

THE BIG IDEAS

The Ten Year Rule
10,000 hours, baby.

The Mozart Myth
& Working furiously hard.

You Gotta Know
Where you want to go.

They All Knew But...
Only some actually did it.

Practice & Napitations
They go well together.

Deliberate Practice
Is where it's at.

Comfort, Learning & Panic
Pick the learning zone.

Great Innovators
Are like roses blooming.

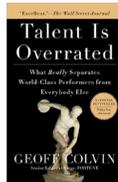
Falling on Your Butt
Go for 20,000 times.

What Do You Believe?
I mean, *really* believe?

We Can All Become Better
And that's super inspiring!

"No matter who they were, or what explanation of their performance was being advanced, it always took them many years to become excellent, and if a person achieves elite status only after many years of toil, assigning the principal role in that success to innate gifts becomes problematic, to say the least."

~ Geoff Colvin



Talent Is Overrated

What *Really* Separates World-Class Performers from Everybody Else

BY GEOFF COLVIN · PORTFOLIO © 2008 · 228 PAGES

"We tend to think we are forever barred from all manner of successes because of what we were or were not born with. The range of cases in which that belief is true turns out to be a great deal narrower than most of us think. The roadblocks we face seem to be mostly imaginary."

~ Geoff Colvin from *Talent Is Overrated*

[Geoff Colvin](#) is *Fortune's* editor at large. He's a great writer and his message in this quick-reading, brilliant book is simple: Talent is overrated. (Hence, the title. :)

If talent is overrated then what accounts for the successes of extraordinary performers?

In short: A lot of hard work. Over thousands of hours over many years. More accurately, a lot of what's called "Deliberate Practice"—where we're at our edge and consciously, intensely developing new skills.

Let's check out a few of my favorite Big Ideas from the book on how we can create more outstanding performances in our own lives!

THE TEN YEAR RULE

"The phenomenon seems nearly universal. In a famous study of chess players, Nobel Prize winner Herbert Simon and William Chase proposed "the ten year rule," based on their observation that no one seemed to reach the top ranks of chess players without a decade or so of intensive study, and some required much more time. Even Bobby Fischer was not an exception; when he became a grand master at age sixteen, he had been studying chess intensively for nine years. Subsequent research in a wide range of fields has substantiated the ten-year rule everywhere the researchers have looked. In math, science, musical composition, swimming, X-ray diagnosis, tennis, literature—no one, not even the most "talented" performers, became great without at least ten years of very hard preparation. If talent means that success is easy or rapid, as most people seem to believe, then something is obviously wrong with a talent-based explanation of high achievement."

In sum: The data shows that talent is overrated.

Ten years. Or about 10,000 hours of deliberate practice. Whether we're talking about sports stars or X-ray diagnoses, that's what it takes to achieve truly great performance levels.

(For the record: That's about 4 hours a day, 5 days a week, 50 weeks a year. For 10 years. :)

THE MOZART MYTH

"Wolfgang's first four piano concertos, composed when he was eleven, actually contain no original music by him. He put them together out of works by other composers. He wrote his next three works of this type, today not classified as piano concertos, at age sixteen; these also contain no original music but instead are arrangements of works by Johann Christian Bach, with whom

"The New Yorker's music critic, Alex Ross, sums up much of the recent scholarship on the Miracle of Salzburg: "Ambitious parents who are currently playing the 'Baby Mozart' video for their toddlers may be disappointed to learn that Mozart became Mozart by working furiously hard.""

~ Geoff Colvin

Wolfgang had studied in London...

Mozart's first work regarded today as a masterpiece, with its status confirmed by the number of recordings available, is his Piano Concerto No. 9, composed when he was twenty-one. That's certainly an early age, but we must remember that by then Wolfgang had been through eighteen years of extremely hard, expert training."

Wolfgang Mozart was born a genius, right? Just kinda fell out of the womb and started composing crazy great stuff, right?

Might want to re-think that one.

First, consider the fact that Mozart's dad, Leopold, was a famous composer who LITERALLY wrote the book on how to teach children music. He'd been practicing for years with Wolfgang's older sister and got to work with little Wolfgang around the time most little doods are getting potty trained.

Long story a little shorter, when you look at his career, you'll see that, as Colvin points out above, Mozart put in EIGHTEEN years (!!!) of remarkably diligent training before he created something truly extraordinary.

As [Carol Dweck](#) (the Stanford researcher and leading authority on motivation and achievement) asks in her great book *Mindset* (see Notes): "Is it ability of mindset? Was it Mozart's musical ability or the fact that he worked till his hands were deformed? Was it Darwin's scientific ability or the fact that he collected specimens non-stop from early childhood?"

Talent is overrated. Long live hard work! :)

KNOW WHERE YOU WANT TO GO

"Step one, obvious yet deserving a moment's consideration, is knowing what you want to do. The key word is not *what*, but *knowing*. Because the demands of achieving exceptional performance are so great over so many years, no one has a prayer of meeting them without utter commitment. You've got to know what you want to do, not suspect it or be inclined toward it or be thinking about it."

Well, there ya go. Step one: Know what you want to do.

There's NO WAY we're going to put in the necessary work without this clear picture.

For me, the highest level answer to the question is that I want to be an extraordinary human being. I want to live in integrity with my deepest values. To be a great husband, father, friend, creator, teacher and leader. Specifically, I want to master wisdom. I've created my life such that I get to do that full-time and I'm excited to spend the years and decades necessary to achieve a high level of mastery and, hopefully, to create more and more meaningful goodness for people.

Back to you: What do YOU want to do?

THEY ALL KNEW IT BUT...

Colvin outlines research done on violinists at the Music Academy of West Berlin where professors were asked to rate their students into three basic groups: 1) students with a chance to go on to become international soloists; 2) students not quite that good but still pretty awesome; and 3) students who would likely go on to become music teachers.

Researchers got all kinds of data on these students. One of the most significant findings?

According to Colvin: "By age eighteen, the violinists in the first group had accumulated 7,410 hours of lifetime practice on average, versus 5,301 hours for violinists in the second group and 3,420 hours for those in the third group. All the differences were scientifically significant."

"They all knew it, but they didn't all do it."

~ Geoff Colvin

"One factor, and only one factor, predicted how musically accomplished the students were, and that was how much they practiced."

~ Geoff Colvin

That's pretty powerful.

Colvin points out the fact that all the students knew that practicing by themselves was *the* most important thing they could do to improve their skills. They also all agreed that it wasn't particularly fun. But, as it turns out, only the top two tiers actually practiced on their own a lot.

As Colvin says: "They all knew it, but they didn't all do it."

This is a theme we talk about ALL. THE. TIME. Whether we want to become musical geniuses or just better human beings, we need to do the things we KNOW are best for us. Period.

[Michael Beckwith](#) talks about how discipline can turn into "blissipline" and says this in his great book *Spiritual Liberation* (see Notes): "The gift of self-discipline is that it has the power to take you beyond the reasoning of temporary emotion to freedom. Think of how empowered you've felt on occasions when you haven't given in to the 'I don't feel like it' syndrome and honored your commitment to yourself. What does not feeling like it have to do with it? The combination of love for something with the willingness to do what it takes to practice it—discipline—results in freedom."

Let's decide on what's important to us and then do it.

PRACTICE & NAPITATIONS

"Practice is so hard that doing a lot of it requires people to arrange their lives in particular ways. The two top groups of violinists did most of their practicing in the late morning or early afternoon, when they were still fairly fresh. By contrast, violinists in the third group practiced mostly in the late afternoon, when they were more likely to be tired. The two top groups differed from the third group in another way: They slept more. They not only slept more at night, they also took far more afternoon naps. All that practicing seems to demand a lot of recovery."

Love it. My hunch is you've seen the same type of pattern in your creative life.

Personally, it's *amazing* to see how much more creative work I can get done when I start my day writing BEFORE I allow myself to get online. Much like the violinists doing their challenging practice earlier in the day when they're fresher, I find it MUCH (!) easier to write earlier in the day and I'm MUCH (!) more likely to get awesome creative work done if I start with it first thing.

How about you?

How do you start your days? Do you hop online and watch your day dwindle away in reactive activities all day long? (OMG I've done that way too many times! :) Or, do you have clear goals on what you want to achieve and discipline yourself to crush it before you let the day get away?

Powerful thing to ponder, eh?

* writing note to self: remember this and put it in to practice way more often! * :)

Oh, one more thing. About the sleep and the naps: YES!

Not that I really needed it, but I feel fully justified in taking what I call "napitations" (= nap + meditation :). In fact, that's another correlation to my highest productivity bursts: I tend to rise with (or before) the sun, meditate, move, work hard, take a napitation and then get back to working hard.

* writing another note to self to do this even more consistently * :)

DELIBERATE PRACTICE

"Deliberate practice is characterized by several elements, each worth examining. It is activity designed specifically to improve performance, often with a teacher's help; it can be repeated a

"Their framework isn't based on a simplistic "practice makes perfect" observation. Rather, it is based on their highly specific concept of "deliberate practice."

~ Geoff Colvin

lot; feedback on results is continuously available; it's highly demanding mentally, whether the activity is purely intellectual, such as chess or business-related activities, or heavily physical, such as sports; and it isn't much fun."

After presenting that definition, Colvin proceeds to focus on each of those elements in his chapter "What Deliberate Practice Is and Isn't." Get the book for more details.

In the meantime, know that simply showing up and "practicing" isn't gonna cut it.

Think of a recreational golfer who goes to the driving range and "practices" for an hour or so vs. the professional who goes to the course and deliberately, intensely, and passionately works on improving their game. :)

COMFORT, LEARNING & PANIC ZONES

"Noel Richy, a professor at the University of Michigan business school and former chief of General Electric's famous Crotonville management development center, illustrates the point by drawing three concentric circles. He labels the inner circle "comfort zone," the middle one "learning zone," and the outer one "panic zone." Only by choosing activities in the learning zone can one make progress. That's the location of skills and abilities that are just out of reach. We can never make progress in the comfort zone because those are the activities we can already do easily, while panic-zone activities are so hard that we don't even know how to approach them.

Identifying the learning zone, which is not simple, and then forcing oneself to stay continually in it as it changes, which is even harder—these are the first and most important characteristics of deliberate practice."

That's great stuff. We talk about something similar in the Note on [Tal Ben-Shahar](#)'s great book [Happier](#) where we describe the zones as "comfort - stretch - panic"—with the stretch zone being our ideal place to grow.

I love to imagine a rubber band held between your pointer fingers on your left and right hands. If you don't pull at all, there's no tension. Comfort zone. Not a whole lot of growth. If you pull TOO hard, you'll snap the rubber band. Snap zone. Ouch.

The ideal? Stretch it so there's some nice dynamic tension. Not too much. Not too little. The stretch zone. Ahhhhhh. :)

THAT's where we want to play.

Begs the question: Where are YOU playing these days?

GREAT INNOVATIONS & ROSES BLOOMING

"... the innovator seems driven to learn as much as possible about the domain, to improve, to drive himself or herself beyond personal limits and eventually beyond the limits of the field."

~ Geoff Colvin

"The greatest innovators in a wide range of fields—business, science, painting, music—all have at least one characteristic in common: They spent many years in intensive preparation before making any kind of creative breakthrough. Creative achievement never came suddenly, even in those cases in which the creator later claimed they did. Whether it was the transistor or the Beatles' *Sgt. Pepper* album or the cell phone or Picasso's *Les Femmes d'Alger*, it always followed a long earlier period of extremely hard work, and in most cases the creative products themselves were developed over a significant period. Great innovations are roses that bloom after long and careful cultivation."

Again, we like to kid ourselves that great innovations just pop up out of nowhere into the laps of born geniuses.

But, alas, that simply isn't so. As Colvin so beautifully says: "Great innovations are roses that bloom after long and careful cultivation."

FALLING ON YOUR BUTT 20,000 TIMES

"The most eminent creators are consistently those who have immersed themselves utterly in their chosen field, have devoted their lives to it, amassed tremendous knowledge of it, and continually pushed themselves to the front of it."

~ Geoff Colvin

"A study of figure skaters found that sub-elite skaters spent lots of time working on the jumps they could already do, while skaters at the highest levels spent more time on the jumps they couldn't do, the kind that ultimately win Olympic medals and that involve lots of falling down before they're mastered."

Colvin brilliantly tells the story of Shizuka Arakawa, who won the gold medal in figure skating at the 2006 Winter Olympics in Turin, Italy. Apparently she rocked some crazy move called "a layback Ina Bauer"—which basically required her to bend backward "almost double with the feet pointing in opposite directions—leading into a three-jump combination."

Now, when most of us watch something like that it simply looks IMPOSSIBLE to do. (And, for most of us, it pretty much is. :) But Shizuka, who won the gold at twenty-four, had been training for NINETEEN years—consistently pushing her edges. Falling down again and again and again...

Colvin calculated the number of times she probably fell and says: "Landing on your butt twenty thousand times is where great performance comes from."

So, back to you. Are you playing it safe and doing what you're already good at? Or, are you pushing your edges—willing to fall on your butt 20,000 times en route to your own personal greatness?

WHAT DO YOU REALLY BELIEVE?

"What do you really want? And what do you really believe? ..."

The second question is more profound. What do you really believe? Do you really believe that you have a choice in the matter? Do you believe that if you do the work, properly designed, with intense focus for hours a day and years on end, your performance will grow dramatically better and eventually reach the highest levels? If you believe that, then there's at least a chance you will do the work and achieve great performance.

But if you believe that your performance is forever limited by your lack of a specific innate gift, or by a lack of general abilities at a level that you think must be necessary, then there's no chance at all that you will do the work."

[Carol Dweck's *Mindset*](#) is essentially an entire book dedicated to exploring the scientific underpinnings of this question: What do you really believe about greatness/genius/excellence?

She's discovered two different perspectives we can have: a "fixed mindset" or a "growth mindset."

As she says: "Believing that your qualities are carved in stone—the fixed mindset—creates an urgency to prove yourself over and over. If you have only a certain amount of intelligence, a certain personality, and a certain moral character—well, then you'd better prove that you have a healthy dose of them. It simply wouldn't do to look or feel deficient in these most basic characteristics."

That's the fixed mindset. And, here's what she says about the growth mindset: "In this mindset, the hand you're dealt is just the starting point for development. The growth mindset is based on the belief that your basic qualities are things you can cultivate through your efforts. Although people may differ in every which way—in their initial talents and aptitudes, interests, or temperaments—everyone can change and grow through application and experience."

So, what do YOU believe?! For yourself? For your kids?

Check in on that. If you're stuck in a limited, fixed mindset but want to step into a fuller expression of your potential, study and learn more about how you can make the shift! And, know

"Everyone who has achieved exceptional performance has encountered terrible difficulties along the way. There are no exceptions."

~ Geoff Colvin

that these PhilosophersNotes are pretty much all about helping us do that.

(And, for the record, one of the reasons I work so hard on all this goodness is because *I* need to remind myself of these truths and firmly establish myself more and more consistently in the glorious growth mindset!! :)

WE CAN ALL BECOME BETTER

“The evidence offers no easy assurances. It shows that the price of top-level achievement is extraordinarily high. Perhaps it’s inevitable that not many people will choose to pay it. But the evidence shows also that by understanding how a few become great, anyone can become better. Above all, what the evidence shouts most loudly is striking, liberating news: that great performance is not reserved for the pre-ordained few. It is available to you and to everyone.”

Whether we feel called to dedicate our lives to achieving greatness or simply to become better and better human beings, as Colvin tells us: “what the evidence shouts most loudly is striking, liberating news: that great performance is not reserved for the pre-ordained few.”

Great performance is available to you. And to your kids. To your friends and to your family. To everyone.

So, let’s embrace this potential within ourselves and everyone we meet today and go out and get a little bit better, shall we? :)



Brian Johnson,
Chief Philosopher

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you’ll probably like...

[The Talent Code](#)

[Mindset](#)

[Why We Do What We Do](#)

[Spiritual Liberation](#)

[Wooden](#)

About the Author of “Talent Is Overrated”

GEOFF COLVIN



Geoff Colvin, Fortune’s senior editor at large, is one of America’s most respected journalists. He lectures widely and is one of the regular lead moderators for the Fortune Global Forum. A frequent television guest, Colvin also appears daily on the CBS Radio Network, reaching seven million listeners each week. He coanchored Wall Street Week on PBS for three years. He lives in Fairfield, Connecticut. (from the book)

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Brian Johnson loves helping people optimize their lives as he studies, embodies and teaches the fundamentals of optimal living—integrating ancient wisdom + modern science + common sense + virtue + mastery + fun. Learn more and optimize your life at brianjohnson.me.