



Mastery

Part 2 – Identifying your Gifts

The second of a 4-part series on achieving mastery at work

By Jean Van Rensselar

The drive toward mastery is as basic as the need for food, safety, and love. But most people never quite master their gifts - often because they don't know what their gifts are. The good news is that it's easy to figure out if you have the courage to experiment.

There are 4 aspects to achieving mastery at work:

1. *Basic Psychological Health and Physical Fitness*
2. *Identifying Gifts*
3. *Instruction and Feedback*
4. *A Place to Practice & Practice.*

For those who weren't child prodigies with alert parents, identifying gifts doesn't just happen. Not knowing what your gifts are – and knowing that you don't know – is one thing. Spending your life pursuing mastery of something you mistakenly believe is your calling is another thing. Many people don't figure this out until they retire, take up a *hobby*, and tap into the explosive energy of a latent talent.

At the other end of the age spectrum are those who can take advantage of the virtues of quitting.

Learn by Quitting

No one wants to be labeled a quitter – especially a serial quitter. However quitters are not losers. In fact, quitting can be one of the best favors you do for yourself. The idea is to quit jobs as often as you want; but quit as early in the experience as possible and *keep trying* until you find something that you really enjoy.

Frustrated friends and relatives who observe you quitting will say things like:

1. No one really likes their job
2. You'll never find the perfect job
3. You're lucky to have a job
4. You're ruining your resume

Yes, you need to be mindful of your resume. But you can't let it dictate your life. Hence the advice to quit as often as you must and as early as you can.

When I was just out of college, I took a job as an accounting assistant. Most of the work was straightforward, like proofing spreadsheets. However, I sat there night after night eating Dairy Queen at my desk, reworking spreadsheets and scratching my head like a chimpanzee. I figured; *Hey, they're just numbers I should be able to do this.*

The only reason I lasted three months was that my superiors could see how hard I was working (these people were saints). But finally my boss called me into her office and said exactly this, "It's obvious that numbers aren't your forte." As I packed up my things, I was surprisingly relieved.

A string of hellish jobs followed – working for a verbally abusive Swedish family at Spudnuts donut shop; waitressing in a dark steakhouse frequented by power brokers and their secret lovers; frantically putting wallets in boxes in a Soviet-esque factory, etc. Every time I got a new job, friends and family would roll their eyes and say unhelpful things like, "What was wrong with the donut shop?"

And then I got my first job as a newspaper reporter. The second I walked in the newsroom it was as if the clouds parted. I knew that was where I was meant to be. At the end of my first year, I won 17 of the 23 journalism awards there.

The point here is to keep trying things until you find what fits. Reading self-help books about discovering your true calling (and there are 1,000s) doesn't work – only illustrating the adage: *The more solutions there are to a problem the less likely it is that any one of them is a good solution.*

Take *calculated* risks (the key word here being *calculated*). Don't do anything reckless and don't follow any advice that begins with "Life is too short..." Serial quitting works best for people early in their careers and it only works in an environment where jobs are plentiful.

So what about everyone else?

Learn by Staying

So what if you're 35 with two kids and a hefty mortgage? Quitting and getting a job at Spudnuts isn't really an option. Instead find something where you already are that's better suited to your gifts. Since, practically speaking, you'll only be able to make one radical job shift, you'll need a strategy. Do the following:

- Write down what you like about your current job
- Write down what activities you enjoy in your off hours – other than eating¹
- Write down the aspects you like about the off-hours activities
- Compare the list of what you like about your current job with the aspects you like about off-hours activities
- Combine those into a single list and create a job description

If you're like most people, you'll be very surprised to see the description matches another job you are aware of – but never considered - where you already work. For example, you may discover that aspects of playing pick-up soccer (physical activity, strategy, teamwork) and aspects of your sales job (face-to-face contact, working on a team) add up to “inter-branch sales strategist”.

If you're feeling really bold, you can take your job description to HR to see what ideas they have. The next (hardest) step is to ask for that job. Many of us have a tough time asking for what we want, but you'll find that if you do and it's reasonable, people will be more than happy to give it to you most of the time. This was a huge and life-altering revelation to me.

Be Aware of the Doors that Open *and* the Doors that Close

We've all heard the saying a million times that when you choose the right path, doors open. Sometimes that's true, but sometimes doors on the wrong path close first.

A friend of mine mused about becoming a motivational speaker. The thought kept bubbling up, but every time it did, she could think of a number of reasons why it wouldn't work. This went on for 12 years. Finally she decided that if this was the right thing for her to do, every door would open. But even after she made a full commitment, the right doors didn't open, rather the wrong doors closed. This left her in the hallway for several months wondering if she'd made the right choice. But she could see that *something* was happening, so she hung in there. Then doors did start opening one-by-one and then two-by-two. In less than a year her career was flourishing.

Some people panic in the hallway. They feel the doors closing and interpret the darkness as the wrong decision, but if you've made the wrong decision, you'll find that doors neither open nor close. So be patient and wait for things to play out.

Opportunity Has the Persistence of a Toddler at a Grocery Store

It's not true that opportunity only knocks once. If you don't heed the call the first time, you'll hear it again and again. If you wait long enough, any talent you're born with will eventually surface as a need. The question is how long will it take to surface as a need and even then, when will you recognize and act on it?

Many of us think that whatever has been put in our path is our calling in life. We figure that it's the best we can do. We live in that mindset of perpetually trying to make the best of a bad situation – like trying to stuff a size 9 foot into a size 8 shoe. It's tolerable, but it's not very comfortable. We spend a good deal of our lives tolerating the status quo because inertia is a very strong motivator.

But inertia is not laziness, or complacency. It's just the perfect disguise for fear. Eleanor Roosevelt said that we should do something that scares us every day. Take that first step - do one scary thing today that will move you toward achieving mastery.

¹ Research shows that from job to job – U.S. Senator to landscaper – the highlights of most people's days are meals.

To summarize:

- Try everything and don't be afraid to quit
- Consider changing your job without leaving your workplace
- Expect doors to close before they open
- Don't lament a lost opportunity – it will come again

About the Author

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