
BOOK REVIEW

"The Element: Finding Your Passion Changes Everything" By Dr Ken Robinson

Penguin: New York 2009

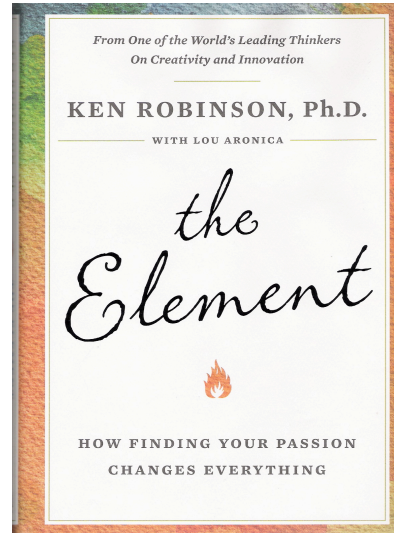
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I remember reading once that at 40 years of age, we are only 4% as creative as we were at four years of age. In the same way, Dr Ken Robinson starts his book by asserting that we all born with huge natural capacities, but that as we grow older, we lose touch with ourselves and we lose touch with our talents. Much of this he blames on an archaic and rigid education system.

So what is the Element? In this book, it is defined as the meeting point between natural aptitude and personal passion. It's the place where the things we love to do and the things we are good at come together. Another phrase for being in your "element," is being in the "flow" or being in the "zone." When you are pursuing your passion in this way a number of things happen. The activity gives you energy – it doesn't take energy away from you and people become more alive when they are in the "zone." A good deal research on this whole area of being in the zone has also been conducted by Dr Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi (pronounced "chicks-sent-me-high-ee").

What could it look like for you to be in your element? Is it working on your car? Is it painting or designing a web site? Is it preparing or making a speech? Is it cooking or having a dinner party? Is it redecorating your room or another part of the house? Is it buying or selling properties? Is it selling particular goods? Is it working the stock market? Where are you in the zone?

More particularly, the features of the "element" generally include the following:

- Facing a challenge that requires a skill that one possesses
- Complete absorption in an activity
- You look forward to the activity
- Clear goals and feedback
- Concentration on the task at hand that allows you to forget everything else
- The loss of self-consciousness
- The sense that time "transforms" during the experience; where did the time go?

A key question to ask yourself according to Dr Robinson is this: "If left to my own devices – if I didn't have to worry about making a living or what others thought of me – what am I most drawn to doing?" What kinds of activities do you tend to engage in voluntarily? What absorbs you most?

The challenge of this book is for us to really find ourselves and what we are really passionate about. It's about being able to put aside the restrictive and punitive education that most of us have been through and to take another look at who we really are and what talents we possess. Sadly, some of us have been so indoctrinated that we don't think we have any talents at all. All of us have the capacity to be in our "element."

An interesting observation is that some of the most brilliant, creative people cited in the book did not do well in school. For instance, Paul McCartney, John Cleese, Mick Fleetwood (and his band Fleetwood Mac), Ewa Laurance (the most famous female billiards player on the planet) and more recently Paul Potts (Britain's Got Talent new found star).

And age is no barrier to finding the element. Benjamin Franklin invented the bifocal lens when he was 78 years. Agatha Christie wrote "The Mousetrap," the world's longest-running play when she was 62 and Jessica Tandy won the Oscar for best actress at 80 years. The evidence is that the creative parts of our brain stay strong deep into our lives and we can recover our sleeping talents by deliberately exercising them. Just look at the lives of people like Albert Einstein, Paul Newman and I.M. Pei who started late in their lives.

A further theme in this book is that we are not very good at predicting the future. In the late 1990's, who would have guessed what over-arching impact the internet would have had, the degree to which commerce would become

globalised and then the extent to which the global financial crisis would have cut into our lives, and then the fact that we now have a black President of the USA. So, since we can't know what the future will be like, the only way to prepare for the future is to make the most out of ourselves on the assumption that doing so will make us flexible and productive as we can be.

Sometimes, seeking your element means overcoming various obstacles such as what others including your family might think or it means walking away from the life you've known to find a setting that is more suited to your growth. Furthermore, probably the most important ingredient in pursuing your element is persistence. Some things don't always come easily. But the rewards are grand.

What activities or pursuits allow you to be in the "zone?" When are you in your "element?"

This book would be a good read for teachers trying to understand "the system" and how to improve it. It explains why the education system is currently failing and will continue to fail and it offers teachers and school leaders a new paradigm. The book is also for those who are asking questions about their purpose and their passion.

This book is a stimulating read. It is book of encouragement and gives tips about how to find your element. The message is clear – you owe it to yourself to find your true self and your true talents. The rewards are huge for you, those around you, and your community.

[Dr Darryl Cross is a clinical and organisational psychologist as well as a credentialed executive and personal coach. He is also an author, international speaker and university lecturer. Dr Darryl assists people to find their strengths and reach their goals. Further information on Dr Darryl can be seen at www.DrDarryl.com]