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# Beyond Talent and Smarts: Why Even Geniuses Struggle



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“**T**he struggle with writing is over.”

That message, written on a Post-It note and affixed to his computer, brings the novelist Philip Roth great relief and contentment these days, according to a profile published earlier this week in the ***New York Times***. At the age of 79, the author of more than 31 acclaimed books says he is finished with writing, and he couldn't be happier. “I look at that note every morning,” he told *Times* reporter Charles McGrath, “and it gives me such strength.”

Fans of Roth's books—which include *Goodbye Columbus*, *Portnoy's Complaint*, *The Human Stain*, and the Pulitzer Prize-winning *American Pastoral*—may be surprised to learn that he regarded writing as a struggle at all.

His words flowed so easily on the page, and his books arrived with such frequency in the stores: at times, close to one every year. But behind that proficiency and productivity was arduous, unrelenting work. Roth told his interviewer that he'd enjoyed spending time with friends at his house in Connecticut this past summer: "In the old days I couldn't have people in the house all the time. When they came for the weekend, I couldn't get out to write."

Americans have a complicated relationship with this kind of relentless striving. We extol the virtues of hard work even as we idolize the "natural," the star who effortlessly achieves, who wins the race without breaking a sweat. The writer Malcolm Gladwell has called this tendency "**the naturalness bias**," and notes that we bring it to bear on individuals ranging from athletes to artists to "gifted" children. In **a study published in the Journal of Experimental Social Psychology** last year, Harvard

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psychologists Mahzarin Banaji and Chia-Jung Tsay applied a scientific lens to the phenomenon, gathering a group of professional musicians as subjects. The experimenters first asked the musicians their opinion on the source of musical achievement: Was "effortful" training more important, they inquired, or innate ability? The former, the musicians replied, expressing "the strong belief that strivers will achieve over naturals."

Banaji and Tsay then described two pianists, equal in achievement but different in their paths to success: one

was a natural, showing early evidence of high innate ability; the other was a striver, exhibiting early evidence of high motivation and perseverance. The investigators played an audio clip of each pianist performing, and asked the musicians for their judgments. Despite their stated belief in the value of effort, the naturalness bias won out: the musicians rated the "natural" performer as more talented, more likely to succeed, and more hireable than the striver. (In fact, the clips were played by the same performer, pianist Gwhyneth Chen.)

**Research by another psychologist**, Carol Dweck of Stanford University, has shown that children and adults who believe in the power of effort to overcome challenges (what she calls a "growth mindset") are more resilient and ultimately more successful than those who are convinced that ability is innate (the "fixed mindset"). Banaji and Tsay's experiment suggests that our faith in inborn talent "may operate less than consciously," leading us to make "suboptimal choices and evaluations"—because, as volumes of research show, elite performance really is the product of striving.

Take it from Philip Roth, who's spent a lifetime laboring to write perfect sentences. Or from Carol Dweck, who puts it more prosaically: "Even geniuses work hard."

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