

the Element: How Finding Your Passion Changes Everything

By Ken Robinson

You will find your highest level of achievement and personal satisfaction when you discover what you naturally do well and that also ignites your passions. You will have discovered your Element when the things you love to do and the things you are good at come together – you find your own distinctive talents and passions – the meeting point between natural aptitude and personal passion.

Much of this book is built around stories of various well known people who have followed different paths to understanding their Element. This synopsis does not cover any of the stories, but concentrates on the observations and methods surrounding the stories. The book is a quick and interesting read when concentrating on the stories themselves.

One of the most important reasons most people haven't found their Element is they have a very limited conception of their own natural capacities.

- We fail to understand the range of our capacities because we use only a fraction of our powers, or sometimes none at all.
- We think that our minds, bodies, feelings and relationships with others operate like separate systems, instead of like an organic whole.
- We think that life is linear and our capacities decline with age, rather than that we have a constant potential for renewal and we can grow and change almost spontaneously.
- Our limited view of our own capacities can be compounded by our peer groups, culture, and by our own expectations. A major factor, however, is our education system. One size does not fit all.

The pace of change is so rapid today that we really have no idea what will be valuable by the time we retire. There are two major drivers of change – technology and demography. When the only thing we know about the future is that it will be different, we need to think very differently about human resources and how we develop them. Because of this rapid change, people have to find their Element to be able to survive.

When people are in their Element, they connect with something fundamental to their sense of identity, purpose, and well-being. That is why discovering your Element is so often described as an epiphany. The Element has two main features – aptitude and passion, and two main conditions – attitude and opportunity. Features – I get it; I love it and conditions – I want it; Where is it?

- I Get It: An aptitude is a natural facility for something and is highly personal.
- I Love It: You have to love all the detail work that goes into your passion.
- I Want it: Attitude is our personal perspective on our selves and our circumstances – do we consider ourselves lucky? How we perceive our circumstances and how we create and take opportunities is largely dependent on what we expect of ourselves.
- Where Is It?: Without the right opportunities, we may never know what our aptitudes are. A lot depends on the opportunities we have, those we create, and how and if we take advantage of them. We must actively seek opportunities to explore our aptitudes in different fields. Often we need others to help us recognize our real talents and we can also help others to discover theirs.

One of the key principles of the Element is that we need to challenge what we take for granted about our abilities and the abilities of other people. Part of the problem is that we don't question those things we take for granted.

Human intelligence seems to have at least three main features.

1. It is extraordinarily diverse.
2. It is tremendously dynamic.
3. It is entirely distinctive.

Intelligence is a blood relative of creativity. You can't be creative without acting intelligently and the highest form of intelligence is creativity. Most people have a narrow view of intelligence, thinking of it mainly in terms of academic ability; whereas intelligence is demonstrated across a broad range of human characteristics.

Far more than any other power, imagination is what sets human beings apart from every other species on earth. The definition of imagination is the power to bring to mind things that are not present in our senses. With our imagination we are free to revisit the past, reframe the present, or anticipate a whole range of possible futures.

Creativity is not the sole provenance of special people. Everyone is born with tremendous capacities for creativity and the trick is to develop, not stifle, these capabilities. Creativity is also possible with anything that involves your intelligence – math, science, and running a business included. Creativity, like IQ, is not static, but dynamic across a person's lifetime and involves our unique powers of imagination.

Creativity is the process of having original ideas that have value – to be creative you actually have to do something, not merely imagine it. Creativity is the strongest example of the dynamic nature of intelligence, and it can call on all areas of our minds and being. Creativity involves generating new ideas, imagining different possibilities, and considering alternative options. Creative work always involves using media of some sort to develop ideas and creative people love the media they are working in.

Finding the medium that excites your imagination, that you love to play with and work in, is an important step to freeing your creative energies. Creativity is like a conversation between what we're trying to figure out and the media we are using. Creative insights often come in nonlinear ways, through seeing connections and similarities between things that we hadn't noticed before.

When we are in connection with our Element we are in a zone where time doesn't matter and we see things in a manner that others simply don't. One of the strongest signs of being in the zone is a sense of freedom and authenticity about both ourselves and what we are doing. Another common feature is a movement into a kind of "meta-state" where ideas come more quickly, as though you are an instrument for the ideas and not the recipient. Being in the zone doesn't take energy away from you; it gives it to you.

Characteristics of the Element in yourself or others around you:

- When we connect with our own energy, we're more open to the energy of others.
- If left to my own devices, what am I most drawn to doing?
- What kinds of activities do children participate in when left to their own devices?

For most people, a primary component of being in their Element is connecting with other people who share their passion (finding their tribe). Tribes are made up of domains (the type of activities and disciplines people are engaged in) and fields (other people who are engaged in the domain with you). Finding your tribe can have transformative effects on your sense of identity and purpose because of three powerful tribal dynamics: validation, inspiration, and "alchemy of synergy."

Internal barriers to finding your Element are personal, social, and cultural. Personal barriers can be physical or personal tragedy. Social barriers often involve parental opposition or even local laws. Cultural barriers often revolve around "groupthink" and the social conventions inherent in tribal associations, as well as actual brain structure evolved in different cultures.

Being good at something and having a passion for it are essential to finding the Element, but getting there depends fundamentally on our view of ourselves and of the events in our lives – a matter of attitude. It's not what happens to us that determines our lives – it's what we make of what happens. Research and experience show that lucky people often make their luck because of their attitudes.

Four principles of lucky people...

1. They tend to maximize chance opportunities – adept at creating, noticing, and acting upon these opportunities.
2. They are very effective at listening to their intuition and do work (such as meditation) that is designed to boost their intuitive abilities.
3. Lucky people expect to be lucky, creating a series of self-fulfilling prophecies because they go into the world anticipating a positive outcome.
4. They don't allow ill fortune to overwhelm them and they move quickly to take control of the situation when it isn't going well for them.

Finding our element often requires the aid and guidance of others; sometimes someone sees something in us we don't see and sometimes that person brings out the best in us. Mentors tend to serve some or all of four roles in our lives...

5. Recognition: Identifying and supporting very specific skills.
6. Encouragement: Mentors lead us to believe we can achieve something that seemed improbable or impossible to us before we met them.
7. Facilitating: Offering us advice and techniques, paving the way for us, and even allowing us to falter a bit while standing by to help us recover and learn from our mistakes.
8. Stretching: Effective mentors push us past what we see as our limits.

Human lives are organic and cyclical. Different capacities express themselves in stronger ways at different times in our lives. Therefore, we get multiple opportunities for new growth, development, and revitalizing our latent capacities – i.e. life is not linear. The key is our capacity to continue to develop our creativity and intelligence as we enter new stages in our lives.

Education is often trying to fit all the students into a predetermined form, rather than trying to find out what form each of the students has – i.e. conformity has a higher value than diversity. The mistake many educational policy-makers make is to believe that the best way to face the future is by improving what they did in the past. They take control of the curriculum and specify exactly what the students should learn – i.e. cutting back arts programs to emphasize math. They follow this with greater emphasis on assessment; effectively discouraging innovation and creativity. Finally, when the assessments show a school is 'failing' they are closed down and students are crammed into other schools with the same inadequacies. Standardized tests can provide essential data to support and improve education, but when these tools become the focus of education, rather than a tool, they crush the educational process entirely.

The most powerful method of improving education is to invest in the improvement of teaching and the status of great teachers. Many people go through their entire education without really discovering their true talents. Education needs to be transformed, not reformed.

If we describe intelligence as being diverse, dynamic, and distinct, then we first need to eliminate the existing hierarchy of subjects – pretending that one subject is more valuable than another. Second we need to question the entire idea of "subjects" – the idea that separate subjects have nothing in common offends the principle of dynamism. Schools should base their curriculum on the much more fertile idea of disciplines – i.e. math isn't just a set of information to be learned, but a complex pattern of ideas, practical skills, and concepts. Thirdly, learning is a personal process and currently education does not take account of individual learning styles and talents.

Education policies should not be aimed at making them teacher-proof (insuring that even poor teachers can function acceptably), but investing in teachers and helping them function more as mentors than instructors. Having teachers function in highly regulated environments, like fast-food chains, will only result in cheap, but tasteless education that isn't particularly good for you. The future of education is not in standardizing, but in customizing. Effective use of the internet can enable cash-strapped districts and assist this process.