



The banner features the 'play to potential' logo on the left. To its right are contact details: a WhatsApp icon with the number '+91 85914 52129*', a Twitter icon with '@PlayToPotential', and a globe icon with 'playtopotential.com'. Further right, under the heading 'Also available on:', are icons for Spotify, Apple Podcasts, and Google Podcasts. On the right side of the banner is a portrait of the host, Deepak Jayaraman, with the text 'Podcast Host' and his name 'Deepak Jayaraman' below it. A small disclaimer at the bottom left reads: '*Just send us a Whatsapp with your name, number and email and we will add you to our distribution list.'

Context to the nugget conversation

Tom speaks about how we went about picking 5 skills that he wanted to learn from Ground Zero. He picks Singing, Surfing, Drawing, Juggling and Making a Ring. He speaks about the criteria he used to come up with this short-list of items that he would pursue.

Transcription

Deepak Jayaraman (DJ): Lovely, let's segue into the book *Beginners*, Tom, you know, before we get into the specifics of the book, give us a sense of how this whole thing came about? You went around learning five totally new skills: singing, surfing, drawing, juggling and making a ring. Give us a sense of the origin of this whole experiment shall we say?

Tom Vanderbilt (Tom): Sure. I was basically in my mid-40s and had had a daughter with my wife obviously, but I was sort of we were both later parents and this whole experience was very it sort of upset our lives. We had had a lot of time and experience in not being parents and suddenly we were parents and so our own learning curve was accelerating greatly and we were suddenly, there's a lot you can try to read up on ahead of time about how to be a parent but a lot of it is just learning by the seat-of-the-pants so... but as part of this process I then, you know, a parent then is entrusted to try to teach their child all these things and children are such natural eager learners. One day I was with my daughter in a library and we were playing a game of checkers and she saw a chessboard nearby. She was about four-years-old and she said can we play a game of chess? I said, I would love to but I actually don't know how to play and this was an incredibly awkward thing to admit to your child because you want to be the picture of authority and competence, but I just never, I had probably learned the basic rules of chess a long time ago, but it had never stuck, I had forgotten it. So, I quickly tried to learn the game online and I got to a certain point where I sort of had gotten the basic rules down, but it is such a complex game that obviously, you know, after five moves the cliché is that there are more possible moves than there are atoms in the universe so it is an infinitely complex game. So, I felt a little bit over my head. I decided to hire a coach to give her lessons and then the coach came to the house and I suddenly had this realization why should I pay this person to teach my daughter this thing that I would also like to learn and so rather than hide out in the other room why don't I simply join the lesson. He thought well, this is a bit unorthodox, you have a four-year-old beginner and a 46-year-old beginner or whatever I was but yeah, I was so struck by the experience that number one it was a very exciting and sort of gratifying thing to be engaging in this learning process with my daughter and then the second thing that I sort of holding up mirror to myself I realized I was constantly telling her how important it was to learn as many things as possible and to just be open-minded and don't worry so much about your age, about whether you are actually good or how good you get, just do it for the pleasure of it. And sort of looking at myself, I realized, I am giving this advice but what was the last new pursuit or skill I had actually tried to take

up. So, I was not being a particularly good role model and that was just sort of an internal alarm went off that I felt this was a part of my character or personality psyche that I was neglecting. I had focused so much on a job that I really enjoyed but to the exclusion of any other types of pleasures or even growth that might be out there via this thing that we might call hobbies or pursuits or skills or passions or there's a variety of ways. So, that was the basic genesis.

DJ: Got it. Got it. And you do you want to talk a little bit about how you picked these five things, five different things Tom of the various choices?

Tom: Yes, sure, I mean, at first, I thought, well, maybe I should do these things that I keep hearing about that people should learn like coding and I thought well, I like computers, coding is interesting to me, but it felt a little extrinsic to me that I was taking this lead from other people about what I should learn and I thought what are the things I actually that are sort of a secret list in my head of things I might have wanted to learn at some point. So, I think, this was an important part of the process for me because this wasn't mandatory training for a job or something like that or I wasn't... there was no reason other than my own interest and pleasure to do these things that I needed them to have sort of an element of enjoyment to them as much as other things because that is an essential part of providing, I think, the necessary motivation to keep at these things which may end up being frustrating to you or time-consuming. So, yeah, I just had this sort of internal list I drew up and the things were basically singing, surfing, drawing, juggling and then I wanted a making component, making a thing. Because I felt like a lot of people do I think in our sort of information age that I was a little bit divorced from working with my hands in any measurable way that I was simply on a computer all day pushing electrons around and I thought it would be interesting to plunge and so the thing I decided that was to I had actually in the process of learning to surf I had lost two wedding rings because of the cold water and my finger had shrunk and the ring had fallen off into the depths of the ocean. So, I needed a wedding ring and I thought well, perhaps I could make that ring, that would be the thing I would make and so it was just a little kind of curriculum I had come up with on my own in a liberal arts fashion I thought I had covered it, I covered a number of different bases sort of a physical activity and an artistic activity, a pure sort of motor skills activity and the only other criteria that they were things I could learn close to my home in New York City at the time. I didn't have to travel to do or nothing too exotic and skills that wouldn't be too all consuming obviously, you know, like becoming a commercial airline pilot or something like that, that is a different sort of prospect. So, on the flip side though I wanted them to be substantial skills not the sort of skills that one might go to YouTube over the course of a weekend to learn how to briefly fix a plumbing issue in one's home or how to do something in the kitchen the right way. And there's nothing those are, you know, they are a form of micro mastery as it is called, it is a very human thing to do and we all do it a lot I think but those didn't have the narratives I was looking for or the challenge or the sort of lifelong aspect where I think the things, I ended up choosing were all fairly open-ended. I could still be trying to improve singing 10 years from now and not be at the top of my game. So, perhaps a bit too ambitious.

DJ: And did you give yourself a certain period of time? At the outset did you say you would learn for X period of time or was it reasonably open-ended when you kicked off this journey?

Tom: I thought maybe a year but I think that was just, I was telling the publisher that to be convenient. Of course, what happened is I really became enamored with the things I was doing but I didn't really want to rush anything and there are certainly ways you could rush it more. But I really wanted to just savor the learning process at each stage. Even the failures and of course I was trying to do all these things at the same time, which often meant I was simply feeling guilty for neglecting one thing at the cost of another. But I felt I would know when I was ready to sort of start writing about it. So, there was a strange period of research where I was just doing all of these things which

was different from a usual book project for me but also talking to people along the way that I met and coaches as well so...

Reflections from Deepak Jayaraman

DJ: While Tom speaks about taking a break and pursuing these activities for a year, the challenge for most of us is how do we integrate some of these into our daily life and make space for it. My only realization in the last few years is that my appreciation for interconnectedness of things has gone up significantly. For instance, I go for guitar lessons on Sunday mornings. The way my Guitar teacher helps me learn often gives me cues to the way I should give feedback and work with some of my Clients.

To give a specific example, he would ask me to practice a set of chords. I would be focused on landing the 4 fingers on the strings without being clumsy. When I would go and show it to him, he would actually find that my thumb is possibly in the wrong position or my right hand (which is the strumming hand) is not holding the pick in the right way. The point being, the feedback would often come in my blind spot while I was busy doing something else. And very often this is exactly what I have to do with the people I work with. They might be busy with A, B and C but the real issue might be X, Y or Z. While the learning is happening in a certain field, I guess there is a meta-learning that is applicable across domains.

The only anecdotal observation I have at least in an Indian context, is that even when leaders pick hobbies, they pick ones that feed the head and often don't feed the heart or feed the soul with some form of art, whether it is drawing, painting, music, sculpture, pottery or some other form of art.

Back to what Tom says, it is worth having a Liberal Arts mindset in the way we craft our hobbies!

Thank you for listening. For more, please visit playtopotential.com. We have recently started sharing nuggets from the Podcast archives on Whatsapp. A couple of nuggets a week. One over the weekend and one in the middle of the week. If this would be of interest, do send a message to +91 85914 52129 stating Interested and do add the number to your contacts list. It will help us broadcast this to you seamlessly.

End of nugget transcription

RELATED PLAYLISTS YOU MIGHT LIKE

Curiosity: "A Curious Mind" by Brian Grazer (Oscar winning Producer of movies like A Beautiful Mind and Apollo 13) was the inspiration behind the Play to Potential Podcast. In this playlist, Leaders reflect about the role of curiosity and how it has helped them in their journeys. As Alvin Toffler says, the Illiterate of the 21st Century will not be those who cannot read and write, but those who cannot learn, unlearn and relearn. You can access the playlist [here](#).

Lessons from another domain: What can the world of business learn about communicating intent from the Army? How is handling customer feedback similar to how a Stand up comedian handles

Podcast Transcript [76.01 Tom Vanderbilt - Learning 5 completely new skills](#)

Also available on Apple Podcasts | Google Podcasts | Spotify

www.playtopotential.com

heckling? What are the parallels between business strategy and chess? What can the world of business learn from other worlds? You can access the playlist [here](#).

SIGN UP TO OUR COMMUNICATION

Podcast Newsletter: Join 1000s of leaders who benefit from the Podcast newsletter. Not more than 1-2 emails a month including keeping you posted on the new content that comes up at the podcast. High on signal, low on noise. Sign up for the podcast newsletter [here](#).

Nuggets on Whatsapp: We also have a **Podcast Whatsapp distribution group (+91 85914 52129)** where we share 2-3 nuggets a week from the Podcast archives to provoke reflection. If that is of interest, please click [here](#) and send a message stating "INTERESTED". Do also add this number to your Phone Contacts so that we can broadcast our messages to you when we share a nugget.

Tom Vanderbilt - Nuggets

- 76.01 Tom Vanderbilt - Learning 5 completely new skills
- 76.02 Tom Vanderbilt - How learning works
- 76.03 Tom Vanderbilt - Misplaced pursuit of Mastery
- 76.04 Tom Vanderbilt - Real meaning of baby steps
- 76.05 Tom Vanderbilt - How unlearning works
- 76.06 Tom Vanderbilt - Learning Approach across the Learning curve
- 76.07 Tom Vanderbilt - Role of feedback loops
- 76.08 Tom Vanderbilt - Observing things the way they are
- 76.09 Tom Vanderbilt - Friction in the learning process
- 76.10 Tom Vanderbilt - Depth of learning
- 76.11 Tom Vanderbilt - In Summary - Playing to Potential

About Deepak Jayaraman

Deepak seeks to unlock the human potential of senior executive's / leadership teams by working with them as an Executive Coach / Sounding Board / Transition Advisor. You can know more about his work [here](#).

Disclaimer and clarification of intent behind the transcripts

This written transcript of the conversation is being made available to make it easier for some people to digest the content in the podcast. Several listeners felt that the written format would be helpful. This may not make sense as an independent document. Very often spoken word does not necessarily read well. Several of the guests have published books and the language in their books might be quite different from the way they speak. We request the readers to appreciate that this

transcript is being offered as a service to derive greater value from the podcast content. We request you not to apply journalistic standards to this document.

This document is a transcription obtained through a third party/voice recognition software. There is no claim to accuracy on the content provided in this document, and occasional divergence from the audio file are to be expected. As a transcription, this is not a legal document in itself, and should not be considered binding to advice intelligence, but merely a convenience for reference.

The tags that are used to organize the nuggets in the podcast are evolving and work in progress. You might find that there could be a discrepancy between the nuggets as referenced here and in the actual podcast given this is a static document.

All rights reserved. No part of this document may be reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any means, or stored in any retrieval system of any nature without prior written permission.