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## Answer Four Key Questions

*The forms of all things are derived from their genius.*

WILLIAM BLAKE

**YOU HAVE A GENIUS** that is inevitably linked to your work and career. Everyone does. And each person's genius is unique. Your genius can be thought of in a practical way: as the exceptional power that comes most naturally to you, as the process you undertake so spontaneously and easily that you do not notice it, and as the business in which you are engaged as a person. It can also be thought of in a mystical way: as the energy of your soul and as an answer to the question of why you exist within the human community. Your genius has been a source of success and satisfaction in work that you have done in the past, and it will be the source of success and satisfaction in your future work. It is a major factor in determining why some situations feel just right, while others feel just awful.

For more than twenty years, I have been helping people recognize their geniuses, through counseling and coaching relationships; personal development, career development, leadership, and

management-training workshops; and team-building processes. Over those years, I developed strategies and exercises to enable people to recognize themselves at a very deep level: the level of their own geniuses. The strategies and exercises, as well as the experience of guiding people toward recognizing their geniuses, form the core of this book.

Having done this work over such a long period, I was able to revisit people who have long recognized their geniuses and ask them, “So what? What difference has that recognition meant to you?” Their answers validate the idea that recognizing your genius can be a turning point in your life. An information technology consultant described it as life changing. A business consultant told me that she reframed her business, rewrote her corporate mission statement, renamed her company, and redesigned her Web site after recognizing her genius. A man who had recently begun a job search said that understanding his genius helped him explain the unique contribution he could make to prospective employers. The CEO of a sales-training company observed that recognizing his genius had helped him understand not only his successes but also his failures and avoid situations that were likely to fail. A project manager said, about both his work and his parenting, “It all flows back to my genius.” A marketing executive made a career change and is happy and thriving.

The people I spoke with often used the word *profound* to describe the experience of recognizing their geniuses and the effect that recognition has had on them. One of them said, “It was as if a celestial being of some sort looked over my shoulder and said, ‘It is good.’ I felt a powerful release from the unrealistic expectations of others—and of myself. Expectations that had not a prayer of becoming real but had the potential to be thought of as nagging shortcomings and disappointments.”

To summarize what I know from my own experience, and from what I have heard from other people, there are at least six significant advantages to recognizing your genius.

First, you gain a **stronger sense of identity**. Recognizing your genius provides you with a positive perception of yourself at a

deeper and more meaningful level than the sense generated by other self-assessment and self-awareness techniques. One person commented, “At the moment of naming my genius, my life was slammed into focus. What had been fuzzy, or had danced at the edge of consciousness, became clear. I instantly understood why I do what I do. I instantly understood why I don't do what I don't do. Most important, it made it OK that I do what I do and not what I don't.”

Second, recognizing your genius grants you a **clearer sense of direction**. It helps you understand that some situations will be ideal for you, while others will not. It helps you distinguish between the things that others have taught you that you should do, but that are not consistent with who you are, and the things that are consistent with who you are. When coupled with a sense of mission, recognizing your genius offers a glimpse, and perhaps a blinding flash, about the course your life must take in the future.

Third, those who have recognized their geniuses often report that they feel **increased confidence**. The deep self-knowledge that comes from recognizing your genius helps you know when you are on exactly the right track and to understand when you have within yourself exactly what is needed to reach your goals. When people have that knowledge, they seem to “catch fire,” to go about their work with renewed passion and determination.

Fourth, when you recognize your genius, you will also have the **language to communicate the value you can add** to the opportunities you pursue. People who come to recognize their geniuses are able to convey more easily to others who they are, what they do best, how and why they do what they do, and what they need in order to achieve success. This ability is invaluable when job seeking, deciding if a particular type of work is right for you, or explaining to clients how you can help them.

Fifth, you are likely to experience **satisfaction and productivity in your work** when you recognize your genius and choose work that engages it. Your genius has been involved during those periods when things seemed to flow, when you lost track of time and felt

fully engaged in whatever you were doing. Since the energy of your genius comes easily and spontaneously, you quite naturally enjoy it.

A man who has known his genius for about eight years said, “I’ve been able to change my work so that it’s more congruous with my genius. But there’s more. I not only feel more satisfaction; I actually get more done. I’m more productive. I devote myself to the work of my genius rather than frittering it away trying to do what I cannot do; I’m doing what I’m good at instead of breaking my neck trying to fix imagined deficiencies.”

Finally, there is a **sense of personal harmony** that arises when your genius is aligned with your everyday activities. One man said about recognizing his genius, “This knowledge provides a kind of inner peace. It’s hard to describe the feeling, but when I get up in the morning and engage people, I have a compass that guides me. And when I’m in my genius zone, I feel at peace. I’m home.”

## FOUR KEY QUESTIONS

The first step toward recognizing your genius is acknowledging that you do have a genius. The idea may seem surprising or quite foreign, yet it is an ancient one that has become impoverished in our culture. We tend to think of genius as a mental capacity, a number on an IQ test, or a quality attached only to those who achieve extraordinary creative accomplishments. The idea is much more fertile than that and has been alive in many cultures throughout many ages.

Today, we are more likely to agonize over our apparent shortcomings and failures than to recognize something unique and valuable about ourselves. In the time we take for self-reflection, we are usually busy asking what is wrong with us. “Why can’t I be more myself?” “How did my family contribute to my dysfunction?” “Why can’t I commit to a relationship?” “Why can’t I find satisfying work?” While it may be fruitful to shine the light of awareness on our problems and flaws, it is equally fruitful to bring our unique gifts out of the darkness. Your genius is one of your gifts.

If you have doubts that you do have a genius, I urge you to suspend those doubts and continue reading.

When you acknowledge that you have a genius, even if you do not understand its unique qualities, you will be better able to respond to four questions, and your answers can deliver invaluable guidance about your work and career. The initial question must be answered first because it is the foundation for answering the others.

## **1. What is your genius?**

Once you acknowledge that you do or may have a genius, the next step is to recognize its unique qualities. The following five chapters will help you do that.

## **2. Is your genius at work?**

This question has two meanings: Is your genius working in the way that it should? and Can you bring your genius to whatever work you are doing? When you have recognized your genius, you will know whether the work you are doing engages your genius sufficiently to provide success and satisfaction for you, whether and how it is possible for you to gain success and satisfaction where you are, whether a change would be better for you, and what kind of change that might be.

## **3. What is your purpose?**

Your purpose is a specific external expression of your genius. It is the earthly reason your genius exists. The concept of a purpose that provides direction for our lives has, like the concept of genius, been with us since ancient times and has existed in many variations and in many cultures. Unlike the idea of genius, however, it has become less clouded over time and has been addressed by many contemporary thinkers.

## 4. Is your genius on purpose?

Satisfaction, productivity, and success in your work arise to the extent that the work allows you to bring the energy of your genius to the fulfillment of your life's purpose.

In the diagram below, I use the term *self* to refer to the characteristics that make up the physical and psychological you. The diagram shows the self in its ideal form, as the perfect means by which your genius may act on your purpose within the context of your life and work. Your self, however, could either nurture or hamper your genius. For example, fear of failure hampers your genius by causing you to avoid needed action, while a more fearless attitude allows you to take necessary risks.



The shaded area of the diagram represents your life and work, which, like your self, either nurtures or hampers your genius and purpose. Your life and work together form the context within which your genius, self, and purpose come alive.

## ENGAGING THE HEART

The story of Francine and her genius illustrates the central importance of the first key question and shows how answering that question suggests answers to the others. Her story also conveys an overview of the concept of genius, a taste of the process that you must carry out in order to recognize your own genius, and a look into the relationship between genius and work.

Francine asked me to meet with her because an important decision about her work was brewing, and she wanted to sort out her thoughts and feelings. In a telephone conversation a few days before our meeting, I suggested that it would be useful to explore her genius.

Francine and I are colleagues and friends, and she already had a cursory understanding of the term *genius*. She also understood that her best chance for success and satisfaction is through work that engages her genius. Francine, feeling neither successful nor satisfied in her job, agreed that exploring her genius would be useful. We met over lunch on a sunny patio overlooking the Ohio River, and she told me why she thought she might need a change of jobs.

At the time, Francine was employed as a psychologist by a large corporation. Her job involved helping the company's managers to develop themselves, their people, and the work environment. On the surface, the job seemed perfect for her because she had devoted her career to helping other people grow in their understanding of themselves. But intellect and logic reigned in the company's culture, while emotion and hunches were suspect.

In her most recent performance appraisal, her boss had admonished her for crying during a meeting in which plans were made for a large downsizing. She explained to me that she felt sadness, because many people would have their lives overturned, as well as a sense of failure, because the company was not profitable enough to provide security for its people. Her show of feelings was disruptive, her boss had insisted. In his view, although the choice to downsize was difficult, it was, after all, the logical thing to do—the only thing to do. So she should have put her feelings aside.

Francine believed that although the decision to downsize was logical and right, sadness and acknowledgment that the act would cause pain were psychologically healthy ways of dealing with the situation. She was discouraged from offering to help those who were staying with the company deal with their feelings about the decision, the absence of friends and colleagues, and their own survivor guilt. It was not only Francine who was being asked to put feelings aside—everyone in the company was expected to do so. To

Francine, this work environment seemed detrimental, not because the company was downsizing or because profits were low, but because her feelings about the situation were judged disruptive.

She said, "I'm angry at myself. When I first went into this, I was not fully aware of what I was in for. I keep thinking I should do something better, but I don't know what to do. I get irritated with myself, then mad at everybody else. I have a great deal of anger that is deadly to express in that climate. So I hold it in and beat myself up a lot."

She sat back in her chair, arms folded tightly across her body. She told me about a presentation she had attended the previous day. The presenter showed an audience of managers a chart containing columns of figures. Several people immediately began tapping away at their calculators, checking the addition in the chart.

"They were more interested in whether the addition was correct than in what the numbers meant," she said. "And they love to catch mistakes. They love to one-up another person."

Francine usually accepts and often values the differences between herself and others, and she is not prone to criticizing other people. But on that day, her posture and tone of voice made it clear that she was repelled by the climate of evaluation, analysis, and intellectual superiority. Her repulsion was a clue to her genius. We often find the behavior and attitudes of others repellent when they give offense to our genius. Francine's unspoken question—"How could they possibly be like that?"—suggested that her genius functions in the opposite direction from analysis and evaluation.

I asked her to clarify the difference between herself and those around her at work.

She unfolded her arms, leaned forward, and said, "I have to get right down to what matters, to the heart of things and to the heart of each person I work with. When my heart is engaged, I know that something is good and right and has to be done. This is not an intellectual knowing, and it's not exactly a feeling. It's a deep inner knowledge."

As she spoke, her hands came alive in waves and flutters. Her attitude changed. She talked about getting to the heart of things with conviction and pride. Her eyes were alight.

I was listening to her in a special way, listening to the content of what she was saying and also for clues to her genius. Those clues are most often found in posture, gestures, tone of voice, emphasis, repetition, and choice of words. In this last declaration, Francine said “heart” three times, each time with more energy.

There is a firm rule about helping someone to recognize his or her genius, and this rule stipulates that the person is the only expert on his or her genius. I may offer guesses, observations, experience, and this special kind of listening, but the person, in this case, Francine, is the only authority, the only one who can really know.

I made a guess based on what I saw and what she had told me so far. Her heart must be involved in what she does, and she was frustrated that those around her seemed not to have their hearts involved, only their minds. Your frustration is another clue to your genius. You will feel frustrated when your genius is thwarted by the circumstances or people around you.

I said, “It sounds like your genius has something to do with bringing the heart into play. Is your genius Involving the Heart?”

The primary method for recognizing your genius is finding a name for it, like the one I proposed to Francine. The next few chapters will help you find the right name for your genius.

“The right word is not *involving*,” she said. “The heart is always involved. But it’s not always *engaged*.”

One of the more satisfying aspects of helping someone recognize his or her genius is that I don’t have to be right when I guess, only close, and the person will refine what I have offered. In fact, I am in danger of subverting the other person’s process if I maintain that I am right.

Francine was thoughtful for a moment and then said, “My genius isn’t Involving the Heart. It’s Engaging the Heart.”

**Appendix A** contains guidelines for people (such as coaches, counselors, etc.) who want to help a person recognize his or her genius (see page 171).

I was not sure how Francine distinguished between *involving* and *engaging*, but it doesn't matter if I understand. It only matters that she does.

After she said this—"Engaging the Heart"—she sat back again, her hands resting on the table, looking directly at me. There was a long moment of silence as she took in what she had just said, followed by a smile and a sigh of recognition. This is an important moment, this moment of recognizing your genius.

She said, "I had to learn the logical stuff that's so important to the people I work with, and I'm good at it. I know I'm smart; I have all the degrees to prove it. But I can't exist in that rational, logical framework all the time. There's more to life than being intellectually adept."

Francine's education had taught her about engaging the mind, but she did not have to learn about engaging the heart. It is her genius, which comes to her naturally and spontaneously. It is an aspect of herself that she values but had not fully recognized or appreciated. It is hard to imagine an organizational climate more antithetical to Francine's genius than the one in which she worked; she is all heart and affirmation, while the people around her were all intellect and analysis. Her experience as an employee of the company frustrated her because she believed that she was not able to "get down to what really matters" with most of the people around her

Plaintively, she asked, "How do you measure the human spirit? How do you measure what is in the human heart? It certainly can't be done with a calculator."

Francine told me that she was going to leave the company. Until that moment, she had not been certain whether or why she had to leave. She had only believed it might be best, and so she had waffled. The reasons for leaving her job became clear to her when she recognized her genius.

She said, "I'm going to search for work that engages my heart, that allows me to engage the hearts of others. And I want to work with people who are doing the same."

## ANSWERS

During our conversation, Francine answered the four key questions. First, she recognized her genius, Engaging the Heart. Everything else flowed from that recognition. Her answer to the question “Is your genius at work?” was “yes,” but her situation was complicated. While her genius was working in the way that it should (her own heart was clearly engaged in what she was doing), she could not bring it to her job without great cost—the pain of having her genius thwarted, rejected, and admonished. Francine was the all-too-common square peg in a round hole. She was angry with herself for not doing “something better” because she had not yet accepted and understood that she was different from those around her. In short, her genius was at work, but the cost was too high for her to bear.

Francine already had an answer to the question “What is your purpose?” before our conversation. She knew that her purpose had to do with creating productive workplaces that respect the human spirit. Although she had made a commitment to helping the company create such a workplace, and was acting in accordance with her own purpose, she was unable to maintain a positive attitude about her work, which consequently suffered.

This is an example of how your self might intervene to either facilitate or hinder your genius as it works to fulfill your purpose. Francine got in her own way when she failed to recognize from the beginning that her current situation was wrong for her, when she began berating herself and getting angry at those around her, and when she continually tried to fit her square self into the company’s round hole. In order to get out of her own way, she would have to continue to recognize her genius, seek work that makes the best use of it and allows her to fulfill her purpose, and surround herself with people who value what she has to offer. She would have to be alert for the signs that indicate she is in the wrong place. She would have to try less to fit in and more to seek or create situations that fit who she is.

Your self also addresses the inevitable compromises that you must face when you try to satisfy all of your values, when you try, for example, to be both creative and secure or both wealthy and self-sacrificing. Francine's job was high paying. Would she have to compromise on her salary or lifestyle if she chose to work at engaging her heart and the hearts of others? In order to answer that question, she would have to explore job options.

Francine answered the question "Is your genius on purpose?" with "yes." The problems she was experiencing were not about bringing her genius to her purpose but about where she chose to do so.

## A WAY OF UNDERSTANDING

Clearly, your genius has important implications for your work and career, as it did for Francine. Your situation may be quite different from hers. For example, you may be content in your job but experiencing the sense that there is something else—or something more—that you are expected or want to do. In any case, the imperative to find work and embark on a career that will allow you to express your genius is the same as it was for Francine. When you recognize your genius, you also may realize that your work situation requires change. This realization will probably not be news to you. More likely, recognizing your genius will give you a way of understanding something that you have sensed for some time.

It is also possible that, if your current situation works well for you, you will recognize why it does. You might also discover that minor changes, less dramatic than Francine's, will make an enormous difference to you. For example, Jerry, a chemical engineer, was disenchanted with his work in the research laboratory of a petrochemical company. He calls his genius Offering Solutions—somewhat of a pun on his work as a chemist. Jerry would love to help you do a crossword puzzle, discover the best route to a driv-

ing destination, or identify that strange new noise coming from your car's engine. Although his job did involve finding solutions to problems, there just wasn't enough of offering solutions to others. Finding a solution without handing it off to someone who would put the solution into practice wasn't enough to satisfy Jerry's genius.

After much discussion between Jerry and his boss, the company found a new role for Jerry. It had been considering the experiment of equipping a truck with a chemical lab. The truck would be on call for problems with oil-drilling rigs and other heavy equipment that might require lubricants custom mixed on the spot. The company assigned Jerry to the experiment, giving him an opportunity to offer solutions.

When you recognize your genius as well as Francine and Jerry do, you will be able to avoid work that is wrong for you. Better yet, you will also be prepared to actively seek work that is fulfilling, that enables you to be most effective and productive, and that allows you to make the contribution that only you can make.

## THE ELUSIVE GENIUS

The process of recognizing your genius is not usually as simple or as quick as it was for Francine. Some people are able to recognize their geniuses almost immediately after hearing about the idea, but this is very rare. In two-day workshops, in which people explore their geniuses intensively, a third of the participants commonly leave without achieving a satisfactory sense of their geniuses. Recognition usually does come within a few days—often at an unexpected time and place. Many people benefit from letting the idea that they have a genius, and that they can name it, percolate within them for a while.

Genius is elusive because we generally do not consider that we have a genius at all, or we ignore it or are not used to thinking about it. It also is not quantifiable, and its uniqueness implies that

it will not be found with any single questionnaire. Francine was able to name and recognize her genius rather quickly because she is practiced at self-examination and because she had a sense of the concept before our conversation.

Even if you think you already have the right name for your genius, read the following chapters and do the exercises. You will probably discover that you need to refine or completely alter the name you now think is right. There is no single magic formula for recognizing your genius, only general guidelines and approaches to help you reach the point at which your genius becomes obvious to you.