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A PATTERN IN YOUR LIFE



Certain things just are. We call such a thing a phenomenon. Take gravity, for example. Gravity is a phenomenon. You don't have to know anything about gravity to take advantage of it. It's just the way the world is.

Well, there's a phenomenon that shapes all human beings (including you). Here's how it works. Every person really is unique. As in one-of-a-kind. That uniqueness manifests itself through the person's behavior. It turns out that every individual lives out a pattern of behavior again and again throughout their life. It's the most natural way for them to function. Indeed, they don't think of doing life any other way.

HOW WARREN BUFFETT BECAME RICH

Later I'll show you how to detect your own pattern. For now, let me just pick someone who is well known and about whom we have lots of data from which to draw some conclusions: Warren Buffett, the world-renowned investor.

In 2003, a Wall Street analyst named Alice Schroeder took a leave of absence from Morgan Stanley to engage in a biographical study of

Warren Buffett's life. With his full cooperation, the project culminated in *The Snowball: Warren Buffett and the Business of Life*. The book is fascinating from many angles, but I regard it as a textbook case in demonstrating the phenomenon of giftedness.

Schroeder tells us that from childhood, Buffett displayed a fascination bordering on an obsession with numbers and the analysis of numbers. For example, as a boy in church: "He liked the sermons, he was bored by the rest of the service; he passed the time by calculating the life span of hymn composers from their birth and death dates in the hymnals. . . . He assumed that hymn composers would live longer than average. Living longer than average seemed to him an important goal."¹

Sometimes he would sit on his friend's porch in Omaha, Nebraska, writing down the license-plate numbers of passing cars. He liked calculating the frequency of the letters and numbers used on the plates.

At six he began selling gum in his neighborhood—never single sticks, only packs of five—for a nickel. Soon he was buying six-packs of Coca Cola for 25 cents, then reselling single bottles for 5 cents, a 20 percent profit. Young Warren's favorite toy was—what else?—a money changer.

The tradition in Buffett's family was for each child, when they were ten, to accompany their father to the East Coast to visit the sites they most wanted to see. For Warren the choice was easy: New York City, to visit the Scott Stamp and Coin Company, the Lionel Train Company (Warren spent hours poring over Lionel catalogues), and the New York Stock Exchange.

Not long after that, Buffett came across a library book entitled *One Thousand Ways to Make \$1,000* (in the 1940s, \$1,000 was a lot of money). He devoured the book, especially the concept of compounding. He became fascinated by the way that "numbers exploded as they grew at a constant rate over time," such that even "a small sum could eventually grow into a fortune. He could picture the numbers compounding as vividly as the way a snowball grew when he rolled it across the lawn" (hence the title of the book). "Warren began to think about time in a different way. Compounding married the present to the future. If a dollar today

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was going to be worth ten some years from now, then in his mind the two were the same.”²

With that insight, Buffett confidently told his family he would be a millionaire by the time he was thirty-five.

In college Buffett read *The Intelligent Investor*, by Benjamin Graham. According to his roommate, “It was almost like he found a god.” Ben Graham was teaching at Columbia University in New York, along with his colleague David Dodd. Together they had coauthored a seminal text entitled *Security Analysis*. Buffett determined he would go to graduate school there and study under these wizards of finance and investing.

Upon graduating, he wanted more than anything else to work for Graham’s investment firm, Graham-Newman. But Graham turned him down. That did not deter Buffett. He returned to Omaha and became a stockbroker, but he continued to correspond with his mentor. He sent him stock tips and occasionally visited New York to see him. Finally, in 1954, Graham and his partner hired Buffett.

For two years, he worked as a securities analyst, quickly making himself the darling of the firm. Then Ben Graham announced he was retiring. Buffett was invited to become a general partner, but he declined. Without Graham, he had no interest in working at a New York investment firm.

So Buffett again returned to Omaha. At twenty-six, he had already made enough money to retire (when he began his studies at Columbia, Buffett had \$9,800 in assets; since then his shrewd investments had grown 61 percent annually to \$174,000). But he was eager to reach his goal of becoming a millionaire. So he formed a partnership named Buffett Associates, Ltd., and invited just six family members and close friends to join him. They all put in \$105,000. Buffett put in \$100.

The rest, as they say, is history. Buffett’s company (later renamed Berkshire-Hathaway) is now the ninth leading public company in the world, worth an estimated \$250 billion. The firm’s annual growth in book value has averaged 19.7 percent to shareholders for the last forty-eight years (compared to 9.4 percent from companies listed on Standard & Poor’s). Buffett himself is believed to hold \$62 billion of personal wealth.

EVERYONE HAS A PATTERN

You can see a consistent pattern throughout Warren Buffett's life, from childhood to the present. He keeps using certain abilities, like analyzing, assessing worth, and recognizing patterns and anomalies. He keeps working with certain subject matter, like numbers, the concept of compounding, and business information. He prefers to do things on his own, and in his own way. When he wants to learn about something, he likes to go directly to the source, to the person who knows the most about it. And of course he measures his results by the dispassionate metric of profit. Many other aspects of Buffett's pattern could be cited from Schroeder's book.

Here's what's important: *every person has their own unique pattern of behavior and motivation.* That pattern begins in childhood and remains consistent throughout their life. Others may have similar patterns, but no two people have exactly the same pattern.

I could illustrate this phenomenon of a motivational pattern with countless other well-known people: Bill Gates, Steve Jobs, Oprah Winfrey, Winston Churchill, Adolf Hitler, Michelangelo, Mother Teresa, Martin Luther King Jr., Leonard Bernstein, Karl Wallenda, Lyndon Johnson, Jim Henson, Judy Garland, C. S. Lewis, Peter Drucker, Evel Knievel, Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart, Ben Carson, Margaret Thatcher, Nelson Mandela, I. M. Pei, Alexander the Great, John James Audubon. The list is endless.

"But Bill," I hear someone saying, "those are all world-class people. That wouldn't be the case for everyday folks."

Actually, it is—for two reasons. First, because *everyone*—including all of the people I mentioned—starts out as "everyday folks." No one is born world-class. But when a so-called average person follows their pattern, they may well end up at the world-class level.

But now let's define what we mean by "world class." That's not the same as having celebrity status. Someone can be world-famous, but not world-class. World-class means being among the best in the world at what you do. Whether or not anyone else knows about it is another story.

By that measure, I could tell you about teachers, appliance repair guys, mechanics, storytellers, editors, waiters, toll booth collectors, mis-

sionaries, bank tellers, and countless other no-name people who function at a world-class level.

Fame is just a distraction. Our aim in life ought not to become famous but to become the best at what we do.

Not only are all of us born as “everyday folks,” we all have a pattern. Everyone! You. Me. The members of our families. Our friends. Our neighbors. Our coworkers. Our allies. Our enemies. Everyone.

How can I be so sure about that? Because for the last fifty years and more, a handful of people (myself among them) have engaged in a methodical, objective process of discovering people’s patterns in order to help them make strategic decisions, both personally and professionally. Hundreds of thousands of individuals have gone through that process. Every single one of them had a pattern. No one has ever been found who doesn’t have a pattern. When you find that kind of consistency, you conclude that human beings by their nature function according to patterns. In other words, there’s a phenomenon at work. It’s just the way the world is.

GIFTEDNESS—AND YOU

Does that phenomenon have a name? Actually it has many names. For example, we say that someone has a certain “bent” or “style.” Or that someone is “wired” to do a certain thing. Or that someone is operating in their “sweet spot.” The French have a wonderful word for it, “*métier*,” meaning an area of activity in which one excels. And of course, we’ve all heard someone explain a person’s behavior by saying, “Oh, he’s just being Fred,” or, “That is so like Sherry,” and somehow we know exactly what they mean. We instinctively recognize people’s patterns, even if we know nothing about the phenomenon.

The term I use for the way that people live out their patterns is *giftedness*. It’s not the most elegant term, but I haven’t yet found a better one. It’s also a term I hear a lot of people using nowadays, but I don’t think most of them really know what they’re talking about.

So let me offer a definition:

Giftedness is not just what you can do but what you are born to do, enjoy doing, and do well.

Giftedness is the unique way in which you function. It's a set of inborn core strengths and natural motivation you instinctively and consistently use to do things that you find satisfying and productive. Giftedness is not just what you can do but what you are born to do, enjoy doing, and do well.

Notice the words “inborn,” “natural,” and “instinctively.” They point to the fact that giftedness is just that—a gift. Your giftedness is not something you acquire or go to school to get. It's just there, in you. You didn't ask for it. You didn't have to pay for it. It's just you.

If everyone has giftedness, then why do so many people hate their jobs?

Let me be clear about how I'm using the term *giftedness*. In popular culture, we call people “gifted” if they show unusual talent—superstars like Michael Jordan, James Taylor, Meryl Streep, Stephen Hawking, Michael Phelps. I won't argue that such people are amazing. And there is undoubtedly a correlation between their giftedness and the thing they do.

But giftedness is, in fact, common. Not all of us rise to “world-class” status (although I suspect we have more Michael Jordans and Oprah Winfreys walking around than we realize). As we've already seen, each of us displays a consistent pattern of behavior, which is expressed even in the everyday, mundane affairs of life. What we wear, who we associate with, what kind of car we drive, who we vote for, what our religious convictions are (if any), what we watch on TV or click on online—all are part of our unique pattern.

Giftedness is not for a fortunate few. It is part of the human condition.

Perhaps one reason why “gifted” is so often applied to the elite is because certain children in schools are determined to be exceptional learners and given enhanced learning opportunities, called “talented and gifted” (TAG) programs or “gifted and talented education” (GATE or G/T). I'm all for these endeavors. But I still hold that all children, regardless of IQ or any other scale of functioning, possess their own form of giftedness—their own particular pattern of motivated behavior.

Is giftedness related to intelligence? No. Even someone who functions at a low level will display a bent toward a particular way of “doing life.”

Is giftedness related to your work? We'll be looking at this later, but no, giftedness is not an occupational title. Many people nowadays identify themselves according to what they do for work: "I'm a lawyer, salesman, homemaker, student," and so on. But I would point out that before you are an occupation, you are a *person*. What you happen to be doing for a career may fit your personhood—but you are not your job.

BUT WHAT ABOUT . . . ?

By this point, I know I've raised a thousand questions: Where does giftedness come from? If it's inborn, then what about the influence of one's environment? What about people with disabilities or mental issues? What about genetic factors? How does giftedness relate to personality? This sounds intriguing, but where's the science for it—the research, the numbers, the control studies? If everyone has giftedness, then why do so many people hate their jobs? If I have my giftedness, why can't I figure out what to do with my life? By saying giftedness is about what people enjoy doing, aren't you just giving them an excuse to live self-indulgently? And what about people living in poverty? Is giftedness just a luxury? What if it turns out someone doesn't like their giftedness? How can giftedness be instinctive when people spend their whole lives becoming who they are?

In addition, you may be asking more practical questions like: How can I find a job that fits me? I already know what I want to do, so how can I get paid to do that? How can I get along better with my boss and/or coworkers? My child has learning differences; do you have any advice on dealing with that? How can I help my twentysomething son or daughter decide on a career? I want to get married, so how do I find the right person? Now that my kids are grown up, what can I do that will be meaningful and satisfying? How can I make my life count?

So many questions! You can see why, when I'm at a party or a dinner and someone asks what I do, I often end up being the center of attention for a while, answering questions about giftedness. People find this stuff fascinating. So did I when I first heard about it years ago.

That's because giftedness is all about the one thing we all care about

Each of us is meant to be a gift to others, if we use our gifts appropriately.

the most—ourselves. But not in a self-absorbed way. Rather, giftedness opens up a way to talk about ourselves that actually takes us outside of ourselves. We not only discover that our giftedness is a gift to us but a deeper truth—that each of us is meant to be a gift to others, if we use our gifts appropriately.

How you read this book and what you do with it is totally up to you. But I would point out that how you learn about your giftedness will itself be driven by your particular giftedness. Because that's you. That's how you do life.

I want to honor that. Indeed, I want to celebrate that! That's why I wrote this book. I believe there is something important you were put here to do—something *only* you can do. As Steve Jobs said shortly before he died, “Your time is limited, so don't waste it living someone else's life.”

I couldn't agree more. But if you don't know what your giftedness is, you're liable to do just that.