

We live in a culture that places value on successful outcomes – outcomes related to professional success, athletic success, academic success. There are an infinite number of books that we have all seen and read related to success – and how its defined and how to achieve it.

I want to share one, somewhat unexpected source of understanding as it relates to achieving success (in all of its many iterations) –

In his book “Outliers”, Malcom Gladwell describes the concept of the “10,000 hours”. In simple terms, he explains that no matter who you are or what you do, you need to do the same thing for over 10,000 hours before you are an “expert”...before you can be considered to be a “master” in your field. In his book, he illustrates this point with examples of athletes and their training regimes – athletes who begin their sport at the age of 5 and achieve their “peak” at the age of 20, need to train over 13 hours a week – beginning at age 5, every week for 15 years to become an elite athlete. As fencing parents we understand this regime and this commitment.

As a professor, what this means for me, is that if I teach for 10 hours a week, 30 weeks a year, I would need to teach for over 30 years to achieve 10,000 hours of teaching and become an “elite” teacher.

This concept of 10,000 hours is logical – we all understand the translation of hard work and commitment to accomplishment.

But, I think there is a much more important message here. The bigger learning – at least for me – was the role of patience and humility.

All true accomplishments in life require patience and the simple acceptance of time. Time. I can’t work harder to achieve 10,000 hours...there are no shortcuts. I need to be diligent and committed with my time, but ultimately I can’t practice (or teach, or work, or consult) 3 hours in 1 hour. Accomplishment (success) cannot be rushed. Consider those beautiful couples in the newspaper celebrating their 50th wedding anniversary. What an amazing accomplishment. The reason why long term marriages are so respected is that there is only one way to get one – to be married for 50 years. It’s a simple concept – but it requires patience and acceptance of time – which seem to be so much more difficult for us than it was for our grandparents.

I think humility is another important theme of the 10,000 hours. Personally, I am humbled when I speak with colleagues who have taught for 30 years – they are the elite athletes of my own discipline. While I may know more about computers, ipads, iphones, etc., I remind myself that they have a wealth of experience in the classroom that can be achieved only through a lifetime dedicated to a single vocation. Through my humility, and appreciation for those who have come before me, I think I learn more – I make my own “10,000 hours” more productive.

I remind my own children of this in their own athletic and academic pursuits – while there is nothing wrong with comparing your own performance with children who are older than you,

don't become discouraged if you fall short – rather embrace a level of humility and respect for their commitment and dedication to the path that they have walked in front of you. Afterall, there are younger ones behind you admiring your accomplishments and progression towards the 10,000 hours. ☺