Finding Your Element
How to Discover Your Talents and Passions and Transform Your Life

By Ken Robinson and Lou Aronica
Have you found your Element? It’s where “natural aptitude meets personal passion,” says Ken Robinson, professor emeritus at the University of Warwick (UK) and recognized global leader in helping people, companies and governments cultivate creativity.

Robinson’s own Element is: “communicating and working with people.” It gives him energy, and when he’s in his Element, time just flies by.

In 2006 Robinson gave a TED talk on how school systems are built to churn out good workers instead of nurturing creative minds. Even today, it’s still one of the most-watched TED presentations.

In this book, Robinson explores why it’s important to find your Element, that activity or environment that gives you both purpose and pleasure. He also outlines the practical steps you can take to find your own Element to give your life greater meaning.
He also tackles the stumbling blocks that can prevent you from seeking and finding your Element, such as thinking you’re too old, or too young, or believing that you don’t have any special talent or ability. The author suggests that life’s turning points - finding yourself in a job you hate, finding yourself unemployed, or just feeling that you need to find a new path - are a good time to look for your Element.

The steps and exercises are spelled out over 10 chapters. In Chapter One, the author explains the basic principles, and why it’s so vital to discover your own Element. Chapter Two helps you discover your unique aptitudes. Chapter Three helps you delve deeper into why you might not realize the scope of your own abilities, and why. In Chapter Four, you unveil your own passions, and explore how these passions fuel you spiritually, and help you identify your Element.
Chapter Five looks at happiness, and how finding your Element leads to more happiness in your life. Chapter Six looks at how your mindset might be holding you back. In Chapter Seven, you look at a snapshot of your situation today, and uncover areas ready for change. Chapter Eight shows you how to find other people who share your Element, and the importance of this type of connection. In Chapter Nine, you craft an action plan and prepare to proceed. And Chapter Ten summarizes and solidifies the central ideas of the book.

Are you ready to set off on the journey? Let’s first look at ways you can clear your mind, and lay the groundwork for this process.

1. Finding Your Element

Three processes are key in identifying your Element. They are “Turn Down the Noise,” “Change Your Perspective,” and “Give It a Try.”
Let’s look at each of these in turn.

Turn Down The Noise

We’re inundated with information today, at home and at work. Google CEO Eric Schmidt estimates that in every 48-hour period we generate as much data as we did from the very beginning of time up to 2003. That’s a lot of distraction. To break free of this “noise,” and focus inwardly, try meditation, says the author. He describes it as “simply taking the time to breathe, relax and be quiet with [yourself].” Meditating for a few moments each day lets you strengthen your sense of self, and become more aware of who you really are, deep down inside.

Change Your Perspective

You might have long-held ideas about your
abilities, or how you fit into the world. Others might have assumptions about you as well. You’ll need to challenge these pre-conceived ideas. Robinson suggests three activities that will help you “disrupt your normal patterns of thought [and] see yourself in new ways.”

I. Mind Mapping

The Mind Map is a graphic way to present ideas and information. Start with a central idea. Put it in the center of your page, in a circle. Related ideas “branch” out from the center, and other ideas can branch out from them. The mind map looks a bit like a flower, with words and ideas standing in for the petals. This is a good way to “see” interesting connections and patterns that you might otherwise overlook.

II. Vision Boards

Vision boards are a visual representation of your hopes, dreams and goals for your life. Assemble a
collection of images from magazines that illustrate your goals. Affix them to a poster board, and use it for inspiration and guidance. As with the mind map, you may uncover a new interest or desire that you weren’t fully aware of.

III. Automatic Writing

In this exercise, you write for at least five minutes in a free-flowing, no-editing burst of personal expression. When you let your mind go, unfettered, you may be surprised by what bubbles up from your subconscious. Afterward, circle meaningful words or phrases, and use them as starting points for your next session of automatic writing.

Try to incorporate these three processes - mind mapping, vision boards, and automatic writing - into your life. Rather than one-time exercises, they are most helpful when they’re used as part of an ongoing process of reflection.
Give It A Try

“You need to try new activities, visit new places and meet new people,” says Robinson. This will widen your perspective, give you new ideas and challenge your assumptions.

The process of finding your Element is based on three principles.

I. Your Life is Unique: Each person’s life is unique in two ways: biology and culture. Our DNA and the community we’re born into are powerful determinants that we cannot change.

II. You Create Your Own Life: Biology and culture give us our starting point, but from there we determine our own paths through life.

III. Life is Organic: Our lives are shaped by the give-and-take between our actual
circumstances, and our choices. So while our starting point is outside of our control, what we choose to do with what we have is up to us.

Shake Up Your Ideas About Education

Taking a particular major in college doesn’t have to determine your career path for the rest of your working life. In fact, studies show that what you choose to study in college often doesn’t match the type of work you do. Vivek Wadhwa, professor at the Pratt School of Engineering at Duke University, surveyed 650 U.S. born CEOs and heads of product engineering at over 500 technology corporations. Of the 90% that had college degrees, only four out of 10 of those degrees were in math or engineering.

“What makes people successful are their motivation, drive and ability to learn from mistakes
2. What Are You Good At?

You were born with a particular set of aptitudes. You might have known as a child that you were good at something, say understanding math, or working with engines.

Aptitudes represent potential. In order to realize that potential, you have to apply and refine them. Education and effort are needed to turn an aptitude into an ability. It takes a lot of work to turn that aptitude for math into an engineering career.

You may have been born with a wide range of aptitudes. Perhaps you have an ear for music or an eye for color. But unless you’ve built on that aptitude with training and time, you won’t be in your Element.

You might also have aptitudes that you’re not yet
Tests To Help You Find Your Aptitudes

There are many types of aptitude tests. Four well-known tests are:

- The General Aptitude Test Battery (GATB) developed by the U.S. Department of Labor
- Clifton StrengthsFinder - developed by the Gallup Organization
- CareerScope - created by the Vocational Research Institute
- The O*NET Ability Profiler - developed by the Occupational Information Network

While these tests can shed a helpful light on
aptitudes, it’s important to keep their limitations in mind - their one-size-fits-all approach means they can’t be too accurate.

You can have more than one Element, too. Elements can change over time, reflecting changes in your interests, or maturity. Or an early experience can block the development of an aptitude, steering you away from something you’d actually be good at.

Take a moment to think about all of your aptitudes, those you’ve developed, and those that, for whatever reason, are dormant. Do you have any untapped aptitudes that might be worth refining?

Now, make three lists:

1. things you’re good at
2. things you’re average at
3. things you do not do well

Keep these lists handy for the following chapters.
3. How Do You Know?

Look at the last two list categories - things you’re average at, and things you don’t do well. Can you think of why this might be? Do you have any experience with the things on these lists, either good or bad? Or do you have zero interest in them? Consider also, if, given the chance, would you like to get better at any of them?

People often have many more aptitudes than they realize. You may even have aptitudes for things you’ve never been exposed to. This is another reason why it’s important to keep trying new things.

If you limit yourself to things that you already have some experience with, you’re limiting your options. And don’t let your culture limit you, either. Perhaps you’ve been taught to believe that some things are done only by women, others by men, or that some avenues are only open to young people. Even
your education may have limited your perspective - many schools focus more on educating pupils to perform a job, rather than inculcating creativity and broadening the imagination.

Your learning style has a lot to do with what you believe your aptitudes to be. You may “think you have no aptitude for something because you weren’t taught it in a way that connected with how you actually think and learn,” says Robinson.

Give some thought to your own “inner story,” about what you’re good at, and what you are not. Then, challenge this inner story. Perhaps it’s accurate, but perhaps it’s more due to the way you were taught, or raised, than the truth. What made you think you were not good at a particular activity? Would you enjoy exploring that activity now?

Robinson suggests making a collage of aptitudes, choosing aptitudes that you don’t have, but that you admire in others. Then, circle the aptitudes
that are of interest to you. Choose a few, and then plan out the steps you can take to explore them. In this way, you’ll broaden your experience with a higher number of aptitudes.

4. What Do You Love?

At this point, you may be developing a clearer idea of what your own aptitudes are. But being in your Element is about more than finding what you are good at. It’s about finding what you love - it’s about finding your passion.

This concept is challenging for many people. “Passion” is a strong word, and not everyone feels filled with a passion for anything. Robinson defines it as “a strong affinity or enthusiasm that can lead to profound enjoyment and fulfillment.”

He also says, “Passion is about what feeds your spiritual energy rather than consumes it.” When
you spend the day involved with something you love, you’re energized, although you might be physically tired. On the other hand, if you spend a day focused on something you don’t enjoy, you may end up mentally exhausted.

So identifying your passion, and being in your Element, is a way to link to, and draw power from, your spiritual energy.

Not everyone is able to find employment that supports their passion. In that case, it’s important to devote at least part of your day to your passions. “While not everyone can become financially rich through their Element, everyone is entitled to be enriched by it,” says the author.

Go back to your list of things that you are good at. Break these items into three groups: things you enjoy very much, things that you don’t mind, and things that you really dislike.

Then, put the items that you enjoy very much into
a numbered order, with those that you love the most at the top. Think about these items from all angles - are there different ways that you could experience them, or in different contexts? And try to tease out what it is, exactly, that you love about them. By identifying what you love, with precision, you can start to see what your passion might look like.

5. What Makes You Happy?

A strange fact is that, as our society has become more affluent, we seem to have become more unhappy. Rates of alcohol and drug abuse are increasing, we’re more depressed, and there’s a greater number of suicides.

There might be many reasons for this change, including the worldwide financial uncertainty in the wake of the 2008 recession, changes to our society with respect to community and family, and
the media-reinforced expectation that having more material goods will make us content.

Are you happy? Think about all the different areas of your life. Are there areas and activities that make you happier than others? Compare your current feelings of happiness to the way you felt 5, 10, and 20 years ago. What activities, and times, made you the happiest?

Studies show that money, beyond paying for your basic needs, does not make people happy. Instead, having a purpose is the key, as is being in your Element. “Having a purpose in life is the wellspring of sustained happiness,” says Robinson. As you look for your Element, pay attention to your feelings of happiness. What makes you happy, and what doesn’t? It’s also important to feel that what you are doing contributes to a larger goal.

Martin Seligman, author of *Flourish*, says that
there are five measurable elements of well-being: positive emotions, engagement, meaning, relationships and achievement. The Gallup Organization identifies five areas that are essential: career, social, financial, physical, and community. We get the most out of our lives when we are doing well in all five.

Studies show that we are all born with a “happiness set point,” which governs up to 50% of our sense of happiness at any given time, and which we can’t really change. A very small percentage - about 10% - is determined by our material circumstances. But 40% is attributable to our behavior, or activities. This 40% we can shape - by choosing the behaviors and environments that make us happy. “... being in your Element dramatically increases the odds of your being happy more often,” says Robinson. “[And] feeling a strong sense of happiness while doing something is a good sign that what you’re doing might be
6. What’s Your Attitude?

Your own attitudes might be preventing you from finding your Element. To get past your mental obstacles, you may need to change your mindset. Do you have a fixed mindset, and believe that your aptitudes and disposition are carved in stone? Or do you have a growth mindset, believing that you can change and grow?

Sometimes it’s the attitudes of others that can hold us back. Think about your Element, and how much you’d like to be in it. Consider how hard you’re willing to work to achieve it. Do you need to change your attitude, or the attitudes of those around you? If so, what do you need to do to bring about this change?
7. Where Are You Now?

Even though you might feel that your life is set, and your options for change very limited (due to your family responsibilities, career, or financial constraints, for example), you can “move toward the life you feel you should be living.” The first step is to assess where you are at this moment.

Try a SWOT analysis (Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, Threats) to analyze your current situation. Your strengths and weaknesses are your own characteristics; opportunities and threats are the external factors holding you in place. Things to think about in this analysis are your age, your financial and personal obligations, and how open you are to taking a risk.

Then consider how badly you want to be in your Element. A lot, or just a little? And what would happen if you took the leap, and did what you really wanted to do?
It’s important to think through all of the implications of making a big change. Are you ready to spend eight hours a day on something that you’ve so far only thought of in the abstract? For some people, it’s easier to start off gradually, exploring a new field while still holding onto a job in the old. For others, nothing will do but a total immersion into something brand new. Again, think about your comfort with risk and your obligations as you plan your progress toward your Element.

8. Where’s Your Tribe?

Tribes - groups of people with the same passions and interests - can be very powerful. Being part of a tribe - whether virtual, or in person - gives you “affirmation, guidance, collaboration and inspiration.” When you’re choosing your Element, make sure you consider the culture and tribes that are a part of it, since you’ll be spending time in this
culture as well.

Ask yourself: are you energized by the people in this tribe, or bored? If you’re inspired, it’s a good sign that you’re on the right track.

Finding tribes to investigate is easy. Search online, attend meetings of clubs and associations, volunteer or become an intern. Even better, find a mentor or hire a life coach. This goes back to opening yourself up to more opportunities, and ideas. It shouldn’t be a linear process, but an “organic” one, that “produces a harvest of new opportunities that you couldn’t have anticipated,” says Robinson.

9. What’s Next?

“If you’re looking for your Element, you have to start from where you are.” But you don’t need to plan out your entire life now. You just need to plan
your next steps.

Under each of these four headings - aptitudes, passions, attitudes, opportunities - write down several practical statements that spell out what you could do to further explore this part of yourself. Some examples: If you have a passion for singing, perhaps you could join an amateur singing group. If you have an aptitude for sharing knowledge with others, maybe you could volunteer to teach at an organization that needs your help.

After you come up with several practical statements for each of the four headings prioritize each statement under each of the four headings. Finally, take the first statement from each group, and these four statements will comprise your starting plan.

Remember that you may have more than one Element. People can also cycle through different Elements over the course of their lives. Finding
your Element doesn’t lock you into a particular path, it guides you to greater fulfillment. “Your life can be multifaceted, evolutionary, and in a process of constant growth and possibility,” says Robinson.

10. Living a Life of Passion and Purpose

As humans, we “can continuously transform our lives if we choose.” All journeys include risk, and opportunity. We need to be open to both, to new experiences, and ideas. Martin Luther King said, “Take the first step in faith. You don’t have to see the whole staircase, just the first step.”

“Do you hope to enjoy your life, or just endure it?” Think about how your life will appear when you look back upon it. Did you strive to live your dreams? Were you in your Element? Don’t let familiarity and fear of change keep you locked into the mediocre.
“Finding your Element is about discovering what lies within you, and in doing so, transforming what lies before you,” says Robinson. While finding your Element won’t guarantee you a life filled with non-stop happiness and pleasure, it will deepen your understanding of yourself, and help you to shape a fulfilling journey forward.