

## THE BIG IDEAS

### Diligent, Patient Industry

Is where it's at.

### Indefatigable Industry

Is also where it's at.

### Comfort & Happiness

True necessities.

### Time Well Spent

Use it or lose it.

### Moving Ourselves.

Be the change, yo.

### Sedulous

My new favorite word.

### Where's Your Will?

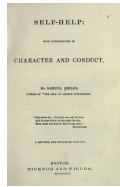
It's the source of your mojo.

### The Happiness Habit

Practice and make it so!

*"Such is true wisdom and humility; for the more a man really knows, the less conceited he will be."*

~ Samuel Smiles



## Self-Help

With Illustrations Of Character and Conduct

BY SAMUEL SMILES · TICKNOR AND FIELDS · © 1859

“Human character is moulded by a thousand subtle influences; by example and precept; by life and literature; by friends and neighbours; by the world we live in as well as by the spirits of our forefathers, whose legacy of good words and deeds we inherit. But great, unquestionably, though these influences are acknowledged to be, it is nevertheless equally clear that men must necessarily be the active agents of their own well-being and well-doing; and that, however much the wise and the good may owe to others, they themselves must in the very nature of things be their own best helpers.”

~ Samuel Smiles from *Self-Help*

*Self-Help* by [Samuel Smiles](#).

I hadn't heard of this book until I was watching a *Big Think* video featuring [Tal Ben-Shahar](#). (Highly recommend those, btw. Google “Big Think + Tal Ben-Shahar” or click here). In the interview “In Defense of Self-Help,” Tal discusses the modern self-help movement and the fact that, unfortunately, a great deal of the books these days share the latest quick-fix solutions to life's challenges rather than teaching us how to develop our character.

Big Think asked Tal what he considers classics in self-help and he mentioned this book (along with [Covey's 7 Habits](#) and [Seligman's Learned Optimism](#)—check out Notes on both of those!).

So, I immediately got it and read it over the weekend and here we are.

I'm thrilled I read it. It's packed with mini-biographies of many of history's greatest scientists, artists, business leaders, generals and political leaders plus Big Ideas encouraging us to develop character, perseverance, diligence, patience and other noble virtues.

My kinda book. :)

I'm excited to share a handful of my favorite Big Ideas so let's jump in!

## DILIGENT, PATIENT INDUSTRY

“Disraeli earned his position by dint of patient industry. He did not, as many young men do, having once failed, retire dejected, to mope and whine in a corner, but diligently set himself to work.”

Smiles tells us the story of Benjamin Disraeli's early failures and how hard he worked to attain his success in life. (Which is just one of countless similar stories he tells on the subject—reminding us that the greatest among us often have suffered the most hardships and setbacks!)

—> “He did not, as many young men do, having once failed, retire dejected, to mope and whine in a corner, but diligently set himself to work.”

Reminds me of some [Emerson](#) mojo on the subject that we talk about in our Note on [The Narcissism Epidemic](#). Here's how the authors of that great book, [Jean Twenge](#) and [Keith](#)

*"It is not accident, then,  
that helps a man in the  
world so much as purpose  
and persistent industry."*

~ Samuel Smiles

[Campbell](#), put it: "The United States has also historically valued self-reliance, which is quite different from narcissism. In his culturally defining 1841 essay "Self-Reliance," Ralph Waldo Emerson argued that individualism must be grounded in effort and responsibility. He praised young people who chose to work hard rather than show off: "A sturdy lad from New Hampshire or Vermont, who...always, like a cat, falls on his feet, is worth a hundred of these city dolls." In other words, repeated effort and hard work are what define you. If you are not successful, suck it up and try again. This would be a great public service announcement, but it is a little at odds with our current cultural values, which instead focus more on admiring yourself no matter how little effort you put in or however bad the result."

With that wisdom in mind, let's drop the idea that we should be incredible super stars without working hard or experiencing failures.

As Twenge and Campbell put it: "If you are not successful, suck it up and try again." :)

## THE POWER OF INDEFATIGABLE INDUSTRY

"We have, indeed, but to glance at the biographies of great men to find that the most distinguished inventors, artists, thinkers, and workers of all kinds, owe their success, in a great measure, to their indefatigable industry and application. They were men who turned all things to gold – even time itself. Disraeli the elder held that the secret of success consisted in being master of your subject, such mastery being attainable only through continuous application and study. Hence it happens that the men who have most moved the world, have not been so much men of genius, strictly so called, as men of intense mediocre abilities, and untiring perseverance; not so often the gifted, of naturally bright and shining qualities, as those who have applied themselves diligently to their work, in whatsoever line that might lie. "Alas!" said a widow, speaking of her brilliant but careless son, "he has not the gift of continuance." Wanting in perseverance, such volatile natures are outstripped in the race of life by the diligent and even the dull. "Che va piano, va longano, e va lontano," says the Italian proverb: Who goes slowly, goes long, and goes far."

*"Labour is not only a  
necessity and a duty, but a  
blessing: only the idler feels  
it to be a curse."*

~ Samuel Smiles

Smiles takes a considerable amount of time to articulate the fact that it was "indefatigable industry" that created history's most distinguished creators—NOT simple inborn genius.

The fact that it takes an incredible amount of effort to tap our highest potential is echoed by modern research. We talk about it quite a bit in these Notes.

Here's how [Geoff Colvin](#) puts it in his great book [Talent Is Overrated](#) (see Notes): "The phenomenon seems nearly universal. In a famous study of chess players, Nobel Prize winner Herbert Simon and William Chase proposed "the ten year rule," based on their observation that no one seemed to reach the top ranks of chess players without a decade or so of intensive study, and some required much more time. Even Bobby Fischer was not an exception; when he became a grand master at age sixteen, he had been studying chess intensively for nine years. Subsequent research in a wide range of fields has substantiated the ten-year rule everywhere the researchers have looked. In math, science, musical composition, swimming, X-ray diagnosis, tennis, literature—no one, not even the most "talented" performers, became great without at least ten years of very hard preparation. If talent means that success is easy or rapid, as most people seem to believe, then something is obviously wrong with a talent-based explanation of high achievement."

Ten years of "indefatigable industry."

Got it.

In her great book, [Mindset](#), [Carol Dweck](#), one of the world's leading researchers in the field of motivation, describes the fact that we can approach life with either a "fixed mindset" (where we believe we're either born great or not) or a "growth mindset" (where we believe we have the ability to shape our destiny thru hard work). Unfortunately, our culture gravitates toward the

*"Defeats do not long cast down the resolute-hearted, but only serve to call forth their real powers."*

~ Samuel Smiles

fixed mindset.

She tells us: "Malcolm Gladwell, the author and New Yorker writer, has suggested that as a society we value natural, effortless accomplishment over achievement through effort. We endow our heroes with superhuman abilities that lead them inevitably toward their greatness. It's as if Midori popped out of the womb fiddling, Michael Jordan dribbling, and Picasso doodling. This captures the fixed mindset perfectly. And it's everywhere."

Said another way: "In the fixed mindset it's not enough just to succeed. It's not enough just to look smart and talented. You have to be pretty much flawless. And you have to be flawless right away."

Check out the Note and the book for more powerful wisdom on learning to work hard and to embrace failure. For now, chew on this Dweck goodness to bring the point home: "Is it ability or mindset? Was it Mozart's musical ability or the fact that he worked till his hands were deformed? Was it Darwin's scientific ability or the fact that he collected specimens non-stop from early childhood?"

(Hint: Their abilities were due to their indefatigable industry. :)

## NECESSITIES FOR COMFORT & HAPPINESS

*"He who allows his application to falter, or shirks his work on frivolous pretexts, is on the sure road to ultimate failure. Let any task be undertaken as a thing not possible to be evaded, and it will soon come to be performed with alacrity and cheerfulness."*

~ Samuel Smiles

"But Joseph Hume was not a man to enjoy the fruits of his industry in idleness. Work and occupation had become necessary for his comfort and happiness."

I just love this: "Work and occupation had become necessary for his comfort and happiness."

For some wacky reason we seem to have this idea that when we really "make it," we'll retire on our own island and pass the days away sipping piña coladas by the pool as the sun sets and we're watching TV on our 2,000" plasma flatscreen that magically hovers in the air.

Um, right.

That's a GREAT recipe for DEPRESSION not fulfillment.

In his classic book, *Flow* (see Notes), [Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi](#) calls this "the paradox of work" and tells us: "Thus we have a paradoxical situation: On the job people feel skillful and challenged, and therefore feel more happy, strong, creative, and satisfied. In their free time people feel that there is generally not much to do and their skills are not being used, and therefore they tend to feel more sad, weak, dull, and dissatisfied. Yet they would like to work less and spend more time in leisure."

Research tells us that happy people have projects. They're engaged in life and committed to giving their gifts to the world.

In short, the happiest among us realize that work and occupation are necessary for our comfort and happiness!!

How about *you*?

Are you lusting after a life of leisure? We all need time for rest and rejuvenation, but let's remember that consistent, joyful service is one of the best ways to ensure our well-being!

## TIME WELL SPENT

"With perseverance, the very odds and ends of time may be worked up into results of the greatest value. An hour in every day withdrawn from frivolous pursuits would, if profitably employed, enable a person of ordinary capacity to go far towards mastering a science. It would make an ignorant man a well-informed one in less than ten years. Time should not be allowed to pass without yielding fruits, in the form of something learnt worthy of being known, some good

*"The secret of it was,  
that he never left a minute  
unemployed."*

~ Samuel Smiles

principle cultivated, or some good habit strengthened."

Time.

If you value your life, it's one of the most precious assets you have.

Smiles tells us: *"Lost wealth may be replaced by industry, lost knowledge by study, lost health by temperance or medicine, but lost time is gone for ever."*

And Aristotle tells us: *"We live in deeds, not years; In thoughts not breaths; In feelings, not in figures on a dial. We should count time by heart throbs."*

Let's do the math. Take an hour wasted from frivolous pursuits every day. That's 365 hours a year, 3,650 hours over ten years.

Let's invest that time in doing something meaningful. What can you learn? What good habit could you strengthen? How could you be of service?

Who would you be in ten years if you meditated for 3,650 hours? Or worked out for 3,650 hours? Or spent more quality time with your loved ones for 3,650 hours? Or learned a new skill or provided service to your community for 3,650 hours?

Let's get it out of the abstract and make it real.

I waste 60 minutes a day doing this: \_\_\_\_\_

I commit to using this time more wisely by engaging in these activities: \_\_\_\_\_

You committed to rockin' that?!

Sweet.

## MOVING OURSELVES

*"Excellence in art, as in  
everything else, can only  
be achieved by dint of  
painstaking labour."*

~ Samuel Smiles

"Socrates said, "Let him that would move the world move first himself. " Or as the old rhyme runs - "If every one would see To his own reformation, How very easily You might reform a nation." It is, however, generally felt to be a far easier thing to reform the Church and the State than to reform the least of our own bad habits; and in such matters it is usually found more agreeable to our tastes, as it certainly is the common practice, to begin with our neighbours rather than with ourselves."

Socrates tells us that he who would move the world must first move himself while Gandhi tells us we need to be the change.

Yet, for some weird reason, we all seem to prefer spending our time trying to change others (and the world at large).

[Anthony de Mello](#) captures this silliness well in [Awareness](#) (see Notes) where he tells us:

*"Imagine a patient who goes to a doctor and tells him what he is suffering from. The doctor says, 'Very well, I've understood your symptoms. Do you know what I will do? I will prescribe a medicine for your neighbor!' The patient replies, 'Thank you very much, Doctor, that makes me feel much better.' Isn't that absurd? But that's what we all do. The person who is asleep always thinks he'll feel better if somebody else changes. You're suffering because you are asleep, but you're thinking, 'How wonderful life would be if somebody else would change. How wonderful life would be if my neighbor changed, my wife changed, my boss changed.'"*

If we want the world to change, we've gotta change ourselves.

So, let's get on that!! :)

## LET'S GET OUR SEDULITY ON!

*"Hence, as Mr. Lynch observes, "the wisest habit of all is the habit of care in the formation of good habits."*

~ Samuel Smiles

Smiles uses the word *sedulous* roughly one million times in his book. Seemed like every other hero he profiled was "sedulous."

For example: "John Sebastian Bach said of himself, "I was industrious; whoever is equally *sedulous*, will be equally successful."

I'd never heard of the word before but it's now one of my new favorite words.

Here's the Apple dictionary def:

Dictionary

**sed·u·lous** |'sejələs|  
adjective  
(of a person or action) showing dedication and diligence : *he watched himself with the most sedulous care*. See note at **BUSY** .

DERIVATIVES  
**se·du·li·ty** |sə'jōlītē| noun  
**sed·u·lous·ly** adverb  
**sed·u·lous·ness** noun

ORIGIN mid 16th cent.: from Latin *sedulus* 'zealous' + -OUS .

*Sedulous*. "Showing dedication and diligence."

LOVE. IT. Here's to getting our sedulity on, my friend! :)

## WHERE'S YOUR WILL?

*"Men who are resolved to find a way for themselves, will always find opportunities enough; and if they do not lie ready to their hand, they will make them."*

~ Samuel Smiles

"Where there is a will there is a way," is an old and true saying. He who resolves upon doing a thing, by that very resolution often scales the barriers to it, and secures its achievement. To think we are able, is almost to be so – to determine upon attainment is frequently attainment itself. Thus, earnest resolution has often seemed to have about it almost a savour of omnipotence."

Love that. Reminds me of [Tal Ben-Shahar](#)'s knapsack.

Check out the Notes on [Happier](#) where he tells us: "In 1879 Thomas Edison announced that he would publicly display the electric lightbulb by December 31, even though all his experiments had, to that point, failed. He threw his knapsack over the brick wall—the numerous challenges that he still faced—and on the last day of that year, there was light. In 1962, when John F. Kennedy declared to the world that the United States was going to land a man on the moon by the end of the decade, some of the metals necessary for the journey had not yet been invented, and the technology required for completing the journey was not available. But he threw his—and NASA's—knapsack over the brick wall. Though making a verbal commitment, no matter how bold and how inspiring, does not ensure that we reach our destination, it does enhance the likelihood of success."

What knapsack do YOU need to throw over the wall?!

(Now a good time?)

## MAKE HAPPINESS HABITUAL

"Even happiness itself may become habitual. There is a habit of looking at the bright side of

*"It is will, - force of purpose, - that enables a man to do or be whatever he sets his mind on being or doing."*

~ Samuel Smiles

things, and also of looking at the dark side. Dr. Johnson has said that the habit of looking at the best side of a thing is worth more to a man than a thousand pounds a year. And we possess the power, to a great extent, of so exercising the will as to direct the thoughts upon objects calculated to yield happiness and improvement rather than their opposites. In this way the habit of happy thought may be made to spring up like any other habit. And to bring up men or women with a genial nature of this sort, a good temper, and a happy frame of mind, is perhaps of even more importance, in many cases, than to perfect them in much knowledge and many accomplishments."

—> "Even happiness itself may become habitual." Amen to that.

[Sonja Lyubomirsky](#) echoes this wisdom in *The How of Happiness* (see Notes): "All that is required to become an optimist is to have the goal and to practice it. The more you rehearse optimistic thoughts, the more 'natural' and 'ingrained' they will become. With time they will be part of you, and you will have made yourself into an altogether different person."

While Csikszentmihalyi (see Notes on [Flow](#)) tells us: "A person can make himself happy, or miserable, regardless of what is actually happening 'outside,' just by changing the contents of consciousness. We all know individuals who can transform hopeless situations into challenges to be overcome, just through the force of their personalities. This ability to persevere despite obstacles and setbacks is the quality people most admire in others, and justly so; it is probably the most important trait not only for succeeding in life, but for enjoying it as well.

To develop this trait, one must find ways to order consciousness so as to be in control of feelings and thoughts. It is best not to expect shortcuts will do the trick."

Here's to making happiness habitual!!

B

**Brian Johnson,**  
Chief Philosopher

If you liked this Note,  
you'll probably like...

[Happier](#)

[The How of Happiness](#)

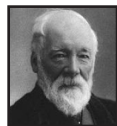
[The Selected Writings of  
Ralph Waldo Emerson](#)

[Flow](#)

[Mindset](#)

## About the Author of "Self-Help"

SAMUEL SMILES



Samuel Smiles (23 December 1812 – 16 April 1904), was a Scottish author and reformer. Learn more on Wikipedia!

## About the Author of This Note

BRIAN JOHNSON



Brian Johnson loves helping people optimize their lives as he studies, embodies and teaches the fundamentals of optimal living—integrating ancient wisdom + modern science + common sense + virtue + mastery + fun. Learn more and optimize your life at [brianjohnson.me](http://brianjohnson.me).