

## THE BIG IDEAS

### Your Life's Task

You have a destiny to fulfill.

### The Apprentices Phase

A time for transformation.

### Let There Be Flight!

Iterate your way to mastery.

### 20,000 Hours

Of tenacious effort.

### A Sense of Destiny

Stay connected to it.

### Character

+ Fluidity + supreme tenacity.

### Deep Desire Within

Follow it.

# Mastery

BY ROBERT GREENE · PENGUIN BOOKS © 2013 · 352 PAGES

"In many ways, the movement from one level of intelligence to another can be considered as a kind of ritual of transformation. As you progress, old ideas and perspectives die off; as new powers are unleashed, you are initiated into higher levels of seeing the world. Consider *Mastery* as an invaluable tool in guiding you through this transformation process. The book is designed to lead you from the lowest levels to the highest. It will help to initiate you into the first step—discovering you *Life's Task*, or vocation, and how to carve out a path that will lead you to its fulfillment on various levels. It will advise you how to exploit to the fullest your apprenticeship—the various strategies of observation and learning that will serve you best in this phase; how to find the perfect mentors; how to decipher the unwritten codes on political behavior; how to cultivate social intelligence; and finally, how to recognize when it is time to leave the apprenticeship nest and strike out for yourself, entering the active, creative.

It will show you how to continue the learning process on a higher level. It will reveal timeless strategies for creative problem solving, for keeping your mind fluid and adaptable. It will show you how to access more unconscious and primitive layers of intelligence, and how to endure the inevitable barbs of envy that will come your way. It will spell out the powers that will come to you through mastery, pointing you in the direction of that intuitive, inside feel for your field. Finally, it will initiate you into a philosophy, a way of thinking that will make it easier to follow this path."

~ Robert Greene from *Mastery*

Leonardo da Vinci. Charles Darwin. Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart. Martha Graham. The Wright Brothers. Jane Goodall. Benjamin Franklin. Thomas Edison. Zora Neale Hurston.

What do they all have in common?

*Mastery.*

In this great book Robert Greene shows us the key components of their mastery and, most importantly, how WE can each attain our mastery in our own lives.

The book is packed with Big Ideas and great biographical sketches. It's thoughtful, powerful and incredibly inspiring. (Get a copy [here](#).)

We're barely going to scratch the surface but I'm excited to share some of my favorite Big Ideas so let's jump straight in.

*"The moment that you rest, thinking that you have attained the level you desire, a part of your mind enters a phase of decay. You lose your hard-earned creativity and others begin to sense it. This is a power and intelligence that must be continually renewed or it will die."*

~ Robert Greene

## YOU HAVE A DESTINY TO FULFILL

*"The first move toward mastery is always inward—learning who you really are and reconnecting with that innate force. Knowing it with clarity, you will find your way to the proper career path and everything else will fall into place. It is never too late to start this process."*

~ Robert Greene

"Let us state it in the following way: At your birth a seed is planted. That seed is your uniqueness. It wants to grow, transform itself, and flower to its full potential. It has a natural, assertive energy. Your Life's Task is to bring that seed to flower, to express your uniqueness through your work. You have a destiny to fulfill. The stronger you feel and maintain it—as a force, a voice, or in whatever form—the greater your chance for fulfilling this Life's Task and achieving mastery.

What weakens this force, what makes you not feel it or even doubt its existence, is the degree to which you have succumbed to another force in life—social pressures to conform. This counterforce can be very powerful. You want to fit into a group. Unconsciously, you might feel that what makes you different is embarrassing or painful...

At all costs you must avoid such a fate. The process of following your Life's Task all the way to mastery can essentially begin at any point in life. The hidden force within you is always there and ready to be engaged."

Your *Life's Task*.

I love that phrase.

What's YOUR Life's Task?

(KNOW THIS: Whether you can feel it or not, this hidden force is always within you!)

This is Chapter #1. It all starts from within. We must take the time to understand who we are, what makes us unique and how we can give our gifts to the world.

Of course, for most of us, this is not easy. But (and I'm smiling as I type this), nothing is particularly easy as we commit our lives to mastery. :)

Robert walks us through five primary ways to dig into the essence of our unique calling sharing the stories of a different master and the various paths they took to discover their Life's Work.

For now, know that "The first step is always inward. You search the past for signs of that inner voice or force. You clear away the other voices that might confuse you—parents and peers. You look for an underlying pattern, a core to your character that you must understand as deeply as possible."

And this is good to keep in mind as well: "You must see your career or vocational path more as a journey with twists and turns rather than a straight line."

P.S. As I looked back on my own path it was fascinating to see the signposts pointing to my Life's Work. One of the most poignant recollections was from nearly 20 years ago when I was dropping out of law school. In the midst of a great deal of emotional pain and fear and confusion, I remember writing: "I would be an evangelist if I only had a religion in which I believed."

And, here we are. Hah! Took me awhile to discover and honor but my "religion" is optimal living—the integration of ancient wisdom + modern science + virtue + mastery + common sense.

P.P.S. Another key Idea to remember here: In Emerson's words: *"Trust thyself. Every heart vibrates to that iron string."*

## THE APPRENTICESHIP PHASE

"The principle is simple and must be engraved deeply in your mind: the goal of an apprenticeship is not money, a good position, a title, or a diploma, but rather the *transformation* of your mind and character—the first transformation on the way to mastery. You enter a career as an outsider. You are naïve and full of misconceptions about this new world. Your head is full of dreams and fantasies about the future. Your knowledge of the world is subjective, based on

*"Some people never become who they are; they stop trusting in themselves; they conform to the tastes of others, and they end up wearing a mask that hides their true nature. If you allow yourself to learn who you really are by paying attention to that voice and force within you, then you can become what you were fated to become—an individual, a Master."*

~ Robert Greene

emotions, insecurities, and limited experience. Slowly, you will ground yourself in reality, in the objective world represented by the knowledge and skills that make people successful in it. You will learn how to work with others and handle criticism. In the process you will transform yourself from someone who is impatient and scattered into someone who is disciplined and focused, with a mind that can handle complexity. In the end, you will master yourself and all of your weaknesses."

Step 1 is complete. We have identified our Life's Work.

Next up? It's time to Apprentice ourselves.

Robert walks us through the key strategies for completing the ideal apprenticeship as we navigate the three steps of The Apprentice Phase: *Deep Observation (The Passive Mode)*, *Skills Acquisition (The Practice Mode)*, and *Experimentation (The Active Mode)*.

The key Idea we want to remember here: The Apprentice Phase isn't about trying to impress people. It's about being humble and doing the work to learn and master ourselves.

It's about TRANSFORMATION.

As da Vinci says, "One can have no smaller or greater mastery than mastery of oneself."

That mastery is our core intention as we submit ourselves to our Apprenticeship.

Robert tells us: "You are a craftsman learning to adhere to the highest standards. For all of this, you must go through a careful apprenticeship. You cannot make anything worthwhile in this world unless you have first developed and transformed yourself."

I will repeat that last part: YOU CANNOT MAKE ANYTHING WORTHWHILE IN THIS WORLD UNLESS YOU HAVE FIRST DEVELOPED AND TRANSFORMED YOURSELF. Period.

This is one of the reasons why I focus so intently on the FUNDAMENTALS—which are, literally, the *foundation* of mastery.

On that note: [What's your #1 nonnegotiable habit?](#)

## LET THERE BE FLIGHT!

"On December 17, 1903, Wilbur piloted their flying machine at Kitty Hawk for an impressive fifty-nine seconds—the first manned, controlled, and powered flight in history. Over the years they would improve the design, and the flight times would increase. For the other competitors in the race it was a complete mystery how two men without any engineering or aeronautic experience or financial backing had managed to get there first."

Robert brilliantly shares the fascinating story of the Wright brothers and how their intense, passionate commitment to mastery gave them the tools they needed to win the race to be the first to fly.

They were bootstrapped entrepreneurs—forced to make the most of limited resources and see the whole picture rather than rely on specialists who mastered one abstract part of the process.

Their constant mechanical tinkering and ability to see the whole picture allowed them to outthrust and outperform the super-well financed groups they were competing against.

Here's the lesson we can apply to our lives: "Through intense labor on your part, you gain a feel for what you are creating. In doing this work, you see and feel the flaws in design... What you are trying to create will not magically take off after a few creative bursts of inspiration, but must be slowly evolved through a step-by-step process as you correct the flaws. In the end, you win through superior craftsmanship, not marketing. The craftsmanship involves creating something with an elegant, simple structure, getting the most out of your materials—a high form of creativity."

We need to let go of the notion that our great work is going to be achieved in some flash of creative brilliance.

We need to adopt the mindset of the tinkering master craftsman.

We need to be willing to, as Seth Godin says, “Ship!!”—taking our minimum viable product to market and seeing how it performs then churning and churning in response to feedback as we optimize one step after another.

That takes courage.

It’s a lot easier to talk about everything we’re going to do than it is to do it and show it to the world. Let’s keep the Wright brothers in mind as we take our ideas to market and optimize.

Let there be flight!

## 20,000 HOURS OF TENACIOUS EFFORT

*“The road to mastery requires patience. You will have to keep your focus on five or ten years down the road, when you will reap the rewards of your efforts... In the end, the money and success that truly last come not to those who focus on such things as goals, but rather to those who focus on mastery and fulfilling their Life’s Task.”*

~ Robert Greene

“In our culture, we tend to denigrate practice. We want to imagine that great feats occur naturally—that they are the sign of someone’s genius or superior talent. Getting to a high level of achievement through practice seems so banal, so uninspiring. Besides, we don’t want to have to think of the 10,000 to 20,000 hours that go into such mastery. These values of ours are oddly counterproductive—they cloak from us the fact that almost everyone can reach such heights through tenacious effort, something that should encourage us all. It is time to reverse this prejudice against conscious effort and to see the powers we gain through practice and discipline as eminently inspiring and even miraculous.”

(First: Wow.)

Question: How do *you* respond when you hear about the 10,000 to 20,000 (!!!) hours that go into mastery? Does it inspire you or depress you?

If you’ve been seduced by our society’s obsession with the quick and easy, it’s likely the 10,000 to 20,000 (<— !!!) hours masters put in depresses you.

Robert tells us that it should, UNEQUIVOCALLY, inspire us.

Why?

Because it means that, with TENACIOUS EFFORT, each of us can attain extraordinary levels of mastery. We can fulfill our Life’s Work.

Of course, that requires us to turn off the TV, unplug the Wi-Fi and get to work, which requires us to master ourselves and our impulsiveness as we commit to something bigger than ourselves and give ourselves wholeheartedly to it but what’s the alternative?!

If that sounds like torture, remember: As Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi tells us in *Flow* ([see Notes](#)) we completely misjudge what will make us happy. We think vegging out in front of the TV and engaging in other leisure activities will do the trick. But it doesn’t. Work does.

Per Csikszentmihalyi: “Thus we have a paradoxical situation: On the job people feel skillful and challenged, and therefore feel more happy, strong, creative, and satisfied. In their free time people feel that there is generally not much to do and their skills are not being used, and therefore they tend to feel more sad, weak, dull, and dissatisfied. Yet they would like to work less and spend more time in leisure.”

(And, of course, I’m not suggesting that you ignore your family. Make that part of your commitment to mastery as well!)

20,000 hours. What a fun target.

Let’s do this!! :)

*"You must understand the following: In order to master a field, you must love the subject and feel a profound connection to it. Your interest must transcend the field itself and border on the religious."*

~ Robert Greene

## A SENSE OF DESTINY

"Like Proust, you must also maintain a sense of destiny, and feel continuously connected to it. You are unique, and there is a purpose to your uniqueness. You must see every setback, failure, or hardship as a trial along the way, as seeds that are being planted for further cultivation, if you know how to grow them. No moment is wasted if you pay attention and learn the lessons contained in every experience. By constantly applying yourself to the subject that suits your inclinations and attacking it from many different angles, you are simply enriching the ground for these seeds to take root. You may not see this process in the present, but it is happening. Never losing your connection to your Life's Task, you will unconsciously hit upon the right choices in your life. Over time, mastery will come to you."

A sense of destiny.

A continuous connection to our Life's Task.

This is what allows us to see every setback, every failure and challenge as seeds that are being planted for future harvest.

I love that.

Are there any challenges you need to re-frame as seeds?

Here's to our destiny.

## CHARACTER + FLUIDITY + SUPREME TENACITY

"They coached their apprentices in all of the principles they had learned along the way—the benefit in looking for new applications of existing technology and needs that are not being met; the importance of maintaining the closest possible relationship with customers; the need to keep ideas as simple and realistic as possible; the value of creating a superior product and of winning through craftsmanship, as opposed to fixating on making money.

As their apprentices learned, they learned as well. Oddly enough, they discovered that what really makes successful entrepreneurs is not the nature of the idea, or the university they went to, but their actual character—their willingness to adapt their idea and take advantage of possibilities they had not first imagined. This is precisely the trait—the fluidity of mind—that Graham had identified in himself and in other inventors. The other essential character trait was supreme tenacity."

Robert tells us the Mastery story of Paul Graham who created Y Combinator—one of the most extraordinary apprentice programs for entrepreneurs.

What makes a venture succeed?

It's not the quality of the idea or background of the entrepreneur as much as it is his or her CHARACTER. Are they the type of person who can move through obstacles, respond fluidly to challenges? Do they have SUPREME TENACITY?

THAT's the type of person who will succeed. In any and EVERY field.

One of my mentors once told me that my consciousness was our company's greatest asset. Our CHARACTER is our greatest asset. Therefore, if we want to increase the value of our business, cultivating our character should be one of our top priorities Every.Single.Day.

Exercise. Nutrition. Rest. Mental toughness. Etc. You investing properly?

P.S. "Tenacity" is one of the words Robert comes back to again and again. The #1 word he uses to describe Masters? INTENSITY. I didn't count the number of times that word showed up but it was a LOT. Let's embrace our intensity. It's a hallmark of awesome.

*"No good can ever come from deviating from the path that you were destined to follow."*

~ Robert Greene

## FOLLOWING THE DEEP DESIRES THAT STIR FROM WITHIN

"Mastery is not a question of genetics or luck, but of following your natural inclinations and the deep desire that stirs you from within. Everyone has such inclinations. This desire within you is not motivated by egotism or sheer ambition for power, both of which are emotions that get in the way of mastery. It is instead a deep expression of something natural, something that marked you at birth as unique. In following your inclinations and moving toward mastery, you make a great contribution to society, enriching it with discoveries and insights, and making the most of the diversity in nature and among human society. It is in fact the height of selfishness to merely consume what others create and to retreat into a shell of limited goals and immediate pleasures. Alienating yourself from your inclinations can only lead to pain and disappointment in the long run, and a sense that you have wasted something unique. This pain will be expressed in bitterness and envy, and you will not recognize the true source of your depression."

(Another wow.)

Striving for mastery is NOT a selfish act. In fact, merely consuming other people's creations and limiting your goals and connection to something bigger than yourself is the height of selfishness.

We're here to optimize and actualize. To give our greatest gifts to the world.

[Abraham's Maslow's](#) Life's Work was understanding this fact. He told us that we have a fundamental NEED to self-actualize. An impulse to become all that we are capable of becoming.

He also told us: *"If you deliberately plan on being less than you are capable of being, then I warn you that you'll be unhappy for the rest of your life."*

Let's commit to mastery. Let's master ourselves. Let's master our crafts. Let's give ourselves most fully to the world. Let's optimize and actualize!

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*Heroic Philosopher CEO*

## About the Author of This Note

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Brian Johnson is the Founder + CEO of Heroic. He's spent half of the last 25 years as a Founder/CEO and the other half as a Philosopher. Brian loves integrating ancient wisdom and modern science to help YOU become the best, most heroic version of yourself so we can create a world in which 51% of humanity is flourishing by 2051. Learn more at [heroic.us](https://heroic.us).

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