

May 5, 2009

LETTERS

## Does Hard Work Translate Into Genius?

To the Editor:

Re “Genius: The Modern View” (column, May 1):

When trying “to picture how a typical genius might develop” in a young writer, David Brooks doesn’t mention the most important part: substance. All things being equal, hard work is clearly a game changer, but no amount of dedication can give someone his voice.

The struggle Mr. Brooks describes is one focused “meticulously on technique.” His aspiring artist’s practice is “painstaking and error-focused,” which raises the question: What are the mistakes? Grammar? Spelling? Run-on sentences?

It may be true that Tiger Woods’s greatness comes from a “deliberate, strenuous and boring practice routine.” He is an athlete. A writer’s true greatness comes from something more elusive. Just because someone has figured out how to “get characters into a room — dozens and dozens of times,” it doesn’t mean they have figured out what they should say.

Mr. Brooks suggests it would help his young example if “one of her parents died when she was 12,” because he imagines this would infuse her with insecurity and a “desperate need for success.” True as that might be, the divine spark it might really give her is a story.

David Marshall Grant

Bridgehampton, N.Y., May 1, 2009

The writer is a playwright and a writer-producer on “Brothers and Sisters” on ABC.

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To the Editor:

In his analysis of the origins of genius, David Brooks doesn’t mention one essential element: love.

Without it, all those hours of strenuous practice will fall short — probably far short — of the spark that creates genius.

For just one example among many, Leonardo da Vinci’s tiny, meticulously detailed sketchbook drawings of battle scenes convey (somewhat ironically) an almost childlike innocence and enthusiasm for the subject. He’s enjoying himself — immensely — and the viewer can sense it in every line.

That intense pleasure, not the self-discipline or self-denial, is the real impetus that pushes some humans to work those very long hours and produce something astonishing.

Cynthia Eardley  
New York, May 2, 2009

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To the Editor:

The preternatural ability to focus on a skill for extended periods of time is surely crucial to mastering it at the highest level.

When a diva delivers an aria from “The Marriage of Figaro,” it is a safe bet that she logged her “10,000 hours” sooner than anyone else. And the effect may be sublime. But it’s not of the same order as Mozart’s act of composing it in the first place. The essence of that still defies rational explanation.

Mr. Brooks may have described the birthing of a virtuoso, but not genius.

Tim Wallace  
Farmington, Me., May 1, 2009

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To the Editor:

I hope David Brooks’s column spurs lawmakers and education leaders to increase the investment in talent development for our most promising students.

When parents can’t provide the resources needed to cultivate talent, public education must fill that role. Yet our education system as a whole has a long history of disregarding gifted education programs and services that have been shown to effectively support budding talent. Washington invests a mere pittance in gifted education, and most states and local districts do even less.

As Mr. Brooks notes, painstaking practice at increasing levels of complexity or challenge and a guiding hand from knowledgeable teachers are necessary to refine promising abilities into excellence. But the underinvestment in gifted education services and resources means very few students in our public schools are afforded this opportunity.

Every day we delay stepping up to address this gaping problem is another day lost for the next Mozart, Einstein, O’Keeffe or Franklin.

Del Siegle  
Storrs, Conn., May 1, 2009

The writer is president of the National Association for Gifted Children.