

One

The Care and Feeding of Human Genius

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Who Do You Think You Are?

Who do you think you are?

That's a very interesting question. Or it would be, if the people who asked it when we were young had really wanted a thoughtful answer. Unfortunately, they weren't looking for an answer at all. They already had the answers. This is what they were saying:

"Who do you think you are, Sarah Bernhardt? Take that shawl off this minute and finish the dishes." *Or:*

"Who do you think you are, Charles Darwin? Get that disgusting turtle off my dining room table and do your arithmetic." *Or:*

"You—an astronaut? A scientist like Madame Curie? A movie star? Who do you think you are?"

Does that sound familiar? Most of us heard that question at some time during our growing up—usually at the vulnerable moment when we ventured some dream, ambition, or opinion close to our hearts. But imagine those words being spoken in a curious, open, wondering tone of voice, for once—not in that scolding tone of scorn we've all had burned into our brains.

I'd like to invite you to try a simple experiment. I'm going to ask you that question again, only this time try hearing it as a real question. Who do you think you are?

EXERCISE 1: Who Do You Think You Are?

Take a blank sheet of paper (we're going to be using a lot of blank paper in this book—it's the stuff of life) and, in a few sentences to half a page, answer the question: "Who do you think you are?" I am genuinely interested in the answer. What do you consider the four or five most important characteristics that define your identity? There are no right or wrong answers, and there's only one rule: don't think too long or hard. Put down the first and surest things that come to mind: "This is me."

Now take a look at your answer. There's a better than 50 percent chance that you said something like this:

"I'm 28, Catholic, single, a secretary in an electronics firm, live in Buffalo."

Or:

"I'm 5'10", 175 pounds, black hair, brown eyes, Italian, former running back, vote Democratic, Vietnam veteran, appliance salesman."

Or:

"I'm a former teacher, married to a man I love, an M.D. in internal medicine, and I'm the mother of three terrific kids: Marty, 13, Jimmy, 8, and Elise, 5 1/2." *Or:*

"I'm black, born in Detroit, oldest of five kids. My father worked for GM. B.A. from Wayne State. Computer programmer. Marrying my high school sweetheart next summer."

All variants of "This is what I do for a living, here's where I live, I'm married, not married, I make money, I don't, I'm so-and-so's mother, I'm Episcopalian, I'm in school"—the kinds of things we usually tell each other when we meet. When we've exchanged these vital statistics, geographical and occupational details, we feel we've declared our identities and begun to get to know each other.

Well, we're wrong.

There's no question that these things have been important in our lives. In fact, they have usually shaped our lives. They are experience, history, role, relationship, livelihood, skill, survival. Some of them are choices. Some, including many we'd call choices, are compromises. Some are accidents.

None of them is your identity.

This may surprise you, but if I were sitting down with you to help you choose a goal and design a life individually tailored for you, I would not ask you for any of this information. I would not want to know what you do for a living, unless you were really excited by your job. I would not want to know any of the things you put in a resume—your background, your experience, your skills. All too often we are skilled in things we never really chose, things we have had to do—like typing or scrubbing floors (those were my skills)—not things we love.

When it comes to picking out what you'll do with energy and joy, what you can be a smashing success at, your skills are not only unimportant—they can get in the way, unless you assign them to a strictly secondary role. For the moment, I'd like you just to forget about them.

What?

That's right. And just for now, I'd like you to forget your job (unless you love it), your family (even though you love them), your responsibilities, your education, all the things that make up your "reality" and your "identity." Don't worry. They won't go away. I know they are important to you. Some of them are necessary and dear to you. But they are not you. And right now the focus is on *you*.

What I'm interested in is *what you love*.

You may or may not be able to say what that is. If you can, it may be your work, or a hobby, or a sport, or a pastime like going to the movies, or something you've always loved reading about, or a subject you wish you had studied in school, or just something that gives off a special whiff of fascination for you whenever it goes by, even though you know very little about it.

There may very well be several things you feel that way about. Whatever they are—guitar music, bridges, bird-watching, sewing, the stock market, the history of India—there is a very, very good reason why you love them. Each one is a clue to something inside you: *a talent, an ability, a way of seeing the world that is uniquely yours*. You may not know you have it. You

may have a case of amnesia about it. That amnesia can be so total that you're not even sure any more what you love. And yet, *that is you!*

That is your identity, your core.

It is something more. Because “who you are” isn't passive or static or unchanging. It is a vital design, as one philosopher put it, that needs to unfold and express itself through the medium of your whole life. And so that unique pattern of talents and gifts that lie hidden in the things you love is also the map to your own life path.

Did you ever go on a treasure hunt when you were a child, or read Poe's “The Gold Bug”? Then you know that the first thing you have to do before you can find the treasure is find the map. It may be hidden, it may be torn in half, or in a million pieces, but your first job is to find it and put the fragments back together, like a jigsaw puzzle. That's what we're going to be doing for you in the first section of this book.

The clues to your life path are not lost. They are just scattered and hidden—some of them right under your nose, in plain sight. They need to be gathered together and carefully examined before you can begin to know how to design a life that truly fits *you*, a life that will make you feel like jumping out of bed in the morning to meet the world, a little scared at times, maybe, but fully alive.

If you are low on energy, if you need a lot of sleep and feel like you're always dragging yourself around at half throttle, it may not be because you need vitamins or have low blood sugar. It may be because you have not found your purpose in life. You will recognize your own path when you come upon it, because you will suddenly have all the energy and imagination you will ever need.

This is part of the secret of all genuinely successful people: they have found their paths. They also happen to have some very special skills for making their visions come true in reality. That is very important, and it's the purpose of the second part of this book to teach you those skills. But first you must liberate your own ingenuity and drive, and the only way to do that is to discover your own path. It is the only path that will ever truly absorb you. And the treasure at the end is success.

Right now I'd like you to do something symbolic. Take that piece of paper on which you answered the question, "Who do you think you are?" Glance through it one more time. *Now crumple it up and throw it in the wastebasket.*

This is the only piece of paper I'm going to ask you to do that with, and as I said, you'll have occasion to write on quite a few sheets of paper as we go along. Alternatively, you might want to save this one as a souvenir. It will serve nicely as the first in a pair of "Before and After" pictures. Call it the souvenir of a misconception. Because if you're like most of us, you are not who you think you are.

Who are you really?

You've forgotten—but you knew once—when you were a very small child. So that's the place to start our search for the lost treasure map of your talents: in the first five precious and mysterious years of your life—the greatest learning period you ever had.

I'll tell you one thing about who you were then.

You were a genius.

YOUR ORIGINAL GENIUS

Now you're probably laughing, but I'm serious. I don't care what you've accomplished in your life or what your I.Q. is—you were born with your own unique kind of genius. And I mean that in the fullest sense of the word. Not genius with a small 'g' as opposed to Albert Einstein. Big "G" genius, *like* Albert Einstein.

We confer the honorific title "genius" only on those very rare people who we believe were born with a mysterious something extra: great brilliance, original vision, incredible determination. And we believe that "something extra" cannot help but express itself with such force that it overpowers the most difficult circumstances. Look at Mozart. Born overflowing with music. Look at Picasso—another genius. The sculptor Louise Nevelson, says Picasso was "drawing like an angel in the crib." Those are geniuses, not you and I. Or so the standard reasoning goes.

OK, let's take the three characteristics I named as defining genius—great brilliance, original vision, incredible determination—and see whether you had them when you were 2 years old.

“Great brilliance” is a little hard to define. We've found out now that we can't test I.Q. very reliably after all. But even if we could, it only measures one very narrow range of knowing and doing. So we'd better call “great brilliance” a special case of “original vision”: intellectual vision, as opposed to the artistic or musical kind, or a dozen other kinds of vision we have or haven't discovered yet: political, emotional, athletic, humanitarian . . . you name it.

You had original vision when you were 2 years old. You may not remember, but that's because it's always difficult to remember things we don't have words for. The fact is, in those early years you were seeing the world in such an original way that no one around you could give you the words for it. And if you found the words for it, usually no one could understand them!

If you've ever listened to a very small child—if you're a mother, for instance—you know that they say some pretty strange and amazing things. That is because they are trying to tell us what the world looks like, seen for the first time, from a point of view that has never existed before! Great poets are people who have held on to that ability to see things new and say what they see, but we all had it once. You had it, when you were 2. You were very busy when you were 2. You were not only reinventing the English language for your own purposes, you were, as a physicist friend of mine told me, doing original research into the nature of the universe.

So you had that: original vision. A new way of seeing the world that was all your own.

You also had “incredible determination.”

You knew perfectly well what you loved and what you wanted. And you went after it without the slightest hesitation or self-doubt. If you saw a cookie on the table, you didn't think “Can I get it? Do I deserve it? Will I make a fool of myself? Am I procrastinating again?” You thought, *Cookie*. And you cried, you wheedled, you crawled, you climbed, you piled boxes up on the floor, you did everything you could think of to get that cookie. If you didn't get it, you made a fuss, took a nap, and changed the subject. And it

didn't stop you in the least from going right for the next wonderful thing you saw.

Notice that you don't need "self-confidence" when you're like that. The word has no meaning. You're not even aware of yourself. You're completely focused on the thing you're after.

Those "rare" and "special" qualities we think distinguishes geniuses from all the rest of us? You had them. I had them.

Where did they go?

As long as you were too young to listen to reason or to be trained to do anything "useful," you had a marvelous freedom to be who you were. By the time you were 5 or 6, if not even sooner, the precious right to make choices based on your own wishes began to be taken away. As soon as you were old enough to control yourself and sit still in school, the honeymoon was over.

You have probably forgotten what it was like to walk into the first grade. You'd just had five years of solid experience—seeing things, knowing things, feeling, hating, and loving things. But schools are not designed to learn from you; they are designed to teach you. Inadvertently, they probably gave the impression that your knowledge, tastes, opinions were of zero value.

Just by ignoring who you were, they cancelled the whole rich inner world you had brought in with you. All they saw was a blank board that they were going to fill up with everything worth knowing. If it was important to you to talk to your best friend, or daydream, or draw, and they were doing multiplication tables, you got punished. If you happened to know how to talk to plants and plants talked back to you, they didn't ask you, "Do you want to learn how to spell, or did you have something else in mind?" They said, "Get away from the plants and let's see how fast you can learn the alphabet."

If you talked to plants, or if you talked to dogs, or if you made sculptures out of mud, or if you were going to be a movie star or ice skate to Eskimo land, you understood very quickly that that didn't count for much. And so, little by little, you forgot it. You developed amnesia about it. *Now* if you walked out into the world and somebody asked, "What are you good at?" you could easily say, "Nothing," meaning "Nothing that anyone would consider

important." Or you might say, "Well, I'm good at math," or "I can type." It would never occur to you to say, "I love plants. I can remember all their names, and I think I understand what makes them happy."

All the people we call "geniuses" are men and women who somehow escaped having to put that curious, wondering child in themselves to sleep. Instead, they devoted their lives to equipping that child with the tools and skills it needed to do its playing on an adult level. Albert Einstein was playing, you know. He was able to make great discoveries precisely because he kept alive the originality and delight of a small child exploring its universe for the first time.

The first thing you will need to do is reawaken those child qualities in yourself. So let's go back and try to get a look at the genius you were. That is the first important clue to your life design—to the discovery of what you'll be happiest doing and what you'll be best at.

It's true that original achievements, great works of art, and the kinds of lives that are works of art almost always have their roots in childhood. Ask any famous woman or man, and you will probably find that they remember having a very clear sense of what they were meant to do at a very early age. A *Redbook* magazine article about singer Linda Ronstadt says that "Her first memory is of saying to her parents, 'Play me some music'. . . She was four years old and singing with them one evening when she began to harmonize. Her father said, 'You aren't singing the melody.' She said, 'I know.'"^{*} And the sculptor Louise Nevelson, in her memoir *Dawns & Dusks*, remembers, "From earliest, earliest childhood I knew I was going to be an artist. I felt like an artist. . . . I drew in childhood, and went on painting daily. . . . As a young child I could go into a room and remember everything I saw. I'd take one glance and know everything I saw. That's a visual mind."[†]

The only real difference between these people and you is that there is an unbroken continuity between the children they were and the adults they have become. We're going to go to work to reestablish that continuity for you. But first we need to know: who was that child? What did she or he love? The design of your life path is right there in miniature, like the genes in a seed that say it's going to become a tomato plant, a palm tree, or a rose. So

^{*} Elizabeth Kaye, "Linda Ronstadt: Why Is She the Queen of Lonely?" *Redbook* 152 (February 1979): 130.

[†] Louise Nevelson, *Dawns and Dusks*. Taped conversation with Diana MacKown. (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1976), pp. 1, 13, 14

I'd like you to think back to your childhood, and see how much you can remember that might point to your own special kind of genius.

Or, since that word still sounds presumptuous to our ears, I've got an even better name for it. Let's call it your *original self*. And I mean that in both senses of the word "original": "there from the beginning" and "unique, new, never seen in the world before."

EXERCISE 2: Your Original Self

Let your mind wander back through your childhood memories—especially the private, special times when you were allowed to play or daydream or do whatever you wanted to do. Now, on a fresh sheet of paper, try to answer these questions:

What especially attracted and fascinated you when you were a child? What sense—sight, hearing, touch—did you live most through, or did you enjoy them all equally?

What did you love to do, or to daydream about, no matter how "silly" or unimportant it may seem to you now? What were the secret fantasies and games that you never told anybody about?

Does it feel like there's still a part of you that loves those things?

What talents or abilities might those early interests and dreams point to?

Marcia, 32, answered this question very poignantly:

"I actually went back to what I'd experienced in the first five years of my life. Since then it's been downhill. This exercise was very emotional for me. I've had a lot of therapy, but I never realized my first five years were so good."

Here are some other answers:

Ellen, 54: “I remember I had this thing about trees. I used to stand and stare up at them and put my arms around their trunks. I think I knew what it felt like to be one.”

John, 35: “I was nutty about rhythm. I was always patting out private little riffs on the dinner table. Nobody could eat their dinner.”

Bill, 44: “I loved color. I know I was drawing from the time I was old enough to clutch a crayon. I covered sheets of paper, the pages of books, and the wall next to my bed with brightly-colored scribbles.”

Anna, 29: “This will sound ridiculous, but there was a commercial on TV in the Midwest for a beer called Hamms that was made in Minnesota. They had this little song—I can still remember the words and the tune: ‘From the land of sky-blue waters / From the land of pines, lofty balsams / Comes the beer refreshing/ Hamms, the beer refreshing.’ It had a haunting sound and Indian tomtoms and they showed a lake sparkling in the moonlight. Well . . . at night in bed I used to put my head under the covers and pretend I was an Indian princess in the Land of Sky-Blue Waters.”

If you didn’t have a goal when you started this book, congratulations.

You may not believe it, but you have just taken your first step toward choosing one.

Ellen’s youngest daughter just left for college, and Ellen is looking for a career. She could have been—and still could be—a botanist, a forester, a gardener, a poet or a painter, or even a psychotherapist.

John is a skilled machinist. He doesn’t know much about music, but he could have been—and still could be—a fine jazz drummer or dancer.

Bill is a lawyer, like his father. He makes a good living and he likes his work OK—but he has a gifted artist or interior decorator hiding inside just waiting to be discovered.

Anna is an editorial secretary in a publishing house. She had, and still has, the kind of imagination it takes to be a writer or film director or an editor-in-chief.

What was your answer? What does it tell you about what you want and what you could be good at?

Now comes the real question.

How was Albert Einstein able to become Albert Einstein, while Marcia, Ellen, John, Bill, and Anna—and maybe you—have not made the fullest use of your talents?

If we really did all come into the world with full-sized helpings of originality and drive, how do you explain Albert Einstein? Mary Cassatt? Luther Burbank? Margaret Mead? They had to make it through the first grade. They had to grow up and pay the rent. How did they manage to keep their treasure maps intact? They must have had some mysterious quality—strength of character, perseverance, self-confidence, self-discipline, belief in themselves, even an instability verging on madness—something that puts those “special” people in a separate category from you and me.

It’s true. The “genius,” the truly successful, the self-fulfilled, did have something we did not. But there is nothing the least bit mysterious about it. It’s not something you have to be born with, nor is it a character virtue you must develop over years of lonely struggle. I’ll tell you exactly what Albert Einstein got.

Soil and air and water and sun.

ENVIRONMENT

If a seed is given good soil and plenty of water and sun, it doesn’t have to try to unfold. It doesn’t need self-confidence or self-discipline or perseverance. It just unfolds. As a matter of fact, it can’t help unfolding. If a seed has to grow with a rock on top of it, or in deep shade, or without enough water, it won’t unfold into a healthy full-sized plant. It will try—hard—because the drive to become what you are meant to be is incredibly powerful. But at best it will become a sort of ghost of what it could be: pale, undersized, drooping.

In a way, that’s what most of us are.

I am talking about nurturing, nourishment, care. I am saying that the difference between a genius and you and me is in our environment—and that means our first environment, our childhood family.

In essence, what Albert Einstein got was this:

Somebody—I don't know who, his mother, his father, his grandfather, his uncle—somebody told him it was fine for him to do whatever he wanted to do. They saw something in him, something stubborn, shy, special, and they respected and cherished it. And I wouldn't be at all surprised to learn that somebody gave him a compass, a gyroscope, some books, and a conspiratorial grin, and then let him alone.

It's that simple. And that rare.

It's hard for us to believe in ourselves if no one has ever believed in us, and it is almost impossible for us to stick to our own vision in the face of overwhelming discouragement. And we cannot so much as build a bookshelf if no one ever told us we could do it, gave us the materials, and showed us how. That's our nature. That's how we are.

In the age of ecology, we ourselves are the only creatures we would ever expect to flourish in an environment that does not give us what we need! We wouldn't order a spider to spin an exquisite web in empty space, or a seed to sprout on a bare desk top. And yet that is exactly what we have been demanding of ourselves.

As a result, most of us are not aware that we didn't grow up in an environment that nurtured genius. We just think we aren't geniuses, and blame heredity or our own lack of character for the spot we're in. Whatever was amiss with the environment we grew up in, we figure "geniuses" had it just as bad or worse. *They* just had the mysterious fortitude to overcome it. We don't see that grandmother or special teacher who was there with the right kind of love and help at the right moment. We wouldn't recognize the key features of a nurturing environment if we fell over them.

In the next chapter, I'm going to show you what that environment really is, and just how it differs from the one most of us grew up in. And then I am going to demonstrate to you that all genuinely successful people—the ones

who love their lives—have had that environment . . . or some parts of it . . .
or they've figured out how to create it for themselves.

And then we are going to start creating it for you.