

How to get good grades without trying: *wei wu wei* and a higher purpose

The Sage is occupied with the unspoken
and acts without effort (*wei wu wei*).
Teaching without verbosity,
producing without possessing,
creating without regard to result,
claiming nothing,
the Sage has nothing to lose.

From Tao Te Ching



All through elementary and high school I was something of a ‘problem’ student. I didn’t like being told what to do and had a negative attitude toward authority figures in general. Consequently, I was always ‘in trouble’. This rebellious attitude came to a climax in my freshman year at college.

I left home and moved into an off-campus apartment with a couple of high school buddies. Much of that first year in college was spent experimenting with my newfound freedom, and cutting a lot of classes to do so. It ended rather badly. Following a stormy disagreement with the Dean about the cause of my ultra low GPA, I was politely asked to leave school.

After working in the advertising industry for a year, I returned to school with a fresh attitude and determination to graduate. There was a new Dean and he let me be flexible with the required curriculum. And then a big breakthrough occurred in an Introduction to Philosophy course I took.

To my surprise, I felt immediately at home among the ancient philosophers. I could hear their voices as if they were speaking aloud. I loved their questioning of authority and exposing of false ideas in a dedicated search for truth, goodness and beauty. Philosophy helped me to see the joy of pursuing knowledge for the sake of wisdom and living the best possible life. I couldn’t get enough of it. But, in contrast, I disliked feeling forced to study for the sake of exams, even though I helplessly fell into that trap. Everyone did! Like mass hypnosis. Your status as a person seemed to rest on your GPA. From this perspective, the whole reason to study was to get good grades. That is performance consciousness.

Exam-taking had always been a source of anxiety for me. If I did well, I thought I was smart and felt good about that. But when I did not do well, I felt

inept and stupid. I often felt that I was not really intelligent enough to be a philosopher, despite the fact that I loved it. Studying so many brilliant thinkers was intimidating. Grade consciousness added to performance anxiety and intellectual self-esteem issues only made exam-taking worse.

Meanwhile, I had taken a course in Eastern Philosophy where I learned about the Taoist principle called *wei wu wei* from the Chinese sages, often translated as “doing by not doing” or “acting without effort,” as in the epigraph above. According to this idea, it is best not to focus on trying to produce outcomes directly, especially to the extent that they are out of your control. Better to focus on the meaningfulness of the process itself and go with the flow. If your focus is true, you can be certain that outcomes will be beneficial.

I decided to practice the *wei wu wei* approach and see what happened. What really mattered to me, I thought, was how much I loved learning about philosophy, psychology, history and other subjects. In the final analysis, I didn’t care about how someone else judged this love of mine. So, I made an effort to stop caring about grades altogether and focus exclusively on what I loved doing. I then found myself feeling much better about studying because I was doing it for the sake of learning and cultivating my knowledge base, and not for the sake of getting a grade. That is mastery consciousness.

This is similar to John Mackey’s idea that successful business persons will focus on pursuing the higher purpose of their business from which profits will naturally follow—more profits than if they focused directly on making profit itself. I found this to be true. Doing good does seem to result in doing well, and, if not, there is good in that too.

No sooner did I stop caring about the grades I got for doing what I loved than the good grades came rolling in. I became a straight A student and was consistently on the Dean’s List after that. And no more test anxiety. Exams worked for me now. They were an opportunity to show off my learning, to see what I could do, to get feedback. I learned to enjoy them and have fun with them. Now I was in charge of the test-taking rather than being victimized by it.

This success as an undergraduate student would stay with me through two masters’ degrees and a Ph.D. where I was consistently at the top of my class, without really caring too much about that competitive success. It simply followed

organically from the fact that I truly loved what I was doing. And that love is under my control, so I can nurture and cultivate it. Thus, *wei wu wei* became a life principle for me that has consistently resulted in success without really trying.

Doing something because you love doing it and believe it is worthwhile is focusing on mastery rather than mere performance. Being motivated by a higher purpose, such as the mastery of your craft, will bring success more certainly than if you focus on trying to make that success happen itself.

That is the lesson of *wei wu wei*.