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DISCOVER your GENIUS

HOW TO THINK LIKE
HISTORY'S TEN MOST
REVOLUTIONARY MINDS

MICHAEL J. GELB

AUTHOR OF THE BESTSELLER

How to Think Like Leonardo da Vinci



DISCOVER YOUR GENIUS

*How to Think Like History's
Ten Most Revolutionary Minds*

Michael J. Gelb

ILLUSTRATIONS BY
NORMA MILLER



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The New Mind Map

To my parents, Joan and Sandy Gelb,
whose example brings to life these sacred words:

*Happy are those who find wisdom
She is more precious than jewels,
And nothing you desire can compare with her
Her ways are ways of pleasantness, and all her paths are peace.*



The Talmud says, “In the world to come each of us will be called to account for all the good things God put on earth that we refused to enjoy.” My wish for you is that you will use the wisdom of these great characters to keep that session as brief as possible.

—MICHAEL J. GELB

FOREWORD

Michael Gelb invites us to explore and apply the essential qualities of ten geniuses in a uniquely engaging personal manner. These extraordinary individuals all changed the world, and Gelb guides us to use their inspiration and example to change the way we look at our lives. Each of the geniuses he introduces was driven by an unquenchable passion for their particular kinds of truth and beauty. Copernicus's act of remodeling the heavens, for example, was one of aesthetic cleansing, creating, as he claimed, a harmonious celestial body or perfect temple where the efforts to save the old theory had resulted in a monstrous structure.

We all have experienced the surprise at how different a street looks when we turn around and see it from another point of view. Most of history walks in one direction. Some geniuses have enabled us to turn around and look the other way, backwards or sideways. Leonardo, for example, noted how the so-called vanishing point toward which furrows in a ploughed field appear to converge seems to move with us as we walk beside the field. The genius not only alters our viewpoint, but also pulls our perspective into line with his or hers.

Through some magnificent act of insight, intuition, inspiration, brain wave, conviction, whatever we might call it, the genius sees or senses something from a different perspective. Their new perspective provides a view that ultimately proves so compelling that we can never see things in quite the same way again. What they see is often a bigger picture than we can readily grasp. And they can do this because they sense how the parts

fit into the whole, the deeper harmonic resonance of things that may seem on the surface to be unrelated.

Originally conceived as an external guardian spirit, the notion of genius (from the root *genare*, “to generate, or beget”) evolved by the Renaissance to represent an innate talent, or special kind of in-built virtue in a specific area of accomplishment. Some argue, however, that the notion of individual genius is fundamentally flawed, nothing more than a construct of the Romantic era of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. The Romantics themselves captured the notion that there is something beyond reason in the supreme achievements of those who transcended the limitations that beset even their ablest contemporaries. Through the history of genius there runs a persistent strain, picked up by Shakespeare, that to be transformingly great you might, perhaps, need to be a bit mad.

There is a sense in which resorting to metaphors of the transcendent is inevitable in talking about genius. This might just be a matter of cliché. But I don’t think so. Understanding genius requires awareness of context, cultural milieu, history, and more, yet the individual component remains. We still can’t define it directly, pin it down by verbal formula. But, we can recognize it when we see or sense it (even though it may take centuries to do so), and can gain a grip on its elusive quality through creative imagination.

Is it daft to attempt to model our selves on the transcendent genius of a Copernicus, Brunelleschi, or Einstein? No, not if we consider that all these great minds applied essential principles of focus and purposefulness to the clarification of their core insights. Moreover, in the face of the monstrous structure of mass-media culture, the emphasis in these pages on a personal access to genius, beauty, and truth can enrich our lives aesthetically, intellectually, and morally.

Of course we will all be able to quibble with Michael Gelb’s choices while recognizing the exemplary nature of those he has included, not as exemplary human beings in all cases, but as exemplary of what humans can potentially achieve, if only we believe in what we can do.

—*Martin Kemp, Professor of the History of Art at the University of Oxford*

A C K N O W L E D G M E N T S

The challenge of combining accessibility with accuracy in bringing these great figures to life for you could not have been met without the help of an extraordinary “genius board” of advisers. I am very grateful to these exceptional scholars for their critiques and contributions:

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Since 1978 I’ve had the privilege of working with many of the most creative leaders in business internationally, leaders who strive to apply the genius principles in their personal and professional lives. Some who were especially helpful in this project include Ed Bassett, Tim Podesta, David Chu, Dennis Ratner, Jim D’Agostino, Marcia Weider, Debbie Dunnam, Nina Lesavoy, Eddie Oliver, Ketan Patel, Marv Damsma, Tony Hayward, Gerry Kirk, Mark Hannum, Susan Greenburg, and Harold Montgomery.

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INTRODUCTION

On the Shoulders of Giants

You were born with the potential for genius. We all were; just ask any mother.

In 1451, in the Italian seaport of Genoa, a new mother saw it in the eyes of her firstborn child, unaware that the scintillating power of the 100 billion neurons in his brain would one day redefine the shape of the planet on which she lived. Decades later, the wife of a prosperous Polish merchant saw it in the eyes of her baby, though she would never have dared to predict that the connections his adult mind would eventually make would effectively reorder the universe. Three centuries and an ocean away, a woman of land and privilege didn't know that what she saw in the eyes of her child was the dawn of the capacity to grasp and synthesize the essence of Classical, Renaissance, and Enlightenment thinking—and reinvent the notion of personal liberty for centuries to come.

Few of us may claim to be geniuses, but almost every parent will tell you of the spark of genius they saw the first moment they looked into their new baby's eyes. Your mother saw it too. And although she may not have realized it, the newborn brain she saw at work shared the same miraculous potential as the infant minds that would one day achieve the greatness described above.

Even if you have yet to revolutionize anyone's ideas about the planet or its inhabitants, you came into the world with the same spark of genius beheld so long ago by the mothers of Christopher Columbus, Nicolaus Copernicus, and Thomas Jefferson. By its very design, the human brain harbors vast potential for memory, learning, and creativity. Yours does too—far more than you may think. The 100-billion-neuron tally is a simple fact of human physiology, according to the great neurologist Sir Charles Sherrington, who described the human brain as “an enchanted loom” ready to weave a unique tapestry of creative self-expression.

But its power can be as elusive as it is awesome, and can be unlocked only with the knowledge of how to develop that potential, and put those hundreds of billions of fact-learning, connection-building neurons to work in the most effective, creative ways possible. It's far from automatic. We must learn to make the most of what we have—even if that requires us to accept on faith the premise that we have more than we're already using.

Fortunately, we don't have to do it alone. History has produced enough intellectual giants to convince anyone of the potential power of the human

We were all infant prodigies.

—THOMAS MANN

brain. Familiar to all of us, their discoveries and innovations have shaped the world in which we live. But as indebted as we are to them for the fruits of their mental labor, we can also turn to the most revolutionary minds in history for guidance and inspiration on how to use our brains to realize our own unique gifts. For just as they have shown us the way in geography, astronomy, and government, these great minds can also show us the way to our own full potential. We needn't aspire to the same incomparable heights to learn from their accomplishments; after all, they've already done their work. But who among us doesn't have to restructure our universe, redefine our world, or renegotiate our relationships with others on an almost daily basis? Indeed, such are the dynamics by which our individuality is developed and expressed.

The full expression of our unique genius does not come without our concerted effort; it requires our embarking upon a deliberate plan for

personal development. In a world that drives us down toward a lowest common denominator of taste, thought, and feeling, we all need all the help we can get in manifesting the best in ourselves. Think about it: your brain is the most powerful learning and creative problem-solving system in the world. But most of us know less about how our brains work than we do about our cars. Of course, cars come with instruction manuals and brains don't; even in school, most of us spend more time studying history, mathematics, literature, and other subjects than trying to understand and apply the most important subject of all, learning how to learn.

The individuals whom history recognizes as revolutionary geniuses have done a better job than most of harnessing the mind power with which they were born. Part of their success can be attributed to an intuitive understanding of how to learn. You can learn anything you want to, and you'll surprise yourself with what you can achieve when you know how to learn. In *Discover Your Genius* you'll develop that understanding for yourself. And as you apply the wisdom of history's great minds, you'll improve your mental abilities as you get older.

Imagine unleashing your creativity by enjoying the benefits of the mental play that helped inspire the theory of relativity. Or evaluating your business climate with the combination of keen observation and an open mind that yielded the theory of evolution. Or navigating your life path with the same love of knowledge and truth that spawned all of Western philosophy.

The individuals behind these revolutions of thought live on in our collective memory as models for tackling the challenges that lie ahead. The difference between your mind and theirs is smaller than you think, and is less determined by inborn capacity than by passion, focus, and strategy—all of which are yours to develop. Harvard biologist Edward O. Wilson writes that the great minds of history “were obsessed; they burned within. But they also had an intuitive grasp of inborn human nature accurate enough to select commanding images from the mostly inferior thoughts that stream

*Study and in general the
pursuit of truth and beauty
is a sphere of activity in
which we are permitted to
remain children all our lives.*

—ALBERT EINSTEIN

For the first time in human history the genius of the human race is available for all to harvest.

—JEAN HOUSTON, PH.D.,
AUTHOR OF *THE POSSIBLE*
HUMAN AND JUMP TIME

through the minds of all of us. The talent they wielded may have been only incrementally greater, but their creations appeared to others to be qualitatively new. They acquired enough influence and longevity to translate into lasting fame, not by magic, not by divine benefaction, but by a quantitative edge in powers shared in smaller degree with those less gifted. They gathered enough lifting speed to soar above the rest.”

In *Discover Your Genius* you’ll learn how ten of history’s greatest geniuses gained the “lifting speed” they needed to change the world. You’ll see how they identified and embraced the “commanding images” that led them to the revolutionary ideas we now know so well. Through practical exercises, you’ll discover how their breakthrough thinking principles can help you sharpen your edge for real-world results. And by getting to know these ten extraordinary individuals, you’ll glimpse the boundless range of human potential in ways that will ignite your own passion for growth and inspire you to soar to new heights of professional success and personal fulfillment. Most important, by studying the lives and minds of others, you will learn to be more fully and truly yourself.

You have been modeling yourself on others all your life. That potential genius into whose eyes your mother gazed was soon returning her look, mirroring her smile, discovering how to be a person by doing what other people did. Learning through imitation is central to the mental development of many species, humans included. But as we become adults, we gain a unique advantage: we can choose whom and what to imitate. We can also consciously select new models to replace the ones we outgrow. It makes sense, therefore, to choose the best role models to inspire and guide us to the realization of our potential.

Ever since I was a child I’ve been fascinated by the nature of genius, an interest that has evolved into my profession and life passion: guiding others to discover and realize their own potential for genius. As an exploration of that passion, I spent years immersed in studying the life and work of

Leonardo da Vinci, perhaps the greatest genius who ever lived. In addition to painting the eternally magnificent *Mona Lisa* and *Last Supper*, Leonardo designed ball bearings, gearshifts, underwater diving equipment, and, most incredibly, a parachute—long before anyone was able to fly (now that’s thinking ahead!). Leonardo’s amazing leaps of imagination and his ability to think far ahead of his time fired my passion for incorporating the lessons of genius into my own life and the lives of my students.

The expression of that passion, *How to Think Like Leonardo da Vinci*, has helped readers around the world claim this towering figure of history, a true giant of mind and spirit, as a personal guide to meeting the challenges of contemporary life. By approaching Leonardo’s unique genius as the sum of seven distinct principles that they can study and emulate, readers have been able to make this supreme genius a role model all their own.

Whom have you chosen to inspire and guide you in your life thus far? Who are your greatest heroes and heroines, your most inspirational role models? If you have already begun the process of mastering and implementing the seven da Vincian principles, you know firsthand the profound impact that your chosen role models can have on your life—and, in true da Vincian fashion, you are ready to discover what you can learn from other role models. There’s no need to limit yourself to Leonardo; after all, one hallmark of genius is the ability to internalize and integrate the thoughts and examples of previous great thinkers. Albert Einstein, for example, kept above his bed a portrait of Sir Isaac Newton, who himself advised that we can see farther if we “stand on the shoulders of giants.”

But on whose shoulders should we stand? This book arose from contemplation of the following three questions:

- ▲ In addition to Leonardo, who are the most revolutionary, breakthrough-thinking geniuses in human history?
- ▲ What is the essential lesson we can learn from each of these great minds?
- ▲ How can we apply the wisdom and experience of these great minds to bring more happiness, beauty, truth, and goodness to our lives, and the

lives of our children, in the midst of accelerating change, rampant materialism, and cultural chaos?

Discover Your Genius will bring you the incomparable power of ten of the most revolutionary, influential minds the world has known. If this pragmatic approach to history is new to you, you are in for a treat; immersing yourself in the life and work of history's greatest breakthrough thinkers provides rich nourishment for your mind and spirit. As you learn to "stand on their shoulders," you'll discover the truth of Mark Twain's statement: "Really great people make you feel that you, too, can become great."

YOUR GENIUS DREAM TEAM

In the pages that follow you will have the opportunity to get to know ten of the most amazing people who have ever lived. Each of these extraordinary individuals embodies a special "genius" characteristic that you are invited to emulate and integrate into your daily life.

Each genius is presented in a brief biography illustrating the role of the key principle in his or her life and work. We then explore how that principle can and does relate to you, including a self-assessment to measure its current impact, and a special highlight on the principle's potential application in the twenty-first-century world of work. Most important, you are offered an opportunity to enjoy a series of practical exercises to develop your mastery of each principle, and to implement its time-tested power in your own life today.

A reporter with whom I recently shared the principles of *Discover Your Genius* raised a concern that you may recognize. "I like basketball, but whatever I do I'll never be like Michael Jordan," he said. "So how can anyone even think of being like Leonardo, Einstein, or Elizabeth I?" I know how he feels; it's normal to feel humble when contemplating genius in any area of life. If