

NOTES FROM: *Wanting*, by Luke Burgis

SUMMARY: *Wanting* is about how we arrive at our desires, and about how we can *transform our relationship* with those desires in order to step into our full humanity, relate to each other more harmoniously, and intelligently select our desires in such a way that we *enlarge ourselves*, rather than diminish ourselves.

Burgis packs a *ton* of ideas into a relatively short book, but once you start to see what he's talking about, you can't *unsee* it. Desire is like the water that the fish are swimming in, and *Wanting* takes us beyond the fishbowl to view the drama of desire from above.

Backed up by the hugely influential French intellectual René Girard, author Luke Burgis shows that *humans rarely desire anything independently*. Human desire is *mimetic* - we imitate what *other* people want.

But in the exact same way that gravity exerts an invisible force on our bodies, the psychological force of mimesis shapes human desire all the time, silently and invisibly, and hardly anyone is aware of it happening at all.

“Each of us spends every moment of our life, from the moment we’re born to the moment we die, wanting something. We even want in our sleep. Yet few people ever take the time to understand how they come to want things in the first place. Wanting well, like thinking clearly, is not an ability we’re born with. It’s a freedom we have to earn.”

“By the way, did you know that in almost every language in the world, people fall in love? Nobody rises up into it.”

“You can never be a neutral observer of mimetic desire.”

“Desire, like gravity, does not reside autonomously in any one thing or person. It lives in the space between them.

“The imitation of desire has to do with our profound openness to other people’s interior lives – something that sets us apart as humans. *Desire*, as Girard used the word, does not mean the drive for food or sex or shelter or security. Those things are better called *needs* – they’re hardwired into our bodies. Biological needs don’t rely on imitation. If I’m dying of thirst in the desert, I don’t need anyone to show me that water is desirable. But after meeting our basic needs as creatures, we enter into the human universe of desire. And knowing what to want is much harder than knowing what to need.”

“Abraham Maslow’s hierarchy of needs is too *neat*. After a person has fulfilled their basic needs, they enter a universe of desires that does not have a stable hierarchy.”

“Facebook was built around identity – that is to say, desires. It helps people see what other people have and want. It is a platform for finding, following, and differentiating oneself from models. Models of desire are what make Facebook such a potent drug. Before Facebook, a person’s models came from a small set of people: friends, family, work, magazines, and maybe TV. After Facebook, everyone in the world is a potential model. Facebook isn’t filled with just *any* kind of model – most people we follow aren’t movie stars, pro athletes, or celebrities. Facebook is full of models who are *inside our world*, socially speaking. They are close enough for us to compare ourselves to them. They are the most influential models of all, and there are billions of them. Thiel quickly grasped Facebook’s potential power and became its first outside investor. ‘I bet on mimesis,’ he told me. His \$500,000 investment eventually yielded him over \$1 billion.”

“History is the story of human desire.”

“There are always models of desire. If you don’t know yours, they are probably wreaking havoc in your life.”

“Eve originally had no desire to eat the fruit from the forbidden tree – until the serpent modeled it. The serpent *suggested a desire*. That’s what models do. Suddenly, a fruit that had not aroused any particular desire became the most desirable fruit in the universe. Instantaneously. The fruit appeared irresistible because – and only after – it was modeled as a forbidden good. We are tantalized by models who suggest a desire for things that we don’t currently have, especially things that appear just out of reach. The greater the obstacle, the greater the attraction.”

“Isn’t that curious? We don’t want things that are too easily possessed or that are readily within reach. Desire leads us beyond where we currently are. Models are like people standing a hundred yards up the road who can see something around the corner that we can’t yet see. So the way that a model describes something or *suggests* something to us makes all the difference. We never see the things we want directly; we see them indirectly, like refracted light. We are attracted to things when they are modeled to us in an attractive way, by the right model. Our universe of desire is as big or as small as our models.”

“After all, each of us is a highly developed baby.”

“Models are most powerful when they are hidden. If you want to make someone passionate about something, they have to believe the desire is their own.”

“We are generally fascinated with people who have a different relationship to desire, real or perceived. When people don’t seem to care what other people want or don’t want the same things, they seem otherworldly. They appear less affected by mimesis – anti-mimetic, even. And that’s fascinating, because most of us aren’t.”

Imitation differs in kind and quality depending on where it happens – depending on whether it happens in what Luke Burgis calls “Freshmanistan” or “Celebristan.” Freshmanistan consists of the people we are closest to, either geographically or socially. It’s like being a freshman in high school and having to differentiate yourself from people who are all fairly similar to you. It’s the people just one or steps above us that we tend to be jealous of as well, not the people in Celebristan who are so far ahead of us that they aren’t really our competition. Models in Celebristan – Hollywood actors, business moguls, saints, etc. – are external mediators of desire, in that they are operating outside our personal sphere. Rivalry is a function of proximity.

“The danger is not that we have a slot machine in our pockets. The danger is that we have a dream machine in our pockets. Smartphones project the desires of billions of people to us through social media, Google searches, and restaurant and hotel reviews. The neurological addictiveness of smartphones is real; but our addiction to the desires of others, which smartphones give us unfettered access to, is the metaphysical threat. Mimetic desire is the real engine of social media. Social media is *social mediation* – and it now brings nearly all of our models inside our personal world. We live in Freshmanistan. Each of us has to examine what this means in our life – how mimetic desire manifests itself in the circumstances we’re in, and how we should live. This new world represents a threat but also an opportunity. Which new pathways of desire will emerge? Which new opportunities can we seize? How can we infect and be infected by desires that will ultimately lead to fulfillment and not to destruction? These are the questions that we’ll finally have to ask and answer as individuals, and as a society.”

“What happens in a mob happens in a fog.”

“The first stone is the only stone without a mimetic model.”

“For more than twelve years, tens of millions of Americans watched the same TV show. Battle lines were drawn at the beginning of each episode. Every person on the show wants the same thing: the prestige of being proclaimed the victor, which will earn them praise from an authority figure and, with it, the adulation of the masses. And each of them is willing to do nearly anything to get it. They fail. They engage in finger-pointing, backstabbing, and betrayals. Then, when the game is over, they walk into a giant boardroom. Donald Trump is seated, scowling, at the middle of a long table. They all want to be his next apprentice, but only one can win. Trump lets the mimetic crisis escalate until it’s boiling over. Finally, he points a finger at one of them and says, ‘You’re fired!’ The crisis is averted. The scapegoat goes home. The team can get back to business. Meanwhile, the perception of Trump as a mimetic model – a person who *knows what he wants* – grows stronger every time he points his finger and utters the words, ‘You’re fired.’ After a dozen years of Trump cultivating and cementing his status as the ‘master’ and everyone else as the ‘apprentice,’ it’s not surprising that he became a cult-like figure.”

“Having a scapegoat means not knowing that we have one.”

“Naming the mimetic forces at work in the systems in which we operate is an important first step toward making more intentional choices.”

Parker Palmer: “Before I can tell my life what I want to do with it, I must listen to my life telling me who I am.”

“A good leader never becomes an obstacle or rival. She empathizes with those she leads and points the way toward a good that transcends their relationship – shifting the center of gravity away from herself.”

“The future will be a product of what people want. The things we build, the people we meet, and the wars we fight will depend on what people will want tomorrow. And that starts with the way that we learn to want today.”

“The question ‘What do we want to want?’ is unsettling partly because, in a world of engineered desires, we have to wonder who is doing the engineering. But also because the question implies that it’s possible to *want to want* something, yet not be capable of wanting it. We cannot want what we lack a model for. The model that we adopt for the future is critical to the formation of our desires.”