



Book The Element

How Finding Your Passion Changes Everything

Ken Robinson and Lou Aronica
Penguin, 2009

Recommendation

According to author and education consultant Sir Ken Robinson, today’s educational systems promote only certain types of learning and recognize only certain types of intelligence and creativity. Yet people are happiest when they follow their talents and do what they love. Robinson, writing with co-author Lou Aronica, describes this avenue to fulfillment as “the Element,” the intersection of ability and passion. He uses stories of artists, scientists, athletes and musicians to support his theory. While Robinson makes a strong case for finding your Element, he doesn’t tell you how to get there. Since he relies on case histories of the famous, some readers might feel more distanced than motivated. Nonetheless, *BooksInShort* recommends this thoughtful self-help book, which challenges traditional views of intelligence and creativity.

Take-Aways

- “The Element” is the intersection of passion and talent.
- Finding your Element is essential to your happiness, fulfillment and success.
- The Element requires “aptitude and passion” and the right “attitude and opportunity.”
- Most educational systems inhibit the emergence of artistic talents and focus more on logic and reasoning.
- Human intelligence is “diverse, dynamic and distinctive.”
- Everyone can nurture and develop the capacity for creativity.
- To be “in the zone” means that you are operating at the peak of your abilities while doing what you love.
- Finding your “tribe,” those who share your passion, is affirming, inspiring and motivating.
- Uncertainty, fear of failure, and family and cultural pressures may prohibit you from exploring your passions.
- With the right attitude, it’s never too late to find the Element.

Summary

“The Element”

Gillian had trouble sitting still in class, staying focused or following directions. Her school’s administrators felt her behavior was disruptive and thought she might do better in a “special” school. This was in the 1930s, before Attention Deficit Disorder became a common diagnosis. Gillian’s mother took her to a psychologist, who conducted a series of tests. In a departure from common practice, he recommended that Gillian attend dance school. This is how Gillian described the experience. “I walked into this room, and it was full of people like me: people who couldn’t sit still. People who had to move to think.” This is the story of Gillian Lynne, the renowned dancer who choreographed the Broadway musical productions of *Cats* and *The Phantom of the Opera* for Andrew Lloyd Webber.

“If we discover the Element in ourselves and encourage others to find theirs, the opportunities for growth are infinite.”

When Gillian discovered dance, she entered the Element, the intersection of interest and ability. Finding your Element is essential to your happiness, fulfillment and success. Yet many people go through their entire lives without ever having this experience. Three obstacles limit them: First, most people underestimate their own capabilities. Second, they view the capacities of their minds, bodies and spirits as separate entities instead of parts of a whole. Third, people’s concept of development and change is often linear, and some feel that they’ve lost their chance at happiness by a certain age.

“We are all born with tremendous natural capacities...we lose touch with many of them as we spend more time in the world.”

When you are in your Element, you connect with your sense of self, purpose and well-being. The Element is different for each individual, but the process of tapping into it is universal. Doing so requires “aptitude and passion” and the right “attitude and opportunity.” Aptitude is a natural ability. Some people immediately grasp complex mathematical concepts, while others gravitate toward paints and brushes. Discovering and developing your creative strengths is essential to reaching your full potential. However, being in your Element requires more than natural talent; you must passionately love what you do.

“Imagination is the foundation of everything that is uniquely and distinctively human.”

People who love their work often describe themselves as lucky. Yet luck is not a happy accident. Your attitude plays an important role. Luck often follows those who are optimistic, positive, hardworking, determined and confident. Opportunity is also essential to reaching your Element. However, you can take specific steps to find opportunities to define your Element.

Lessons Not Taught in School

In spite of able and devoted teachers everywhere, the structure of school systems generally inhibits the emergence of diverse talents. This happens for three reasons: First, educational systems emphasize critical thinking and reasoning. Second, schools feature a “hierarchy of subjects.” Mathematics, sciences and languages rank higher than the humanities. Art, music, theater and dance receive the lowest priority. Third, schools rely heavily on assessment tools such as standardized tests. The result is that educational systems everywhere work within a narrow definition of intelligence and capacity.

“Given the challenges we face, education doesn’t need to be reformed – it needs to be transformed.”

Most people view intelligence as a set characteristic. This idea of intelligence has roots in the Greek philosophers’ belief in logic and reasoning. The assumption that intelligence equates to academic ability grew more entrenched as the scientific method developed. Scholars had to prove theories with evidence they could observe and document through the human senses.

“Being in the zone is about using your particular kind of intelligence in an optimal way.”

Alfred Binet contributed to the development of the IQ test, a common tool for measuring intelligence. Yet Binet never intended it to measure “mental worth” or to imply that intelligence is a set entity. An IQ test measures only a person’s abilities to work with certain types of mathematical and verbal reasoning. Today, many specialists are re-examining popular notions about intelligence. Harvard psychologist Howard Gardner notably posits that humans have multiple intelligences including “linguistic, musical, mathematical, spatial, kinesthetic, interpersonal (relationships with others) and intrapersonal (knowledge and understanding of the self)” intelligences. Clearly, human cognition is “diverse, dynamic and distinctive.”

Creativity’s Broad Reach

Just as people view intelligence in terms of academic ability, they also hew to a narrow definition of creativity. One common misconception is that only special people, such as artists or musicians, are creative. In truth, everyone can nurture and develop a creative capacity. Another mistaken belief is that creativity is limited to a few artistic mediums, like painting or dancing. People also view creativity as a fixed quality, but you can become more creative as you apply your intelligence and imagination to your work.

“We need to challenge what we take for granted about our abilities and the abilities of other people.”

Creativity is “applied imagination.” Imagination differentiates humans from all other species. Imagination is entirely internal, but creativity requires action. The creative process has some common features across disciplines. Although some ideas arrive fully formed, most begin as a seed that requires cultivation in a creative process. Mull over your original concept and consider various alternatives. Choose which options work best. Test your theory to refine your approach. Draw on your experience and build on the work of people in your field. You’ll hit roadblocks, encounter failure and feel frustration. The creative process is seldom linear or rational. When you get it right, you’ll experience joy and satisfaction that characterizes being in the Element.

Zones and Tribes

When you are doing something you love and are good at, you will feel a sense of connection and rightness, of being “in the zone” of your Element. Professional billiards player Ewa Laurence recognizes how “being able to control the cue ball scooting forward two and a half inches instead of three is a pretty amazing feeling.” Laurence spends hours every day perfecting her game and is not always in the zone. Yet, when it all comes together, she feels energized and at peace. Award-winning *West Wing* writer Aaron Sorkin explains that when his work is thriving, he feels “completely lost in the process.” Being in your Element is empowering because you connect with your authentic self. Hours fly by like minutes. Conversely, when you work on something that doesn’t come naturally to you or that you dislike, time slows, and you feel exhausted.

“Every person’s intelligence is as unique as a fingerprint.”

Many people find their Element by connecting with others who share the same interest. This association provides “validation and inspiration,” and it can spur people to new heights of achievement via the “alchemy of synergy.” Actress Meg Ryan initially went to school to study journalism in hopes of becoming a writer. When she detoured into acting, she found that she loved being in the company of other actors. “I was surrounded by people who worked from really deep, deep down in themselves and were interested in the human condition and the idea of bringing writing to life. All these things just started to bloom in my mind and in my heart and in my soul.” Finding your “tribe” is affirming and inspiring; it helps you excel.

“Different capacities express themselves in stronger ways at different times in our lives.”

A “domain” is a particular tribe’s activity, while a “field” refers to the category that includes its members. For example, Ryan’s domain is acting, and actors make up her field. When she moved into writing and directing, she expanded her domains and extended her field. You’re not limited to one domain, and sometimes activities in one domain overlap with another. For instance, Pablo Picasso’s interest in African art influenced the way he painted *Les Femmes d’Alger* and led him into exploring the Cubist work for which he is famous.

“One of the enemies of creativity and innovation, especially in relation to our own development, is common sense.”

When people create together, the sum can be greater than the individual parts. Abundant examples confirm this phenomenon: from sports – such as the profoundly collaborative 1969 New York Knicks – to music – for instance, jazz trumpeter and composer Miles Davis and his band’s album *Kind of Blue* – to politics for example, President Abraham Lincoln’s administration, a collection of thinkers and politicians with disparate viewpoints that produced incredible results.

What’s Stopping You?

Often, the chief barrier to finding your Element lies within yourself. Uncertainty, fear of failure and self-doubt prohibit you from exploring your passions. You may fear the disapproval of friends and families. You may strive to live up to other people’s expectations, even when those expectations run contrary to your true calling. When your loved ones discourage you from following your dream, they usually believe they are acting in your best interests. They might tell you that pursuing acting will bring only disappointment, or your family might refuse to pay your tuition if you study art history. Such pronouncements are always destructive.

“Finding your tribe can have transformative effects on your sense of identity and purpose.”

The culture into which you are born also influences your ability to follow your interests. All cultures have rules, behavioral guidelines and constraints. Societal norms can prevent individuals from attaining their Element if their passions conflict with their environment. When confronted with “personal, social and cultural” constrictions, consider how willing you are to buck the tide in order to reach your Element.

“It is difficult to feel accomplished when you’re not accomplishing something that matters to you.”

You may need support and guidance from a mentor to navigate obstacles and find your Element. Mentors help by recognizing and identifying your aptitudes and talents, and by encouraging your development. They push you to learn, refine your skills and boost your confidence. Jackie Robinson, the first African-American to play Major League Baseball, took endless abuse from management, players and fans. At one of his lowest points, Robinson’s Brooklyn Dodger teammate, shortstop Pee Wee Reese, told Robinson that he played well enough to earn a place in the Hall of Fame. Robinson credits Reese with giving him confidence when he needed it most, thereby saving his career. Mentors also act as facilitators who provide practical advice and help. A mentor’s support and confidence can allow you to stretch past your self-imposed limits.

Beyond Passion

Having an interest and an aptitude is never enough. You must have the right attitude. Some people ascribe success to luck, but it’s not that simple. John Wilson was conducting a routine experiment in his high school chemistry class when a mislabeled fluid blew up in his face and cost him his sight. Wilson continued his education, received a law degree from Oxford and worked for the UK’s National Institute for the Blind. Through his work at the Institute, he traveled through Africa and was astounded at the high rate of blindness caused by preventable diseases. He founded the British Empire Society for the Blind, now called Sight Savers International. His organization prevented blindness in millions of people. Losing his sight was not lucky for John Wilson, but he made his life productive by following his passion and finding his Element.

“A strong will to be yourself is an indomitable force.”

Many people believe that life is linear and so think it’s too late to attain the Element once they reach a certain age. However, Benjamin Franklin was 78 when he invented bifocals. Agatha Christie wrote the play *The Mousetrap* at age 62, and violinist Vladimir Horowitz was still filling every seat in concert halls when he was 84. Life expectancy is longer now than ever before, and people remain healthier as they age than they did in previous generations. Life is cyclical, and different opportunities arrive at different times. Continue to develop your creativity and intelligence so you can explore new avenues to the Element.

“We all shape the circumstances and realities of our own lives, and we can also transform them.”

You don’t have to devote 100% of your time to something to be in your Element. Most people can’t make a living doing what they love most. They can’t afford to leave their jobs to pursue their passions. Most earn their living doing their jobs and follow their interests in their own time. Moreover, in many fields, the line between professional and amateur is blurring. Consider, for example, the Linux computer operating system. Many so-called amateur programmers contribute to this collaborative open-source effort without receiving credit or remuneration.

“We don’t know who we can be until we know what we can do.”

Don’t be afraid to reach for your dreams. In the words of Michelangelo, “The greatest danger for most of us is not that our aim is too high and we miss it, but that it is too low and we reach it.”

About the Authors

Sir **Ken Robinson**, the author of *Out of Our Minds: Learning to be Creative*, is a speaker and consultant on education and creativity. **Lou Aronica** co-wrote *The Culture Code*.