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When do we choose our passions? Often, what we like is whatever came easily when we were young – naturally fast runners grow to love sport, kids who found maths easy grow to love maths, kids with good voices grow to love singing. But as we get older, our preferences can harden into ‘truths’: I am a sports kid, not a drama kid. I am a science kid, not a humanities kid. I am an art kid, not a maths kid.

There’s nothing wrong with playing to our strengths, of course, that’s how we perform well! But ignoring our weaknesses or giving up when we aren’t naturally good at something is a self-fulfilling prophecy; by narrowing our perspectives, we cut off opportunities to grow.

Good morning, Mr Featherston, Dr Swann, Mr Angus, Ms White, my parents, staff, and boys. When I was in kinder, I loved space. The idea of infinite planets waiting to be discovered, sending robots to Mars to search for life, and black holes billions of times bigger than the sun. It captivated me, and I decided that when I grew up, I wanted to be a scientist. So, when I got to Year 7, that’s what I focused on! Science and maths, not humanities and English. When would I need to know about Ancient Egypt? When would I ever need to... write a speech?

So throughout much of Secondary School, I didn’t like English because I saw myself as bad at it. I’ve always loved reading, but I found the writing hard. Because of that, I never did much study, and so I never improved. But now with 10 months until the final exam, the problems I’ve been putting off for years have caught up to me, and I’m left in a tricky spot.

All of us have different strengths and weaknesses. All of us have stuff we don’t like doing, whether it’s academic-related or not, like meeting new people or riding a bike. And it’s tempting to just ignore it, to try to avoid situations where we’d be out of our depth. But whether it’s exams, job interviews, or the Great Southwest Journey, our weak spots will inevitably come up, and it’s up to us to be ready for them.

To be ready to face tricky situations, to grow as people, we need to improve the things we would naturally shy away from. Because if we only do things we’re good at, how can we grow? All of us want to become well-rounded people, but we can’t do this only practising the areas we can already do.

Choosing to see the gaps in your skillset as opportunities to become better also helps us build important skills for our future. It makes us more adaptable, lets us see things we already know in a new light. It opens our minds to a whole new world of possibilities. And the best bit is, it’s a cycle! When we put ourselves out there and give things a go, it builds confidence. The better we get at something, the more we enjoy it, which leads to us getting better again and enjoying it more!

So how do we start?

You'll often hear that if you want to improve, you just have to work harder. Spend more hours practising, raise the effort, just focus more in class. It's a first step, but it's usually not the whole picture. There's a story about two new golfers –neither of them has ever played before, and they have awful, inconsistent swings; they can barely hold the club right. One of them goes to the driving range every night, trying to figure out how it's done, and stays out longer than anyone else there. But after thousands of balls, he hasn't improved nearly as much as he'd hoped. Most of his balls still spray out unpredictably, and he doesn't know what he's doing wrong.

The other golfer works hard too, going to the driving range just as often, but with one difference. He gets lessons. Within weeks, he's alright, and after a few months, he's a decent golfer! It seems trivial wrapped up in a story like that, but hopefully we can all see what a game-changer it is to have active feedback! If you're alone, a mistake is just that, a mistake. But with help? Every mistake gets picked up on, something you know to work on. Every mistake is still progress.

Real improvement doesn't come from just blind repetition, putting in the hours. It comes from deliberate, repeated efforts to seek feedback from teachers, tutors, or mentors. Now, don't get me wrong, I'm not saying this is an easy solution. Seeking help is a difficult thing to do. In school, it can be uncomfortable to ask questions when everyone else understands, to meet with a tutor, or to stay behind after class because you don't really get something. But that guidance – that little bit of feedback – that's the bit that does the work; that's what pushes the needle.

The price of improvement is different for everyone, but for all of us, it must involve the discomfort of acknowledging our weaknesses and feeling exposed. But if we persevere, be vulnerable, *Face the Fire*, the rewards are incredible! You find yourself getting better at things you could never do before, and enjoying things you once dreaded. It's scary, and it's tough, but that's what makes it so satisfying. So, to answer that question, 'when do we choose our passions?', I say, 'whenever we want'.

Thank you.