

Hendricks, G. (2009). *The Big Leap*.

Do you want to live in “your zone of genius”? Hendricks’ book shows you how.

Moving from the Upper Limit to Zone of Genius

Book Review by Sydney Scott

Have any of you spent hours trying to crazy glue something back together when you have no idea how? I once spent an hour late at night with a flashlight trying to glue my smart car’s turn signal back into place. The air was blue; the car was not fixed; any joy I had before I started to engage in the insane act was gone while I tried to do something outside my area of competence.

According to Gay Hendricks in *The Big Leap*, many of us believe we are flawed, not destined for greatness, or simply not good enough to deserve our dreams (p. 23). We create the barriers to becoming fully ourselves and developing our unique talents; by the time we reach our 40’s, we have established well entrenched negative answers to the call to become greater. But we can change that by applying simple yet challenging steps such as monitoring our reactions and growing our ability to be happy, successful, and creative. When we take the big risk to get there, we are living in our zone of genius. To spend time away from this zone becomes wasteful of our energy and abilities. In the case of my car repair, I needed to turn my efforts in the direction of what I am good at and delegate this task to a trained mechanic.

The essence of Hendricks’ book is: “Each of us has an inner thermostat setting that determines how much love, success, and creativity we allow ourselves to enjoy. When we exceed our inner thermostat setting, we will often do something to sabotage ourselves, causing us to move back into the old familiar zone where we feel secure” (p. 20).

Hendricks’ explanation of how this self-sabotage works is what I like best about his book. He tells us that career growth or development of any area of our lives that pushes us beyond the usual comes at the expense of personal joy in another area of our lives. He is intent on supporting the reader to stop making this trade off. He states: “when I hit my Upper Limit, I do something that stops my positive forward trajectory. I get into conflict with my ex wife, get into a money bind, or do something else to bring me back down within the bounds of my limited tolerance” (p.7). The challenge, then, is to create within ourselves an opening to learning to exist in positive energy, without sabotaging it. The path to development and the ultimate goal involve allowing yourself to feel good in one area of your life and to boost that feeling of good so that you incorporate and grow it in all other areas.

Recognizing the differences between incompetence, competence, excellence, and genius is essential to progress. The four stages or zones that Hendricks writes about are related to the adult stages of development that formed the cornerstone of my doctoral dissertation. His approach to living for those who have made progressive steps to further success and contribution to the world are consistent with adult development research. But this existing research does not provide a process towards this growth other than meditation and general reflective practices. Hendricks makes an important contribution by establishing road signs for us to follow. It starts with being “willing to accept that possibility, you’re on the way to experiencing real magic in your life” (p. 15).

In which of these zones do you spend most of your time? I will claim that none of you live in the genius zone all the time. Some may have glimpses of the joy of being in this zone but that is short lived. For me, the zone of incompetence lies in trying to edit my writing or anyone else’s, for that matter. I would spend hours and do a totally terrible job, end up being angry, and feeling like a failure because my ego is telling me that I am simply not smart and capable.

The zone of competence is often the area you are trained in, and thus have the knowledge and skills at hand; you do it well, but it brings you no joy. You come home exhausted, frustrated, and even angry, because there is no joy in it. Maybe, however, you are functioning in the zone of excellence where you have the joy of learning and mastering specific aspects of work you excel in. This is where the ego takes over and holds you stuck. You know you are good, so you do not want to risk being any better.

The biggest work in this process of getting to the genius zone is becoming conscious of internal voices. When you notice that your inner voices are creating a distraction from feeling wonderful and start tracking the underlying repetition of these messages, you have taken the first step toward removing them. Hendricks calls this “a radical act” (p. 11). He believes, and I support him, that we owe ourselves and those we love the courage to commit to making such change.

This book is a wonderful guide for those looking to go bigger and to take the challenge of building their career and organization. Hendricks leaves the theories and research behind and provides a practical approach to stepping into wider spaces where you can have greater impact on others. It is an approach that the Alchemist professors take personally and with each other. We are committed to our growth as well as to the growth of our clients.

If you are willing to reflect on the following seven questions (p. 107), then you are practicing conscious living; if you answer yes to questions eight to ten, then this book is an essential read for you:

1. Where do I feel out of integrity with myself?
2. What is keeping me from feeling complete and whole?
3. What important feelings am I not letting into my awareness?
4. Where in my life am I not telling the whole truth?
5. Where in my life have I not kept my promises?
6. What are my Upper Limit behaviors?
7. In my relationship with . . . what do I need to say or do to feel complete and whole?
8. Am I willing to increase the amount of time that my whole life goes well?
9. Am I willing to feel good and have my life go well all the time?
10. Am I willing to take the Big Leap to my ultimate level of success in life, money, and creative contribution?