

What's talent got to do with it?

Tony Griff

I am who I am. I speak 3.5 languages (no, the half is not English). Being 6'7", I used to be a decent dancer. I play the guitar a bit, and according to my wife, I'm still rather dashing when done up properly. Some have even called me funny, which I take as a compliment. Lately, I've started painting Bob Ross style, and I'm not half bad at it. You don't need any talent for that. Just watch 400 episodes of *The Joy of Painting*, rinse and repeat. In general, I've always been pretty good at whatever I tried, so why do I feel like a complete mediocrity? Let me tell you.

I used to play a lot of racquetball, and I was good at it, for an amateur. One day I was invited to play against Andy Hawthorne, who at the time was ranked number eight in the world (well, in the U.S. really, because racquetball is mostly an American thing). Our game was a revelation. Andy was not just twice as good as I was, he was ten times better. His speed and precision just blew me away. I didn't know it was possible to move that fast, pivot, and hit a rollout.

As another example, I can write a neat short story that others appreciate, but it takes me three days of editing and rewriting. In contrast, Christopher Hitchens wrote profound essays in one draft, without correcting a single word, and typ-

ically after consuming near-lethal amounts of spirits. He was a literary mastermind and a real intellectual. Read some of his books, or watch some of his debates.



The author's attempt at painting the Matterhorn.

In science, we've had the great Isaac Newton, "notre maître à tous" Leonhard Euler, "The French Newton" Pierre-Simon Laplace, Joseph Fourier, Marie Curie, Albert Einstein, John Von Neumann, Claude Shannon, Alan Turing, Richard Feynman, and Stephen Hawking. In music, we've had great composers: Bach, Vivaldi, Beethoven, Mozart, Chopin, Brahms. All these people were geniuses, head and shoulders above the rest of us. We might understand their work, but we could never match it.

It's especially easy to feel inferior while working at a university. Here at the University of Illinois, we've had John Bardeen, Nick Holonyak, Paul Lauterbur, and Tony Leggett, all Nobel Prize winners, except for Holonyak, whose lack of a Nobel is a travesty. The man invented the LED! Talk about genius!

My friend Martin Bohn likes to say: "Ton, it's OK to be mediocre in the top 5%." I'm not convinced. High-level mediocrity is still mediocrity, and genius is more than just relative success. Few would disagree that Robin Williams was a comic genius. Tragically, he suc-

cumbed to mental illness (as did Ernest Hemingway), a trait seemingly common among geniuses. Does genius require obsession, or even suffering?

A few years ago, I saw Andrea Bocelli in concert, one of the most wonderful evenings of my life. My wife cried because the music was so beautiful, and I cried because the tickets were \$350 apiece. That was a joke. When people say that if there were a God, he would sound like Bocelli, I know what they mean. Bocelli's voice touches people. It gives people a feeling of connectedness with transcendent beauty. It's almost a religious experience.

I've also seen Mark Knopfler play "Sultans of Swing", David Gilmour play "Comfortably Numb", and Jimi Hendrix

The common factor connecting Hawthorne, Hitchens, Bocelli, Knopfler, Gilmour, Hendrix, and now Tina S, is that they all make it look easy. That's just not fair! I had to work hard to achieve my level of mediocrity, while they merely apply their innate talent and achieve brilliance. I know that reaching their level of proficiency takes years of practice. But Tina S is only 22. How did she learn so much so fast?

Because I envy geniuses, I come up with excuses for my own shortcomings: "Yeah, they may excel at a single thing, but I am good at many things." The truth is that I couldn't do what they do in a hundred years, but they could take over my job tomorrow just by learning a few tricks. I could practice racquetball full-time, but I will never be as good as Andy Hawthorne. Nor will I ever be as erudite as Christopher Hitchens. I will never combine π , e , and i into a sublimely beautiful equation, as Euler did, and my guitar skills will never let me sit in with ax masters like Mark Knopfler, David Gilmour, and Tina S.

So what is the point in life for the rest of us, mere mortals, in trying to convince others that we matter? Should we just give up, knowing that we will never accomplish anything phenomenal, anything brilliant, or anything worth remembering? That reality is hard to accept, but we have little choice. Tomorrow morning, I'll get up, feed the kitties, clean their litterboxes, take out the trash, and then make my way to the office to do my usual academic stuff. Maybe I'll get a

surprising compliment from a colleague, or a student will ask a tough question that I can readily answer, or my wife will call, just to tell me she loves me, even though I'm not a genius.

ASABE Fellow Tony Grift, Professor, University of Illinois, Urbana, grift@illinois.edu.

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play "All Along the Watchtower". They are three of the best guitarists who ever lived. However, they've lately been overtaken by a French kid named Tina S. If you don't know who she is, go to YouTube and search "Tina S Moonlight Sonata". The word wunderkind doesn't cut it. Watching her play, my jaw dropped to the floor. I struggle to define genius, but I know it when I see it.

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