

# How to Discover and Cultivate Your Talents



Christopher News Notes

*“Do not bury your talents, the gifts that God has given you. Do not be afraid to dream of great things.”*

*—Pope Francis*

**EVERY PERSON HAS HIDDEN TALENTS WAITING TO BE DISCOVERED.** We have unique gifts that God has bestowed upon us with the expectation that we will cultivate and share them with the world in a spirit of generosity.

How do we reach within ourselves to find our God-given talents? How do we risk what little we have for the sake of growing into thriving individuals capable of giving all we are able?

The answers to these questions reside in our hearts, and the search for those answers will send us on a journey that is the surest way to lasting happiness.

## Cultivating Talent

*“The thing that makes you say, ‘I want to do something’—that is the beginning of talent.”*

— Stella Adler

In his book *The Talent Code*, Daniel Coyle explains how deep practice, ignition and master coaching work together to cultivate talent. Deep practice occurs when we balance doing what we’re capable of with what we find challenging. It involves setting the bar just high enough so that we’re constantly making little mistakes and then adjusting to correct those mistakes.

Coyle explains that scientists have actually discovered a substance in the brain called myelin that responds to deep practice, wrapping around neurons, insulating them, and causing them to fire more efficiently. The kind of deep practice that produces this effect is made possible by what Coyle calls ignition, a spark that awakens and motivates us to move through challenges in pursuit of a goal. There are examples of this throughout the world and throughout history.

For example, Coyle offers Michelangelo, who lived with a stonemason’s family as a child, where he gained exposure to the basic tools used in sculpting. After an unsuccessful attempt at schooling, he was apprenticed to the artist Ghirlandaio, under whom he mixed paints, made sketches, and prepared frescoes. Then he was apprenticed to the sculptor Bertoldo, and in his teens he lived at the home of Lorenzo de’ Medici, where he had the opportunity to study under other luminaries.

Coyle writes, “He was a promising but little-known artist until he produced the Pietá at age twenty-four. People called the Pietá pure genius, but its creator begged to differ. ‘If people knew how hard I had to work to gain my mastery,’ Michelangelo later said, ‘it would not seem so wonderful at all.’”

## Keys to Unlocking Talent

**Pursue Passions**—Engaging in activities we are passionate about leads to the awakening of our talents. Passion is what drives us to work through difficult tasks to accomplish a goal. When we perform at this level, we develop patterns of behavior that lead to success.

**Find Teachers**—Seek out teachers capable of conveying the specific knowledge necessary to progress to the next level. The best teachers strike a balance between encouraging and challenging their students, and have a keen awareness of the uniqueness of each individual.

**Cooperate and Compete**—Working alongside others who share our interests can stimulate growth through an exchange of ideas and a sense of belonging. Collegiality provides an atmosphere of healthy competition that allows us to measure our accomplishments against others, push ourselves to keep up, and discover our own niche to thrive.

**Deep Practice**—St. Ignatius called this attitude “magi” and today we might call it being in a zone. It’s when our practice of a task is so focused that it drives us beyond our current abilities to tackle ever increasing challenges.

**Discern God’s Will**—God works through the circumstances of our lives to help us fulfill the deepest desires of the heart. St. Ignatius teaches that a rational assessment of our situation combined with imagination and attunement to the inner workings of the spirit will lead to a better understanding of the higher purpose of our talents.

These are humble words from a man who was an artistic genius, but they point to a profound reality about talent. It is not a magical quality that we either have or don’t. It is something that evolves out of life experiences and the passions we pursue.

## The Purpose of Talent

*“Talent is always conscious of its own abundance, and does not object to sharing.”*

—Alexander Solzhenitsyn

Sir Kenneth Robinson is an expert on education and in his book *Finding Your Element*, he tells the story of Emily Cummins, a British inventor and entrepreneur whose creativity was ignited by her grandfather. She says, “I used to spend just hours with my granddad in the shed in the bottom of his garden. I was absolutely fascinated by his inventiveness and how he could take leftover materials and scraps and create toys for me and my cousins.”

Cummins’ grandfather put a hammer in her hand at the age of four, and, as she grew older, he

began to teach her his craft. She says, “He allowed me to do things that not all kids could do. He let me experiment with taking things apart and putting them back together. He’d give me little challenges and I was very creative at different ways of making things.”

Cummins went from making toys for herself and her cousin to realizing a higher purpose for her talent. She began to see her gift as intrinsically linked to service and the common good. In high school, she entered technology competitions. She noticed how much trouble her other grandfather had getting toothpaste out of a tube due to his arthritis. So, for her first competition, she built an automatic toothpaste dispenser.

The judges were critical and she was terrified to give the presentation, but, she says, “I found a voice that I didn’t know I had. I really believed in my product and was passionate about it, and this self-belief came out. I ended up winning because they said they saw that the real passion I had for my product was different from what a lot of the

other school-children were doing.”

For her last high school competition, Cummins built an evaporation-based refrigerator that doesn't use any energy. It was so successful that, instead of going straight to university, she got a deferment and went to Africa instead. She says, “I started to teach people how to use my fridges. I was using local resources and local materials and I started to create some businesses with these women and they passed along the idea. Now my fridge is used across Namibia, South Africa, Zimbabwe and Botswana.”

## God's Hopes and Dreams for Us

*“Life is entrusted to man as a treasure which must not be squandered, as a talent which must be used well.”*

—Pope John Paul II

Saint Ignatius of Loyola, founder of the Society of Jesus, had a saying: “Always go in their door and come out your own.” He offered this counsel to anyone trying to share their faith with others. What he meant was that we should meet people where they are, if we ever hope to lead them to a better place. Ignatius was a master coach, a mentor with a talent for helping people explore their calling in life. But the discovery and exploration of this talent was not always the dream he had for himself, explains Father Gerald M. Fagin, SJ, in his book *Discovering Your Dream: How Ignatian Spirituality Can Guide Your Life*.

Born in 1491 into a noble Basque family that prided itself on its courage and honor, Ignatius

dreamed of becoming a great knight, and he pursued that path with zeal until being injured in battle. While recuperating, he had access to only two books, one on the life of Christ and the other a collection of stories about the saints.

Always a dreamer, Ignatius began to dream about spending time with Christ, accomplishing great things with Him, and outdoing all the saints in his exercise of heroic virtue. He realized his previous worldly dreams were empty in comparison to his new dream of life with Christ, which filled him with a sense of peace and joy.

Ignatius laid down his sword at the altar of Our Lady of Montserrat, vowing to Mary, “I will now become your knight.” Then he exchanged clothes with a beggar and continued on a pilgrimage to Jerusalem, stopping in the little town of Manresa with the intention of staying only a few days. But he wound up in Manresa for a year, exploring the spiritual life, struggling to overcome his immaturities, and eventually entering into a dark night of the soul. Of this time, he later said, “God dealt with me the way a schoolmaster deals with a child.”

Ignatius emerged with a more mature faith and began to have mystical experiences, one of which helped him realize, as Fagin writes, “life and the world around him as a gift coming from a loving God,” and also as a gift “on its way back to God.”

Talking about Ignatius' journey to discover God's hopes and dreams for him, Fagin writes, “God went in Ignatius' door and led him out another. God went in the door of Ignatius' dream of becoming a great knight and led Ignatius to a whole new dream, a whole new vision.”

  
**“It's better to light one candle than to curse the darkness.”**

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*“When I stand before God at the end of my life, I would hope that I would not have a single bit of talent left, and could say, ‘I used everything you gave me.’”*

*Erma Bombeck*