Else Must Fail* (2003), the late technology journalist Karen Southwick describes Oracle's domineering CEO as "a modern-day Genghis Khan who has elevated ruthlessness in business to a carefully cultivated art form. . . . Ellison runs through and discards [subordinates] with unusual ferocity." Like Jobs, Ellison was abandoned by both his parents shortly after birth. When Ellison was nine months old, his unwed mother shipped him off to Lillian and Louis Ellison, his grandmother's sister and her husband. In contrast to Jobs, who bonded with both his adoptive parents—particularly his father—Ellison got along with his mother but feared his father, who constantly belittled him.

"Larry hated that man and had nothing but venom toward him," Nancy Wheeler Jenkins, the second of Ellison's four ex-wives, told me in a recent interview. When Ellison was a sophomore in college, Lillian Ellison died of cancer, leaving him without much of a support system. He would end up bouncing around a couple of colleges and never earned a bachelor's degree. The self-taught programmer, who began working in northern California tech firms in the late 1960s, was nothing if not ambitious. "If I needed information to build something," Ellison told an interviewer in 1995, "I was relentless. I could not stop thinking about a problem that had to be solved in order to build something. I was obsessive." But in contrast to Jobs, Ellison was obsessive only about success—not about cleanliness, order, or details. According to Jenkins, who married Ellison in 1977—the union lasted only eighteen months—just as he was starting Oracle, his first manual for the company was littered with spelling mistakes. "He thought it a total waste of time to fix those errors," she stated. Jenkins, who found Ellison brilliant and witty, believes that his drive for vast wealth stemmed from his difficult childhood: "Larry wanted to show everyone that he was legitimate—he wanted to be a somebody." While fellow adoptee Jobs struggled with a similar, if not larger, batch of insecurities—his routine failure to attend to his own personal hygiene in early adulthood suggests that unlike Ellison, he also endured a period of neglect in childhood—the Apple founder viewed the accumulation of material possessions as secondary to the pursuit of his obsessions.

In contrast to narcissists like Ellison, obsessive innovators like Jobs aren't consumed solely by raw ambition. He did not design "insanely great products" just

to build a great company; he built a great company so that he could keep designing “insanely great products.” So compelled was Jobs to pursue this obsession, which dated back to his childhood in Mountain View, California, that he could not *think* of stopping. Becoming a master craftsman was his way to earn the approval of his beloved father; it was thus forever associated with his deepest needs for both validation and connection. This was something that mattered more to the adult Jobs than life itself. When the sedated cancer patient was lying in his hospital bed, he once ripped off his oxygen mask, railing that he hated its design. Much to the surprise of his doctors, Jobs then ordered them to begin work on five different options for a new mask. Similarly, Estée Lauder was also a prisoner to her own compulsions. As a little girl, she assisted her mother in her daily beauty rituals; and for the rest of her life, she could not stop putting makeup on women’s faces.

Like narcissists, obsessive innovators are made more than born. While it is not possible to rule out a genetic component, as a general rule OCPD constitutes a direct response to adverse circumstances in early childhood. The seven super-achievers profiled in this book all faced more than their fair share of early stressors; medical illness, neglect, emotional abuse, parental mental illness, loss of a parent, and severe family discord are common in their histories. “The obsessive personality type emerges in response to unmet emotional needs. Children who have little control over the key events and people in their lives begin to focus on something that they can control, such as details,” says psychiatrist Kerry Sulkowicz, founder of the Boswell Group, which provides advice to CEOs and corporate boards. Sulkowicz, also a clinical professor of psychiatry at New York University, emphasizes that over time this strategy of adapting to the environment becomes ingrained. Paradoxically, the cure to the child’s stressful predicament is this lifelong disease.

Behind every obsessive innovator is a unique constellation of family circumstances that derails normal parent-child bonding. And the same obsessions and compulsions, which originally constitute an ingenious resolution to this existential crisis, eventually beget the legacy. By adolescence, these future dynamos are typically friendless loners who are much more attached to things than to other people. As a child, Ted Williams was neglected by both his parents, who couldn’t stand each other and rarely spent much time at home. The baseball bat was not just his ticket to stardom; it was also his emotional anchor. In high school, Williams lacked the social skills to do the basics, such as go out on a date. The same

was true for Lindbergh and Kinsey. The Lone Eagle's tempestuous parents were also constantly bickering with each other; as a teenager, he ogled not girls but the gadgets at the local hardware store. His closest ties were to the machines and animals on the family's Minnesota farm. Likewise, Kinsey's favorite boyhood pastime was bonding with bugs and ferns during his long, solitary hikes in suburban New Jersey.

In contrast to these three obsessive innovators, who never learned to connect in childhood, Henry Heinz and Melvil Dewey became hyperobedient—the by-product of having grown up in families run by domineering women who bent their numerous children (as well as their passive husbands) to their wills. Both Anna Heinz and Eliza Dewey were strict disciplinarians who ruled by repeating harsh parental maxims. Eliza Dewey's favorite was "Praise to the face is an open disgrace." In grade school, Heinz and Dewey were already working overtime to please their "Tiger Mothers." While little Henry was feverishly helping Anna grow fruits and vegetables to sell to neighbors, little Melvil was busy classifying and arranging the contents of Eliza's pantry. And thus were born the vocations of two future American icons.

The case studies of Heinz and Dewey illustrate a point often obscured in the recent national debate about child-rearing unleashed by Amy Chua's controversial memoir, *Battle Hymn of the Tiger Mother* (2011)—like the Chinese, Americans also have a long history of "extreme parenting" designed to instill success. Anna Heinz and Eliza Dewey were both mid-nineteenth-century versions of Grace Welch, the hard-charging mother of former General Electric CEO Jack Welch. In his bestselling autobiography, *Jack: Straight from the Gut* (2001), Welch talks about an incident in high school when he flung his hockey stick across the rink after his team suffered a bitter defeat. Startling his teammates and everyone else in sight, his fiery Irish mother rushed into the locker room and grabbed him by the collar, yelling, "You punk! If you don't know how to lose, you'll never know how to win." Like Heinz, who also idealized his mother, Welch calls his "the most influential person in my life...who taught me the value of competition."

While Tiger Mothers can produce exceptional leaders, the same humiliations that teach lifelong lessons also have the potential to create long-term emotional problems. "Neutron Jack," the man who constantly trimmed his staff at GE, has often been described as a narcissist incapable of empathy. "His egocentrism is everywhere," observes Joseph Nocera in his review of *Jack* for the *New York Times*

Book Review. A likely reason why Heinz and Dewey developed into two-for-ones rather than pure narcissists is that unlike Jack Welch, they both also experienced maternal neglect. Eliza Dewey was forty-two when she had Melvil and, as he later recalled, “had no time to fuss with babies.” Whatever early bonding the future decimal man experienced came at the hands of his elder sister, Mate, to whom his mother entrusted his care.

While obsessive innovators all have obsessive-compulsive personality disorder (OCPD), they do not necessarily suffer from obsessive-compulsive disorder (OCD). These two psychiatric conditions, while often considered synonymous, are actually cousins. Broadly speaking, obsessions are things that one can't stop thinking about, and compulsions are things that one can't stop doing. While the content of these thoughts and actions can be similar in the two disorders, the person's internal experience is very different. Whereas in OCD, the obsessions—say, fears of dirt—are unwelcome, in OCPD the opposite is true. In psychiatry speak, this is the distinction between egodystonic and egosyntonic. Compare the elderly Howard Hughes, who would spend all day sitting naked in the middle of hotel rooms—the germ-free zone—with the thirty-something Steve Jobs, who would do his quick dust checks on the factory floor. In contrast to Hughes, who was paralyzed by his OCD, Jobs basked in his OCPD; he was proud of his company's cleanliness. Likewise, Melvil Dewey celebrated his childhood fixation with the number 10, turning it into his signature achievement, the decimal classification system that bears his name. And in contrast to those with OCD, who often seek psychiatric treatment, those with OCPD rarely acknowledge that anything is wrong. That's because the personality disorder typically improves rather than impairs normal functioning. “OCPD is a method of avoiding suffering. Those with the disorder come for help only if someone else—say, a spouse—demands it,” explained Lorrin Moran, a professor emeritus of psychiatry at Stanford University who ran the Medical Center's OCD Clinic for many years. But this rarely happens. More often than not, like the inflexible Charles Lindbergh, who insisted that his wife, the writer Anne Morrow Lindbergh, keep track of all household expenditures in detailed ledgers, those with OCPD tend to drive other family members into treatment. And Anne Lindbergh had to fight with her husband in order to see a psychotherapist, because he hated everything to do with psychiatry.

OCPD is also sometimes confused with Asperger's syndrome. “Aspies” do have some of the same core symptoms, such as rigidity, anger outbursts, and lack of empathy; they, too, can get caught up in repetitive or ritualistic behavior

such as collecting bits of information (though they gravitate even more toward the totally useless variety). But the hallmark of this autistic spectrum disorder is the inability to read the social or emotional cues of others—something that doesn't apply to obsessives. While obsessives can also be cold and distant, they are capable of occasional warmth and charm. For example, Estée Lauder had a remarkable knack for relating to customers, but not necessarily to anyone else; with both employees and family members, she was often demanding and unpredictable. And the characteristically tight-lipped Lindbergh eventually learned a thing or two about how to seduce women—techniques that he would need to feed his sexual addiction. If he had been a true Aspie, he would not have been able to maintain his long-term affairs with his three German mistresses, with whom he fathered a total of seven children. Aspies, who often have trouble connecting with their dates, certainly can't do that kind of thing (nor, for that matter, can most of us, as it takes an obsessive innovator to build four families).

While several of these seven super-achievers found a degree of happiness in marriage—including Lindbergh, who developed a deep and meaningful bond with Anne, even though he spent as little as two months a year with her—they all lived as fragmented individuals. Uncomfortable in their own skin, they often fiddled with their identity or created new identities. Estée Lauder (née Josephine Esther Mentzer) hid her Jewish background by inventing not only a new name, but also a bogus aristocratic family, whose origins she kept changing. Much to the amusement of his library colleagues, Melvil (né Melville) Dewey changed his last name to “Dui” after a business failure in his late twenties. On his love trips to Germany, Charles Lindbergh borrowed Superman's pseudonym, Careu Kent; and the swinging bachelor Ted Williams would sometimes check himself into hotel rooms as G. C. Luther (“How do you doubt,” the perspicacious dissembler explained, “a name like G. C. Luther?”). While Thomas Jefferson didn't hide his identity, he also had a secret lover—his slave Sally Hemings.

These larger-than-life figures were several fully realized Shakespearean characters all rolled into one. Besides the sybarite and the upstanding family man (or woman), they housed a host of other contradictory selves such as the saint, the sinner, the rule maker, and the rule breaker. Like the young Steve Jobs, who rarely showered, Alfred Kinsey was a cleanliness nut who flirted with filth; the sex doctor enjoyed hanging around public bathrooms in order to count (and to hook up with) gay men searching for anonymous sex partners. Ted Williams helped save the lives of thousands of cancer patients through his tireless advocacy on

behalf of the Jimmy Fund, a charity affiliated with the Dana-Farber Cancer Institute in Boston; however, he also was, as he admitted, “horseshit” with his own three children. The Red Sox star was even two different people on the baseball diamond; the hyperfocused hitter coexisted with the lackadaisical outfielder, who sometimes turned his back to home plate in order to take phantom swings. For Williams, as for the others, the core obsessions and compulsions could rarely be held in check for very long.