

# Play, Passion, and Purpose: A New Arc for Education

By David Lynn Gould

## (INTRODUCTION)

I'd like to ask you to close your eyes. Admittedly, a dangerous way to begin a talk, and at some point I will beg you to reopen them. But for now, I want you to simply take a minute and try to picture the most pleasurable moments of your life. Where are you? What are you doing? Who are you with? These images should come easily. They are the instances when you have felt most alive. A personal highlight reel, chronicling what really matters.

You can open your eyes.

If I were to make a sweeping guess, these memories likely included family or friends. Or possibly you were alone. They took place in a far off land or maybe the intimacy of your own home. You paid for the experience... or maybe not. And the occasion could have happened at any stage of your life.

How am I doing?

There is one thing, however, I am confident every one of your memories has in common. In each – in your own way – you are playing.

## (PLAY)

According to Dr. Stuart Brown, founder of the National Institute for Play, humans are not only built **to** play, but built **through** play. "When we play," writes Brown, "we are engaged in the purest expression of our humanity, the truest expression of our individuality." It shapes the brain, encourages empathy and complex social systems, and opens us up to new possibilities. Play is the basis for all art, books, fashion, music, sports, exploration, daydreaming and wonder. It makes us more productive, and is the remedy for what would otherwise be a grinding, colorless existence. As psychologist Brian Sutton-Smith concluded, "The opposite of play is not work. It's depression."

Play is also how we learn. Young children don't merely observe the world around them they taste it, touch it, heave it, bend it, and break it to see how it works. While even more exciting activities get introduced throughout adolescence, a particular enthusiasm for some naturally grows. And with time, these passions mature into a deep sense of meaning. It is the beautiful story of a developing life arcing its way from **Play to Passion to Purpose**.

Sadly, it is never that easy. Young children enter pre-school alive with creative confidence only to leave high school doubting it entirely.

### **(GORDON MACKENZIE)**

The late Gordon MacKenzie liked to visit grade schools. In fact, the self-proclaimed, "loyally subversive", Hallmark Card employee would start the day with a roomful of kindergarteners, and working his way through the ranks, end up in the sixth grade. Gordon began each class with the same question: "Is anybody here an artist?" If you have a five-year-old in your life, or can dredge up an old memory of what it was like to be one, it is pretty easy to guess how Gordon's first stop goes. The kindergarteners erupt with excitement and jostle for Gordon's attention. Everyone in the room is an artist! But as the day progresses the excitement wanes. And when Gordon finally asks his question for the last time, only two wary sixth graders are willing to accept the label. "What happened?" Gordon probes. "I just visited the kindergarten class this morning and it's full of artists! Did they all transfer out?" And then giving himself away, Gordon pauses and regrettably concludes, "No, I suspect something much worse has happened here. Someone has told you it's not ok."

It is estimated, that on average, preschool children ask their parents 100 questions a day. Why? Why? Why? Why? Why? By middle school, this relentless probing has all but stopped, as student enthusiasm and engagement plunge. They don't stop asking questions because they lose interest. Quite the contrary; they lose interest because they stop asking questions.

"I am interested," wrote cultural anthropologist, Margaret Mead, "in what happens to people who find the whole life so rewarding that they are able to move through it with the same kind of delight in which a child moves through a game." Mead is referring to the spot at the edge of a bluff where Alexander Graham Bell found his "dreaming place." Or the first "imagination workshop" Steven Spielberg conceived behind his closed bedroom door.

Pablo Picasso claimed that, "Every child is an artist. The problem is how to remain an artist once you grow up." Unlike Bell and Spielberg many young people today are unwittingly being educated out of their creative capacities. What beauty and innovation is being lost as a result? How does this impact our individual and collective lives? And what can be done to keep all the "fairy dust" spread over a childhood from blowing away?

As I grow older, I think about these questions more and more. It's still relatively easy for me to be impressed. I can still be stumped and fooled as well. But with the passing of time that feeling of standing in wonder, or being wrapped in awe, has become increasingly hard to find. It is absurd that many educators and parents still distinguish between a time for learning and a time for play — without seeing the dynamic link between the two. The fact that your heartbeat changes to mimic the music you are listening to, or that there are over eight million lightening bolts striking the Earth 100 times every second of every minute of every hour of every day... forever and ever... doesn't make the topics less enchanted, only more so.

## **(MENTORS)**

The word educator comes from the Latin “educare” meaning to lead, to guide. Each semester, I ask my students the question: “If you could select anyone in the world to learn from, who would it be, and what would you ask?” Now imagine that you can!

To make my point, I created the “Dave’s Dream Mentor Challenge,” and request my students give me the names of three living, influential – yet seemingly unreachable – people in their lives. My challenge is to connect them with one of the names on their list for an interview

It could be the English author, Neil Gaiman, or Doug Ulman, former President and CEO of LIVESTRONG, or Lance Benson, a marathon athlete, who after being born without legs, competes using a skateboard and his arms.

While the conversations are always meaningful, the most rewarding thing to me has been watching a student’s idea of what’s possible shift. Once you get a backstage pass to life, sitting in the “lawn seats” is never quite the same.

Interestingly, the insights seem to deepen in relationship to the span of years. When one of my students Chaz’men Williams-Ali interviewed his mentor, 74-year-old opera singer Simon Estes, the conversation was more than a lecture on vocal technique and diction. The discussion was filled with glimpses into a time when African American opera singers had to travel to Europe to be heard. Estes told his story of being the grandson of a slave sold for \$500, and the son of a father that could neither read nor write. With sadness he shared that he has sung in more opera houses than all the black men in the history of the art form combined. When Chaz asked Simon what distinguished a great singer from a good one, Simon answered without hesitation, “The great singers sing with their heart and soul, not just their mind.” Leaning forward, Simon asked, “Where is your brain located?” Chaz pointed to his head. “Where is your heart?” Chaz obediently lowered his hand to his chest. “And where is your voice?” Simon concluded. “It is located in between.”

In his book, “Steal Like An Artist”, Austin Kleon contends that all creative work builds on what came before. “In the beginning,” Kleon writes, “we learn by pretending to be our heroes. We learn by copying.”

Kleon advocates for selecting one thinker you really love – writer, artist, scientist, philosopher – and then learn everything you can about that person. When you’ve exhausted your research, select three people that thinker loved and do it all over again. Scale the tree as high as you can go, and embrace the emerging lineage. In time, Kleon promises, a branch of your own will appear.

Who are your heroes? Where do you find your inspiration? What do you stick on the refrigerator, pin to a bulletin board, or copy into your journal late at night? In the ennobling words of DJ Spooky, “You’re only as good as your record collection.”

## **(PASSION)**

The creative mind likes to play with the things it loves, and as with any good relationship, passion is sure to follow. Passion not only deepens the emotional connection, but creates a thirst for learning and drive for success.

The etymological origin of the word passion comes from the Greek word “pascho,” which means to suffer. In fact, up until the 1630s the word passion actually meant suffering. Though it has now come to be associated with joy and enthusiasm, there are moments of anguish tied to anything worth achieving. As novelist Norman Mailer puts it, “Every one of my books had killed me a little more.”

Despite this association, it is widely assumed that creative geniuses seldom fail. Just watch them; they make it look so easy. This couldn’t be further from the truth, however. In fact, from Mozart to Edison, they fail all the time. The secret is in how they shrug it off. History is crowded with examples of this type of legendary perseverance:

- When J.K. Rowling wrote the first Harry Potter book in 1995, twelve different publishers rejected it before the book was finally purchased by Bloomsbury. Even then, the small publishing house told the author to “get a day job.”
- As a young man, Walt Disney was fired from the Kansas City Star Newspaper because his superiors thought he lacked creativity. Forced to shut down his Laugh-O-Gram Films animation company, and barely able to pay rent, Disney resorted to eating dog food to get by. His last few dollars were spent on a train ticket to Hollywood.

## **(DAN GABLE & PERSISTENCE)**

I have spent the past 43 years unintentionally studying persistence. My accidental education began as a middle school wrestler, and while I only lasted two years in the sport, they happened to overlap the 1972 Summer Olympic Games. To this day, I can still recall every member of that American team. There was the Peterson brothers, Ben and John, and the 412-pound super heavyweight, Chris Taylor. But the wrestler that captured my young imagination was an unassuming 150-pound athlete named Dan Gable. While I devotedly watched Dan’s Gold Medal march in Munich, on my family’s black and white television set, it was the journey that brought him to that heroic moment that ultimately marked my life.

Dan was 15 years old when his big sister, Diane, was brutally raped and murdered in the family’s Iowa home. The horrific news was delivered to Dan’s father over a pay phone, as Dan and his mother sat motionless in the idling car. A neighborhood boy was arrested for the crime, before the Gables made it back to their hometown. He was casually bagging groceries, when the police arrived.

The heartbreak left Dan's parents in a self-destructive spiral. In fact, his dad would start each morning perched atop the fire station. Aiming an empty rifle at the prison across the street, he would pull the trigger, and metaphorically revenge his daughter's death before leaving for work.

Dan was well aware that he was all his parents had left, and knew if he didn't act fast he risked losing his entire family. In 1964, Waterloo, Iowa was a blue-collar, physical town. The kind of place where fathers went drinking at night, and mothers drove the streets trying to bring them home. With no resources, Dan turned to the only thing he had – wrestling. He would use the sport to distract his parents from their grief. But it wasn't enough to simply compete, Dan concluded. He would never lose.

And that's exactly what he did. Winning everything through high school and college, one hundred eighty one victories in a row. But then in his final collegiate match, with the eyes of the sports world upon him, Dan suddenly lost on a controversial call. By then, Dan was carrying much more than just his parents on his back. Teammates, coaches, and a growing community of people inspired by his sharply focused mission now joined them. The feeling that he had let them down was devastating.

When Dan finally was able to move forward, he simply returned to the original blueprint. Only this time, it was no longer good enough just to win – he had to dominate. Factor in that the Russians pledged to find a man that could beat Dan Gable in the 1972 Olympic Games; consider that he seriously injured his left knee, and had to learn how to wrestle protecting it; that he got head butted in his very first Olympic match, and bleeding profusely, needed to swiftly pin his opponent to keep from being disqualified. Today, Dan Gable stands as the only man in Olympic competition to go unscored upon.

Wrestlers from Dan's generation will tell you that he was never the fastest or the strongest. Nor did he have the best technique. Dan simply worked harder, cared more, and was relentless. "Gold medals aren't really made of gold," asserts Dan. "They're made of sweat, determination, and a hard-to-find alloy called guts."

It should come as little surprise that people who work hard are more successful than those who don't. In turn, individual determination is more predictive of success than either talent or intellect. While many of the skills necessary to succeed in the marketplace can be learned on the job, capabilities like persistence and reliability must be cultivated in advance. As author Daniel Pink asserts, "The world is littered with gifted people who didn't put in the hours, who didn't persist, who gave up too early, who thought they could ride on talent alone. Meanwhile, people who might have less talent pass them by." Beethoven wrote 60 to 70 drafts of a single phrase of music. Hall of Famer, Ted Williams hit practice pitches until his hands bled. Prior to his death in Rome in 1564, Michelangelo burned a large

number of his own drawings, sketches and cartoons so that no one would see the labors he endured, or how his genius was tested.

Much like creativity, healthy amounts of ambition come standard in all children. Just watch a headstrong baby learn to walk. No matter how many times the little one staggers and falls, it keeps doggedly trying until the new skill is mastered. It is not until years later, around the start of middle school, when this natural drive to succeed begins to fade. Education must accept some responsibility for keeping these flames lit. Like compound interest, persistence has a way of building upon itself. We can ill afford to have so many futures compromised so soon.

David Shenk, author of *The Genius in All of Us*, believes that while inherited differences do exist, they are not straightjackets holding us in place. Each of us arrive much like a “human jukebox,” with many potential tunes inside. The opportunities presented, and the dedication one puts towards them, ultimately determine what song comes out.

### **(PURPOSE)**

I encourage my students to regularly share the “tunes” they are chasing. They are what you might expect -- “to own a business,” “make a lot of money,” “travel the world,” “start a family.”

Pushing a bit, I will inquire, “Why”? Maybe it’s to retire early, buy a big house, or explore new cultures.

But why? And then why again?

If you do this exercise long enough something fascinating occurs. As varied as these initial goals start out, all answers eventually lead to a common denominator: They simply want to be happy.

A portion of our happiness – perhaps 50 percent – is simply genetic. But every day we learn more about the environmental and social conditions that impact the remaining share.

### **(VIKTOR FRANKL)**

“Success, like happiness”, writes Viktor Frankl, “cannot be pursued; it must ensue... as the unintended side-effect of one's personal dedication to a course greater than oneself.”

Viktor’s great insight was formed in the winter of 1942, when as a young psychiatrist, he and his wife, Tilly, were among the hundreds of Jews rounded up and arrested in Vienna. At the time, Viktor was already hard at work on a theory of psychological well-being. Anticipating the roundup, the young couple took great pains to save their most cherished possession – the manuscript Viktor was writing. Before the officials marched into their home, Tilly sewed the document into the

lining of Viktor's coat. Viktor wore that coat when the couple was later dispatched to Auschwitz, but on his second day in the concentration camp, he was stripped by the SS guards, and never saw the manuscript again.

In the ensuing three years, at Auschwitz and later at Dachau – as his brother, mother, father, and pregnant wife all perished in the gas ovens – Viktor worked to rewrite the text by scratching notes on stolen scraps of paper. And in 1946, one year after Allied forces liberated the concentration camps, those crumpled pieces were transformed into what would become one of the most powerful and enduring books of the last century, "Man's Search for Meaning." Within those pages Viktor describes how those who found meaning in the camp's insufferable conditions were far more resilient than those who did not. "Everything can be taken from a man but one thing," Viktor writes, "the last of the human freedoms — to choose one's attitude in any given set of circumstances, to choose one's own way." He who knows the "why" for his existence can bear almost any "how."

Pure passion on its own is not enough to sustain the type of motivation required to do difficult things. Individuals need to be driven by something far deeper. Apple cofounder Steve Jobs sought to "put a ding in the universe," Amazon founder Jeff Bezo wants to "make history," Skype cofounder Niklas Zennstrom strives to "be disruptive, but in the cause of making the world a better place."

Though many people become content to color within the lines of their education, I don't believe anyone aspires to live an inconsequential life. As a friend of mine once said, "The person who risks nothing, does nothing, has nothing, is nothing, and becomes nothing. He may avoid suffering and sorrow, but he simply cannot learn, feel, change, grow or love."

I will let you in on one of the world's great secrets. If you want to improve your life, focus your energy on bettering the lives of others. If you want to find your calling, simply respond to the voices of those in need. This is likely advice you have heard before, but chosen to apply selectively and conveniently. The "toes in the water" approach yields little, and what I am proposing requires a special kind of faith and abandon. In effect, I am asking you to give away what you want most – be it love, knowledge, compassion, or resources - and trust it to return to you enriched from the journey.

### **(PLAY - PASSION - PURPOSE)**

If we pair the Play to Passion to Purpose sequence, with elementary, middle school, high school, and college, it is easy to envision how the educational system could be one long relay race, filled with key handoffs. While I love this image, why stop there? In fact, why not perpetuate this cycle over and over again throughout our lives, learning, caring... and trying to change the world.

**Thank you!**