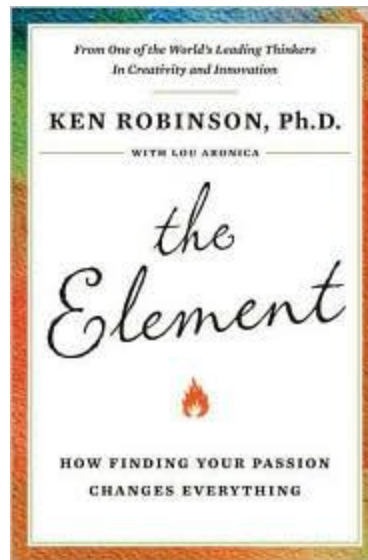


Fathers, children and The Element

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When people close to you discourage you from taking a particular path, they usually believe they are doing it for your own good. – Sir Ken Robinson in The Element



Many readers of educational blogs are already aware of Sir Ken Robinson through his TED talks, especially "[Do Schools Kill Creativity?](#)" If you've enjoyed his presentations, his new book *The Element* is well worth reading. And even if you haven't see him speak, read it anyway.

With sly humor and readable prose, Robinson describes through revealing interviews people who have been successful in the arts, sports, education, and business how they have found in their "Element." This wide variety of fascinating people, many who have overcome great odds to do so, all have found a way to make their livelihood from a passion or enriched their lives through it. Identifying one's Element may be as easy as asking, "If left to my own devices - I didn't have to worry about making a living or what others thought of me - what am I most drawn to doing?" (Does napping count?)

Robinson' describes The Element as the "meeting point between natural aptitude and personal passion." He sets the stage by arguing that there are nearly as many "intelligences" as there are individuals and that standardized tests, and thus success in school, only measure a narrow range. He believes we should not be asking if people *are* intelligent, but *how* they are intelligent. The Element flourishes when one finds his "tribe" of others with similar passions "who tend to drive each other to explore the real extent of their talents." One often needs to overcome the obstacles of both a personal, social and cultural nature. People who find their Element are often considered lucky, but tend to make their own luck through attitude. Mentors and teachers are important to most of the interviewees. – people who see "something in us we don't see in ourselves."

Happily one does not need to be young to find one's passion and does not need to pursue it full time. (I think this is why we see many happily retired teachers who have not retired at all, but have pursued other interesting careers.) In fact, Robinson concludes that for writers maturity can be an advantage given that our "insights and sensitivities deepen with age." Take that, you young techno-Turks.

Robinson criticizes our factory model of education, writing:

But too many graduate or leave early, unsure of their real talents and not knowing what direction to take next. Too many feel that what they are good at isn't valued by schools. and cites the U.S.'s growing drop out rate as proof. He argues that schools do not need to be reformed – but transformed – by personalizing education so that it will build achievement on the individual talents of each child.

The part of Robinson's book that struck a real chord with me talked about how parents can either help or block their children finding their Element. Permit me a personal reflection...

As a teacher, I quickly realized that children who developed a passion for something early in life seemed the happiest. Whether it was an interest in horses or music or science fiction or sports or cartooning or whatever, somehow these lucky kids sort of knew who they were and spent less time thrashing about looking for identity. This is why I found the role of librarian so appealing. No matter what the interest, I could help students engage in it more deeply. If I could match the research project with a personal interest, the work was always better. It's also why I liked directing plays and coaching speech students far better than classroom teaching - and I guess many coaches of any activity feel the same way.

For those of you who are parents, you know that one of the most difficult things to accept is that what makes your children happy may not be the same thing that makes you happy. While my daughter always seemed to be on the familiar collegiate track that was my own route to career and fulfillment, I did worry about my son.

Brady was not a reader. Did not find school of interest. Had an obsession with video gaming and movie making instead of reading and writing which his old man thought of more value and worth. So my suggestion that he look at a career in speech therapy went pretty much unheeded and he went to technical college to learn the art of film making. He is now working in Wellington, New Zealand, just to be close to Peter Jackson's WETA studios. Perhaps he will be an orc in the Hobbit movie being made. Or the next Peter Jackson.

I worry. I suppose that is a dad's job. There seem to be a lot of starving artists in the world. But I

helped Brady acquire both his video making equipment while in high school and his schooling in how to use it. My pragmatic rationale was that if he gets tired of being hungry, he can always go back to college to become the speech therapist. And should he become a rich and famous film director, a *high* quality nursing home might be in my future.

As I think back, I am sure I caused my own father a good deal of anxiety as well. He was a farmer and crop duster who had an oldest son who lacked any mechanical ability or interest in farming. (Actually I was just disinterested in the physical labor part of it.) I still wonder if he felt the same concern when I went off to college driving a \$50 1954 Rambler station wagon with no brakes and a new wife that I felt as I watched my son head to NZ with a couple buddies and a suitcase full of video games. What goes around, comes around.

Every teacher (and parent) should be aware of and open to how she can develop the true passions in her students and even serve as mentors. There could worse legacies than knowing one has helped another human being find his Element .

Oh, have I found my Element? I *am* writing this just for the just plain fun of it.