

## **Never Mind Talent: Practice, practice, practice**

By Karen Rile

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Me, I want to be a natural. I want to show up at the first class and discover I have a knack for whatever it is we're going to study - pottery, Japanese calligraphy, racquetball, oil painting, flute. I don't mind work, as long as it comes easily, with guaranteed results. But I'm usually the class dunce, or at least that's what it feels like as I struggle to keep up after the going gets tough. Eventually I quit, loath to spend precious effort on what could be a mediocre outcome.

Sound familiar?

But my four daughters turned out differently. They don't think about talent, because it's beside the point. Like the proverbial tortoise, they make slow and steady strides in disciplines that are difficult for them, eventually surpassing more gifted hares. They weren't born this way. Their approach to learning came about as a lucky accident. When they were little, I encouraged them to dabble in the usual lineup of Saturday kiddie activities. When the oldest was in kindergarten, she had a whim to play the violin, so I signed her up for lessons at the neighborhood Suzuki school. Some musicians I knew warned me that "no great violinist has ever come from the Suzuki tradition." Fine by me - I wasn't looking to raise a violinist, just a well-rounded kid.

Gradually, inexorably, those violin lessons took over our lives. The younger one wanted to copy everything her big sister did, and soon we had a 2-year-old strutting around with a tiny violin case, like a miniature mafioso. I was pregnant at the time, so the baby learned her Twinkle Variations in the womb. As soon as that baby could talk, she, too, demanded a violin. And so it escalated, until we were juggling four weekly private lessons, four group classes, and hours of practicing every day of the week. The house was littered with violins. I learned to play piano so I could accompany them as they practiced. I wasn't even sure why we were doing all this, only that it seemed crucial in some way I could not define.

Let me be clear: My family was not naturally suited for immersion in the Suzuki method. We're not joiners. My oldest, an inquisitive and highly verbal child, asked so many questions during lessons that her teacher suggested we have her tested for ADHD. (We

declined.) The little ones had meltdowns in group class, or refused to open their instrument cases at their lessons. They did not exactly embrace the idea of daily practice.

But we stuck it out. They practiced every day and, lo and behold, progressed. Two of our four turned out to be musically gifted and before long were shuttled out of Suzuki to hard-core classical violin teachers. The baby, by age 6, was so in love with music that she was practicing for hours every morning before school. Her new teacher put her on a steady diet of dry 19th-century études to reform her technique. This difficult work she embraced with joy, because the habit of daily practice and steady, incremental progress had been ingrained in her from infancy. I doubt that she or I would have had the heart to steady that rigorous course without the foundation laid out for both of us by our accidental immersion in the Suzuki world. She's now a violin performance major at Juilliard.

Flash-forward 20 years from that first Suzuki lesson, and three of my four kids have put away their violins in favor of other pursuits. But those early lessons stuck. All four have had the courage to embrace long-term, large-scale projects outside the realm of their formal academic training. All of them credit their Suzuki days for ingraining in them the habit of patient practice that has seen them through the long, slow development of mastery.

Sure, talent matters. Talent is the difference between good art and great art, between proficiency and virtuosity. But talent alone is rarely enough to get by. In our culture, we have romantic notions of the artist as a formidable, congenital genius. Obsessive focus on talent alone creates a hobbling anxiety of failure. How many of us are discouraged from trying because we were told we are "tone deaf" or "can't draw a straight line"?

So forget about talent. If I had a nickel for every parent who told me her own kid was a "natural" at music, dance, or whatever, but never got anywhere because he didn't like to practice, I could take everybody out for lunch. Teach your kids to practice. Practice something difficult and complex, where the rewards come slowly over time. And it doesn't matter if they're naturals; the lesson's more profound when they are not.

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