

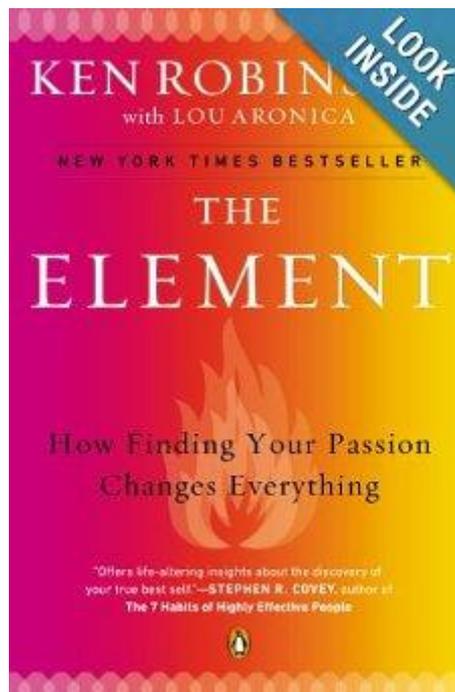
A summary of the book

# The Element

How finding your passion changes everything

By Sir Ken Robinson

Summary by Kim Hartman



*This is a summary of what I think is the most important and insightful parts of the book. I can't speak for anyone else and I strongly recommend you to read the book in order to fully grasp the concepts written here. My notes should only be seen as an addition that can be used to refresh your memory after you've read the book. Use the words in this summary as anchors to remember the vitals parts of the book.*

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## **Description from amazon**

The Element is the point at which natural talent meets personal passion. When people arrive at the Element, they feel most themselves and most inspired and achieve at their highest levels. With a wry sense of humor, Ken Robinson looks at the conditions that enable us to find ourselves in the Element and those that stifle that possibility. Drawing on the stories of a wide range of people, including Paul McCartney, Matt Groening, Richard Branson, Arianna Huffington, and Bart Conner, he shows that age and occupation are no barrier and that this is the essential strategy for transforming education, business, and communities in the twenty-first century. A breakthrough book about talent, passion, and achievement from one of the world's leading thinkers on creativity and self-fulfillment.

## Chapter 1: The Element

Never underestimate the vital importance of finding early in life the work that for you is play. This turns possible underachievers into happy warriors.

**The Element:** The place where the things you love to do and the things that you love to do come together. The Element is the meeting point between natural aptitude and personal passion.

For the most part, people seem to think that life is linear, that our capacities decline as we grow older, and that opportunities we have missed are gone forever. Many people have not found their Element because they don't understand their constant potential for renewal.

When people are in their Element, they connect with something fundamental to their sense of identity, purpose and well-being. Being there provides a sense of self-revelation, of defining who they really are and what they're meant to be doing with their lives.

High-achievers often share similar attitudes, such as self-belief, optimism, ambition and frustration.

## Chapter 2: Think differently

Common sense is the enemy of creativity and innovation. As soon as something seems the most obvious thing in the world, it means that we have abandoned all attempts at understanding it.

*Human intelligence seems to have three main features:*

- **It is extraordinary diverse:** you use multiple parts of the brain in every task you perform and it is the dynamic use of the brain – finding new connections between things – that true breakthrough occurs.
- It is tremendously dynamic:
- **It is entirely distinctive:** every person's intelligence is unique as a fingerprint

Intellectual growth and creativity come through embracing the dynamic nature of intelligence. Growth comes through analogy, through seeing things connect rather than only seeing how they might be different.

## Chapter 3: Beyond imagining

Children do not see anything so strange and different about art. They accept it; they understand it; they love it. But the world is going to pick them apart; this does not look like a tree, this does not look like a man.

Imagination is what sets human beings apart from very other species on earth. Imagination underpins every uniquely human achievement. It lets us visit the past, contemplate the present, and anticipate the future. Through imagination we can not only bring to mind things that we have experienced but things that we have never experienced.

To be creative you actually have to do something. It involves putting imagination to work to makes something new, to come up with new solutions to problems, even to think of new problems and questions. Creativity is applied imagination.

Usually the creative process begins with an inkling which requires further development.

Creativity involves several different processes that wind through each other.

1. The first is generating new ideas. Imagining different possibilities, considering alternative options.
2. The creative process also involves developing these ideas by judging which work best or feel right.

These processes don't come in a predictable sequence – they interact with each other.

Creativity always involves using media of some sort to develop ideas. The medium can be anything at all. The reason that so many people think they're not creative is that they haven't found their medium. To develop our creative abilities, we also need to develop our practical skills in the media we want to use.

Sometimes when we are playing around with ideas and laughing, were most open to new thoughts.

Creative thinking depends greatly on what's sometimes called divergent or lateral thinking, and especially on thinking in metaphors or seeing analogies.

Being creative is about making fresh connections so that we see things in new ways and from different perspectives.

**Lateral thinking:** using reasoning that is not immediately obvious.

We don't just see the world as it is; we interpret it through the particular ideas and beliefs that have shaped our own cultures and our persona outlook. All of these stand between us and our raw experiences in the world, acting as a filter on what we perceive and how we think.

## Chapter 4: In the Zone

One of the strongest signs of being in the zone is a sense of freedom and authenticity. When we are doing something that we love and are naturally good at, we are much more likely to feel entered in our true sense of self – to be who we truly are. When you are connecting this way with your deep interests and natural energy, time tends to move more quickly, more fluidly.

**Meta-state:** where ideas come more quickly, as if you are tapping a source that makes it significantly easier to achieve your task. You develop a facility for the thing you are doing because you've unified your energy with the process and the efforts you are making.

Once you think about being in the zone, you are immediately out of it.

**Flow:** happens when psychic energy – or attention – is invested in realistic goals, and when skills match the opportunities for action.

**The optimal experience:** is comprised by the elements of enjoyment. These include facing a challenge that requires a skill one possesses, concentration on the task at hand that allows one to forget everything else, the loss of self-consciousness, and the sense that time transforms during the experience.

The activity that consumes us becomes intrinsically rewarding. Being in the zone doesn't take energy away – it gives it to you. Activities we love fill us with energy even when we are physically exhausted. When people place themselves in situations that lead to their being in the zone, they tap into a primal source of energy.

Mental energy isn't a fixed substance. It rises and falls with our passion and commitment to what we are doing at the time. The key difference is in our attitude, and our sense of resonance with an activity.

These peak experiences are associated with physiological changes in the body – there may be a release of endorphins in the brain and of adrenaline through the body. There may be an increase in alpha wave activity and changes in our metabolic rates and in the patterns of our breathing and heartbeats.

When we connect with our own energy we are more open to the energy of other people. The more alive we feel, the more we can contribute to the lives of others.

When people are in the zone, they align naturally with a way of thinking that works best for them. And when people use a thinking style completely natural to them, everything comes more easily.

Each person's intelligence is distinct from the intelligence from every other person, that everyone has a unique way of getting in the zone.

## Chapter 5: Finding your tribe

What connects a tribe is a common commitment to the thing they feel born to do.

No one is limited to one domain, and many people move in several. Often, breakthrough ideas come about when someone makes a connection between different ways of thinking, sometimes across different domains.

As cultures and technology evolves, new domains emerge.

Finding your tribe can have a transformational effect on your sense of identity and purpose because of three powerful tribal dynamics: validation, inspiration and The alchemy if synergy.

Finding your tribe provides inspiration and provocation to raise the bar on your own achievements.

**The alchemy of synergy:** the combination of creative energies and the need to perform at the highest level to keep up with peers leads to a commitment to excellence.

*Great creative teams are:*

- Diverse. They are composed of very different sorts of people with different but complementary talents.
- Dynamic. Creative teams find ways of using their differences as strengths, not weaknesses. They have a process through which their strengths are complementary and compensate for each other's weaknesses. They are able to challenge each other as equals and to take criticism as an incentive to raise their game.
- Distinct. Creative teams have a distinctive personality and come together to do something specific. They are together only for as long as they want to be or have to be to get the job done.

**Social identity theory:** people often derive a large sense of who they are through affiliation with specific groups and tend to associate themselves closely with groups likely to boost their self-esteem – fan behavior.

Tribe membership helps people become more themselves, leading them toward a greater sense of personal identity.

Fandom is in many ways a form of what psychologists call deindividuation. This means losing your sense of identity through becoming a part of the group.

## Chapter 6: What will they think?

The barriers to finding the element could be thought of as three concentric circles:

- Personal
- Social
- Cultural

Fear is perhaps the biggest obstacle to finding your element, for example fear of disapproval.

**On groupthink:** According to Judy Rich Harris, who have studied how the influences of you people on their friends and peer groups, there are three main forces that shape our development:

- Personal temperament
- Our parents
- Our peers

The influence of peers is much stronger than the influence from parents. The world that the children shares with their peers is what shares their behavior and modifies the characteristics they were born with, and hence determines the sort of people they will be when they grow up. Children get their ideas of how to behave by identifying with the group and taking on its attitudes, behavior speech, and styles of dress and adornment.

Ants achieve their goals by fulfilling their own very specific roles with military precision. Each ant work toward a global goal, while no ant takes the lead. There seems to be no hierarchy at all within an ant colony.

**A culture:** the values and forms of behavior that characterize different social groups. Culture is a system of permissions. It's about the attitudes and behaviors that are acceptable and unacceptable in different communities, those that are approved of and those that are not.

All cultures promote contagious behavior, for example language.

The parts of the brain involved in processing background and objects are engaged differently across the two sets of elderly people coming from different geographical and cultural backgrounds.

All cultures have an unwritten survival manual for success.

The great social movements are those that are stimulated when boundaries are broken. Finding your element sometimes require breaking away from your native culture in order to achieve your goals.

On the web we have patterns of contagious behavior being generated on massive scale. Many of us now live like a Russian doll nestled I multiple layers of cultural identity.

## Chapter 7: Do you feel lucky?

It's not what happens to us that makes the difference in our lives. It is our attitude toward what happens.

Research shows that lucky people often make their luck because of their attitudes. We all create and shape the realities of our own lives to an extraordinary extent.

Those who consider themselves lucky tend to exhibit similar attitudes and behavior. Wiseman has identified 4 principles that characterize lucky people:

- Lucky people tend to maximize opportunities. They are especially adept at creating, noticing, and acting upon these opportunities when they arise.
- Second, they tend to be very effective at listening to their intuition, and do work such as meditation that is designed to boost their intuitive abilities.
- The third principle is that lucky people tend to be lucky, creating a series of self-fulfilling prophecies because they go into the world anticipating a positive outcome.
- Last, lucky people have an attitude that allows them to turn bad luck to good. They move quickly to take control over the situation when it isn't going well for them.

Two different people with the same cultural orientations may still see the same scene in completely different ways, depending upon their preconceptions and their sense of mission.

## Chapter 8: Somebody help me

Finding our element often requires the aid and guidance of others.

*Mentors serve one or all of 4 roles for us:*

- **Recognition.** Mentors recognize the spark of interest or delight and can help an individual drill down to the specific components of the discipline that match that individual's capacity and passion.
- **Encouragement.** Mentors lead us to believe that we can achieve something that seems improbable or impossible before we met them. They stand by to remind us of the skills we already possess and what we can achieve if we continue to work hard.
- **Facilitating.** Mentors can help lead us toward our element by offering us advice and techniques, paving the way for us, and even allowing us to falter a bit while standing by to help us recover and learn from our mistakes.
- **Stretching.** Effective mentors push us past what we see as our limits and prevent us from doing less with our lives than we can.

## Chapter 9: Is it too late?

One of the most basic reasons of thinking that it is too late to be who you are truly capable of being is the belief that life is linear. As if we were on a busy one-way street, we think we have no alternative but to keep going forward. If we missed something the first time, we can't double back and take another look because it takes all our effort just to keep up with the traffic.

Human lives are organic and cyclical. Different capacities express themselves in stronger ways at different times in our lives. Because of this, we get multiple opportunities for new growth and development, and multiple opportunities to revitalize latent capacities.

Laughter has a huge effect on aging. So does intellectual curiosity.

Babies don't learn to speak by instructions. They learn by imitation and inference. We are all born with a deep, instinctive capacity for language, which is activated almost as soon as we draw breath. Babies instinctively recognize meanings and intentions in the sounds and tones they hear from other humans around them.

During early stages of development, our brains go through a process that cognitive scientists call "neural pruning". This involved trimming away neural pathways that we determine at an unconscious level to have little long-term value. It serves the same function in our brains as pruning does to a tree – it gets rid of the unnecessary branches to allow for continued growth and increased overall strength. It shuts down pathways that we will never use again in order to make room for the expansion of pathways that we will use regularly.

As long as we keep using our brains in an active way, we continue to build neural pathways as we get older.

Just as physical exercise can revitalize our muscles, mental exercise can revitalize our creative capabilities. The brain continues to generate new cells, and certain mental techniques can accelerate this.

One of the results of seeing our lives as linear and unidirectional is that it leads to a culture of segregating people by age.

## Chapter 10: For love or money

At the most basic level, professionals are simply those people who earn their living in that field, while amateurs are people who don't. But the term amateur and professional often imply something else – something about quality and expertise. People often think of amateurs as second-rate well below professionals.

The word amateur derives from the word “amator”, which means lover, devoted friend, or someone who is in avid pursuit of an objective. In the original sense, an amateur is someone who does something for the love of it. Amateurs do what they do because they have a passion for it, not because it pays the bills.

**Pro-am:** a type of amateur that works at increasingly higher standards and generates breakthrough sometimes greater than made by professionals. For pro-ams, leisure is not passive consumerism but active participatory. They pursue their passions outside of the workplace, but with an energy and dedication rarely given the acts of leisure. They often compensate for less-inspiring jobs.

There is an important difference between leisure and recreation. We tend to think about work as something that takes our energy. Leisure is what we do to build it up again. Leisure often respites, a passive break from the challenges of the day, a chance to rest and recharge. Recreation carries a more active tone – literally of recreating ourselves. It suggests activities that require physical or mental effort but which enhance our energies rather than depleting them.

The element is about a more dynamic, organic conception of human existence in which the different parts of our lives are not seen as hermetically sealed off from one another but as interacting and influencing each other.

## **Chapter 11: Making the grade**

Public schools were not only created in the interest of industrialism – they were created in the image of industrialism. In many ways, they reflect the factory culture they were designed to support.

Schools divide the curriculum into specialist segments: some teachers install math in the students, and other installs history. They arrange the day into standard units of time, marked out by ringing of bells, much like a factory announcing the beginning of the workday and the end of breaks. Students are educated in batches, according to age, as if the most important things they have in common is their date of manufacture. They are given standardized tests at set points and compared with each other before being sent out onto the market.

Education doesn't need to be reformed – it needs to be transformed. The key to this transformation is not to standardize education but to personalize it, to build achievement on discovering the individual talents of each child, to put students in an environment where they want to learn and where they can naturally discover their true passion.

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