

# Strive for **Ordinary**

## Where the Magic Happens

By Jessie Welsh, NCTM

**“Wow, you must be so talented.  
I was never musically gifted.”**

**T**his is the reaction I often receive when responding to the usual, “What do you do for work?” back when mingling in public was a normal part of life.

“I’m a pianist and a piano teacher.” No one ever knows what *pedagogy* is. There is usually an excitement over the “glories” of my career for which fate must have destined me.

“Actually, it’s just a lot of hard work, much like anything else. But I love it!”

The truth is, there *are* many glorious moments in my life as a performing and teaching artist. A few stand out: performing at my local symphony center, premiering a living composer’s work and nailing the ending of *Appassionata*, to name a few.

But the more accurate and honest truth is what happens in the everyday, the mundane—in the daily grind of habit formation and repetition—in short, the ordinary: troubleshooting fingering; slow, detailed practice; waking up before the sun to run my recital program yet again. In *Atomic Habits*, author James Clear writes, “[C]hanges that seem small and unimportant at first will compound into remarkable results if you’re willing to stick with them for years” (2018, 7).

### **Be Ordinary**

What if we stopped trying to be great and started trying to be ordinary? After all, ordinary is where the real magic happens, where the stellar moments are made possible and

where the “one more time” creates habit and consistency and further imprints itself onto our identities. As I have walked the line of both teacher and student for nearly a decade, I have come to embrace a set of values that reflects this idea of ordinariness. I have stopped living for the “end all be all” degree recital that takes my emotions on a terrifying roller coaster each go-around and, instead, started simply showing up every day, surrounding myself with a support network and accepting challenges from a place of humility. These ideas are not unique to me, and by no means do I always succeed, but they have been instrumental in shaping my career, in molding my character and in guiding and connecting with my students.

First, show up. Musicians are the ones who show up day after day and make music. They are not necessarily the ones with the most degrees or the ones who reminisce of glory days but the ones who are out there “in the field” doing the hard work of sight reading, passage-work repetition, counting aloud, managing nerves and walking out on stage yet again—whether that stage is Bass Hall, a Sunday morning church service or a studio recital.

Woody Allen is credited with famously suggesting that 80% of success is simply showing up. By committing to being at the piano each morning at a set time, I make a way for myself to be successful. Without that habit, my work is left to my changing emotions about my progress or fleeting ideas as to how best pass the time.

### **Form Habits**

None of us sets out to fall short of our daily goals, but how do we follow through when the

snooze button is so convenient or the unending to-do list demands our attention? Both the science of habit formation and anecdotal writings from professionals can inform our understanding of the importance of the everyday in shaping our identity in the long term. *Power of Habit* author Charles Duhigg states that “willpower becomes a habit” by “choosing a certain behavior ahead of time, and then following that routine when an inflection point arrives” (2012, 146). He further states that to do so requires a conscious acceptance of “the hard work of identifying the cues and rewards” (2012, 270) of our routines and finding creative alternatives. In *Atomic Habits*, Clear further emphasizes this point, stating that “tiny battles”—like getting to the piano after breakfast—ultimately “define your future self” (2018, 18).

In her book on spiritual formations, Anglican priest Tish Harrison Warren notes that the “crucible of our formation is in the anonymous monotony of our daily routines” (2016, 34). If we do not intentionally form our habits, our mindless habits will instead shape us. Duhigg coins this as “self-regulatory strength” (2012, 140). The more we commit to showing up, the more we flex these muscles and train our bodies and brains to do the same tomorrow and the following days.

Struggling with practice fatigue on a Bach Fugue? Practice it first, while your mind is fresh. Always running out of time to practice in the morning? Shower at night. This is where our creativity as musicians can greatly aid us. There is nothing glorious about brushing my teeth and walking to the piano in my pajamas, but it is my habit and arguably the most valuable part of my life as a musician. It is what I do every day.

## Support Network

Secondly, we must surround ourselves with a positive and resilient support network and culture. A life of repetitive and isolated work ultimately leaves us discouraged, stuck in our own thoughts and often unable to move forward. In his book *Make Your Bed*, Admiral William H. McRaven (U.S.

Navy, Retired) claims, “If you want to change the world...find someone to help you paddle” (2017, 12). His experience gives

testimony to the importance of the collective in shaping the individual:

During my time in the SEAL Teams, I had numerous setbacks, and in each case, someone came forward to help me: someone who had faith in my abilities; someone who saw potential in me where others might not; someone who risked their own reputation to advance my career. I have never forgotten those people and I know that anything I achieved in my life was a result of others who have helped me along the way. (2017, 21)

This basic principle is also what makes running clubs and fitness groups effective in creating lifestyle changes. Pursuit of a mutual goal somehow lightens the load and ends up pushing all the participants to reach higher than they otherwise would have alone. During my undergraduate career, my studio mate and I met at the practice rooms at 5:00 A.M. each weekday. Knowing she would be waiting alone if I bailed motivated me to remain consistent. I focused better in my practice room, too, knowing my friend was in the same battle just down the hall. To this day, studio class remains a favorite part of my academic week. It is such a privilege to cheer for my friends, see the monumental growth that occurs over a few short months and to take the stage in my own turn each week. It is humbling, encouraging, inspiring and—outside of my own practice time—the single most formative part of my development as a musician.

Life as a pianist can feel lonesome and isolated. The pressures are many, and too often we shoulder them alone in shame, fear or determined willpower. Find your crew, your teammates, your ensemble—the individuals who will care for you as a professional and as an individual, speak frankly when you need honest words and build you up when you are low. In her best-selling book *Grit*, Angela Duckworth says “the bottom line” is this: “If you want to be grittier, find a gritty culture and join it. If you’re a leader, and you want the people in your organization to be grittier, create a gritty culture” (2016, 245). Often our decisions to practice one more hour, wake up earlier or pursue higher education come not (only) from our own internal motivations, but from the culture in which we live and grow. As Duckworth puts it, we make these choices not from a “cold, calculating analysis of the costs and benefits” but instead because “the source of our strength is the person we know our-



selves to be” (2016, 248). And this is often an outgrowth of our culture.

## Accept Challenges

Finally, the third principle I have seen emerge is to humbly accept challenges. At first, this might seem counterintuitive. After all, do “ordinary” people seek to challenge the status quo? I would argue that it is the individual who is already in the habit of *doing* his or her work—and who will do it again tomorrow regardless of famed success or utter defeat—who is willing to put himself or herself on the line and rise to the occasion when difficult tasks arise.

Admiral McRaven elaborates on his experience in Navy SEAL training, noting that “the potential for failure is ever present, but those who live in fear of failure, or hardship, or embarrassment will never achieve their potential.” Without taking “calculated risks,” he continues, we “will never know what is truly possible” (2017, 63). I have taken many risks in my performing and teaching career, and I know many more are still ahead. Some have ended in accolades and beaming smiles, while honestly, even more have resulted in rejection, disappointment and the need for further improvement. But I will yet again walk out on stage, submit a proposal, audition and apply for a job, because those are the experiences from which I learn and grow and find out who I was made to be.

In his iconic book, *The War of Art*, author Steven Pressfield writes, “The professional does her work. She is invested in it wholeheartedly. But she does not forget that the work is not her. Her artistic self contains many works and many performances. Already the next is percolating inside her. The next will be better, and the one after that better still” (2002, 88). The reason we can accept challenges is that we know we are more than a single event, performance, competition or application. While our habits are indeed formative in shaping who we are and who we become, our identity is not solely tied to what we do. Our value supersedes our contribution to society or our achievements on a given day. Striving for ordinary allows us to be humbly vulnerable because we do not live or die with each success or disappointment. Instead, we learn, we grow and we repeat the process the next ordinary day. The more our work is merged with our everyday lives, and yet distinctly separate from our innate value, the more freedom we

will have to take these calculated risks and rise above. This paradox enables us to accept challenges without the debilitating fear of defeat.

Duhigg argues, “Small wins fuel transformative changes by leveraging tiny advantages into patterns that convince people that bigger achievements are within reach” (2012, 112). The small wins are the mundane, the ordinary. These small wins are how medals are won and the repertoire is polished and performance confidence is built. Do the work for which you are skilled and do it often to continue refining your craft. Writers get up each day and write. Nurses care for patients. Runners run. And pianists get to the piano and practice. This should be our habit, our normal and not the exception. If you need me, you’ll find me in my usual spot at the piano in my pajamas tomorrow morning. Because that’s where the magic happens. ☺

## References

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