

A LESSON ON

HIDDEN POTENTIAL

The Science of Achieving
Greater Things



ADAM GRANT

#1 *New York Times* bestselling author of
THINK AGAIN

HOW WE CAN APPLY ADAM GRANT'S WORK TO
PUSH BEYOND OUR PERCEIVED LIMITS.

MOST OF US BELIEVE POTENTIAL IS A FIXED TRAIT OR THE LUCKY COMBINATION OF THE RIGHT GENES AND THE RIGHT CHILDHOOD.

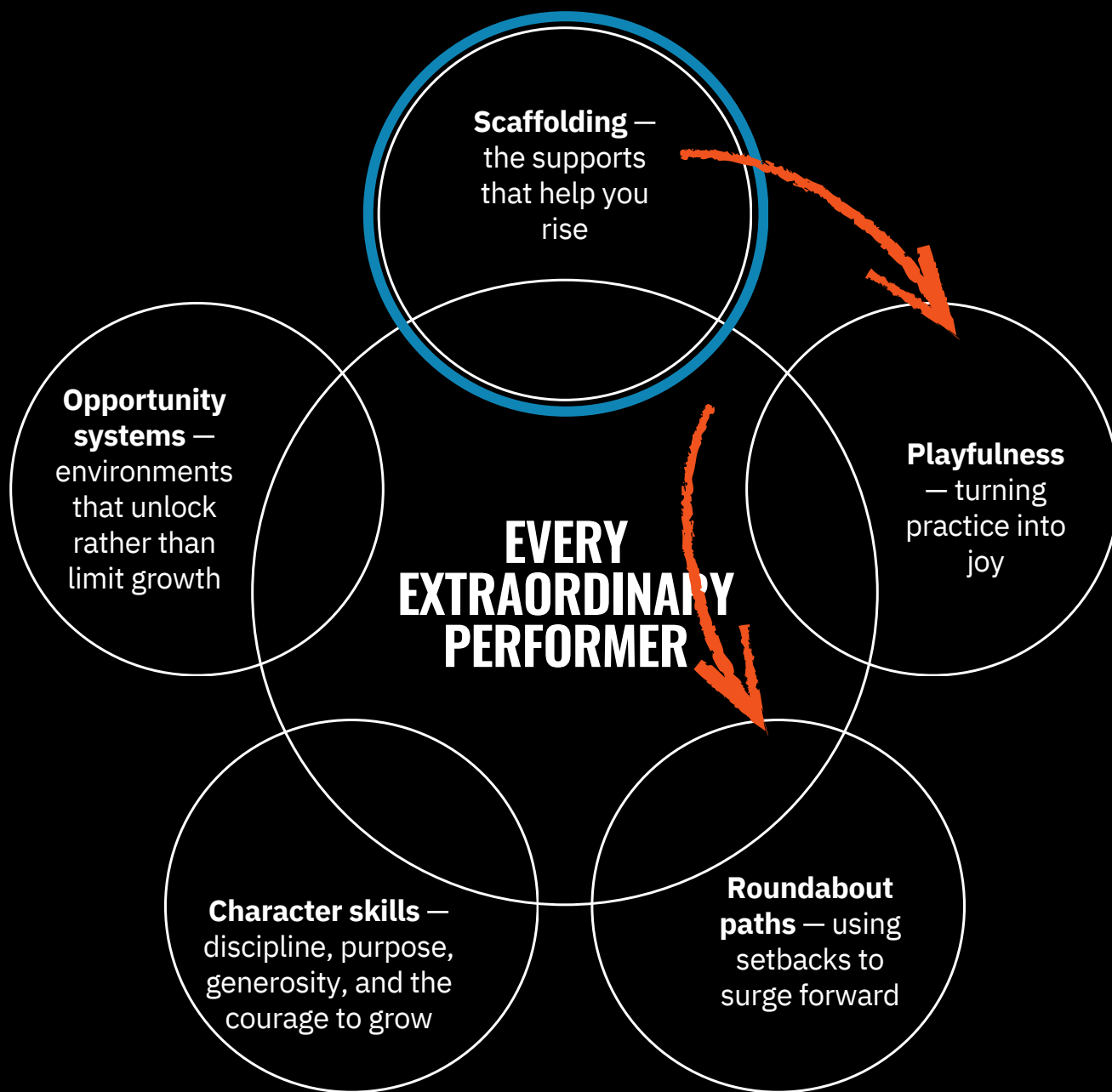
Adam Grant's thesis is the opposite:

Potential is not something you are born with.

Potential is something you build.

And what builds it is not talent. **It's systems.**





None of these are
genetic. Every one of
them is *learnable*.

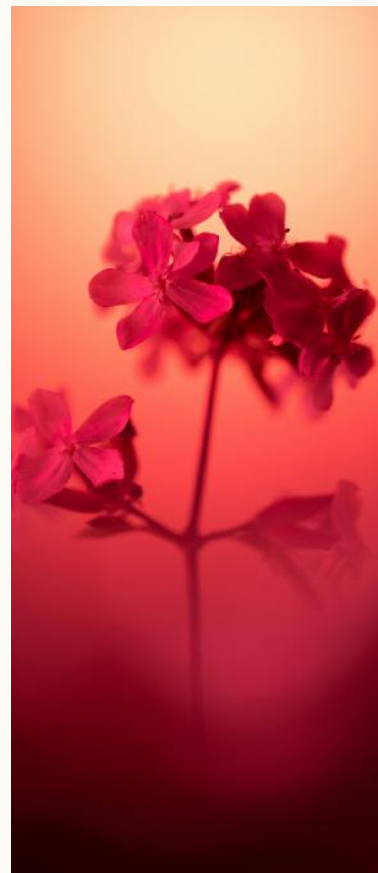


"The true measure of your potential is not the height you've reached, but how far you've climbed to get there"

Adam Grant

By changing **systems** that write people off, it's possible to improve the odds for underdogs and late bloomers. Meaningful accomplishments can come from the places where we have serious shortcomings.

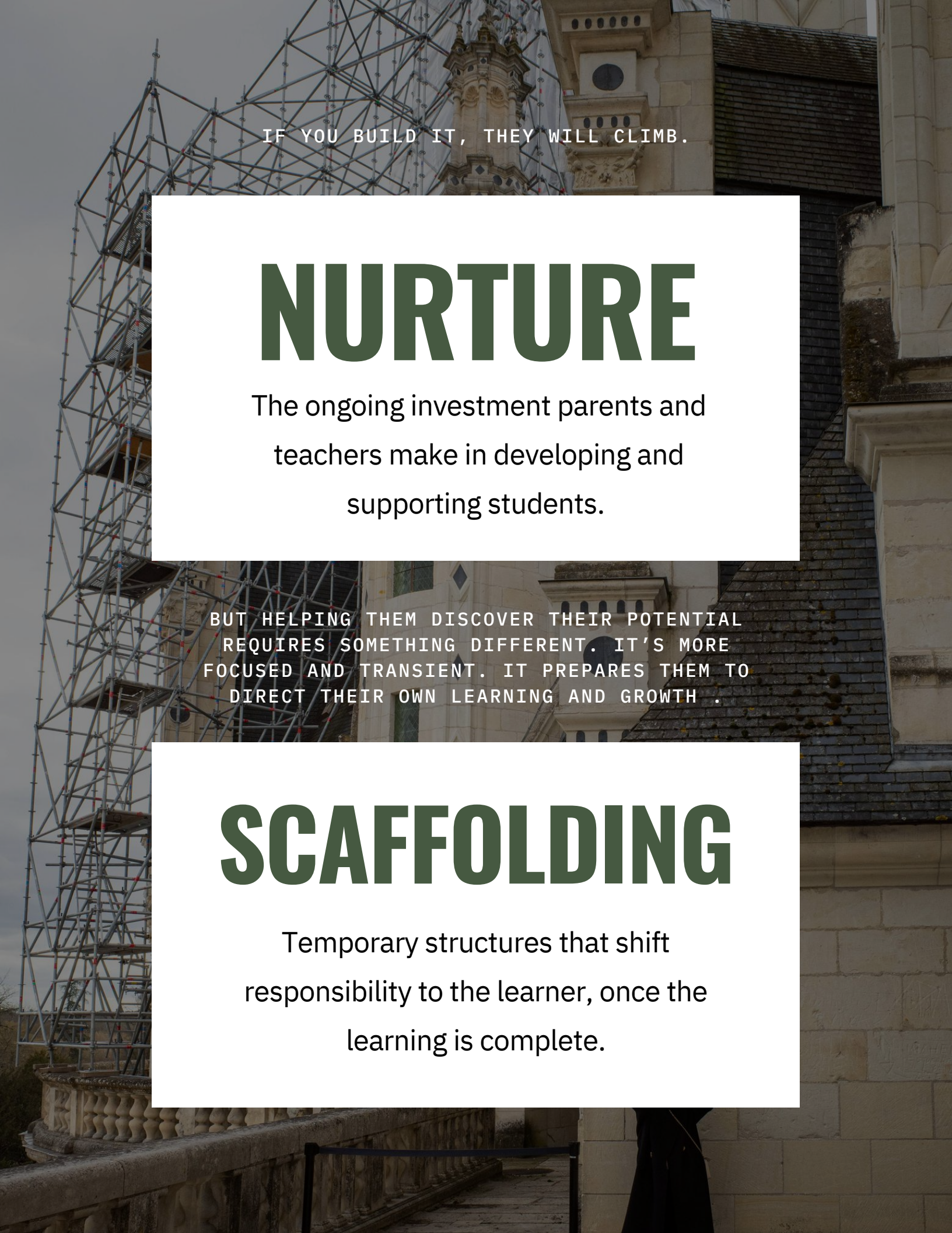
WE CAN TRAVEL GREAT DISTANCES BY
TRANSFORMING OURSELVES AND THE WORLD
AROUND US. WHAT MAKES THE DIFFERENCE IS
THE LESSON LEARNED, NOT THE ACTIVITY
ITSELF.



PART ONE

Why SCAFFOLDING *Comes First*





IF YOU BUILD IT, THEY WILL CLIMB.

NURTURE

The ongoing investment parents and teachers make in developing and supporting students.

BUT HELPING THEM DISCOVER THEIR POTENTIAL
REQUIRES SOMETHING DIFFERENT. IT'S MORE
FOCUSED AND TRANSIENT. IT PREPARES THEM TO
DIRECT THEIR OWN LEARNING AND GROWTH .

SCAFFOLDING

Temporary structures that shift responsibility to the learner, once the learning is complete.

The TETRIS EFFECT: 4 Principles of Scaffolding

01

SCAFFOLDING COMES FROM OTHERS

- We don't naturally invent the support we need
- Mentors, coaches, guides, and peers offer solutions we'd never think of

02

SCAFFOLDING IS TAILORED TO THE OBSTACLE

- Tetris counters intrusive imagery → activates visual-spatial circuits
- Effective support is specific to the challenge in front of you

03

SCAFFOLDING ARRIVES AT THE RIGHT MOMENT

- Timing matters: the 24-hour window determines whether it works
- In life: the right support at the right time changes everything

04

SCAFFOLDING IS TEMPORARY

- Just enough support to get momentum; not dependency
- 10 minutes of Tetris → lasting resilience

Where
Scaffolding
Really Comes
From

COMMUNITIES
→ BELONGING
& RESILIENCE

ROLE MODELS
→ EXPANDED
POSSIBILITY

PEERS →
SHARED
MOMENTUM

COACHES →
TARGETED
GUIDANCE

MENTORS →
WISDOM



SCAFFOLDING FOR THE DAILY GRIND:

TURNING PRACTICE INTO PASSION

Even with character and skill, the grind can drain motivation

Scaffolding helps us rediscover joy where monotony kills it

- Traditional “grit” models focus on pushing harder

Grant argues the opposite:

- *We grow better when the process fuels us, not depletes us*
- Passion is not found. It’s engineered through the **right structures**

The right learning framework transforms:

- boredom → **curiosity**
- monotony → **mastery**
- obligation → **desire**



Evelyn Glennie's story shows:

**SCAFFOLDING CAN CHANGE HOW
YOU LEARN, NOT JUST WHAT YOU
LEARN**

**ADAPTING THE METHOD →
RESTORES CURIOSITY,
CHALLENGE, AND FLOW**

Why Passion Needs Rest: The Scaffolding of Recovery

1

Joy evaporates when practice becomes obligation

2

Elite performers protect passion with **breaks**:

- Micro-breaks reduce fatigue and boost energy
- Rest fuels creativity and incubation
- Spaced repetition deepens learning

3

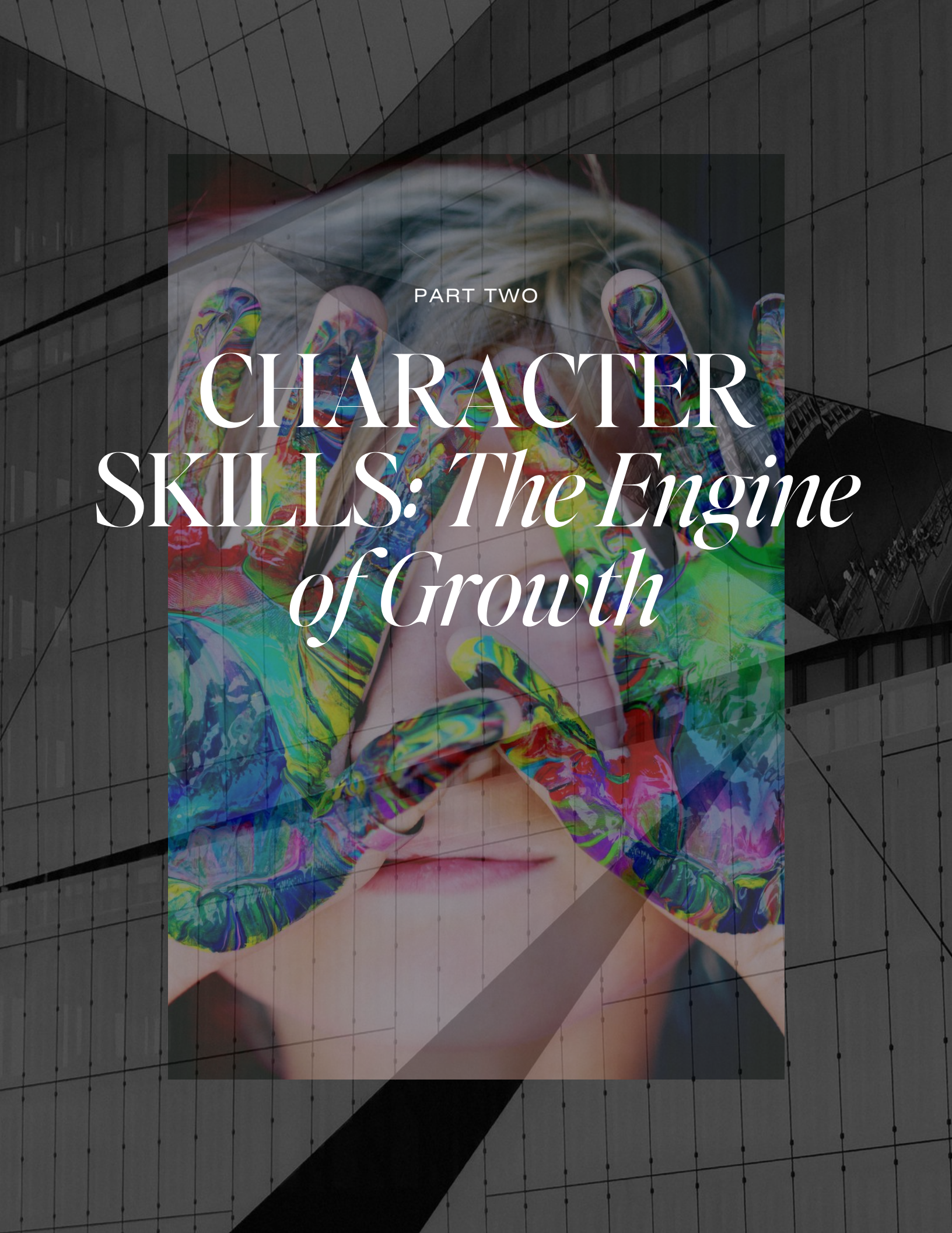
Rest **isn't a luxury**; it's a learning tool:

- Prevents burnout and bore-out
- Keeps curiosity alive

4


- Maintains long-term harmonious passion





PART TWO

CHARACTER SKILLS: *The Engine of Growth*



THE MYTH: WILLIAM JAMES CLAIMED THAT BY AGE 30, CHARACTER “SETS LIKE PLASTER.”

THE TRUTH: GRANT CITES MODERN EVIDENCE PROVING THE OPPOSITE.

CHARACTER ISN'T FIXED: IT'S PLASTIC

West Africa Experiment (1,500 adult entrepreneurs):

- **Three groups:** control, cognitive training, character training
- **Cognitive training:** finance, HR, marketing
- **Character training:** proactivity, discipline, determination
- Results:
 - **Character training** → 30% profit growth over 2 years
 - Nearly **3x the effect of cognitive training**

- Financial literacy helps you react to opportunities
- **Character helps you create opportunities**
- Marketing knowledge helps you position your product
- **Character helps you innovate new products**
- Strategy helps you plan
- **Character helps you persevere when the plan fails**

CHARACTER ≠ PERSONALITY

- 1 Personality: **natural tendencies**, predispositions, instincts
→ “How you respond on a typical day.”
- 2 Character: prioritizing your **values** over your instincts
→ “How you show up on a hard day.”

Character skills give us the power to:

- Act according to our principles under pressure
- **Generate opportunities** rather than wait for them
- Stay resourceful, resilient, and proactive

PERSONALITY IS YOUR
TENDENCY. CHARACTER IS
YOUR **CHOICE**.

AND BECAUSE IT'S A CHOICE,
YOU CAN **TRAIN IT**.



WHY CHARACTER SKILLS ARE THE NEW POWER SKILLS

The term “soft skills” was a historical accident.

- In the 1960s, the U.S. Army used “hard” for **metal-based skills**
- Everything else — leadership, teamwork, discipline — got labeled “**soft**”
- Psychologists later tried to retire the term because it sounded “weak”
- Ironically, these skills prove to be our greatest strength

THE THREE CHARACTER SKILL SETS THAT UNLOCK HIDDEN POTENTIAL:

COURAGE: THE WILLINGNESS TO SEEK
THE RIGHT DISCOMFORT

ABSORPTIVE CAPACITY: THE DISCIPLINE
TO TAKE IN THE RIGHT INFORMATION

IMPERFECTION ACCEPTANCE: THE
DETERMINATION TO TOLERATE THE RIGHT
FLAWS

Let's go *deeper*...



COURAGE: THE WILLINGNESS TO SEEK THE RIGHT DISCOMFORT

This means:

- Not the wrong discomfort (self-punishment)
 - Not all discomfort (chaos)
 - But targeted, intentional challenge
-



ABSORPTIVE CAPACITY: THE DISCIPLINE TO TAKE IN THE RIGHT INFORMATION

This means:

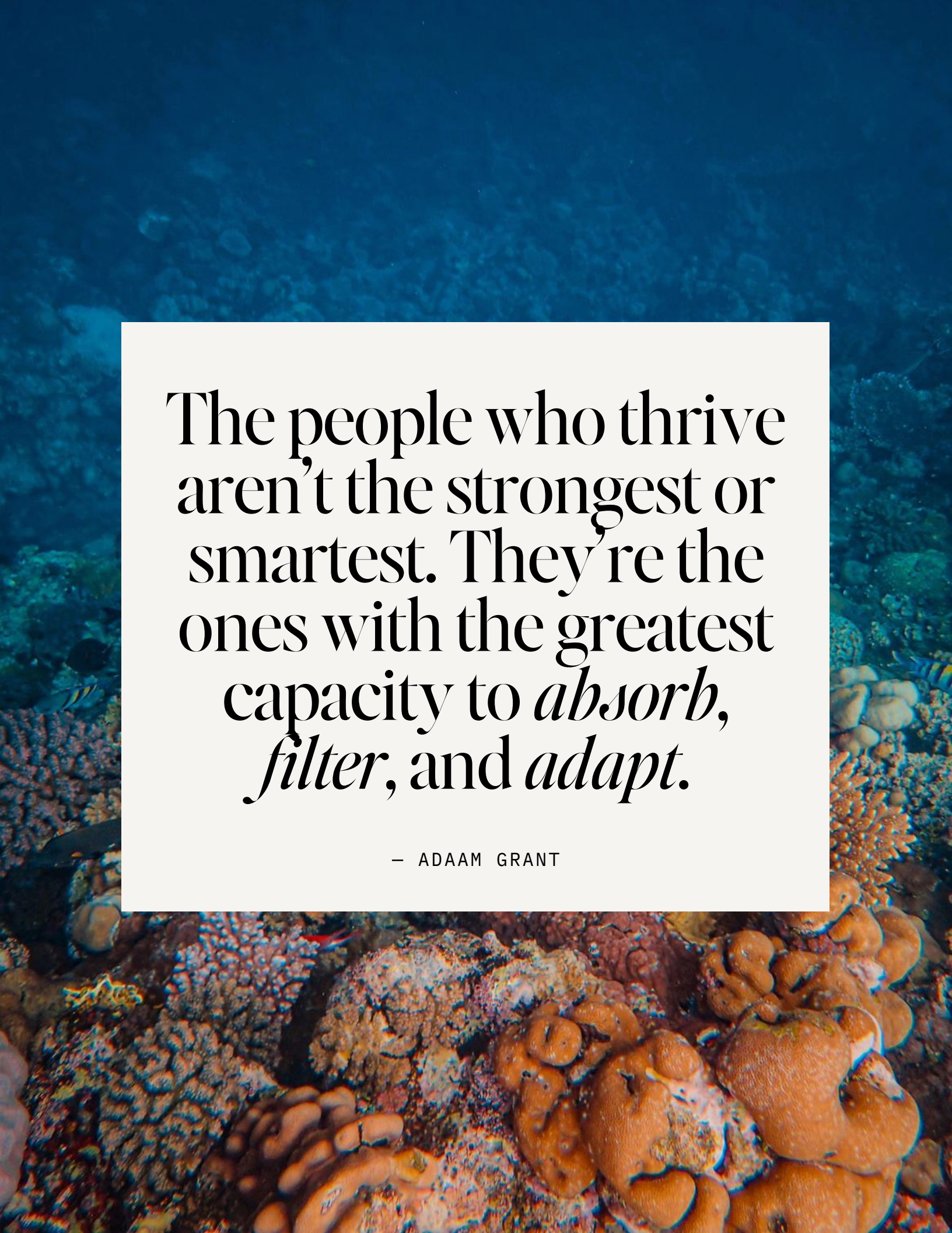
- Filtering (not just absorbing)
 - Seeking advice instead of feedback
 - Choosing mentors with competence and care
 - Becoming the coach you wish you had
-



IMPERFECTION ACCEPTANCE: THE DETERMINATION TO TOLERATE THE RIGHT FLAWS

This connects to:

- Striving for excellence, not perfection
- Wabi-sabi thinking

An underwater photograph of a coral reef. The top half of the image is a deep blue, slightly hazy water column. The bottom half shows a vibrant, colorful coral reef with various types of coral in shades of orange, red, and brown. Small fish are visible swimming around the coral.

The people who thrive
aren't the strongest or
smartest. They're the
ones with the greatest
capacity to *absorb*,
filter, and *adapt*.

— ADAAM GRANT

HUMAN SPONGES: The Power of Absorbing & Adapting

Being sponge-like is not passive. It's a character skill:

- proactively seeking knowledge
- filtering out noise, ego, and toxic input
- adapting repeatedly and intentionally

FOUR LEARNING STYLES:

- Reactive + Ego-driven: avoid discomfort, stay stuck
- Proactive + Ego-driven: seek info but reject anything threatening
- Reactive + Growth-driven: open to learning but dependent on others
- **Proactive + Growth-driven = SPONGES: self-starters, experimenters, adapters**

PICTURED: Julius Yego ("The YouTube Athlete"): No coach, no facilities, no resources—became a champion by teaching himself through relentless curiosity and improvisation.

Filtering: How to Turn Critics & Cheerleaders into Coaches

- 1) Most people won't tell you the truth — they confuse **politeness** with kindness
- 2) Critics attack your **worst self**; cheerleaders praise your best self
- 3) Coaches see your potential and help you grow toward it

The **best way to turn people into coaches?**

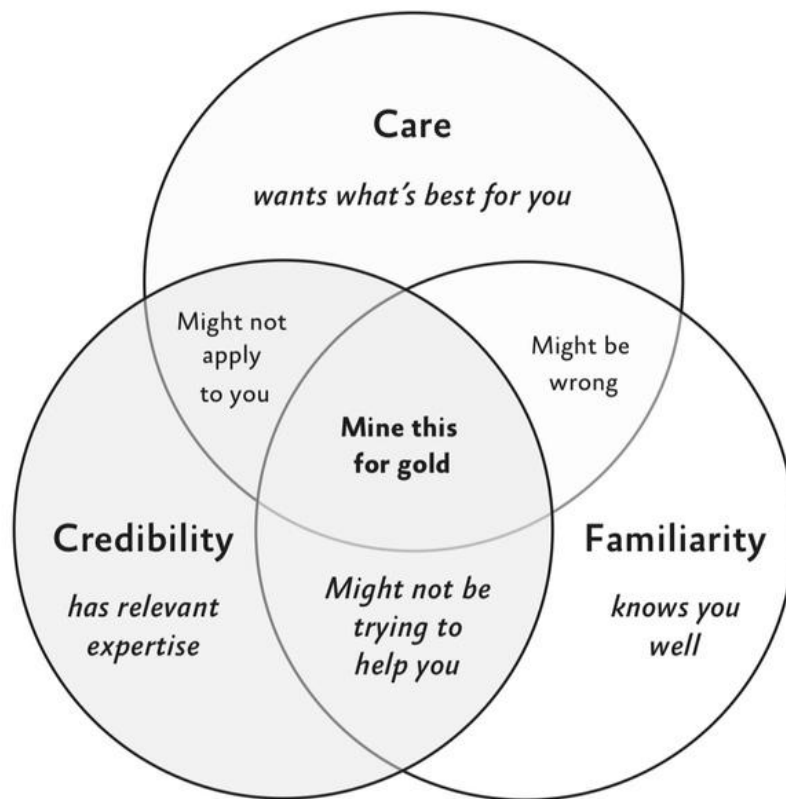
- Don't ask for feedback (“How did I do?”)
- Ask for advice (“What's one thing I could do better next time?”)

Advice generates:

- Specific insights
- Forward-looking suggestions
- Actionable improvements

THE 3 TESTS OF A TRUSTWORTHY COACH

WHICH SOURCES TO TRUST



**Absorb from those who know you,
believe in you, and understand the
path you're walking.**



SPONGES DON'T JUST LEARN. THEY GIVE LIFE

Sea sponges don't only absorb — they **create**:

- Anti-viral, anti-cancer, anti-inflammatory compounds
- Chemicals used in HIV, leukemia, breast cancer treatments
- Even oxygenated the oceans → enabling complex life
- Human sponges do the same:

They share insights

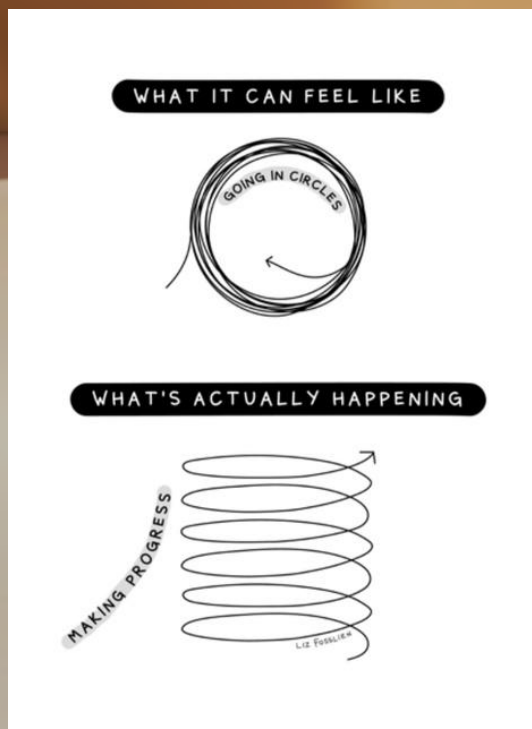
- Uplift peers
- Elevate rooms
- Strengthen teams
- Mentor others

THE MYTH OF THE STRAIGHT LINE: WHY PROGRESS STALLS

EVERYONE HITS PLATEAUS — SURGEONS,
SCIENTISTS, ATHLETES, CREATIVES

WE ASSUME: STAGNATION = DECLINE

SOMETIMES THE ONLY WAY FORWARD IS A
ROUNABOUT PATH



The Compass: What You Need When the Map Doesn't Exist



Being stuck means your current road is exhausted:

- You don't need a perfect plan. You just need direction
- A compass can come from:
 - A book
 - A mentor
 - A colleague
 - A single conversation
 - A YouTube video
- R.A. Dickey's coaches couldn't give him a map
 - But they pointed his compass: Try the knuckleball
- New methods feel backward, awkward, and slow
 - That's how you know they're new

Scaffolding during reinvention:

- direction → encouragement → new technique → patience → persistence



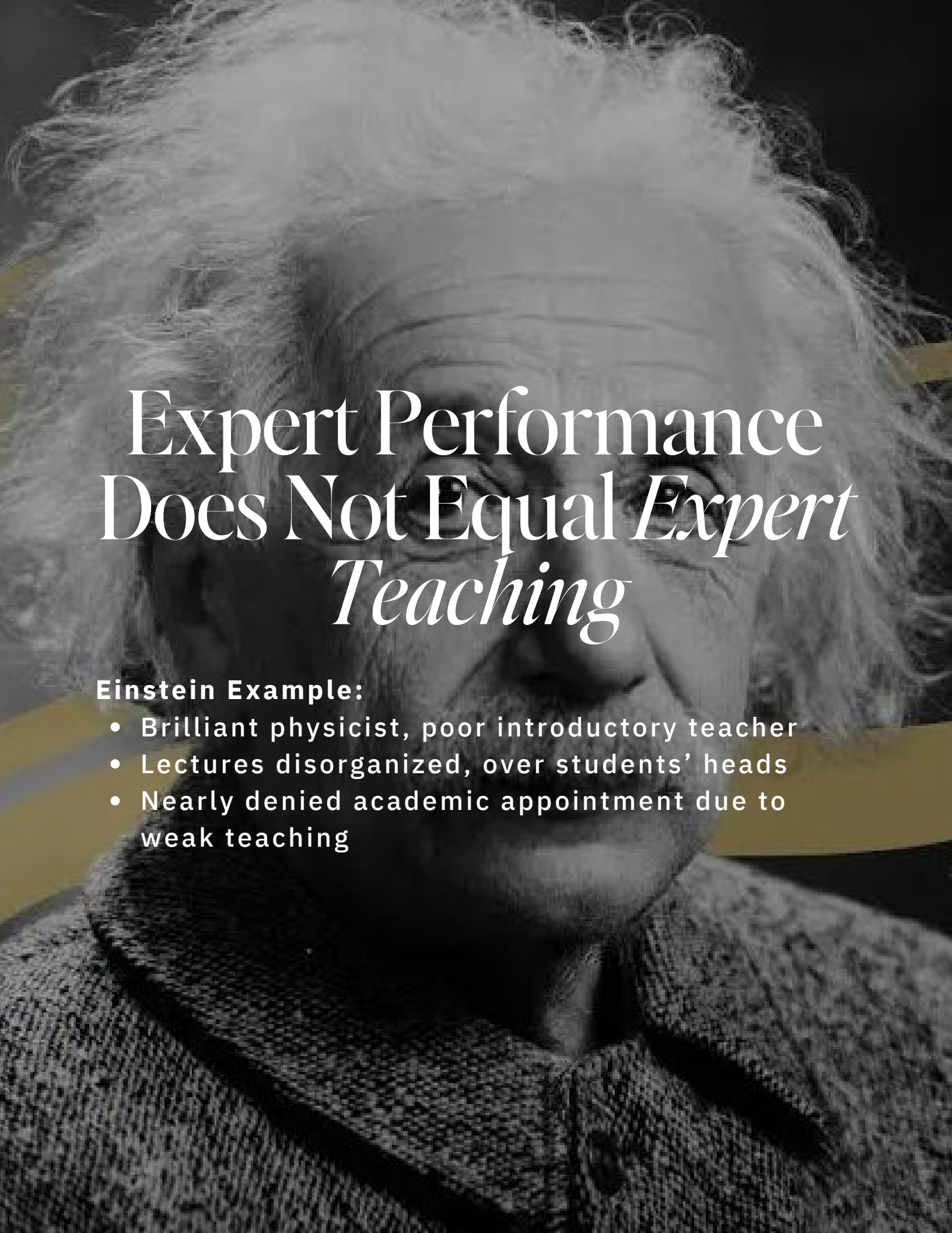
R.A. DICKEY

A 7th-grade phenom, Dickey drew professional scouts in high school, won an Olympic bronze medal in college, and was drafted in the first round by the Texas Rangers. They offered him more than \$800,000 and expected him to reach the majors within just a year or two.

When Dickey arrived to sign his contract, a trainer noticed something off in his arm, and an x-ray revealed he was **missing the UCL**, a crucial ligament for pitchers, causing the Rangers to slash his bonus, demote him to the lowest minors, and label him a longshot.

He then spent seven grinding years stuck in the minor leagues, trying to reinvent himself without a fastball before finally clawing his way to the majors in his late twenties.

Dickey's major league career collapsed quickly and sent back to the minors. By 31, he was considered finished, scraping by selling golf balls from alligator-filled ponds. His coaches urged him to **reinvent himself with the knuckleball**, forcing him to unlearn everything and endure repeated failures as he rebuilt his identity as a pitcher. **Fourteen years after he'd started, his reinvention paid off, he joined the Mets, became one of the league's top pitchers**, and ultimately won the Cy Young Award as the first knuckleballer ever to do it.



Expert Performance Does Not Equal *Expert Teaching*

Einstein Example:

- Brilliant physicist, poor introductory teacher
- Lectures disorganized, over students' heads
- Nearly denied academic appointment due to weak teaching

A collage of images including a knife, a cork, and a metal stamp.

WHY ONE GUIDE IS NOT ENOUGH

1.

MENTORS DON'T HAVE:

Your exact strengths, your exact weaknesses, your exact starting point.

2.

LEGAL PROFESSION STUDY

Having one mentor → no difference in promotion. Having 2–3 mentors → significantly higher chance of making partner

3.

THE “GUIDEBOOK METHOD”:

Grant says to collect “pins” instead of directions.

4.

ASK GUIDES TO:

Retrace their steps, Identify key turning points, Share crossroads, decisions, mistakes, Reveal invisible constraints and opportunities

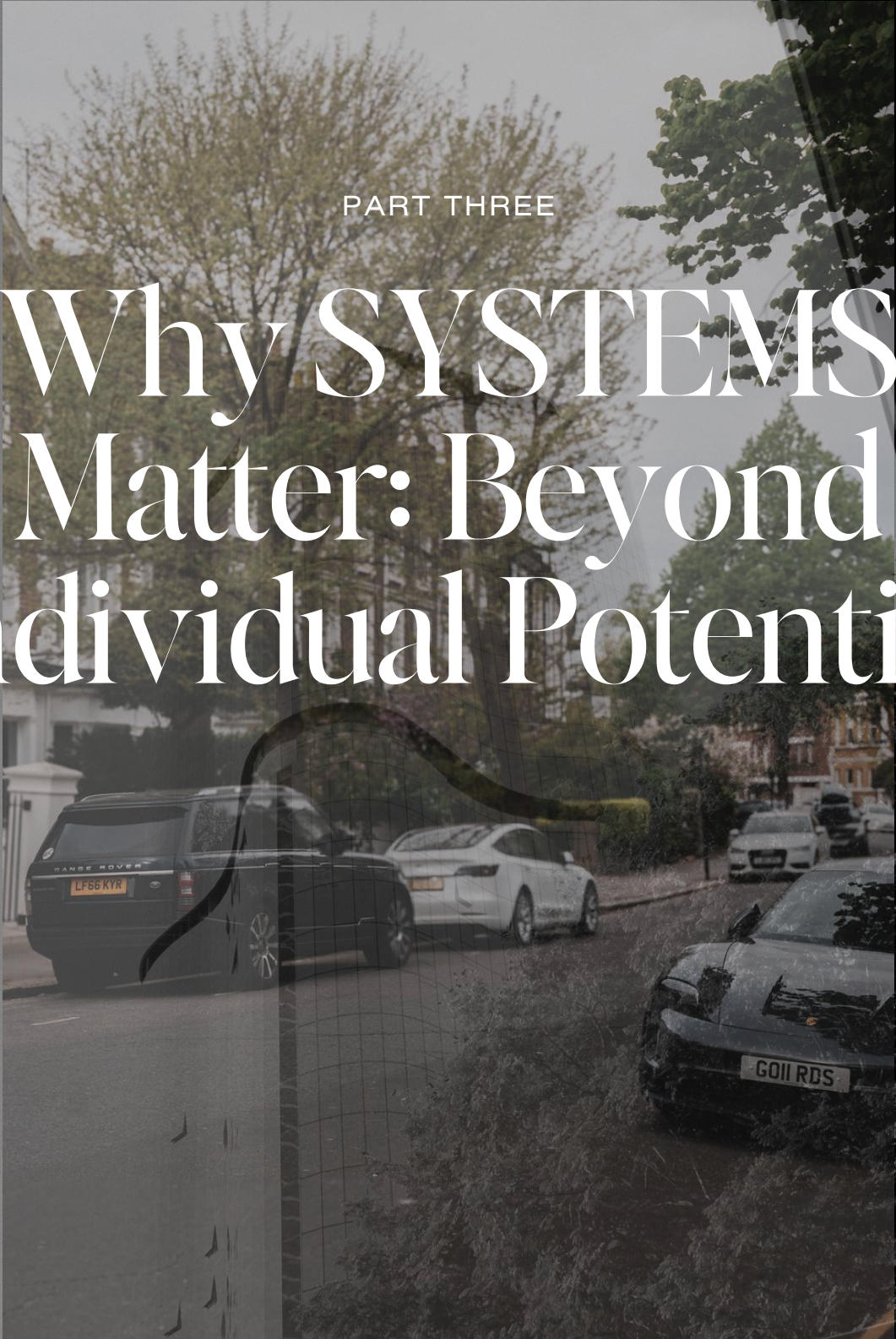
5.

YOUR JOB:

Absorb their insights, Filter for relevance, Adapt to your own route, Assemble your own map

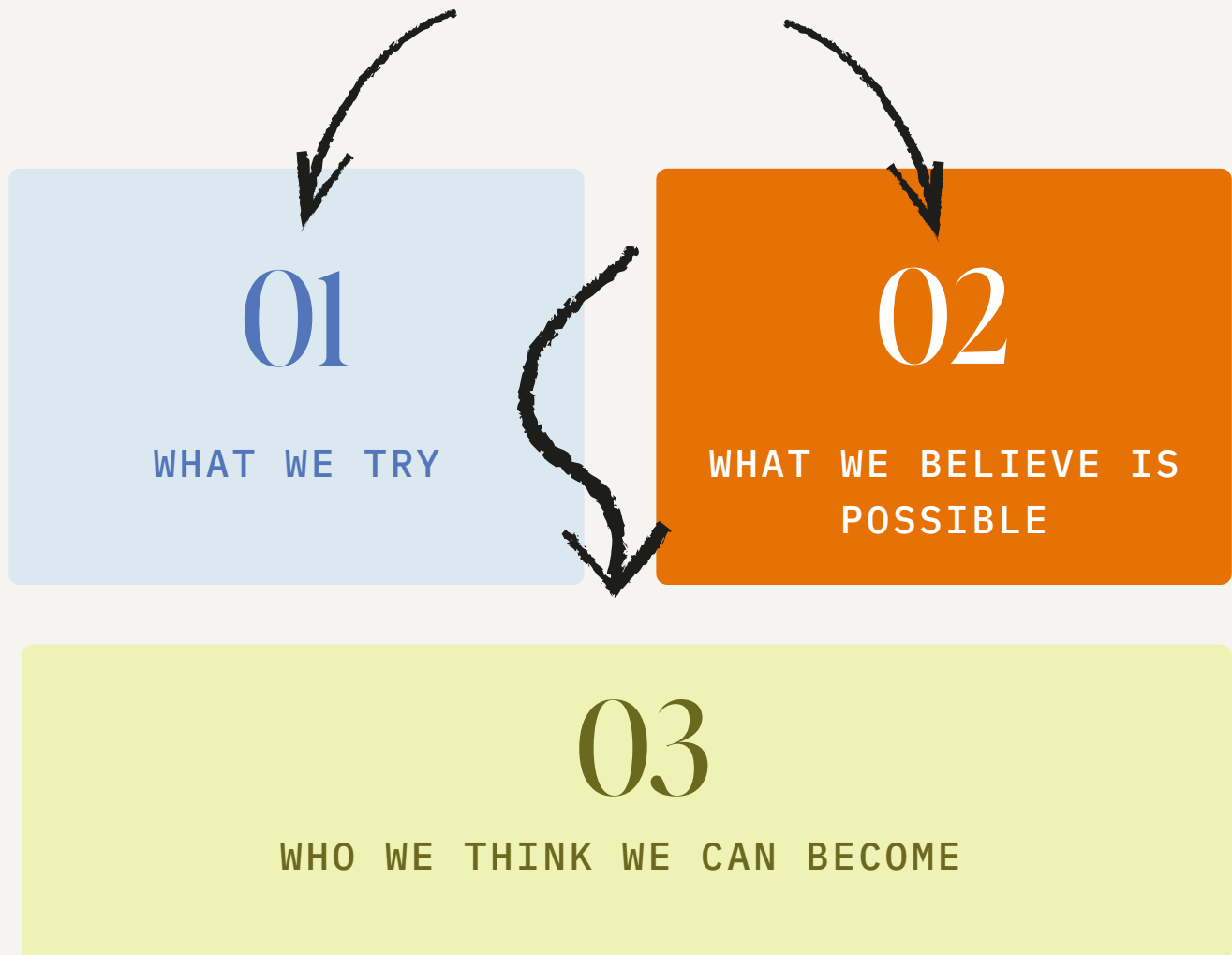
PART THREE

Why SYSTEMS Matter: Beyond Individual Potential



CHARACTER AND SCAFFOLDING HELP
INDIVIDUALS GROW. BUT SYSTEMS DETERMINE
WHO GETS THE CHANCE TO GROW AT ALL.

The ENVIRONMENTS we're
placed in profoundly shape:



Insights from 1M+ tax & patent records:

- *Kids in the top 1% are 10× more likely to become inventors than kids below the median income.*
- *Even when matched for the same math skills, wealthy kids → double the innovation rate.*
- *Low-income high-ability kids. are called “Lost Einsteins”: brilliant but blocked by circumstance.*

Economist Raj Chetty to speak on ‘Creating Equality of Opportunity in America’

Lecture will detail how big data can help combat child poverty and inform policy

January 9, 2023



How can we give children from all backgrounds a better chance of succeeding? Harvard economist Raj Chetty will discuss his efforts to study the science of economic opportunity using big data—and to propose scalable policy solutions—as the Winter 2023 Distinguished Public Policy Lecturer at Northwestern University's Institute for Policy Research (IPR). Register now for his in-person lecture on “Creating Equality of Opportunity in America: New Insights from Big Data” on Monday, February 20, 2023, at 3:30 p.m. CT at the Global Hub, 2211 Campus Dr. on Northwestern University's Evanston Campus.

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CHETTY FOUND THE MECHANISM:

IT WASN'T WEALTH ALONE.

IT WAS EXPOSURE TO INNOVATORS.

WOMEN AND GIRLS, IN PARTICULAR, LOSE OPPORTUNITY WHEN THEY DON'T SEE THEMSELVES REPRESENTED IN ROLES OF INNOVATION.



Great systems do three things:



Open doors

for those historically excluded



Offer windows

when doors are closed




Break ceilings

that keep potential suppressed

Systems of opportunity include:

- **ADMISSIONS THAT LOOK FOR TRAJECTORY, NOT PEDIGREE**
- **HIRING THAT VALUES GROWTH CAPACITY, NOT POLISH**
- **TEAMS THAT TREAT IDEAS AS BOTTOM-UP, NOT TOP-DOWN**
- **SCHOOLS THAT SCAFFOLD LATE BLOOMERS, NOT SORT EARLY BLOOMERS**

The background of the entire slide is a photograph of a snowy forest at night. In the foreground, there are several evergreen trees covered in snow. The sky is dark, and a vibrant green aurora borealis is visible, creating a glowing effect across the upper half of the image. The text is overlaid on this background.

“I think there is a
brilliant child locked
inside every student.”
— Marva Collins

Finland didn't simply improve its schools.

It changed its assumptions, rewired its culture, and
built systems where every child could rise.

FINLAND WINS PISA

Timeline:

- **2000:** First global PISA exam → Finland ranks #1
- **2003:** Wins again
- **2006:** Wins a third time
- **2012:** Finnish adults also rank #1 in global skills

The Secret

FINLAND BUILDS EQUITY
INTO THE FOUNDATION,
NOT AS AN AFTERTHOUGHT

A Culture of Opportunity for All

Key Finnish Assumptions:

- ▶ Intelligence has many forms
- ▶ Every student has potential
- ▶ Schools should develop, not select, talent
- ▶ “We can’t afford to waste a brain”

Contrast with U.S. assumptions:

- ▶ Talent is innate and visible early
- ▶ Systems are built to identify the gifted
- ▶ Early bloomers get resources; late bloomers get labels



what FINLAND *actually did*



TEACHING BECOMES A HIGH-STATUS PROFESSION



ALL TEACHERS EARN MASTER'S DEGREES



SALARIES RISE AND APPLICANT POOLS STRENGTHEN



SCHOOLS ADOPT TEACHER AUTONOMY, NOT BUREAUCRACY



TEACHERS COLLABORATE ON SHAPING CURRICULUM & CULTURE

The 3 Pillars of Finland's Opportunity System

INDIVIDUALIZED RELATIONSHIPS (LOOPING)

Teachers stay with the same students for 2–6 years, building deep insight into: Strengths, Needs, Motivation, Learning patterns.

→ **Result:** higher achievement, especially for struggling students.

INDIVIDUALIZED SUPPORT (EARLY INTERVENTIONS)

Principals and teachers personally tutor students, Special education is not stigmatized, Extra support comes before failure, not after.

→ **Result:** Students don't fall through cracks.

INDIVIDUALIZED INTERESTS (PERSONALIZED LEARNING)

Teachers help students pursue passions, Learning plans adapt to the child, Success is measured by growth, not comparison

WHAT THIS MEANS FOR US: REWRITING OPPORTUNITY

Assume everyone can grow



Invest early and equitably



Prioritize relationships,
support, and passion



Value teachers as
transformational professionals



Design culture intentionally,
not incidentally



Why Play Is the Foundation

In Finnish kindergarten:

- ☐ Academic instruction = 1 day/week
- ☐ Lessons = 45 minutes
- ☐ Recess = 15 minutes after every lesson
- ☐ Most learning happens through play

What children do:

- ☐ Games
- ☐ Nature exploration
- ☐ Building
- ☐ Arts & crafts

PLAY BUILDS COGNITIVE SKILLS AND CHARACTER SKILLS

THE POWER OF READING AS AN OPPORTUNITY ENGINE

- Reading is the gateway to every other subject.
- Motivation to read predicts long-term growth.

Finland's reading innovations:

- Free book bags for every newborn
- Home reading rituals encouraged
- Teachers help children choose books based on passions
- "Library recess" and reading in the forest
- Students share book reflections with peers, not just teachers

CONTRASTS:

- Many high-performing Asian systems: excellence with high stress
- U.S. elite schools: high achievement + high anxiety/depression
- Finland: high performance + high life satisfaction
- Only **2.9 hours of homework per week**
- #1 in the world for **learning efficiency** (performance per hour of study)

FINLAND'S QUIET REVOLUTION:

- No burnout
- No perfectionist pressure
- No cram culture
- Deep learning through joy, autonomy, and well-being

PART FOUR

And FINALLY..





Dreams aren't naïve.
They're FUEL.

They are your
DIRECTION, the
COMPASS *that*
points you to who
you can become.

Let's consider...

HIDDEN POTENTIAL & THE IMPOSTER PARADOX


Imposter syndrome feels like evidence of **inadequacy**, but what would happen if we used it as **evidence of growth**?

When others believe in you more than you believe in yourself, it's not that they're overestimating you; **you're underestimating yourself.**

Hidden potential is what lies on the other side of self-doubt.

WHAT SUCCESS REALLY MEANS

The most **meaningful distance** we travel is the distance between who we were **yesterday** and who we're becoming **tomorrow.**

A blue door with a handle and a lock, serving as a background for the text.

UNLEASHING
HIDDEN
POTENTIAL IS
THE GREATEST
ACCOMPLISHMENT
OF ALL.

SELF INVESTED

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