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The Element

How Finding Your Passion Changes Everything

THE SUMMARY IN BRIEF

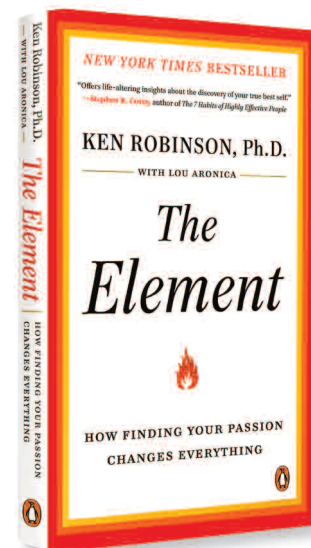
A 2-year-old teaches himself to read by watching *Sesame Street* and tries to teach other kids to count using his number blocks. As an adult, his math lectures draw standing-room-only crowds. A 9-year-old girl is thought to have a learning disability. A psychologist thinks otherwise and opens the door to an extraordinary life of dance. A young girl in Greece dreams of academic life and becomes one of America's leading political commentators. Terence Tao, Gillian Lynne and Arianna Huffington all took different paths to discovering their Element and each was changed profoundly by the experience.

The Element is the point at which natural talent meets personal passion. When people arrive at the Element, they feel most themselves, most inspired and achieve at their highest levels.

In *The Element*, learning expert Ken Robinson, Ph.D., draws on the stories of a wide range of artists, athletes, scientists, business leaders, academics and others to show you why finding your Element is essential for all of us. He also explores the conditions that lead us to live lives that are filled with passion, confidence and personal achievement.

IN THIS SUMMARY, YOU WILL LEARN:

- How to unleash the powerful driving force inside every human being.
- The key to the breathtaking diversity of human talent and passion, and to our extraordinary potential for growth and development.
- How to make any vision, any dream, a reality.
- How to find the place where your talents and desires intersect.



by Ken Robinson, Ph.D.,
with Lou Aronica

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THE COMPLETE SUMMARY: THE ELEMENT

by Ken Robinson, Ph.D., with Lou Aronica

The authors: Sir Ken Robinson, Ph.D., is an internationally recognized leader in the development of creativity, innovation and human resources. He has worked with national governments in Europe and Asia, international agencies, Fortune 500 companies, national and state education systems, nonprofit organizations and some of the world's leading cultural organizations. He was knighted by Queen Elizabeth II in 2003 for his service to the arts.

Lou Aronica is the author of two novels and co-author of several works of nonfiction, including the national bestseller *The Culture Code* (with Clotilde Rapaille).

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Introduction

The Element is the place where the things we love to do and the things we are good at come together. It is essential that each of us find his or her Element, not simply because it will make us more fulfilled but because, as the world evolves, the very future of our communities and institutions will depend on it.

The world is changing faster than ever in our history. Our best hope for the future is to develop a new paradigm of human capacity to meet a new era of human existence. We need to evolve a new appreciation of the importance of nurturing human talent along with an understanding of how talent expresses itself differently in every individual. We need to create environments — in our schools, in our workplaces and in our public offices — where every person is inspired to grow creatively. We need to make sure that all people have the chance to do what they should be doing, to discover the Element in themselves and in their own way.

To make the best of ourselves and of each other, we urgently need to embrace a richer conception of human capacity. We need to embrace the Element. ●

The Element

Gillian was only 8 years old, but her future was already at risk. Her schoolwork was a disaster, at least as far as her teachers were concerned. She turned in assignments late, her handwriting was terrible and she tested poorly. Not only that, she was a disruption to the entire class, one minute fidgeting noisily, the next staring out

the window, forcing the teacher to stop the class to pull her attention back, and the next doing something to disturb the children around her. The school was very concerned. This came to a head when the school wrote to her parents.

The school thought that Gillian had a learning disorder of some sort and that it might be more appropriate for her to be in a school for children with special needs. All of this took place in the 1930s.

The Letter

Gillian's parents received the letter from the school with great concern and sprang to action. Gillian's mother put her daughter in her best dress and shoes, tied her hair in ponytails and took her to a psychologist for assessment, fearing the worst.

Gillian remembers being invited into a large oak-paneled room with leather-bound books on the shelves. Eventually, her mother and the psychologist stopped talking. The two adults left her sitting there on her own. But as he was leaving the room, the psychologist leaned across his desk and turned on the radio.

As soon as they were in the corridor outside the room, the doctor said to Gillian's mother, "Just stand here for a moment, and watch what she does." There was a window into the room, and they stood to one side of it, where Gillian couldn't see them. Nearly immediately, Gillian was on her feet, moving around the room to the music. The two adults stood watching quietly for a few minutes, transfixed by the girl's grace. Anyone would have noticed there was something natural — even primal — about Gillian's movements. Just as they



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would have surely caught the expression of utter pleasure on her face.

At last, the psychologist turned to Gillian's mother and said, "You know, Mrs. Lynne, Gillian isn't sick. She's a dancer. Take her to a dance school."

Little Gillian, the girl with the high-risk future, became known to the world as Gillian Lynne, one of the most accomplished choreographers of our time, someone who has brought pleasure to millions and earned millions of dollars. This happened because someone looked deep into her eyes — someone who had seen children like her before and knew how to read the signs. Someone else might have put her on medication and told her to calm down. But Gillian wasn't a problem child. She didn't need to go away to a special school.

She just needed to be who she really was.

Gillian Lynne found her Element. Most people have not.

Find Your Element

Finding your Element is essential to your well-being and ultimate success, and, by implication, to the health of our organizations and the effectiveness of our educational systems.

If we can each find our Element, we all have the potential for much higher achievement and fulfillment. We all have distinctive talents and passions that can inspire us to achieve far more than we may imagine. Understanding this changes everything. It also offers us our best and perhaps our only promise for genuine and sustainable success in a very uncertain future.

Being in our Element depends on finding our own distinctive talents and passions. Why haven't most people found this? One of the most important reasons is that most people have a very limited conception of their own natural capacities. ●

Think Differently

One of the key principles of the Element is that we need to challenge what we take for granted about our abilities and the abilities of other people. This isn't as easy as one might imagine. Part of the problem with identifying the things we take for granted is that we don't know what they are *because* we take them for granted. They become basic assumptions that we don't question, part of the fabric of our logic. We don't question them because we see them as fundamental, as an integral part of our lives.

'The Shoulders of Giants'

Isaac Newton famously said, "If I saw further it was because I stood on the shoulders of giants."

This is not just a phenomenon of science.

A good example of something that many people take for granted without knowing it is the number of human senses. When asked how many senses they have, most people will answer five — taste, touch, smell, sight and hearing. Some will say there's a sixth sense and suggest intuition. Rarely will anyone offer anything beyond this.

Physiologists largely agree that in addition to the five we all know about, there are four more. The first is our sense of temperature. Another is the sense of pain. Next is the vestibular sense, which includes our sense of balance and acceleration. And then there's the kinesthetic sense, which gives us our understanding of where our limbs and the rest of our body are in space in relationship to each other.

Athletes and Performers

Athletes have a profound sense of the capacities of their physical bodies, and their achievements show how limited our everyday ideas about human ability really are. If you watch athletes, dancers, musicians and other performers of their class at work, you can see that they are thinking, as well as performing, in extraordinary ways. They draw from the deep reserves of feeling and intuition and of physical reflex and coordination that use the whole brain and not just the parts that we associate with rational thinking.

In these ways, athletes and all sorts of other performers help to challenge something else about human capacity that too many people take for granted and also get wrong — our ideas about intelligence.

How are you intelligent? Knowing that intelligence is diverse, dynamic and distinctive allows you to address that question in new ways. This is one of the core components of the Element. For when you explode your preconceived ideas about intelligence, you can begin to see your own intelligence in new ways. Discovering the Element is all about allowing yourself access to all of the ways in which you experience the world, and discovering where your own true strengths lie.

Just don't take them for granted. ●

Beyond Imagining

We tend to underestimate the range of our senses and

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our intelligence. We do the same with our imaginations. In fact, while we largely take our senses for granted, we tend to take our imaginations for granted completely. We'll even criticize people's perceptions by telling them that they have "overactive imaginations" or that what they believe is "all in their imagination." And yet, far more than any other power, imagination is what sets human beings apart from every other species on earth.

The imagination is vitally important in our lives. Through imagination, we can visit the past, contemplate the present and anticipate the future. We can also do something else of profound and unique significance.

We can create.

Creative Dynamics

Creativity is a step beyond imagination because it requires that you actually do something rather than lie around thinking about it. It's a very practical process of trying to make something original. Some common features pertain:

- It is a process. Usually, the creative process begins with an inkling, which requires further development.
- Creativity involves several different processes that wind through each other.
- It involves using media of some sort to develop ideas.
- Creative work also often involves tapping into various talents at your disposal to make something original.
- People who work creatively usually have something in common: They love the media they work with.
- Creativity also uses much more than our brains. We, ourselves, are the medium of our creative work.
- Creative work also reaches deep into our intuitive and unconscious minds and into our hearts and feelings.

In the 19th century, William James became one of the founding thinkers of modern psychology. By then, it was becoming more widely understood that our ideas and ways of thinking could imprison us or liberate us. James put it this way: "The greatest discovery of my generation is that human beings can alter their lives by altering their attitude of mind. ... If you change your mind, you can change your life."

This is the real power of creativity and the true promise of being in your Element. ●

In the Zone

At the age of two, Terence Tao taught himself to read

by watching *Sesame Street*, and he tried to teach other kids to count using number blocks. Within the year, he was doing double-digit mathematical equations. Before his 9th birthday, he took the SAT-M (a math-specific version of the SAT given primarily to college candidates) and scored in the 99th percentile. He received his Ph.D. at age 20. When he was 30, he won a Fields Medal, considered the Nobel Prize of mathematics, and a MacArthur Fellowship.

Dr. Tao is extraordinarily gifted. He's earned the moniker "the Mozart of Math," and his lectures — his *math lectures* — draw standing-room-only crowds. His academic record suggests that he could have been successful in several disciplines, but his real calling, his discovery of the Element, came via math when he was still a toddler.

"I remember as a child being fascinated with the patterns and puzzles of mathematical symbol manipulation," he told an interviewer. "I think the most important thing for developing an interest in mathematics is to have the ability and the freedom to play with mathematics — to set little challenges for oneself, to devise little games, and so on. Having good mentors was very important for me, because it gave me the chance to discuss these sorts of mathematical recreations; the formal classroom environment is of course best for learning theory and applications, and for appreciating the subject as a whole, but it isn't a good place to learn how to experiment."

Brilliance and Passion

Tao probably finds himself in the zone regularly. In addition to being born with rare skills, he is also extremely fortunate because he arrived at his version of the Element when he was very, very young. He found the place where his brilliance and his passion met, and he never looked back.

No one was going to tell Tao to stop doing math because he'd make more money if he were a lawyer. In that way, he, and others like him, had an unencumbered path toward the Element.

But they *provide* a path as well. For they show all of us the value of asking a vitally important question: 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? Tao probably never had to wonder what he was going to do with his life. What the rest of us need to do is see our futures and the futures of our children, our colleagues and our communities with the childlike simplicity prodigies have when their talents first emerge.

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This is about looking into the eyes of your children or those you care for and, rather than approaching them with a template about who they might be, trying to understand who they really are.

We need to understand what puts them and us in the zone.

And we need to determine what implications that has for the rest of our lives. ●

Finding Your Tribe

Tribe members can be collaborators or competitors. They can share the same vision or have utterly different ones. They can be of a similar age or from different generations. What connects a tribe is a common commitment to the thing they feel born to do. This can be extraordinarily liberating, especially if you've been pursuing your passion alone.

Finding your tribe can have transformative effects on your sense of identity and purpose. This is because of three powerful tribal dynamics: validation, inspiration and what is called the “alchemy of synergy.”

Connecting with people who share the same passions affirms that you're not alone; that there are others like you and that, while many might not understand your passion, some do. It doesn't matter whether you like the people as individuals, or even the work they do. It's perfectly possible that you don't.

What matters first is having validation for the passion you have in common. Finding your tribe brings the luxury of talking shop, of bouncing ideas around, of sharing and comparing techniques, and of indulging your enthusiasms or hostilities for the same things.

Some people are most in their Element when they are working alone. This is often true of mathematicians, poets, painters and some athletes. Even with these people, though, there's a tacit awareness of a field — the other writers, other painters, other mathematicians, other players, who enrich the domain and challenge their sense of possibility.

How Do They Do That?

Finding your tribe offers more than validation and interaction, important as both of those are. It provides inspiration and provocation to raise the bar on your own achievements. In every domain, members of a passionate community tend to drive each other to explore the real extent of their talents.

Sometimes, the boost comes not from close collaboration, but from the influence of others in the field,

whether contemporaries or predecessors, whether directly associated with one's particular domain or associated only marginally. ●

What Will They Think?

When Arianna Stasinopoulos was a teenager in Greece in the 1960s, she had a sudden and passionate dream. Leafing through a magazine, she saw a picture of Cambridge University in England. She was only 13 years old, but she decided on the spot that she had to be a student there. No one took her seriously. No one except Arianna herself, that is. And one other person.

Her mother decided that they had to find out if Arianna's dream was even remotely possible. She made some inquiries and learned that Arianna could apply for a scholarship. Arianna applied as soon as she was eligible.

To her delight and everyone's astonishment (except her mother's), Cambridge accepted Arianna — and she won a scholarship. She went on to graduate from Cambridge University with an M.A. in economics.

Now based in the United States, Arianna Huffington is the author of 11 books on cultural history and politics, a nationally syndicated columnist and co-host of a National Public Radio political roundtable program. In May 2005, she launched the *Huffington Post* Web site, “one of the most widely read and frequently cited media brands on the Internet.” In 2006, *Time* magazine put her on their list of the world's 100 most influential people.

Swimming Against the Tide

All cultures — and subcultures — embody systems of constraints that can inhibit individuals from reaching their Element if their passions are in conflict with their context.

The urban culture may not be best for someone who wants to run a small shop where he knows everyone's name. Parts of heartland American culture are not prime territory for those who want careers as scathing political comics. This is why Arianna Stasinopoulos wanted to leave Greece. Finding your Element sometimes requires breaking away from your native culture in order to achieve your goals.

In seeking your Element, you're likely to face one or more of the three levels of constraint — personal, social and cultural.

Ultimately, the question is always going to be, “What price are you willing to pay?” The rewards of the Element are considerable, but reaping these rewards may mean pushing back against some stiff opposition. ●

Do You Feel Lucky?

Some “lucky” people have been fortunate to find their passions and have the opportunities to pursue them. Some “unlucky” people have had bad things happen to them. But good and bad things happen to all of us. It’s not what happens to us that makes the difference in our lives. What makes the difference is our attitude toward what happens. The idea of luck is a powerful way of illustrating the importance of our basic attitudes in affecting whether or not we find our Element.

Describing ourselves as lucky or unlucky suggests that we’re simply the beneficiaries or victims of chance circumstances. But if being in your Element were just a matter of chance, all you could do is cross your fingers and hope to get lucky as well. There’s much more to being lucky than that. Research and experience show that lucky people often make their luck because of their attitudes.

We all create and shape the realities of our own lives to an extraordinary extent. Successful people take an active role in “getting lucky.” They’ve mastered a combination of attitudes and behavior that lead them to opportunities and that give them the confidence to take them.

Conscious Efforts

One way of opening ourselves up to new opportunities is to make conscious efforts to look differently at our ordinary situations. Doing this allows a person to see the world as one rife with possibility and to take advantage of some of these possibilities if they seem worth pursuing. If we keep our focus too tight, we miss the rest of the world swirling around us.

Another attitude that leads to what many of us would consider “good luck” is the ability to reframe, to look at a situation that fails to go according to plan and turn it into something beneficial.

People who find their Element are more likely to evolve a clearer sense of their life’s ambitions and set a course for achieving them. They know that passion and aptitude are essential. They know, too, that our attitudes to events and to ourselves are crucial in determining whether or not we find and live our lives in the Element. ●

Somebody Help Me

Mentors serve an invaluable role in helping people get to the Element. It might be overstating things to suggest that the only way to reach the Element is with the help

of a mentor, but it is only a mild overstatement. We all encounter multiple roadblocks and constraints on the journey toward finding what we feel we were meant to do. Without a knowledgeable guide to aid us in identifying our passions, to encourage our interests, to smooth our paths and to push us to make the most of our capacities, the journey is considerably harder.

Mentorship is, of course, a two-way street. As important as it is to have a mentor in your life, it is equally important to fulfill these roles for other people. It is even possible that you’ll find your own real Element is as a mentor to other people.

More Than Heroes

We all have personal heroes — a parent, a teacher, a coach, even a schoolmate or colleague — whose actions we idolize. In addition, we all have heroes we’ve never met who stir our imaginations with their deeds. We consider Lance Armstrong a hero for the way he overcame a life-threatening illness to dominate a physically grueling sport, and Nelson Mandela a hero for his critical role in ending apartheid in South Africa. In addition, we forever associate people with heroic acts — Rosa Parks’ triumphant stand against bigotry, Neil Armstrong’s first step on the moon.

These people open our eyes to new possibilities and fire our aspirations. They might even drive us to follow their examples in our lives, moving us to dedicate ourselves to public service, exploration, breaking barriers or lessening injustice. In this way, these heroes perform a function similar to mentors.

Yet mentors do something more than heroes in our search for the Element. Heroes may be remote from us and inaccessible. Mentors are different. They take a unique and personal place in our lives. Mentors open doors for us and get involved directly in our journeys. They show us the next steps and encourage us to take them. ●

Is It Too Late?

One of the fundamental precepts of the Element is that we need to reconnect with ourselves and see ourselves holistically. One of the greatest obstacles to being in our Element is the belief that our minds somehow exist independently of our bodies, like tenants in an apartment, or that our bodies are really just a form of transportation for our heads. The evidence of research, and of common sense, is not only that our physical health affects our intellectual and emotional vitality, but that our attitudes can affect our physical well-being. But

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equally important is the work you do to keep your mind young. Laughter has a huge impact on aging. So does intellectual curiosity. Meditation can also provide significant benefits to the physical body.

The answer to the question, “Is it too late for me to find the Element?” is simple: No, of course not. Even in the cases where the physical degradations that come with age make certain achievements impossible, the Element is still within reach.

Keeping Things Plastic

What this really comes down to is our capacity to continue to develop our creativity and intelligence as we enter new stages of our lives.

Research indicates that, as long as we keep using our brains in an active way, we continue to build neural pathways as we get older. This gives us not only the ongoing potential for creative thought, but also an additional incentive for continuing to stretch ourselves. There is strong evidence to suggest that the creative functions of our brain stay strong deep into our lives: We can recover and renew many of our latent aptitudes by deliberately exercising them.

Remarkable, life-enhancing things can happen when we take the time to step out of our routines, rethink our paths and revisit the passions we left behind (or never pursued at all) for whatever reason. We can take ourselves in fresh directions at nearly any point in our lives. We have the capacity to discover the Element at practically any age. ●

For Love or Money

To be in your Element, it isn’t necessary to drop everything else and do it all day, every day. For some people, at some stages in their lives, leaving their current jobs or roles to pursue their passions isn’t a practical proposition. Other people choose not to do that for a whole range of reasons. Many people earn their living doing one thing, and they then create time and space in their lives to do the thing they love. Some people do this because it makes greater sense emotionally. Others do it because they feel they have no alternative but to pursue their passions “on the side.”

Whether or not we can spend most of our time in our Element, it’s essential for our well-being that we connect with our true passions in some way and at some point.

A New Richness

Discovering the Element doesn’t promise to make you

richer. Quite the opposite is possible, actually, as exploring your passions might lead you to leave behind that career as an investment banker to follow your dream of opening a pizzeria. Nor does it promise to make you more famous, more popular or even a bigger hit with your family. However, for everyone, being in their Element, even for part of the time, can bring a new richness and balance to their lives.

The Element is about a more dynamic, organic conception of human existence in which the different parts of our lives are not seen as hermetically sealed off from one another, but as interacting with and influencing each other. Being in our Element at any time in our lives can transform our view of ourselves. Whether we do it full-time or part-time, it can affect our whole lives and the lives of those around us. ●

Making The Grade

The core ideas and principles of the Element have implications for each of the main areas of education. The curriculum of education for the 21st century must be transformed radically. Intelligence is diverse, dynamic and distinct. Here is what it means for education.

First, we need to eliminate the existing hierarchy of subjects. Elevating some disciplines over others only reinforces outmoded assumptions of industrialism and offends the principle of diversity. Too many students pass through education and have their natural talents marginalized or ignored. The arts, sciences, humanities, physical education, languages and math all have equal and central contributions to make to a student’s education.

Second, we need to question the entire idea of “subjects.” For generations, we have promoted the idea that the arts, the sciences, the humanities and the rest are categorically different from each other. The truth is that they have much in common. There is great skill and objectivity in the arts, just as there is passion and intuition at the heart of science. The idea of separate subjects that have nothing in common offends the principle of dynamism.

Third, the curriculum should be personalized. Learning happens in the minds and souls of individuals — not in the databases of multiple-choice tests. Learning is a personal process, especially if we are interested in moving people toward the Element. The current processes of education do not take into account individual learning styles and talents. In that way, they offend the principle of distinctiveness.

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Teaching

The Element has implications for teaching. Too many reform movements in education are designed to make education teacher-proof. The most successful systems in the world take the opposite view. They invest in teachers. Mentoring and coaching is the vital pulse of a living system of education.

The Element has implications for assessment. Education is being strangled persistently by the culture of standardized testing. The irony is that these tests are not raising standards except in some very particular areas, and at the expense of most of what really matters in education.

The future for education is not in standardizing, but in customizing; not in promoting groupthink and “deindividuation,” but in cultivating the real depth and dynamism of human abilities of every sort. For the future, education must be Elemental. ●

Afterword

Finding the Element in yourself is essential to discovering what you can really do and who you really are. At one level, this is a very personal issue. It’s about you and people you know and care for. But there is a larger argument here as well. The Element has powerful implications for how to run our schools, businesses, communities and institutions. The core principles of the Element are rooted in a wider, organic conception of human growth and development.

Sir Isaac Newton composed his theories at the dawn of the mechanical age. To him, the universe seemed like an enormous mechanical clock, with perfectly regular cycles and rhythms. Modern science has changed metaphors and, in doing so, has shifted our understanding of how the universe works.

In our own time, though, we still routinely use mechanistic and technological metaphors to describe ourselves and our communities.

The power of metaphors and analogies is that they point to similarities, and there are certainly some similarities in how lifeless computers and living minds actually work. Nonetheless, your mind clearly isn’t a solid-state system in a metal box on your shoulders. And human organizations are not at all like mechanisms. They are made up of living people who are driven by feelings and motives and relationships. Organizational charts show you the hierarchy, but they don’t capture how the organization feels or how it really works. The fact is that human organizations and communities

Become the Best

The Russian novelist Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn understood the connection between ourselves and others. “If you want to change the world,” he said, “who do you begin with, yourself or others? I believe if we begin with ourselves and do the things that we need to do and become the best person we can be, we have a much better chance of changing the world for the better.”

are not like mechanisms: they are much more like organisms.

Aiming High

Human beings and human communities are the same. We need the right conditions for growth, in our schools, businesses and communities, and in our individual lives. If the conditions are right, people grow in synergy with the people around them and the environments they create. If the conditions are poor, people protect themselves and their anxieties from neighbors and the world. Some of the elements of our own growth are inside us. They include the need to develop our unique natural aptitudes and personal passions. Finding and nurturing them is the surest way to ensure our growth and fulfillment as individuals.

If we discover the Element in ourselves and encourage others to find theirs, the opportunities for growth are infinite. If we fail to do that, we may get by, but our lives will be duller as a result.

To make the best of our time together on this small and crowded planet, we have to develop our powers of imagination and creativity within a different framework of human purpose. Michelangelo once said, “The greatest danger for most of us is not that our aim is too high and we miss it, but that it is too low and we reach it.” For all our futures, we need to aim high and be determined to succeed. To do that, each of us individually and all of us together need to discover the Element. ●

RECOMMENDED READING LIST

If you liked *The Element*, you’ll also like:

1. ***A Whole New Mind* by Daniel H. Pink.** The age of right-brained thinkers — artists, inventors, big-picture thinkers — has arrived. Learn the six essential aptitudes you’ll need to excel in this new business environment.
2. ***What Got You Here Won’t Get You There* by Marshall Goldsmith.** The corporate world is full of intelligent and skilled executives, but Goldsmith gives you the 20 habits to help you push for the very best in your career.
3. ***Talent is Overrated* by Geoff Colvin.** What’s the real solution to the mystery of high performance? Colvin reveals the secrets of “deliberate practice.” It’s difficult. It hurts. But more of it equals better performance. Tons of it equals great performance.