You’re Never Too Old To Become a Beginner

Learning a new skill as an adult is challenging—which is why it brings so many cognitive and emotional benefits.

By Tom Vanderbilt

ave we ever needed a fresher start than the one promised by 2021? As we head into a new year with all its hopes—new year, new you, newly recovered world—there is one thing from the ongoing annus horribilis we should carry forward and even deepen: the spirit of the novice.

The pandemic turned us all into beginners. Suddenly, the usual ways of doing things were no longer an option. Governments and businesses scrambled to develop new protocols, and we all struggled to reinvent the activities of everyday life. From queuing to Zoom to mask etiquette, we were faced with an unsettling societal learning curve.

Just as noteworthy is how many people, in the face of such disruption, decided that they wanted to learn new things. Online learning sites like Skillshare, Duolingo and Coursera saw extraordinary growth. Enrollments in online art and music classes spiked, while novice bakers flooded the help lines of the Vermont-based flour company King Arthur Baking.

Even before “The Queen’s Gambit,” online chess lessons were flourishing. From gardening to camping to bicycling to sewing, people have been taking up new pursuits with abandon.

But cultivating new skills and habits is a challenge. Even as we commit to new activities, we struggle to shake off the stasis of familiar routines, especially if we are older. I had this feeling a few years ago when I suddenly realized, shepherding my young daughter to any number of classes and lessons, from swimming to piano, that I couldn’t remember the last new skill I had learned. I had gently obviated into a finished being, coasting along on midcareer competence.

So I decided to become a beginner in a number of things that I’d long wanted to try to learn, from singing to surfing. Being a beginner is hard—it feels better to be good at something than to be bad. It’s even harder for adults. The phrase “adult beginner” has an air of gentle pity. It implies learning something that you perhaps should have learned already.

Though the first steps can be difficult, it’s worth the effort. Becoming a beginner is one of the most life-enhancing things you can do.

A good starting point is to take up juggling. The innocuous little act of throwing balls into the air has been found, in a number of neuroscience studies, to alter the brain. This “activation-dependent structural plasticity,” as it is called, pops up in as little as seven days. Juggling changes not only gray matter, the brain’s processing centers, but also white matter, the networked connections that bind it all together.

“Learning a new skill requires the neural tissue to function in a new way,” says Tobias Schmidt-Wilcke, a neuroscientist (and juggler) at Germany’s University of Bochum. After that initial burst of activity, the brain settles down. By the time you can do the skill without much thinking—when it becomes automatic—gray matter starts to alter.

This essay is adapted from Mr. Vanderbilt’s new book, “Beginners: The Joy and Transformative Power of Lifelong Learning,” which will be published by Knopf on Jan. 5.
Learning doesn’t have to be career-related to help in your career. When we expand ourselves through new activities, we are able to see more.

someone new, which you can’t help but encounter other people about. The old joke is, “How do you become a beginner? You tell someone a story.”

In the course of exploring their world, infants are often changing their identity in the wake of episodic memory to propositional memory; and they are learning to become a person, an observer. They are learning to perceive the environment as something that is different from them. The same is true of older adults, as they are exploring new activities through the lens of the “beginner’s mind” to solve the problem because they think of it more as a container for the tasks, rather than realizing that it can be used to learn the task and act as a shield for the candle. In an experiment published in the journal Cognition in 2000, however, one group did poorly with this problem, whereas the other did not. Why? Compared with older children or adults, “Younger children or adults, in solving a water-criticism task for as many of its goals, but more so than of a single object-creating function in terms of the affordances of the shelf for the candle. This ability to be increasingly linked with loneliness and neuroticism and agreeableness—that extraversion, conscientiousness, five” personality traits—along with the more the better—and, even more important, to give yourself permission to fail, you’ll fail to learn.

Infants live what might be called the beginner’s creed: If you don’t learn to walk, you fall, you fail to learn. So let “beginner” be your watchword for 2021. But watch for overcorrection in your resolutions. Don’t de- train: you may want to master the piano or paint like Picasso. You may de-stage yourself like the beginner stages, even growing resentful of the fact that you are less successful than you used to be. Infants are exposed to a variety of new situations, as if an opportunity to descend a steep slope. A striking pattern was observed: Infants looking at a descending—30-degree decline would be brainwashed creatures, avoid it, or app-

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