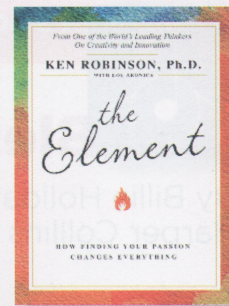


The Element: How Finding Your Passion Changes Everything

By Sir Kenneth Robinson, PhD, with Lou Aronica
Viking, 2009



There is a place down deep that all imaginative humans seek when creating. It is fairly difficult to describe, but it is there that life takes on radiance and a soul-touching sweetness. People sometimes compare this place to what heaven might be like. In the moments we are allowed into this rarified domain, life is unspeakably good and all-consuming. We are unaware of time, and our eyes are opened to truths and all kinds of awakenings. To get there, we have to be in a state of complete comfort and satisfaction, doing what we do best from a place where life flows, and where it takes little effort to assign great intensity to any task.

The luminary English author Sir Kenneth Robinson has written a compelling book about the importance of *finding* this place. He calls it “The Element” and describes it as “the meeting point between natural aptitude and personal passion”—i.e., “I get it. I love it. I want it. Where is it?”¹ He feels we are all born with tremendous natural capacities but can lose touch with them as we spend time in the world. He also feels “too many people never connect with their true talents and don’t know what they’re capable of achieving of who they really are.” Their resources are therefore undiscovered, and often their lives are not fully lived.

Throughout the book, he has a fairly cautious attitude about schools and teaching in general and the mistakes made in assessing students. In one of many true examples, he writes about a young girl named Gillian who couldn’t sit still—the typical “move-all-the-time child.” It was so troubling to the teacher that she insisted the

girl be assessed by a psychiatrist, with the possibility of medicine looming in the distance to cope with what was perceived as a possible ADD condition. The wise doctor interviewed the girl (who later told him that she could think better when she was moving), and at the end of the meeting, he and her mother left the girl alone in the room for a minute with some music playing. Looking through the two-way mirror, they saw Gillian begin to move immediately, subsequently turning to all-out dance. He told the girl’s mother to get her dance lessons and that she was clearly *meant* to move! She turned out to be Gillian Lynne, who became a very famous English dancer and choreographer.

Robinson gives other compelling examples of how teachers often miss helping students find their “element”: In a commencement speech he once gave in Liverpool, Sir Paul McCartney spoke afterwards to the points Robinson had made. He shared that he’d never liked music at all in the schools, that he went through his entire education without anyone noticing that he had any musical talent at all. He was turned down at his tryout for the choir of Liverpool Cathedral, and ironically, this very choir ultimately staged two of his classical pieces. John Cleese from *Monty Python* admitted in an interview with Robinson that he did very well at school but not at comedy, the thing that actually shaped his life. He said that he went all the way from kindergarten to Cambridge, and none of his teachers noticed that he had any sense of humor at all!

Robinson had me galvanized early in the book when he spoke of how we

hypothetically get into “The Element” by “leaving the city of our comfort and going into the wilderness of our intuitions.” I think Carl Orff would have lit up reading this description, for “in the wilderness of our intuitions” is certainly where Orff Schulwerk lives. The invitation to the candy store of Orff activities—singing, dancing, moving, creating, playing elemental instruments, rhythm, speech play, and glorious improvisation—is bound to captivate students *somewhere* and help them find where their “element” might be. And like Orff, Robinson recognizes that the pursuit of “The Element” should start early, as he speaks of the “wonderful confidence young children have in their own imaginations” and “never to underestimate the vital importance of finding early in life, the work that for you is play!”

The Element is a heavenly platform where human potential can be fully realized and where occasionally the world splits open, allowing us to “vibrate in the resonance of the moment and revel in epiphanies.” I believe the reader will agree with Robinson’s description of his book—that it is a “hymn to the breathtaking diversity of human talent and passion, and to our extraordinary potential for growth and development.” It should be required reading for Orff Schulwerk teachers and Boards of Education! ■

Judith Thomas is an internationally known Orff Schulwerk educator, clinician, and author who has delighted in bringing children and teachers to Orff Schulwerk for the past four decades.

1. Sir Kenneth Robinson, PhD, with Lou Aronica, *The Element: How Finding Your Passion Changes Everything* (New York: Viking, 2009), 2.