AWAKENING YOUR INNER GENIUS

SEAN PATRICK
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If I could write one sentence that would magically increase your IQ by thirty points, would you be interested in reading that sentence?

Probably. But why? What would be in it for you? Do you think it would help you make more money? Make a name for yourself? Find love, happiness, or fulfillment?

I’ve asked many people these questions and their answers are invariable. “Of course it would.” The cultural correlation is undeniable: we’ve been indoctrinated to believe that the higher the IQ, the more likely one is to succeed in life. Hence, we assume that the scientists that win Nobel Prizes, the businesspeople that go from rags to millions, the authors that write runaway bestsellers, register in the highest ranges of IQ simply because they’re enjoying sweet successes.

Well, a tremendous amount of research has been done into the scientific correlation between IQ and real-life success, and a very different picture has emerged.

IQ and success are related...to a point. Sure, someone with an IQ of 150 (a “genius” by all normal standards) is going to do much better in life than...
someone with an IQ of 80 (nearly “mentally disabled”). Similarly, a person with an IQ of 130 (“near genius”) has a significant upper hand in life when compared to a person with an IQ of 100 (“average”).

But here’s the catch: the relation between IQ and success follows the law of diminishing returns. That is, when you compare two people of relatively high IQs, you can no longer predict success by IQ alone. A scientist with an IQ of 130 is just as likely to rise to the top of his discipline as one with an IQ of 180.

Dr. Liam Hudson, a British psychologist that headed up Cambridge’s Research Unit of Intellectual Development in the sixties, compared IQ to basketball. If you’re five foot five, your prospects of becoming even an NBA bench warmer are slim-to-none. The fact is if you’re less than six feet tall, you can pretty much forget about your dreams to challenge King James in his court.

Statistical data shows us that you have to be at least seventy-two inches tall to be allowed on the ride, and each inch you push over that is probably better for you. There comes a point, however, when height just doesn’t matter much anymore. Just because someone is seven feet tall doesn’t mean he’s a better player than someone who’s six foot six (Michael Jordan’s height). The point is you only have to be tall enough to have a shot at the pros.

The same pattern is true of intelligence and success in life. You only have to be smart enough to fulfill the intellectual requirements for success. History’s greatest achievers—practical, savvy people that did big things and changed the world—are heralded as the greatest geniuses to ever have walked the earth, but while many of them had remarkably high IQs, many others were just smart enough.

If we can’t explain their success in terms of IQ alone, what else did they possess that allowed them to rise to such heights?

Most people would answer along the lines of “extraordinary inherent talent.” And they would be wrong.

_Call in the inspired bard, Demodocus._

_God has given the man the gift of song._

That’s one of the many god-given gifts of characters in the _Odyssey_. We’ve learned much since it was written—we’ve decoded human DNA and discovered our place in the universe—but we still marvel at the abilities of geniuses in the same way as the ancient Greeks did.
Whether we listen to a sonata of Beethoven’s, watch highlight reels of Michael Jordan, or learn a law of Newton’s, we view extraordinary human skills as gifts granted by unknown forces for unknown reasons. Such an explanation is convenient, but is it correct?

For the last two centuries, behavioral scientists have studied that question through focused research on great performers of all types: business managers, chess players, swimmers, surgeons, jet pilots, violinists, salespeople, writers, and many others. Their findings, numbering in the hundreds, have led to conclusions that fly straight in the teeth of what “everybody knows” about ability.

The studies conclusively disproved the notion that great performance stems primarily from a natural “gift” or talent. While some people display innate talents for certain activities early on, amazingly average people have become champions in all manner of endeavors. Many such top performers overcame their average—or even below-average—inTEllects and nonexistent aptitudes to develop outstanding abilities in disciplines such as chess, music, business, and medicine.

Examples of such remarkable transformations abound throughout history. Henry Ford failed in business several times and was flat broke five times before he founded the Ford Motor Company. In his youth, Thomas Edison’s teachers told him he was “too stupid to learn anything.” Beethoven was so awkward on the violin that his teachers believed him hopeless as a composer.

The world of sports reveals similar findings. Many athletes viewed as superhuman in their abilities were found to have little or no inherent advantage over their peers when they first began their journeys to greatness. Michael Jordan didn’t make his sophomore team because he was deemed too short and average to play at that level. Stan Smith, a world-class tennis player and winner of Wimbledon, the U.S. Open, and eight Davis cups, was once rejected for the lowly position of a ball boy because the event organizers felt he was too clumsy and uncoordinated.

How do we explain such unintuitive findings?

While many theories were put forth, there was one common factor that researchers recognized in all great performers: they practiced so hard and intensely that it hurt.

Ted Williams, a baseball legend considered the most “gifted” hitter of his time, was believed to have natural abilities far beyond ordinary men, including eagle-like vision, extraordinary hand-eye coordination, and uncanny hitting instincts. Williams later said that such stories were all “a lot of bull.” He had a much better explanation for his superior skills.
Williams began his path to greatness at the age of seven, when he decided to dedicate his entire life to one singular task: hitting a baseball as perfectly as possible. Starting at that young age, Williams spent every free minute he had at San Diego’s old North Park field hitting balls, every day, year after year after year. His childhood friends recall finding him on that field smashing balls with the outer shells completely beaten off, with a splintered bat, and with blistered, bleeding hands. He would spend his lunch money to hire other kids to shag his balls so he could hit as many as possible every day. When the city turned off the field’s lights, he would go home and swing a rolled-up newspaper in the mirror until he went to bed.

This obsession continued throughout Williams’ entire professional career, and it’s no surprise that he excelled because of it. For “The Kid,” as he was known, greatness was a long, grueling process—not a gift from the beyond (a claim that he found insulting).

Studies of people with extraordinary abilities, like Ted Williams, have given rise to what Swedish psychologist Dr. K. Anders Ericsson called the “10,000 hour” rule. The rule’s premise is that, regardless of whether one has an innate aptitude for an activity or not, mastery of it takes around ten thousand hours of focused, intentional practice. Analyzing the lives of geniuses in a wide range of intellectual, artistic, and athletic pursuits confirms this concept. From Mozart to Bobby Fischer to Bill Gates to the Beatles, their diverse journeys from nothing toward excellence in their respective fields shared a common denominator: the accumulation of ten thousand hours of unwavering “exercise” of their crafts.

To put that number in perspective, if you practiced an activity four hours per day, seven days per week, it would take you about seven years to reach ten thousand hours. That kind of dedication can only come from the heart—a true love and passion for the activity.

So, what does all this tell us? First, that the seed of greatness exists in every human being. Whether it sprouts or not is our choice. Second, that there are no such things as natural-born under- or overachievers—there are simply people who tap into their true potentials and people who don’t. What is generally recognized as “great talent” is, in almost all cases, nothing more than the outward manifestations of an unwavering dedication to a process.

Thus, the advice of “work toward your ten thousand hours” sounds completely reasonable. Right? But there’s a problem. There are millions of people who work incredibly hard, yet have little success to show for it. Is ten thousand hours too simple of a prescription for greatness?
Yes. It overlooks another aspect of great achievement that cannot be ignored: *opportunities*—conditions that often appear to be plain old dumb luck.

As Malcolm Gladwell explains in *Outliers*, in many ways, the opportunities presented to one are just as important to success as one’s own inherent talents and willingness to put in thousands of hours of work. For instance, if your dream is to become a professional athlete, it’s quite possible that you won’t be able to work hard enough to overcome a most devious obstacle: your birthday. How could that possibly be a hurdle?

Easy. Most sports enforce age cut-offs—that is, the ages that determine whether you can play another year in your current age bracket as a “senior,” or whether you have to move up and be a “freshman” in the next.

In Canadian junior hockey leagues, the age cutoff was formerly January 1 (it’s now December 31). The closer your birthday was to January 2, the better. Why? Well, let’s say you were playing in the Bantam category, which is for children aged 13 – 14. If your birthday was in December, you were going to get two years of play at this level. You were going to turn fifteen and have to move immediately into the next category, Midget (which is for kids aged 15 – 16). If your birthday was January 2, however, you’d get an entire additional year to play in Bantam (and every other age group) because when the ages were checked on January 1, you were still fourteen years old.

An extra year of play against players younger than you is a huge advantage. Your body becomes bigger, stronger, and faster every day, giving you an opportunity to truly stand out from your birthday-handicapped peers. This extra developmental time predisposes you for selection onto more elite teams, which in turn leads to more ice time and better coaching, which advances your abilities even further.

Sociologists call this phenomenon an “accumulative advantage.” For the elite Canadian junior hockey leagues, the result of this advantage was that for many years, the distribution of birth dates for the top performing kids was heavily weighted toward “first-quarter” babies—kids born between January and March.

Whether we’re talking birthdays in sports, or the fact that Bill Gates just happened to go to a high school that housed one of the most advanced computers of the time—a computer that most colleges didn’t even have—we can easily see that being in the right place (physical, educational, societal, or otherwise) at the right time can influence our destinies as much as anything
else.

Now, that doesn’t mean our fates are written in the stars. We can wholly control our dedication to thousands of hours of study, training and work. And grasping opportunities is equally controllable. Sure, we may not be built for the NFL or Kentucky Derby, but we’re surrounded by opportunities every day, everywhere we go. There is no shortage of problems to be solved, needs and desires to be fulfilled, and innovative ways to help others.

But there’s a catch. Most opportunities never announce themselves with trumpets and confetti. They’re easily missed, mistaken, or squandered. They can be scary. And they never come with a 110% money-back guarantee. They’re often nothing more than chances to improve on something other people are already doing.

Opportunities are whispers, not foghorns.

If we can’t hear their soft rhythms—if we are too busy rushing about, waiting for thunderclaps of revelation, inspiration, and certainty—or if we can hear them but can’t nurture them into real advantages, then we might as well be deaf to them.

This realization points us to the real heart and mystery of greatness. Just knowing that great achievers work very hard and take advantage of opportunities isn’t enough. Why do some people recognize, appreciate, and pursue opportunities with passion and determination, whereas others don’t? Why are some people willing to push through hell and high water to win, whereas others quit early and easily? Are there practical answers to these questions, or are they unsolvable enigmas of human psychology?

Well, I believe there are very practical answers to what makes a genius tick. I believe there are principles that we can isolate and use to better our own lives. I believe that genius is a path that we can all take and derive much benefit, happiness, fulfillment, and success from...not a genetic windfall or divine gift. Ultimately, this is the path to greatness.

Not sure if you buy into that? Well, I wouldn’t either if I didn’t know about Dr. Alfred Barrios.

Psychologist Dr. Alfred Barrios conducted research on the nature of genius in the seventies. He set out to answer the same basic question I posed just a page ago: why do some people rise to greatness whereas others don’t?

To look for an answer, he decided to analyze the lives of many of history’s greatest geniuses. Were there patterns of circumstances, events, behaviors, atti-
tudes, or ideas that could account for their success? Did the chronicles of their lives collectively hold the secrets to their greatness? He was going to find out.

He first noted and categorized a long list of factors outside of the geniuses’ control. Things like lineage, birthright, geography, genetics, education, familial ties, upbringing, and unexpected windfalls. The more data he accumulated and analyzed along this line, however, the more it looked like a dead end. The backgrounds of our species’ greatest thinkers and achievers appeared infinitely varied. If there were patterns among the data, he couldn’t see them.

Barrios was undeterred and continued to study. Eventually, a different kind of common denominator emerged, one that he found within each of the people he studied. Barrios discovered that his subjects had each developed and routinely displayed a combination of very specific characteristics throughout their lives, and not just mildly but conspicuously.

This character-driven idea fascinated Barrios. It suggested that genius is much more than high intelligence, innate talent, extraordinary work ethic, or uncanny luck, but rather a composite manifestation: a synthesis of very specific types of worldviews and behaviors. The more he looked at data through this lens, the more things started to make sense.

Barrios then wondered if anyone could operate at a genius level—and achieve genius-level greatness—simply by learning and adopting the same educated views and disciplined behaviors that so repeatedly characterized history’s greatest achievers.

By the end of his research, Barrios had pieced together his “genius code” — a profound insight into what really spawns greatness. He also concluded that we could all indeed use his genius code as a roadmap to walk in the footsteps of history’s brightest and boldest, thereby learning to operate at a genius level.

An attractive concept, no doubt, but is it true?

This book seeks that answer. In each chapter, we will delve into a single characteristic of Barrios’ code. We will look at how these traits have defined many of history’s greatest geniuses, and how we can further develop them in ourselves. My proclamation for this book is that while Barrios’ research may not be the end-all on the subject, it certainly illuminates the path to greatness via a unique, accessible, and practical decoding of genius. By the end of this book, I think you’ll agree.

This immediately involves us in a bigger picture question, too—one that’s deeply penetrating and personal: why do we desire to heighten our genius and pursue the path of greatness?
We all face a fundamental choice in our lives. Do we take the path prescribed by our “now you’re supposed to” society, or do we take our own path toward the life we feel we ought to be living? Do we choose our life’s work based on the U.S. Department of Labor’s list of highest-paying jobs, or do we follow our bliss? Do we heed the call to conformity, or the call to adventure?

Every day we see how people have answered these questions, whether consciously or otherwise. We’re constantly confronted with the lazy, the apathetic, the immoral, the indifferent, the irresponsible, and the disconnected—the signs of a decaying culture.

“What does it all mean?” many wonder while chasing purposes they’re told are worthwhile, but which feel empty. “What is the purpose of this life?” humans have wondered for millennia, contemplating how insignificant we are in the great cosmic symphony.

Well, as the preeminent mythologist Joseph Campbell said, deep down inside, we don’t seek the meaning of life, but the experience of being alive. And that’s what this book is ultimately about.

It’s about how we can empower ourselves to bring true meaning to our lives and the lives of others in ways most people would consider impossible. It’s about rising above a life of, as Thoreau said, “quiet desperation” that ends with our songs still in our hearts, and experience the rapture of truly living. It’s about saying yes to our adventures.

We rely on geniuses to entertain us, educate us, lead us, and show us all what our species is capable of. We rely on geniuses to give us smart phones, electric cars, cures for diseases, social networking sites, sublime art, world-class food, and, indeed, the very fabric of our culture.

If you’ve ever dreamed of playing a hand in the development of human-kind, or if you just have a burning desire to improve one small aspect of it, then you have an adventure waiting.

Will you take it?

This book is your invitation.
A bored Alice sits by the riverbank, contemplating the daisies. A White Rabbit scurries by, fretting about being late, and pulls a watch from its pocket. Alice is intrigued. *A rabbit with a waistcoat and pocket watch?* She races off after it.

Filippo Brunelleschi is commissioned by the powerful Medici family to complete a construction project previously abandoned as impossible. His challenge: to complete the largest dome in the world, and thus finish what is to be the greatest cathedral in Florence, the heart of the Renaissance. Nobody has a clue how to do it, but Brunelleschi buries himself in Classical teachings and devises ingenious solutions that the world has never seen before.

“The truth is out there, Neo,” Trinity whispers into his ear. “It’s looking for you and it will find you, if you want it to.”

Adventures are quirky, indeed.

Sometimes they flash by, giving you only a moment to jump in or forever lose their trail, as Alice experienced. Sometimes they hide in plain sight, calmly waiting for someone to try them on for size, as Brunelleschi did. Sometimes they play hard to get, forcing you to prove you’re worthy, as Neo discovered.

“*The important thing is not to stop questioning. Curiosity has its own reason for existing. One cannot help but be in awe when he contemplates the mysteries of eternity, of life, of the marvelous structure of reality.*”

-Albert Einstein
Perhaps the most interesting quirk about adventures, however, is their reflection of the universe itself—their indifference.

They care nothing of morality or tradition, of what’s deserved or fair. They won’t judge your race, sex, age, or customs. They won’t beg for attention or force your hand. And they make no promises.

They must be willfully discovered and pursued. One must be able to find their clues—their invitations—hidden throughout a world that many people consider mundane, predetermined, or hopeless. This is a rare talent, one that relies solely on curiosity.

Curiosity is a lens through which you view everything around you. Without it, there are no adventures to be had. With it, there are enough for a million lifetimes.

At least that’s how one man looked at it, a man widely considered the greatest genius of all time...

In the first century BC, at the dawn of the Roman imperial age, the architect Marcus Vitruvius published one of the most important sources of modern knowledge of Roman building methods, planning, and design. It covers almost every aspect of Roman architecture, from town planning, to building materials, to the construction of temples, civil and domestic buildings, pavements, aqueducts, and more.

Vitruvius’ publication also describes what he felt were the ideal human proportions, and that sacred temples should conform to these proportions. In fact, he believed that the human body was imbued with the hidden geometry of the universe itself, and thus was a microcosmic representation of the physical realm.

Sound a bit far-fetched to you? Probably so to most average intellectuals, but not to Leonardo da Vinci.

Over fifteen hundred years later, sometime around 1487, da Vinci drew the human figure in accordance with Vitruvius’ observations, and named it the Vitruvian Man. He had the same particular fascination with human anatomy as Vitruvius: he believed that, in his own words, “man is a model of the world.”

The answer to that enigmatic statement lies in what’s known as the divine proportion or golden ratio. For over two thousand years, esteemed mathematicians and scientists have studied, pondered, and debated this ratio and its ubiquity in nature, mathematics, architecture, and art.
So, what is this ratio? Euclid first defined it in his tour de force *Elements*, published in 300 BC. The concept is simple: two quantities are in the Golden Ratio if the ratio of the sum of the quantities to the larger quantity is equal to the ratio of the larger quantity to the smaller one.

Visually, it looks like this:

\[
\frac{a+b}{a} = \frac{a}{b}
\]

Now, the fascinating thing about the Golden Ratio is its plausibility as a natural law. Scientists have found its expression in the arrangement of branches along the stems of plants and in the veins of leaves, in the skeletons of animals and the disposition of their veins and nerves, and in the composition of chemical compounds and the geometry of crystals. Researchers have recently reported the ratio present even at the atomic level.

Nowhere is the Golden Ratio more exemplified than in the human body, however, as da Vinci knew so long ago. In fact, he found that the more the body reflected this proportion, the more beautiful it was.

The human face, for instance, abounds with examples of the Golden Ratio. The head forms a golden rectangle with the eyes at its midpoint. The mouth and nose are each placed at golden distances between the eyes and the bottom of the chin. The spatial relationship of the teeth and the construction of the ear each reflect the ratio too.

Further, the Golden Ratio is found in the overall proportions of the human body: the different lengths of the finger bones, the makeup of the feet and toes, and even the structure of DNA.

When da Vinci drew his masterful depiction of the ideal human body, he enclosed his man in a circle and a square, age-old symbols that represent the cosmic and the divine, and the earthly and the secular, respectively. Thus, the *Vitruvian Man* is far more than a pretty sketch—it’s a statement on the fantastic order and harmony of the metaphysical and physical.

This iconic drawing was just one of da Vinci’s many creations that still, centuries later, inspire awe, mystery, analysis, and debate, and that earn him wide recognition as the greatest genius to have ever lived.

Every masterpiece that da Vinci is known for has humble origins, though.
He didn’t dream of fame or riches. He didn’t chase approval or admiration. His motives were far nobler. Sir Kenneth Clark, one of the most accomplished art historians of the twentieth century, called da Vinci “the most relentlessly curious man in history.” Da Vinci’s life and greatness is best summarized by his own statement that “the noblest pleasure is the joy of understanding.” He did what he did because he loved peeling back the skin of the universe to catch a glimpse of its vast inner workings. Pay or no pay, recognition or no recognition, this is just who he was.

If we are to awaken our inner genius, we must first learn da Vinci’s lesson of curiosity. Let’s take a closer look at him, then, and how his love of understanding weaved together the rivalrous fields of art and science with ingenuity and grace, and a flourish of the spiritual and divine.

The illegitimate son of a twenty-five-year-old gentleman, Ser Piero, and a peasant girl, Caterina, da Vinci was born on April 15, 1452 in the Tuscan hills of Vinci, in the Medici-ruled Republic of Florence.

He received an informal education in Latin and mathematics, and was exposed to Vinci’s longstanding painting tradition. When he was fifteen, his father apprenticed him to the renowned Florentine workshop of Andrea del Verrochio. Here da Vinci received intensive theoretical training in the arts, and also learned a vast range of technical skills, including drafting, chemistry, metallurgy, metal working, plaster casting, leather working, mechanics, and carpentry, as well as techniques for drawing, painting, sculpting, and modeling.

Verrochio was struck by da Vinci’s preternatural aptitude and focus. Thus, he chose the teenager to depict an angel in his painting, *Baptism of Christ*. According to the historian Vasari, Verrochio was so wonderstruck by the quality of da Vinci’s work that he vowed to never touch a brush again. By the age of twenty, da Vinci qualified as a master in the Guild of St. Luke, a popular trade association for painters and other artists.

In 1477, da Vinci completed his tutelage under Verrochio and set out to make his mark in the world. He quickly received his first two commissions, but completed neither before leaving to work in Milan under the patronage of its duke, Ludovico il Moro.

The duke kept da Vinci busy painting, sculpting, and designing elaborate court festivals and weapons, and while his creations during this time are each lauded as masterpieces, his passion was his private studies. Driven by an unquenchable curiosity, da Vinci studied a wide variety of subjects including anatomy, zoology, geology, botany, optics, aerodynamics, civil and mechanical engineering, geometry, and architecture.
He believed that “all our knowledge has its origins in our perceptions,” and thus preferred to approach science observationally, experiencing truth for himself, rather than theoretically. This philosophy led to thousands of experiments, which he would meticulously record the results of in a notebook that he would carry at all times.

There’s a profound lesson here. Da Vinci wasn’t content with reviewing and regurgitating the work of others. He was bold enough to view the teachings of his time—no matter how dogmatic—as springboards, not boundaries. His curiosity wasn’t a robotic desire to stockpile and categorize foregone conclusions, but a dynamic energy capable of absorbing, transforming, and purifying anything it touched.

Da Vinci’s anatomy studies of 1510 and 1511 are a perfect example of his uncanny ability to observe and record nature with precision, and his unwavering determination to unravel the secrets of life. Anatomy texts of his day featured long-winded, confusing descriptions of the body. Da Vinci knew that pages of puzzling text could be replaced by a mere handful of accurate drawings.

Da Vinci could think of only one way to produce the quality of drawings he envisioned: dissecting the rotting cadavers of criminals. He spent countless nights in charnel houses, surrounded by the hot, choking stench of death, “living through the night hours in the company of quartered and flayed corpses fearful to behold.” He examined every bone, joint, muscle, sinew, and organ of the body in minute detail, even paying attention to nerves and capillaries. He also dissected, studied, and drew the anatomy of many animals—including cows, birds, monkeys, bears, frogs, and horses—in order to compare their structures with that of humans.

Da Vinci’s anatomical drawings were nothing short of dazzling and revolutionary. They were unprecedented in scope, accuracy, and detail, and they revealed aspects of the human body that were completely unknown at the time, including the intricate inner workings of the female body and the formation of the fetus in the womb. The latter discoveries earned him the informal title of the father of embryology.

His gift to mankind was more profound than the collection of drawings, however. His work heralded the birth of a new method of scientific study that relied on close observation, repeated testing, and systematic, descriptive illustrations with brief explanatory notes. “Science is the observation of things possible, whether present or past; prescience is the knowledge of things which may come to pass, though but slowly,” he wrote.
His dissections even led him to discover the relationship between the buildup of cholesterol and the onset of heart disease, but the academia refused to recognize his findings as he wasn’t a formally trained physician. “I cannot quote from eminent authors as they can, these trumpeters and reciters of the works of others,” he said. “I know that all knowledge is vain and full of error when it is not born of experience, and so experience will be my mistress.” Da Vinci knew that the pursuit of questions is far more important in the journey to greatness than the memorization of others’ answers.

The true testament to the transcendent perfection of his anatomical drawings is the fact that they’re still used in medical textbooks today. Yet, incredibly, this was only a slice of his life’s work and legacy.

Da Vinci believed that painting was a universal language. His curiosity and desire to paint things realistically was bold and fresh, and eventually became the standard for all Renaissance painters who followed. In his studies of light and shadow, da Vinci realized that objects are three-dimensional bodies defined by their illumination and shadowing, and from this insight he developed a highly refined technique for painting soft, detailed, lifelike figures. His curiosity also led him to discover that an object’s detail and color changed as it became more distant, which helped him pioneer techniques that allowed a new level of realism in atmosphere and depth.

“A picture or representation of human figures, ought to be done in such a way as that the spectator may easily recognize, by means of their attitudes, the purpose in their minds,” he wrote.

These advancements began as lighthearted curiosities, but they became much more. True to form, da Vinci’s enthusiastic pursuit of his calls to adventure in painting changed the discipline forever. His works are some of the most imitated, analyzed, and discussed works of all time, and for good reason. Not only was his technique flawless and unparalleled, his paintings were rich in symbolism, and structured with mathematical precision.

The Virgin of the Rocks depicts a popular story of Mary and Jesus meeting an infant John the Baptist in the care of the angel Uriel, who pays homage to the Christ. The background is dominated by phallic rocks and womb-like imagery. Even the plants da Vinci chose to paint had layers of meaning: the stained St. John’s wort suggested a martyr’s blood, heart-shaped leaves represented love and virtue, sword-shaped leaves represented the sorrow that was to pierce Mary’s heart, and palm leaves signified victory.

The Last Supper, which represents Jesus’ last meal with his disciples and revelation of a traitor, was acclaimed as a masterpiece of design and character-
Curiosity and the Greatest Genius Who Ever Lived

ization and is one of the most reproduced works of art in history. Historians recently discovered that the painting’s proportions and layout are mathematical in nature, echoing the musical equation of 12:6:4:3, which is an octave, fifth, and fourth, respectively. Da Vinci left clues to this when he spoke of the “resonance between visual and aural harmonies” and intended to “offer praise to the harmonies of the universe.”

The iconic painting is also the subject of ongoing debates regarding the meaning behind various mysterious elements, widely popularized by *The Da Vinci Code*, such as the apparent femininity of John, the disembodied hand holding a knife, the repetition of the “V” symbol representing the feminine, and others.

*The Mona Lisa* is arguably the most famous painting in the world. The portrait is so finely painted that, even up close, it’s nearly impossible to see any brushstrokes on the canvas. For centuries, admirers have been guessing the real identity of the woman and the meaning behind her oblique smile. Scientists have recently discovered various tiny letters and numbers hidden throughout the painting, such as the letters LV in the right eye, the letters CE or B in the left eye, 72 or L2 in the arch of the bridge in the background, and more. What are the meanings of these hidden codes?

Da Vinci’s boundless curiosity, love of mastery, and need for patronage also led him to the worthy challenge of engineering. From his imagination poured forth scores of diagrams of “new machines” for a “new world”—machines hundreds of years ahead of their time. He drew the first ever airplane design, recently proven as capable of flight, now known as the “Da Vinci Glider”; the first concept of a helicopter; the first “automobile” in the form of a self-propelled wagon; the first system of concentrated solar power, which used concave mirrors to amplify the sun’s energy and heat water—a method used in today’s solar power plants; the first feasible parachute design; the first self-contained underwater breathing equipment; the first mechanical calculator; various novel musical instruments; the first concept of the hydraulic pump; and more.

His engineering curiosity didn’t stop at civilian challenges. Although da Vinci detested war as “beastly,” Renaissance Italy had been embroiled in it since he was a child. He won his first patronage with Ludovico by claiming that he was a military engineer capable of building all manner of fearsome weapons. He delivered on his promise by producing designs for innovative war machines and devices such as the military tank, missiles, multi-barreled guns for rapid fire, grenades, and finned mortar shells. Ironically, he withheld his
underwater breathing device, believing that it would be used for “evil in war.”
“It vexes me greatly that having to earn my living has forced me to interrupt
the work and to attend to small matters,” he later wrote of such work.

As electricity was centuries away, water was seen as the ultimate source of
power during the Renaissance. Da Vinci studied all forms of water—liquid,
steam, and ice—and diagrammed a cornucopia of radical inventions, includ-
ing a device to measure humidity, a steam-powered cannon, many varieties of
waterwheels, myriad industrial machines powered by flowing water, webbed
gloves to explore underwater, a life preserver to remain afloat, a form of float-
ing snowshoes for walking on water, vessels that could travel underwater and
attack and sink other ships, an “unsinkable” double-hull design for ships, and
dredges for clearing harbors and channels. He even devised an intricate system
of canals to revitalize Milan, which would require innovative construction ma-
chines also of his design.

Another brilliant product of his engineering curiosity was a life-sized au-
tomaton, which he built in 1495 to showcase during parties at his patron
Ludovico’s home. The robot, dressed in a knight’s armor, could walk, stand,
sit, open and close its mouth, move its head side to side, and raise its arms, and
was powered by a crank. Like many of his pursuits, da Vinci built the robot
to test a theory of his that the human body is, in essence, a machine whose
structure and movements could be imitated with levers, pulleys, and gears
(implements which, incidentally, he also pioneered the development of).

As if all of the innovations above weren’t enough, da Vinci found an-
other field to master: cartography. In 1502, at age fifty, da Vinci undertook
the incredibly difficult task of mapping the town of Imola, the stronghold
of the notorious son of the Pope, Cesare Borgia. There were no devices for
simplifying this work—da Vinci had to personally walk the distances of every
street, field, and hill, to draw his map. The result was an astonishingly precise,
proportionate layout of the city, and when he presented it to Borgia to win
his patronage, the powerful leader was in awe. Maps were extremely rare, and
the unprecedented accuracy of da Vinci’s compelled Borgia to hire him on the
spot as his chief military engineer and architect.

From 1514 to 1516, da Vinci worked in Rome, undertaking various proj-
ects for the Pope. Following the death of his patron Giuliano de’ Medici in
March 1516, da Vinci was commissioned by Francis I, King of France, to
create a mechanical lion that would walk forward and open its chest to reveal
a cluster of lilies. The king was so impressed with da Vinci’s work that he of-
fered him the title of Premier Painter and Engineer and Architect of the King.
Francis was his last and most generous patron, providing him with an ample stipend, and a manor house near the royal chateau at Amboise.

Although his right hand was now paralyzed for reasons still unknown (a stroke is assumed), da Vinci spent his final years drawing and teaching. He produced studies of paintings, cats, horses, dragons, Saint Washington, the nature of water, the Deluge, and various machines.

Da Vinci died on May 2, 1519 in Clos Luce, France. In addition to his acclaimed art pieces, he left behind over thirteen thousand pages of notes and drawings, which were his daily observations, thoughts, findings, inventions, and even doodles that beautifully integrated art and natural philosophy in a way that has never been duplicated. His work was the precursor to science as we know it today, and his writings are still scoured by scientists for new discoveries and possibilities.

Hippolyte Taine, an influential French critic and historian, wrote of da Vinci, “There may not be in the world an example of another genius so universal, so incapable of fulfillment, so full of yearning for the infinite, so naturally refined, so far ahead of his own century and the following centuries.”

A burning curiosity helped da Vinci become a giant of the High Renaissance, and a pioneer in just about every field of study he undertook. Such a desire to investigate the unknown is the starting point for every great undertaking in history. Your adventurous journey to genius requires a direction too. As with da Vinci, curiosity is how you’ll discover it. And be open to directions you’ve never considered before. Paths of greatness aren’t usually obvious. Da Vinci’s weren’t. In fact, most of history’s remarkable minds followed their curiosity into uncharted waters.

The Wright Brothers started with a printing business, but a few years later, found themselves more interested in bicycles. They soon applied their fascination for engineering to the study of flight, leveraging the work of da Vinci and others. From the back room of their bicycle store in Ohio, they took on the best engineering and scientific minds in America and won the race to the skies.

Akio Morita was supposed to take over the four-hundred-year-old family sake business, but he was more interested in tinkering with electronics around the house. Morita nurtured a love for mathematics and physics, and after college, was going to pack his bags and join the faculty of the Tokyo Institute of Technology. Before he could leave, however, he read about an electronics research laboratory founded by a man named Masaru Ibuka. Morita met with
Ibuka, and they formed a company together, Tokyo Tsushin Kogyo K.K. The duo decided to rename the company for marketing purposes, and settled on a combination of the Latin word for sound—sonus—and a popular 1950s term for a boy, sonny. TTK is now known as Sony.

Don’t be surprised if—or should I say when, really—your journey takes you in unforeseen directions and into places you never thought you’d find yourself. You never know what opportunity might beckon and, if you’re interested enough in pursuing it, what it might mean for your life.

Regardless of what opportunities are out there, however, it takes individual interest to make anything of them. And real success requires much more than a flash of curiosity in the brainpan—it requires an enduring interest that must be renewed daily despite the long, hard work that it takes to make something of significance, and the sometimes crushing blows of setbacks, adversity, outright attacks, and many other reasons to quit.

But how does someone harness such individual interest for the long haul?

Da Vinci’s most prominent trait was an overwhelming interest in the people and world around him. When studying physiognomy, the dubious art of determining personality based on facial structure and traits, he would often cruise piazzas looking for people with interesting faces. When someone caught his eye, he would follow them around for hours, sketching their face from every angle, observing their behavior and how they interacted with others.

“There are three classes of people,” he wrote. “Those who see. Those who see when they are shown. Those who do not see.”

Geniuses are, one for one, people who see things that others don’t, and the first reason why is they’re making the effort to actually look. They’re interested in something outside themselves. They’re so curious about the world around them that they just can’t leave it alone. There is an opposite, however—a trait that is far more prevalent, and one that baits the trap of uninspired mediocrity.

As writer and philosopher L. Ron Hubbard once put it, “And when a person becomes terribly interesting, he has lots of problems, believe me.” Of this essential difference, Hubbard further writes, “That is the chasm which is crossed by all of your celebrities, anybody who is foolish enough to become famous. He crosses over from being interested in life to being interesting. And people who are interesting are really no longer interested in life.”

When you take interest and flip its polarity—when a person no longer creates and flows it outward, but only craves its warming rays from others, the
adventures that come are grotesque mutations that lead to nothing but petty hostilities, jealousies, and contests of one-upmanship.

The *interesting* person goes on a date with a girl and talks about his expensive car, his Salesman of the Year Award and all his money. The *interested* person compliments his date and asks about her family, her hobbies, and her interests.

The *interesting* person goes to your brother’s wedding and feels compelled to tell you how her wedding was held at a four-star resort, had three hundred guests, and one hundred doves. The *interested* person is thrilled to see family and wants to get an update of how everyone’s doing.

The *interesting* person doesn’t really listen to what you think or how you feel and can’t wait to jump in and give his point of view. The *interested* person finds your opinion, though different from his, important and allows you to express it.

The *interesting* person hears that your business is finally making a profit and immediately tells you about how incredible his first year in business was. The *interested* person congratulates you and asks how you did it.

This problem has much larger ramifications, of course. Without curiosity and interest in something *meaningful*, no important goals can be formed. No matter our potentials, if they aren’t willingly channeled to the pursuit of one knowable, worthwhile end, they diffuse. As Alexander Graham Bell said, “the sun’s rays do not burn until brought to a focus.”

Oscar Wilde once wrote that people have an “insatiable curiosity to know everything, except what is worth knowing.” This couldn’t be truer today. If you doubt me, look no further than the meteoric rise of ultimately meaningless entertainment like reality TV and commercialization of sports. A curiosity in who’s going to win the next season of *Survivor*, whom Kim Kardashian is going to marry and divorce next, or who’s going to lead the league in rushing is hardly the type of interest that will help you grow or improve.

We must be discerning with our interest out of necessity, as da Vinci was. We only have so much time in this life, and if we squander it on consuming and analyzing meaningless facts and baubles, we are squandering our potentialities and ultimately our destinies. Lao Tzu warned us of this when he said, “Watch your thoughts; they become words. Watch your words; they become actions. Watch your actions; they become habit. Watch your habits; they become character. Watch your character; it becomes your destiny.”

There’s something else to consider about curiosity and interest. The leg-
endary composer Tchaikovsky said that “inspiration will come to those who can master their disinclination.” That is, it must come from within you. Curiosity, the invitation to inspiration, can never be gifted by teachers, parents, mentors, bosses, or friends. You can be pointed, prodded, and persuaded, but in the end, you need to be willing to create it, embrace it, and live it every day of your life. Your adventures can only sweep you to far-flung places if you care to go.

Unsurprisingly, the ability to harness your curiosity and discover your own “White Rabbit” adventures is closely tied into another defining trait of da Vinci’s: the power to observe.

“Anyone who conducts an argument by appealing to authority is not using his intelligence,” da Vinci wrote. “He is just using his memory.”

Unlike many of his contemporaries, da Vinci believed that the writings of the Bible and ancient Greece and Rome could only bring one so far in the pursuit of truth. While he was greatly influenced by the wisdom of his ancestors, through his work and writings, he introduced a brand new way of thinking.

Da Vinci believed that knowledge and understanding could only be advanced through actual observation, the asking of simple questions, and the systematic testing and recording of what was observed. This mindset and methodology was revolutionary in his time, and was an important milestone in our emergence from the superstition and ignorance of the Dark Ages into the rational empiricism of the scientific method.

While it might seem simplistic, the power of observation has a profound meaning and application in everyday life. What made da Vinci’s brand of curiosity so unique was his insistence on accepting only what he could actually observe and experience himself, regardless of whether his findings were in line with the beliefs of his peers or not.

For example, his geometric observations and work, which included the first illustration of the highly complicated rhombicuboctahedron and other geometric shapes of significance that were later used in the development of the printing press, were shunned by academics because he lacked a formal education. Additionally, much of the intelligentsia scoffed at his description of a theory of evolution not unlike Charles Darwin’s, which was developed over four centuries later, and his discovery of cholesterol and its connection to heart disease.

While the illogical rebuffs of da Vinci’s work frustrated him, he never let
them stifle neither his drive to know nor his drive to continue observing for himself and reporting factually what he saw. When his observations and conclusions were in contradiction with sacred cows of his time, or were even considered impossible, he didn’t care. He simply continued to observe, deduce, test, and record. He knew that his enemy was not his naysayers, but time itself.

Da Vinci never set out to “fit in”—his goal was to join the small group of people in history that stretched the bounds of human knowledge entirely by the strength of their curiosity. “He who is fixed to a star does not change his mind,” he wrote.

In this worldview, da Vinci teaches us a simple lesson: don’t be afraid to play with the world in your head and wonder “what if?” Don’t assume that there’s no reason to look because everything is already known. Don’t assume that there’s nothing left for you to discover or add.

There’s an old Christian proverb that goes like this:

*Two men looked through prison bars; one saw mud and the other saw stars.*

When the genius looks out to the world, she sees a vast playground of possibility and wonder, not unlike a child. This is an *exercised* ability and conscious choice, not a gift, and perhaps the genius’ greatest virtue.

Sadly, in today’s society, it’s all too easy to spend the majority of our lives immobile in front of screens, vicariously living through pictures and sounds fed to our inert minds. The average American watches four hours of television per day. The average American youth spends more time watching television than in school, and plays about two hours of video games per day (on top of the average of four hours of television).

Our culture is making it easier and easier to disassociate from the natural itchess of the mind and the real adventures of life. We’re left as degenerates, little more than purposeless, visionless drones that punch buttons for paychecks and punch remotes for instant gratifications that remind us we’re still alive.

“Iron rusts from disuse; stagnant water loses its purity and in cold weather becomes frozen; even so does inaction sap the vigor of the mind,” da Vinci wrote.

Thankfully, no matter how far people fall from participation in life’s great opportunities, no matter how miserable and uninterested they become, they can rise out of it. The human spirit is remarkably resilient. The human curiosity is fantastically eternal. With the most minor steps in the right direction, if repeated and reinforced, people can bring themselves back from the deepest depths of listlessness, desperation, and depression.
So, the first step in your journey to genius is to find the direction. Curiosity will unveil your adventure, and that requires a genuine interest in life and its many mysteries, wonders, emotions, experiences, rewards, tribulations, injustices, beauties, and imperfections.

Finding your direction is only the beginning, of course. You will then face the first test of a genius, and your choice will either bring you forward in your quest, or end it before it can even begin.
Every great adventure begins with a call to leave the ordinary world and enter the unknown and strange.

A young Amelia Earhart visits a flying exhibition put on by a World War I ace. When he spots Earhart and her friend, looking on in a nearby field, he dives at them to give a scare. Earhart doesn’t even flinch. “I did not understand it at the time,” she later says, “but I believe that little red airplane said something to me as it swished by.”

In junior high, Steve Jobs’ friend introduces him to a computer junky named Stephen Wozniak, who shows Jobs a little computer board he’s building. Jobs is fascinated, and years later, the duo forms the Apple Computer Company in Jobs’ parents’ garage.

Luke Skywalker snaps a metal fragment off a little droid and activates a hologram message of distress from a beautiful princess. “Help me Obi-Wan Kenobi, you’re my only hope!”

Gandalf pulls a gold ring from the fire, drops it into Frodo’s hand, and it begins to glow with Elvish markings that read, “One ring to rule them all, One ring to find them, One ring to bring them all, and in the darkness bind them.”

“Whatever you do, you need courage. Whatever course you decide upon, there is always someone to tell you that you are wrong. There are always difficulties arising that tempt you to believe your critics are right.”

-Ralph Waldo Emerson
The call can be accepted or refused. This is the first test in the path toward greatness.

Do you have the guts to follow, or will you shun it?

It takes courage—sometimes incredible courage—to take that first step, just as Miguel de Cervantes did.

The Spanish galley *Marquesa* was in the thick of the bloodiest front of what was known as the Battle of Lepanto, fought on October 7, 1571, in the Gulf of Patras, Greece. As far as the eye could see, smoke billowed and fires raged while over four hundred Christian and Ottoman galleys blasted, boarded, and burned each other into oblivion.

Below the *Marquesa*’s decks, a young man named Miguel de Cervantes, nearly delirious with fever, rose from his bed to fight beside his countrymen, insisting that he would rather die for his God and king than hide with illness.

Cervantes was assigned with twelve men under him to a boat alongside the galley. He fought valiantly and was shot three times—twice in the chest and once in the left arm, which paralyzed his left hand. The Ottomans at large, however, suffered a devastating defeat, one that prevented them from invading Italy and moving farther into Europe.

After his wounds healed, Cervantes rejoined the Spanish navy. Three years later, in June 1575, Cervantes was granted leave to return to Spain, and had high hopes for promotion thanks to letters of commendation from Don John of Austria and the Duke of Sesa. Ironically, these auspicious letters were a double-edged sword in what was to come.

In September 1575, Cervantes set sail for Spain aboard the galley *Sol*. After two weeks of travel, the journey was nearly complete as the *Sol* approached the Spanish coast of Catalonia. It was there that a fleet of Algerian pirates ambushed the *Sol* and its two companion ships. The captain of the *Sol* and many of its crew members were killed. Cervantes evaded death again and was captured along with his brother Rodrigo and the surviving Spaniards.

The captives were taken as prisoners to Algiers and sold as slaves, with Cervantes becoming the property of a Greek pirate named Dali Mami. The letters Cervantes carried on him proved he was a man of importance and therefore worth a high ransom and deserving of special surveillance.

Undaunted, Cervantes immediately made plans for his escape. In 1576, Cervantes persuaded a Moor to guide him and other Christian captives through two hundred miles of treacherous desert to a Spanish fortress in the
port of Oran.

The guide abandoned Cervantes and his friends on the road, however, leaving the fugitives stranded with no food, water, or idea of how to reach their destination. They had no choice but to return to Algiers. Cervantes was recaptured and severely beaten, but his life was spared because of his ransom value. His companions, however, weren’t so fortunate: every day one of them was hung, impaled, or disfigured until all had been killed.

In the spring of 1577, two priests arrived in Algiers with three hundred crowns entrusted to them by Cervantes’ parents, to be used in buying his freedom. The ransom was rejected as too low, however, and Cervantes used the money to bargain for his brother’s freedom instead. The brothers had already carefully planned a second escape attempt, and Rodrigo’s now imminent freedom would be instrumental in Cervantes’ escape.

Later that year, in the fall, a Christian gardener helped Cervantes and fourteen other captives slip away while their master was privateering, and took them to caves on the outskirts of the city. They were to hide in these caves until a rescue party arrived, which was to be organized by Rodrigo.

Cervantes and his fellow captives hid in these caves for nearly two months before their rescue ship arrived, but, as fate would have it, nobody dared to disembark and notify the hidden men. The sailors returned the next night to an empty beach, and again nobody attempted to get Cervantes from the caves. They wouldn’t return again, and wouldn’t escape the treacherous waters—they were captured by the Algerians.

Things would get worse for Cervantes. A Spanish renegade who had been supplying him and the others betrayed them to the new viceroy of Algiers, Hasan Pasha—a man infamous for his cruelty to slaves. Hasan sent thirty heavily armed men to retrieve the Spaniards in hiding, and when they arrived at the caves, Cervantes insisted that he was to blame for the scheme, and that he had persuaded the others to join him.

Cervantes was taken before Hasan. Cervantes declared that he was the only culprit in the escape attempt, hoping that the other fugitives would be spared. Despite many threats of grueling torture and certain death, Cervantes wouldn’t give up any names of accomplices, insisting that he alone be punished for the crime. Hasan, struck by Cervantes’ courage, not only spared him torture but also bought him from his master for a tidy sum.

Hasan demanded an impossibly exorbitant ransom for Cervantes, effectively condemning the maimed Spaniard to indefinite detention. Unsurprisingly, Cervantes had other plans because, in his own words, “the hope of ob-
taining my freedom never deserted me."

In March 1578, Cervantes arranged for a secret letter to be delivered to the Governor of Oran, Don Martin de Cordoba, and other important people he counted among his friends. In the letter, Cervantes asked them to send spies and other trustworthy, resourceful men to help him and three other important captives escape. Don Martin was sure to listen to Cervantes’ plea, as he was once a captive himself along with his father, who lost his life in the ordeal.

The Moor entrusted with the letter made it to the gates of Oran, but the letter never reached the hands of Martin. Hasan’s spies stopped the messenger, found the letter suspicious, captured him, and brought him before the viceroy. Hasan had the Moor impaled and sentenced Cervantes to two thousand strokes across his stomach and the soles of his feet—a slow, tormenting death.

Amazingly, for reasons still not completely understood, Cervantes received no punishment for his third foiled escape attempt. And it wasn’t long before he starting working on his fourth—and final—plan to break free and return home.

In September 1579, Cervantes persuaded a Spanish corsair named Giron to buy an armed frigate from a trusted Valencian merchant in Algiers. Another merchant sympathetic to Cervantes’ cause advanced the money used for the purchase. Cervantes secretly spread word of the upcoming breakout to sixty other Christian captives in Algiers, inviting them to flee with him.

One month before his departure, Cervantes was betrayed yet again—this time by a Spanish monk, Juan Blanco de Paz, who was bitter at being excluded from the plan, and who hoped to gain favor with Hasan Pasha. Hasan kept his knowledge of the getaway hidden, hoping to catch the whole lot at once and appropriate them all to himself, as slaves condemned to death.

News of Paz’s betrayal spread, however, and the merchant that lent the money for the frigate was sure that Hasan would extort all the particulars out of Cervantes through torture if he were caught. Fearful of losing his property, liberty, and likely his life, the merchant offered to pay Cervantes’ ransom at any price and put him on a ship leaving for Spain.

Cervantes felt it would be too dishonorable to abandon his companions. He declined the offer, but promised that he would implicate nobody in the scheme, regardless of the suffering inflicted upon him—he would take the blame alone to save everyone else involved.

As the day of the escape approached, it became clear that Hasan was fully aware of the scheme. A few days after Cervantes sneak out of his master’s
home, a formal proclamation was issued that anyone who harbored or helped Cervantes would be put to death. Displaying his indomitable courage once again, Cervantes turned himself in to Hasan voluntarily. Hasan was outraged; he had a noose fastened around Cervantes’ neck, and threatened torment and the gallows if he didn’t reveal who else was involved in the aborted escape. Cervantes remained resolute, accusing nobody but himself and declaring that he had no accomplices but four Spanish gentlemen who had recently obtained their liberty and were to sail to Spain as free men.

Hasan knew Cervantes was lying but, overcome again by Cervantes’ extraordinary courage in the face of torture and death, spared his life for a second time. Although he didn’t know it yet, Cervantes’ magnificent generosity and grit had won him great honor among the twenty-five thousand fellow Christian captives in Algiers. Two Spaniards were foiled in an attempt to induce an insurrection on his behalf, and this intensified Hasan’s fear that as long as he held Cervantes in captivity, he risked a Christian uprising that would destroy one of the most important asylums of the pirates of the Mediterranean.

In the spring of 1580, Philip II of Spain had become aware of Cervantes’ meritorious military service and heroic deeds, and he dispatched two priests with instructions to ransom for captives, including Cervantes. The priests had two hundred and fifty ducats from Cervantes’ family—the most they could muster—to apply toward his freedom. Hasan demanded one thousand crowns for Cervantes—an extravagant sum that was double what he had paid. Further, he would soon be leaving for Constantinople, and if he were not paid promptly, he would take Cervantes with him.

Negotiations continued to no avail and Hasan prepared to leave, placing Cervantes aboard his ship, loaded with chains. One of the priests, father Juan Gil, pitied Cervantes’ plight and begged for Cervantes’ freedom so earnestly that Hasan finally agreed to five hundred crowns. To raise the additional money needed, Juan borrowed it from several Christian merchants who admired Cervantes for his now-famous exploits, and drew on his church’s general redemption fund.

The funds were delivered just as Hasan was casting off to sail. Cervantes paid nine doubloons to the officers of the galley as a compliment, and was permitted to go ashore as a free man—something he had so passionately pursued for five years, and that he described as “one of the greatest joys a human being can taste in this world: that of returning, after a long period of slavery, safe and sound to his native land.”

And what did Cervantes do with his newfound freedom? His true love
was adventure, travel, and duty to his country, so he re-enlisted in the Spanish navy. He participated in several campaigns, and used the long voyages to study diligently, driven to learn the art of poetry and prose by a deep love for a young lady from a noble Spanish family. He wrote a poem in her honor, *La Galatea*, which was his first major work, published in 1585.

For the next twenty years, Cervantes led a nomadic life as a sailor in the navy, a purchasing agent for the Spanish Armada, and a tax collector. He published the first volume of *Don Quixote* in 1605, and the second in 1615. Cervantes’ literary legacy would ultimately include over twenty-five novels, short stories, plays, and poems. *Don Quixote* is one of the most influential works of fiction ever written, and Cervantes is widely considered one of the greatest writers of Western literature.

The story of Cervantes’ rise to literary prominence pales in comparison to the story of the perils and hardships he overcame to even get a chance to put a pen to paper, and forever change the literary culture of the West.

There’s a good reason Barrios included courage in his genius code.

Without courage, the adventure to genius and greatness can never even begin.

It takes a special strength to be willing to scrap the life that others have planned for us—safe, beaten trails walked by millions—and embrace one fraught with uncertainty, danger, and the unknown. While we may hope for paths that are clear and predictable, we quickly learn that like a night drive through the deep, dark country, our headlights can only help us see so far.

Courage is the primary catalyst in the genius code; it begins your transformation into something more.

**WD-40, ANGRY BIRDS, AND THE DIRTY LITTLE SECRET OF OVERNIGHT SUCCESS**

Do you know why WD-40 is called “WD-40”?

The abbreviation stands for “Water Displacement—40th Attempt.”

“Who cares?” I hear you wondering.

Well, the formula that accounted for over $300 million in sales last year was successfully created only after 39 failed attempts.

Similarly, the incredibly popular game *Angry Birds* was software maker Rovio’s 52nd attempt at creating a product that would make money. They eked out a living for eight years and nearly went bankrupt before creating a
game that has now been downloaded over one billion times.

James Dyson endured a staggering 5,126 failed prototypes before creating his revolutionary vacuum cleaner. It took another ten years of dogged persistence before he had enough money to start the Dyson Company, which grossed over $200 million in sales last year.

Groupon almost died early on for lack of funds and interest. At the time of this writing, it’s valued at $6.3 billion.

Captains of industry didn’t have the undying support and encouragement of their peers when they began. At one point, most considered just about any fantastically successful person you can name an impractical, naive dreamer.

No great council decreed that Gates’ vision of Microsoft was going to change the world of software forever. Nobody believed that Oprah Winfrey would amount to anything after running away from home at thirteen, following years of sexual abuse by family.

No, every great organization or cause that is around today exists because someone had the courage to unleash who they truly were, to refuse to believe they couldn’t complete their journey, and to refuse to let setbacks defeat them. They tapped into their inner genius to unlock their full potential for greatness.

“Success seems to be connected with action,” wrote hotelier Conrad Hilton, founder of the Hilton Hotels chain. “Successful men keep moving. They make mistakes, but they don’t quit.”

Maybe you’ll fail ten times in your adventure. Maybe you’ll fail one hundred times. But after months or years of hard work, you might just be that next story of “overnight” success that people marvel at, so long as you possess the courage to take the first step and not look back.

Without courage, the adventure to genius and greatness can never be completed.

Once the adventure begins, the stakes only get higher and higher, and more and more courage is needed to weather the storms of doubt, disbelief, and dismay. Cervantes’ uncanny displays of bravery not only saved his life against all odds, they provided him with a rich, larger-than-life experience that later served as the basis of *Don Quixote*. If he had chosen a different path—if he had escaped captivity early, perhaps at the expense of his brothers in captivity—it’s very possible he would’ve never written of the gentleman from La Mancha, and Western literature would’ve been robbed of one of its most influential landmarks.
Many of history’s extraordinary geniuses had to overcome overwhelming obstacles and hardships to achieve greatness. They had to retain their strength of heart and faith in their convictions, proclaiming “yes!” when the world yelled “no!” They didn’t care if they were criticized for their beliefs or plans. They spoke the truth as they knew it, even if it meant ostracism or worse. They weren’t afraid of responsibility; rather, they embraced it. Our society advances because of their courage.

Like any hero on a great quest, as you strive to accomplish great things in life, you will face trials to test your resolve. People will try to stop you. Circumstances won’t always be favorable. Sometimes all might look hopeless, and you’ll really know fear. In each case, you’ll have two simple choices: give up or get tough.

You will be faced with this predicament many times in your voyage, and your choices will depend solely on your guts. Are you willing to carry forward into the belly of the whale, or will you turn back?

Courage is your compass. It illuminates your path.

FROM CARTOONIST TO CULTURAL ICON

Walt Disney dropped out of high school at sixteen to enlist in the army. He was rejected due to age, of course, but decided to join the Red Cross instead of returning to school. He was sent to France to drive an ambulance and chauffeur Red Cross officials.

When he returned to Kansas City in 1919, Walt decided to pursue his dream of an artistic career. As he was a talented cartoonist, he tried to get work as a newspaper artist, but nobody would hire him. His brother Roy got him a temporary job at a local studio. When that expired, Walt decided to start his own studio with friend and fellow cartoonist Ubbe Iwerks, a venture that never got off the ground.

The Kansas City Film Ad Company hired both Walt and Iwerks to work on cutout animations. Walt fell in love with animation while working there, his head full of ideas for shorts. He soon decided that he would become an animator and opened his second company shortly after, in 1922.

Walt’s cartoons quickly became popular in the Kansas City area. He used the money to hire a large number of animators and expand his business into a proper studio. Walt paid his employees handsomely, but profits couldn’t cover the salaries. Financial burdens mounted. To ease the financial pressure, Walt chose to live at the office and take a bath once a week at the Kansas City Union
Station.

The Laugh-O-Gram Studio, as it was known, collapsed under debt in 1923. Walt was only twenty-one years old. Instead of resigning his dreams, he sold his movie camera to buy a one-way train ticket to join his brother Roy in Hollywood, and together open a cartoon studio. In his suitcase were Walt’s only possessions: a few changes of clothes, an unfinished reel of a film for a project he was working on, and twenty dollars. But he never lost confidence in the value of his ability to create characters and stories that brought laughter and pleasure to others. This, he knew, would carry him through even the roughest times.

Walt and Roy began the Disney Brothers Studio. Iwerks and his family relocated to the area to join the duo. As their first order of business, they set out to finish Walt’s series of cartoons known as the “Alice Comedies,” and hired a young woman named Lillian Bounds to ink and paint the celluloid. Walt and Lillian’s immediate chemistry turned to love, and they married within a year.

The Alice Comedies were completed and became a modest success, allowing Walt, Roy, and Lillian to move from Walt’s uncle’s garage to the back of a real estate office. In 1927, Universal Studios decided to get into the cartoon business, and they contracted Walt’s studio to create a character and series that would become known as “Oswald the Lucky Rabbit.”

The new cartoon was a runaway hit for Universal. People loved Walt’s lighthearted, engaging style as well as Iwerks’ endearing illustrations. The windfall allowed Walt to re-hire some of the talented animators that were with him at Laugh-O-Gram, and together they continued to build Oswald’s popularity.

In 1928, Walt traveled to New York to negotiate a higher fee per animation for his team. Charles Mintz, Walt’s distributor, not only dismissed the request, but told Walt that he would either accept a reduced fee, or lose the entire project and all of his main animators, who were secretly under contract with Mintz to form a new studio that would continue the work. Universal owned the Oswald trademark, not Walt, and the show would go on, with or without him.

Walt wouldn’t give in to Mintz’s bullying. Instead, Walt had a simple solution to the predicament: he would create a new character to replace and outshine Oswald. On his train ride back from New York, when his business fortunes were “at lowest ebb and disaster seemed right around the corner,” an idea struck Walt. He got out his sketch pad and drew a cute, small character that would change his life, and the world of animation, forever. It was a mouse
inspired by a particularly tame pet he kept at the Laugh-O-Gram Studio.

The sketches of “Mortimer Mouse,” as Walt called him, were brought to Iwerks, who redesigned the character using circles to make him easier to animate. Lillian insisted that the name was too “sissified,” and suggested “Mickey Mouse” instead.

Walt and Iwerks secretly began work on animating a Mickey Mouse cartoon while still under contract with Universal. The first screening of the brand new character in 1928 received a lukewarm response from the audience. Consequently, Walt couldn’t find a distributor interested in picking up the cartoon. He was disappointed, but not defeated. He and Iwerks immediately began the production of the second Mickey Mouse cartoon, which also languished for lack of distribution. But then, in true fairy tale form, their third attempt at Mickey’s debut was a charm.

Walt and Iwerks created a cartoon with synchronized sound called *Steamboat Willie*, and it was an instant success. *Steamboat Willie* catapulted Walt, Iwerks, and Mickey Mouse to international fame, with wide praises of cartoon ingenuity and laughs galore.

“Born of necessity, the little fellow literally freed us of immediate worry,” Walt said of Mickey. “He provided the means for expanding our organization to its present dimensions and for extending the medium of cartoon animation toward new entertainment levels. He spelled production liberation for us.”

Walt won an Academy Award for Mickey Mouse in 1932. His success launched what became known as the Golden Age of Animation, which included the creation of iconic characters such as Donald Duck, Goofy, and Pluto plus groundbreaking full-length animations such as *Snow White and the Seven Dwarves*—for which he won one large Oscar and seven miniatures—*Pinocchio, Fantasia, Bambi*, and *Dumbo*.

“Somehow I can’t believe there are any heights that can’t be scaled by a man who knows the secret of making dreams come true,” Walt wrote. “This special secret, it seems to me, can be summarized in four Cs. They are Curiosity, Confidence, Courage, and Constancy and the greatest of these is Confidence. When you believe a thing, believe it all the way, implicitly and unquestionably.”

Walt lost nearly everything multiple times in his life, but he never lost that which matters most: confidence in himself and in his ideas, and the courage to follow his adventure. He never gave in to the fears that lurked inside or loomed outside—fear of failure, of destitution, of the realization that his dreams were just not meant to be. He knew that fear is merely a byproduct of
any courageous adventure. The word itself actually has this connotation built in.

“Fear” can be traced back to the Germanic *per*, which meant “to try, risk, come over, go through,” and the Greek *piera*, which meant “trial, attempt, experience.” Mark Twain said that courage is the resistance to and mastery of fear, not the absence of it. Aristotle said that courage is the mean between fear and recklessness.

Hence, you could fairly conclude that fear is a good thing. It’s an indicator that tells us what we have to do. The more scared we are of what blocks our path, the more important it is that we face it, the more we can be sure that we must overcome it, and the more we can expect out of its defeat.

The only thing to really be afraid of is not trying. Wilting in the presence of fear guarantees misery. That brings the death of dreams, which is, in many ways, the death of the individual.

“A person should set his goals as early as he can and devote all his energy and talent to getting there,” Walt wrote. “With enough effort, he may achieve it. Or he may find something that is even more rewarding. But in the end, no matter what the outcome, he will know he has been alive.”

Spoken like a true genius.

The first act of courage taken by every genius in history was the wholehearted acceptance of the calls to their adventure. They had the courage to rise above their fears, insecurities, and boredom to recognize who they really were and what they must do. Like Theseus’ daring offer to slay the fearsome Minotaur, they voluntarily marched into the labyrinths of the world to face and conquer the unknown.

Cervantes could’ve ignored his call and remained below the *Marquesa’s* decks. His fellow sailors even pleaded for him to do so. To join the fray, they said, would mean certain death in his condition. But he didn’t care. Some part of him recognized the moment for what it was: the call to his greatness.

Likewise, Disney could’ve dismissed the silly cartoons he drew on his Red Cross ambulance as childish and worked on a farm or railroad instead, like his father. He easily could’ve given in to Charles Mintz’s oppressive negotiations. But, no matter how little others believed in him, he refused to sell his desire to bring cheer to the world for an easy paycheck and a life of comfortable, anonymous mediocrity.

Looking back, Cervantes’ and Walt’s calls to adventure were obvious.
That’s the clarity of hindsight. Foresight is far less clear. What will the invitations to our adventures look like? How might they manifest in our lives? Will they reveal themselves under normal circumstances?

Discovering your calls to adventure gets easier when you know their other name: opportunities. They’re problems that need solving, challenges that need conquering, gaps that need filling. Such opportunities exist wherever you look, waiting for people to adopt and nurture them into the products, services, and art that change the world. They’re flashes of insight and hints of possibility that stir in people’s minds when they connect two dots in a way that nobody else did before.

You’re not looking for just any problems, challenges, insights, or possibilities, though. You’re looking for the ones that speak to you, even if nobody else gets it. They’re the ones that you just can’t resist. Invariably, those are the ones that produce the greatest rewards, both material and spiritual.

Don’t be surprised if your calls to adventure scare you a bit. They should. I snuffed my call to write multiple times before I finally had the courage to accept it and face the big, bad world of publishing. But once I did, I discovered that writing and publishing is easier and more rewarding and fulfilling than I could’ve ever imagined.

That’s me. What about you? Are you ready for your adventure? Have you already begun looking and listening for its call? Deep down inside, do you already know what it is?

Lao Tzu said that a journey of a thousand miles begins with a single step. Your journey begins the moment you take that first step. And as for the thousand miles ahead, who knows where it will take you or what the outcome will be? But in the end, you’ll know one thing: that you’ve been alive.
ARE YOU READY TO EMBRACE YOUR JOURNEY TO GREATNESS?

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