

DISCIPLINE FOR GODLINESS

Sometime in the early summer before entering the fourth grade, I wandered over from the baseball field and picked up a baseball bat and glove for the first time ... and I was hooked! It was not long before I became a ten-year-old baseball bum. My passion for the sport became so intense; I would idly hold a baseball and just sniff it. The *crack, crack* and the lingering ring of a sweetly hit ball, especially in the quietness of early morning, was to me symphonic. My memories of this and the summer which followed are of blistering dirt fields, hot feet, salty sweat, long drafts of delicious rubbery tepid water from an empty ball can, the short shadows of midday heading slowly toward the east, followed by the park's "daylight" of the court's lights, and the ubiquitous eerie night bats dive-bombing our throws and hits.

And I became good. Good enough, in fact, that as a twelve-and-a-half-year-old, one-hundred-and-ten-pound freshman I was second baseman on the varsity baseball team of my large 3,000-student New York City high school.

Not only did I play at a high level, I learned that personal discipline is the indispensable key for accomplishing anything in this life. I have since come to understand even more that it is, in fact, the mother and handmaiden of what we call genius.

EXAMPLES

Those who have watched **Mike Singletary** (perennial All-Pro, two-time NFL Defensive Player of the Year, and member of the Super Bowl XXV Dream Team) "play" — and have observed his wide-eyed intensity and his churning, crunching *samurai* hits — are usually surprised when they meet him. He is not an imposing hulk. He is barely six feet tall and weighs, maybe, 220. Whence the greatness? Discipline! Mike Singletary is as disciplined a student of the game as any who have ever played it.

In his biography, *Calling the Shots*, he says that in watching game films he will often run a single play fifty to sixty times, and that it takes him three hours to watch half a football game, which is only twenty to thirty plays! Because he watches every player, because he mentally knows the opposition's tendency — given the down, distance, hash mark, and time remaining, because he reads the opposition's mind through their stances, he is often moving toward the ball's preplanned destination before the play develops. Mike Singletary's legendary success is testimony to his remarkably disciplined life.

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We are accustomed to thinking of **Ernest Hemingway** as a boozy, undisciplined genius who got through a quart of whiskey a day for the last twenty years of his life but nevertheless had the muse upon him. He was indeed an alcoholic driven by complex passions. But when it came to writing, he was the quintessence of discipline! His early writing was characterized by obsessive literary perfectionism as he labored to develop his economy of style, spending hours polishing a sentence, or searching for the *mot juste*—**the right word**. It is a well-known fact that he rewrote the conclusion to his novel *A Farewell to Arms* seventeen times in an effort to get it right.

This is characteristic of great writers. **Dylan Thomas** made over two hundred handwritten(!) manuscript versions of his poem “**Fern Hill**.” Even toward the end, when Hemingway was reaping the ravages of his lifestyle, while writing at his Finca Vigia in Cuba he daily stood before an improvised desk in oversized loafers on yellow tiles from 6:30 a.m. until noon every day, carefully marking his production for the day on a chart. His average was only two pages — five hundred words. It was discipline, Ernest Hemingway’s massive literary discipline, which transformed the way his fellow Americans, and people throughout the English-speaking world, expressed themselves.

Michelangelo’s, da Vinci’s, and Tintoretto’s multitudes of sketches, **the quantitative discipline of their work, prepared the way for the cosmic quality of their work**. We wonder at the anatomical perfection of a da Vinci painting. But we forget that Leonardo da Vinci on one occasion drew a thousand hands. In the last century Matisse explained his own mastery, remarking that the difficulty with many who wanted to be artists is that they spend their time chasing models rather than painting them.⁶ Again the discipline factor!

In the 20th Century **Winston Churchill** was rightly proclaimed the speaker of the century, and few who have heard his eloquent speeches would disagree. Still fewer would suspect he was anything but a “natural.” But the truth is, Churchill had a distracting lisp which made him the butt of many jokes and resulted in his inability to be spontaneous in public speaking. Yet he became famous for his speeches and his seemingly impromptu remarks.

Actually, Churchill wrote everything out and practiced it! He even choreographed the pauses and pretended fumbling’s for the right phrase. The margins of his manuscripts carried notes anticipating the “cheers,” “hear, hears,” “prolonged cheering,” and even “standing ovation.” This done, he practiced endlessly in front of mirrors, fashioning his retorts and facial expressions. **F. E. Smith** said, “Winston has spent the best years of his life writing impromptu speeches.” A natural? Perhaps. **A naturally disciplined hard-working man!**

And so it goes, whatever the area of life.

Thomas Edison came up with the incandescent light after a thousand failures.

Jascha Heifitz, the greatest violinist of the 20th Century, began playing the violin at the age of three and early began to practice four hours a day until his death at age

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seventy-five — when he had long been the greatest in the world — some 102,000 hours of practice. He no doubt gave his own “Hear, hear!” to Paderewski’s response to a woman’s fawning remarks about his genius: “Madame, before I was a genius, I was a drudge.”

We will never get anywhere in life without discipline, be it in the arts, business, athletics, or academics. This is doubly so in spiritual matters. In other areas we may be able to claim some innate advantage. An athlete may be born with a strong body, a musician with perfect pitch, or an artist with an eye for perspective. But none of us can claim an innate spiritual advantage. In reality, we are all equally *disadvantaged*. None of us naturally seeks after God, none is inherently righteous, none instinctively does good (cf. [Romans 3:9–18](#)). Therefore, as children of grace, our spiritual discipline is everything — everything!

I repeat ... discipline is everything!