could express it before he was out of diapers (I’m not certain about whether Dr. Tao was still in diapers at age two, actually; I suppose he could have been a toilet-training genius as well). He could be what he was naturally inclined to be before the world put any restrictions on him (we’ll talk more about these restrictions later in this book). No one was going to tell Terence Tao to stop doing math because he’d make more money if he were a lawyer. In that way, he and others like him have an unencumbered path toward the Element.

But they provide a path as well. For they show all of us the value of asking a vitally important question: If left to my own devices—if I didn’t have to worry about making a living or what others thought of me—what am I most drawn to doing? Terence Tao probably never had to wonder what he was going to do with his life. He probably never used the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator or the Hermann Brain Dominance Instrument to determine which career options offered a spark for him. What the rest of us need to do is to see our futures and the futures of our children, our colleagues, and our community with the childlike simplicity prodigies have when their talents first emerge.

This is about looking into the eyes of your children or those you care for and, rather than approaching them with a template about who they might be, trying to understand who they really are. This is what the psychologist did with Gillian Lynne, and what Mick Fleetwood’s parents and Ewa Laurance’s parents did with them. Left to their own devices, what are they drawn to do? What kinds of activities do they tend to engage in voluntarily? What sorts of aptitude do they suggest? What absorbs them most? What sort of questions do they ask, and what type of points do they make?

We need to understand what puts them and us in the zone.

And we need to determine what implications that has for the rest of our lives.

## Chapter Five

**Finding Your Tribe**

For most people, a primary component of being in their Element is connecting with other people who share their passion and a desire to make the most of themselves through it. Meg Ryan is the popular actor best known for her work in such movies as *When Harry Met Sally . . .* and *Sleepless in Seattle*. Her acting career has been buoyant for more than a quarter of a century, yet she didn’t imagine a lifetime in that profession when she was at school. In fact, the whole thought of acting or even speaking in public terrified her. She told me that at school performances, she’d always preferred to be on the bleachers than on the stage. She was a good student, though, and in the eighth grade, she was valedictorian. She was thrilled at her achievement until she realized that she had to give a speech in front of the whole school.

Although she practiced for weeks, when she found herself at the podium she simply froze in terror. She said that her mother had to go up onto the platform and bring her back down to her seat. And yet she went on to become one of the most accomplished comedy actresses of her generation. This was, in part, because she found her tribe.

Following a successful career at school, Meg won a scholarship to New York University to study journalism. She had always loved to write, and her intention was to focus on becoming a writer, something she considered at the time to be her true passion. To help pay for tuition, though, she found work in the occasional
commercial. This led to producers choosing her for a regular role in the soap opera *As the World Turns*, and to Meg’s discovery that she loved traveling in this circle.

“I found the world of actors fascinating,” she told me. “I was around hilarious people. The job was like being in this nutty extended family. It was a kick. I was doing sixteen-hour days and I became more and more comfortable with the ‘everyday’ of it. I loved the fact that we were always talking about why someone would do something and examining human behavior. I found I had all these opinions about what my character would or wouldn’t do. I didn’t know where I got them from but I had lots and lots of them. I would say things like, ‘OK, that’s what the subtext is. So why am I speaking my subtext?’ I would find myself rewriting lines and really engaging in the character and their world. Every day we’d get a new script and I had to memorize all these lines. It was absolutely, overwhelmingly engaging. There was no time to think about anything else. It was complete immersion.”

Still, after leaving *As the World Turns* and graduating from college, Meg did not set off immediately for Hollywood. Believing she had more to discover about herself, she spent some time in Europe and even considered joining the Peace Corps. But when a movie offer took her to Los Angeles and she returned to the acting milieu, she found once again that she was in a rare place when doing this work.

“I met up with this really great acting teacher. Her name was Peggy Fury. Peggy started talking to me about the art and craft of acting and what being an artist meant to her. Sean Penn was in the class above me, and Anjelica Houston, Michelle Pfeiffer, and Nicolas Cage were there, too. I was surrounded by people who worked from really deep, deep down in themselves and were interested in the human condition and the idea of bringing writing to life. All these things just started to bloom in my mind and in my heart and in my soul. So I stayed in Los Angeles and got an apartment. My agent in New York hooked me up with an L.A. agent, and that’s when it all came together for me.

“Various movies have come along and taught me so many things and helped me grow as a human being. When I decide to do a movie, it may be because I think it’s funny, or I want to work with a particular actor, but in the end, it always has a profound effect on my life. If it’s not the subject matter, it may be a particular group of people. My evolution is served by the different incarnations that are part of every single movie.”

Meg Ryan could have been many things. She has genuine skill as a writer. She has considerable academic talents. She has a wide variety of interests and fascinations. However, when she’s acting, she finds herself with a group of people who see the world the way she does, who allow her to feel her most natural, who affirm her talents, who inspire her, influence her, and drive her to be her best. She is close to her true self when she is among actors, directors, camera and lighting people, and all of the others who populate the film world.

Being a part of this tribe brings her to the Element.

*A Place to Discover Yourself*

Tribe members can be collaborators or competitors. They can share the same vision or have utterly different ones. They can be of a similar age or from different generations. What connects a tribe is a common commitment to the thing they feel born to do. This can be extraordinarily liberating, especially if you’ve been pursuing your passion alone.

Don Lipski, one of America’s most acclaimed sculptors and public artists, always knew that he had an artistic bent. There were some early signs that he had unusual creative energy. “When
I was a child," he told me, "I was always making things. I didn't think of myself as a creative person but as someone with nervous energy. I had to be doodling and putting things together. I didn't think of it as an asset. If anything, it was a peculiarity." This "nervous energy" made him feel different from other kids, and sometimes uncomfortable. "As a child," he said, "more than anything else you just want to be like all the other kids. So rather than me seeing my creativity as something special, it seemed to set me apart."

Through elementary school and into junior high, Lipski was pulled in different directions. He was academically bright but bored by academic work. "Academic work came very easily to me. I would finish assignments very quickly and with the least effort rather than the most depth." He was gifted in math, and his school moved him into an accelerated math group, but in other respects teachers thought of him as an underachiever because he did just enough to get by. He spent more time drawing on his books than thinking about what to write in them: "When I should have been doing academic work, I was drawing or folding paper. Rather than being encouraged, I was chided for it."

One teacher strongly encouraged his artistic talents, but Don didn't take art that seriously. The teacher became so upset with Don that "he literally wouldn't speak to me." Shortly afterward, the teacher left, and another art teacher arrived at the school. He brought with him a revelation for Don. "They had a very rudimentary welding setup in the sculpture department, and he taught me how to weld. To me it was like magic that I could actually take pieces of steel and weld them together. It felt like everything I had done before in art was just child's play. Welding steel and making steel sculptures was like real adult art."

Discovering welding was like finding the Holy Grail. Still, he wasn't sure what to make of this fascination. He didn't think of himself as an artist because he wasn't good at drawing. He had friends who drew well. While they were drawing, "I was playing with blocks or building things out of my erector set. None of that felt like real art. It was the kids who could draw a horse that looked like a horse that felt like the real artists."

Even when he began winning school art shows for his sculptures, he never thought about going to an art school. When he graduated from high school, he enrolled at the University of Wisconsin as a business major. He subsequently switched his major to economics and then history, but he stayed away from the art department, even though he found little inspiration in any other classes.

In his final year, he bluffed his way into taking two electives, woodworking and ceramics, for which he wasn't actually qualified. He loved and excelled in both. Most importantly, he felt, almost for the first time, the true exhilaration of working as an artist on his own terms. In the ceramics class, he also found something he'd been missing throughout his college experience: an inspirational teacher. "He was a very romantic and enthusiastic guy. Everything he did was like an artwork. If he was buttering his bread, he was totally into it. He served as a model for me and made me think that I could really make my life by making things."

For the first time, a career as an artist seemed possible and worthwhile to Lipski. He decided to go to graduate school at the Cranbrook Art Institute in Michigan to study ceramics. Then he hit an obstacle. His parents had encouraged his creative work as long as it was a hobby. When he applied to Cranbrook, his father, a businessman, called him in and tried to drum some economic sense into him. Don agreed; studying ceramics made no practical sense. But it was all he wanted to do. His father looked at Don long and hard, saw that his mind was set, and stood aside. And when Don went to Cranbrook, he discovered a new world of
people and possibilities." I'd had very little exposure to arts students other than in the few courses I had taken," he said. "Cranbrook is almost completely a graduate school. There were maybe two hundred art students there, and about a hundred and eighty of them were graduate students. So for the first time I was around a big body of people who were very serious, knowledgeable, and committed to making their artwork, and it was fantastic for me. I went to all the critiques, not just in the ceramics department but in the painting department, the sculpture department, the weaving department, and everywhere, just soaking it all up. I spent a lot of time visiting with other students in their studios absorbing what everybody was doing. I started to read the art magazines and go to museums and fully immerse myself in art for the first time."

At Cranbrook Don found his tribe, and it set him on a different path.

Finding the right tribe can be essential to finding your Element. On the other hand, feeling deep down that you're with the wrong one is probably a good sign that you should look somewhere else.

Helen Pilcher did just that. She stopped being a scientist and became one of the world's few science comedians. She fell into it after falling out of science. In fact, falling around has been a theme of her professional life. As she puts it, "I wasn't pushed into science, rather I stumbled." After school, she was offered a university place to study psychology and "to drink cider and watch daytime TV." After university, "a generalized apathy and unwillingness to find a real job" led her to take a one-year master's degree in neuroscience. At this point, science itself started to get interesting for Helen. "There were big experiments, brain dissections, and ridiculously unflattering safety specs."

Bitten by the science bug and little else, she stayed on to complete her Ph.D. She learned some useful science, as well as "how to play pool like a diva." She also learned something else. She enjoyed science, but scientists were not her tribe. In her experience, science, unlike pool, was not played on a level surface. "I learned that seniority in the scientific community is inversely proportional to communication skills, but directly related to the thickness of trouser corduroy."

She did learn something of her craft too. "I learned how to make forgetful rats remember. I 'made' and grafted genetically modified stem cells into the brains of absent-minded rodents, which, shortly after my meddling, went on to develop the cognitive capacity of a London cabby. But, at the same time, my own attention began to wander."

Most of all, she found that the world of science as she experienced it was not the utopia of free inquiry that she hoped for. It was a business. "Whilst corporate science pours cash and man-hours into medical research, its downfall is that it's driven by business plans. Experiments are motivated less by curiosity, and more by money. I felt disappointed and confined. I wanted to communicate science. I wanted to write about science. I wanted out."

So she formed "a one-woman escape committee and started digging a tunnel." She enrolled for a diploma in science communication at Birkbeck College in London, and there found "like-minded friends." She was offered a degree in media fellowship "and spent two wonderful months writing and producing funny science films for Einstein TV." She plucked up the courage to sell her freelance science writing to anyone who would have it: "I whored my wares to radio, to print, and to the Internet." Finally, she left the laboratory and went to work for the Royal Society. "My role was to find ways of making science groovy again—not the official job description."
And then, unexpectedly, she received an e-mail message offering her prime-time stage space at the Cheltenham Science Festival to do stand-up comedy about science. No sooner had she said yes than the panic set in. “Science, as we all know, is serious stuff. Einstein’s theory of relativity does not do a one-liner make. I enlisted the help of friend and fellow comedian and writer Timandra Harkness and several pints later, The Comedy Research Project (CRP) was born.”

She went on to join the London comedy circuit, and for the next five years, she “cultured stem cells by day and audiences by night.” The CRP became a live stage show where Timandra and Helen counted down the “Five Best Things in Science Ever.” Members of the audience “find themselves joining in with the formula for nitrous oxide, volunteering to catch a scientist recreating early experiments in flight, and singing along with Elvis about black holes.”

The CRP, she says, aims to prove scientifically the hypothesis that science can be funny. “We are methodologically sound. During each show, a control audience is locked in an identical, adjoining room without comedians. We then assess whether this control audience laughs more or less than the experimental audience who are exposed to jokes about science. Preliminary data gathered from shows around the country looks promising.”

For Helen Pilcher, a life in science has given way to a life of writing and communicating about science. Leaving the lab was scary, she says, “but not as scary as the prospect of staying. My advice, should you be contemplating making that leap, is to make like a lemming and jump.”

Domains and Fields

When I talk about tribes, I’m really talking about two distinct ideas, both of which are important for anyone who is looking to find their Element. The first is the idea of a “domain” and the second, of a “field.” Domain refers to the sorts of activities and disciplines that people are engaged in—acting, rock music, business, ballet, physics, rap, architecture, poetry, psychology, teaching, hairdressing, couture, comedy, athletics, pool, visual arts, and so on. Field refers to the other people who are engaged in it. The domain that Meg Ryan discovered was acting, particularly soap operas. The field was the other actors she worked with who loved acting the way she did, and who fed Meg’s creativity. Later, she moved to another part of the domain, to film acting and within that from comedy to more serious roles. She extended her field as well, especially when she met Peggy Fury and the other actors in her class.

Understanding Meg’s domain and her connection to her field helps explain how the shy girl who couldn’t give a valedictorian speech became an accomplished, world-renowned actor. “When I was working, it was just me and a couple of other actors in a black room with a camera team. I wasn’t worried about an audience, because there wasn’t one. The everyday of it has no audience. The everyday of it is a black sound stage with cameras and one other person you’re doing scenes with. And the activity was so absorbing; these people were so great that I just got carried away in the whole process.”

The confidence she got from that experience was strong enough to carry her further into her domain and to fresh fields of people. Even now, though, she still dislikes talking in public or television talk show interviews. “I’d rather...
not. It's just not who I am. I really don't feel comfortable in that spotlight.”

Brian Ray is an accomplished guitarist who has worked with Smokey Robinson, Etta James, and Peter Frampton and toured on bills with the Rolling Stones and the Doobie Brothers. He came to his domain early, and it ultimately led him into the inner circle of a hero that as a child he never dreamed he would meet.

Brian was born in 1955, in Glendale, California, the year that Alan Freed coined the term rock and roll. He was one of four kids, including a half sister, Jean, who was fifteen years his elder.

“Jean would take me over to her girlfriend’s house, and they would be playing Rick Nelson, Elvis Presley, and Jerry Lee Lewis while poring over photos of these guys. It had such a visceral impact on me, the reactions of these girls to this music that was pouring out of the radio and their response to these photos. There was a part of me that just got the whole thing, right then and there at age three. My dad played piano, and we had a little phonograph-making kit. It had a microphone, and you could cut a record and put this other needle on it to play the record. I remember sitting, at two or three, with my dad at the piano and cutting records.

“Right out of high school Jean started getting into music, and she joined a folk band called the New Christy Minstrels. They did a tour throughout the country. She’d tell us stories and would be glowing from this life she had grown into. Jean imparted to me her love and joy of music and sealed that by bringing me to clubs and concerts when I was nine and ten years old. I would see and meet people that I worshipped.

“My brother was given a really nice Gibson guitar plus lessons. He didn’t have a big desire to play music, and while he was busy not caring about the lessons, I was busy practicing on his guitar. Then I was given a $5 nylon string guitar by my sister Jean that she bought in Tijuana. I just started crying. My passion for music was so big that it was almost a crusade, without my knowing to or knowing that I wanted to share it and spread it around a little. I started a band with guys before I even knew how to tune a guitar.”

“One Sunday night when I was ten or eleven we heard this new band on The Ed Sullivan Show, the Beatles. It was such a different kind of music. It was a mixture of that black R&B that I loved so much, but it was mixed with some other X factor or element that I didn’t know. It was from Mars. It changed everything.

“I knew I wanted to play music, but now they’d closed the deal for me. It was just the most exciting thing I had ever seen. It made being in a band seem like something that was doable and attractive and something I could do for a living. They took away all the ‘maybe I’ll be a fireman.’ I was driven now to what ended up being my life.”

In the next twenty years, Brian played with some of the most outstanding musicians of his generation. Then came the call he never expected—an invitation to audition for Paul McCartney’s new band. He has been touring and playing with McCartney ever since.

“Never in my wildest dreams would I have thought that, you know, this little blond kid sitting Indian-style in front of the TV in 1964 would end up playing with that guy singing ‘All My Lovin’’ and ‘I Saw Her Standing There’ on The Ed Sullivan Show. There is something really gratifying about this story, this, you know, just being a part of this scene.”

The people in this book have found their Element in different domains and with different fields of people. No one is limited to one domain, and many people move in several. Often, breakthrough ideas come about when someone makes a connection
between different ways of thinking, sometimes across different domains. As Pablo Picasso explored the limits of his Blue and Rose periods, he became fascinated with the collections of African art at the Musée d’Ethnographie du Trocadéro in Paris. This work was vastly different from his, but it sparked a new level of creativity in him. He incorporated influences from the ceremonial masks of the Dogon tribe into his landmark painting Les Demoiselles d’Avignon, and thus launched himself into the Cubist work for which he is most celebrated.

As cultures and technologies evolve, new domains emerge, new fields of practitioners populate them, and old domains fade away. The techniques of computer animation have generated an entire new domain of creative work in cinema, television, and advertising. These days, though, people aren’t spending quite as much time as they used to illuminating manuscripts.

Finding your tribe can have transformative effects on your sense of identity and purpose. This is because of three powerful tribal dynamics: validation, inspiration, and what we’ll call here the “alchemy of synergy.”

*It’s Not Just Me*

Debbie Allen’s career in dance, acting, singing, producing, writing, and directing has dazzled and touched millions. Her career soared in 1980 with the hit TV series *Fame*. She holds the distinction of having choreographed the Academy Awards for six consecutive years, and she has won many awards herself, including the Essence Award in 1992 and 1995. She is the founder and director of the Debbie Allen Dance Academy, which offers professional training for young dancers and professionals. It also commissions opportunities for new choreographers and provides an introduction to dance for all ages.

“As a young child,” she told me, “very young, four or five years old, I can remember putting on my pink shiny bathing suit and tying a towel around my neck, climbing a tree, and dancing on the roof of my house performing to the birds and the clouds. I was always dancing as a little girl; I was inspired by the beautiful pictures of ballerinas. Because I was black and lived in Texas, I hadn’t seen a dance performance but I watched musical films, Shirley Temple, Ruby Keeler, the Nicholas Brothers. When the Ringling Brothers Circus came to town, when I saw the spectacle, the people in beautiful costumes and the dancers flying in the air, toes pointed, I just thought it was amazing! I was so inspired by movies. Margot Fonteyn and Rudolf Nureyev were the most incredible things I had ever seen.

“As a young girl, I couldn’t go to serious dance schools because everything was segregated. I joined Debebo Studios. I got a full grant scholarship and attended ten dance classes a week. I still remember my first dance recital— I wore a white shiny satin skirt, a white jacket and orange blouse, white tap shoes and was playing a triangle. The feeling of performing was like being on top of the world! I was always wearing leotards as a child. In fact, at my fifteenth birthday party one of my aunts brought a picture of me at age five in my leotard. I knew I was a dancer very early on.

“I first saw the Alvin Ailey Company at age seventeen. I knew then that I was going to throw away my point shoes, put on high heels and long white skirts, and dance to that kind of music. I identified myself with them so much onstage. It was glorious.

“One summer I went to the Spoleto Dance Festival in the Carolinas. That was when it all fell into place for me. I had ideas as a child but I was challenged by segregation, and so this opportunity to be taught by Dudley Williams in those classes was amazing. Alvin Ailey was there, the resident dance company taught Revelations Dance Classes, and I just shone. They wanted me in
the company but Alvin thought I was too young. I never joined them but I knew I had to do that kind of dancing and teach.

"The Academy is born out of my desire to give back. It offers all styles of dance from flamenco, African, modern, and character to tap and hip-hop. We have incredible teachers from all over the world. Every child has the right to learn to dance. It is an incredible language. These are not the kids that are going to get into trouble, believe me."

Connecting with people who share the same passions affirms that you're not alone; that there are others like you and that, while many might not understand your passion, some do. It doesn't matter whether you like the people as individuals, or even the work they do. It's perfectly possible that you don't. What matters first is having validation for the passion you have in common. Finding your tribe brings the luxury of talking shop, of bouncing ideas around, of sharing and comparing techniques, and of indulging your enthusiasms or hostilities for the same things. Making this connection was a significant spur to many of the people we've met so far in this book—from Matt Groening to Ewa Laurence to Meg Ryan to Black Ice—and to many of those ahead.

Being among other artists at Cranbrook gave Don Lipski a deeper sense that what he was doing mattered and was actually worth doing. He said, "In graduate school I started taking seriously for the first time the little doodles I had made. If I saw a rubber band in the street, I'd pick it up and then start looking for something to wrap it around or combine it with. That's the sort of activity I'd always done, but when I was in graduate school, I realized that that indeed was sculpture. Although modest, it really was art making and not just passing time."

Some people are most in their Element when they are working alone. This is often true of mathematicians, poets, painters, and some athletes. Even with these people, though, there's a tacit aware-

ness of a field—the other writers, other painters, other mathematicians, other players, who enrich the domain and challenge their sense of possibility.

The great philosopher of science Michael Polanyi argues that the free and open exchange of ideas is the vital pulse of scientific inquiry. Scientists like to work on their own ideas and questions, but science is also a collaborative venture. "Scientists, freely making their own choice of problems and pursuing them in the light of their own personal judgment," he said, "are in fact cooperating as members of a closely knit organization."

Polanyi argues passionately against state control of science because it can destroy the free interactions on which genuine science depends. "Any attempt to organize the group... under a single authority would eliminate their independent initiatives and thus reduce their joint effectiveness to that of the single person directing them from the centre. It would, in effect, paralyze their cooperation." It was partly this pressure on science that made Helen Pilcher jump ship from stem cells to the comedy stage.

Interaction with the field, in person or through their work, is as vital to our development as time alone with our thoughts. As the physicist John Wheeler said, "If you don't kick things around with people, you are out of it. Nobody, I always say, can be anybody without somebody being around." Even so, the rhythms of community life vary in the Element just as they do in daily life. Sometimes you want company; sometimes you don't. The physicist Freeman Dyson says that when he's writing, he closes the door, but when he's actually doing science, he leaves it open. "Up to a point you welcome being interrupted because it is only by interacting with other people that you get anything interesting done."
How Do They Do That?

Finding your tribe offers more than validation and interaction, important as both of those are. It provides inspiration and provocation to raise the bar on your own achievements. In every domain, members of a passionate community tend to drive each other to explore the real extent of their talents. Sometimes, the boost comes not from close collaboration but from the influence of others in the field, whether contemporaries or predecessors, whether directly associated with one’s particular domain or associated only marginally. As Isaac Newton famously said, “If I saw further it was because I stood on the shoulders of giants.” This is not just a phenomenon of science.

Bob Dylan was born in Hibbing, Minnesota, in 1942. In his autobiography, Chronicles, he tells of his sense of alienation from the people there, from his family, and from the popular culture of the day. He knew he had to get away from there to become whoever he was going to be. His one lifeline was folk music. “Folk music,” he said, “was all I needed to exist. . . . I had no other cares or interests besides folk music. I scheduled my life around it. I had little in common with anyone not like-minded.”

As soon as he could, he moved on instinct to New York City. There he found the artists, the singers, the writers, and the “scene” that began to unleash his own talents. He had begun to find his people. But among all of those who inspired and shaped his passion, there was one who led him to an artistic place that he had never imagined. When he first heard Woody Guthrie, he said, “It was like a million megaton bomb had dropped.”

One afternoon in the early 1960s in New York City, a friend invited Dylan to look through his record collection. It included a few record albums of old 78s. One was The Spirituals to Swing Concert at Carnegie Hall, a collection of performances by Count Basic, Meade Lux Lewis, Joe Turner and Pete Johnson, Sister Rosetta Tharpe, and others. Another was a Woody Guthrie set of about twelve double-sided records. Dylan had listened casually to some of Guthrie’s recordings when he was living in Hibbing, but hadn’t paid them close attention. This day in New York City was going to be different.

Dylan put one of the old 78s on the turntable, “and when the needle dropped, I was stunned. I didn’t know if I was stoned or straight.” He listened entranced to Guthrie singing solo a range of his own compositions: “Ludlow Massacre,” “1913 Massacre,” “Jesus Christ,” “Pretty Boy Floyd,” “Hard Travelin’,” “Jackhammer John,” “Grand Coulee Dam,” “Pastures of Plenty,” “Talkin’ Dust Bowl Blues,” and “This Land Is Your Land.”

“All these songs together, one after another made my head spin,” he said. “It made me want to gasp. It was like the land parted. I had heard Guthrie before but mainly just a song here and there—mostly things that he sang with other artists. I hadn’t actually heard him, not in this earth shattering kind of way. I couldn’t believe it. Guthrie had such a grip on things. He was so poetic and tough and rhythmic. There was so much intensity, and his voice was like a stiletto.”

Guthrie sang like no other singer Dylan had listened to, and he wrote songs like no one he’d ever heard. Everything about Guthrie—his style, his content, his mannerisms—came to him as a revelation of what folk music could be and had to be.

“It all just about knocked me down. It was like the record player itself had just picked me up and flung me across the room. I was listening to his diction, too. He had perfected a style of singing that it seemed like no one else had ever thought about. He would throw in the sound of the last letter of a word whenever he felt like it and it would come like a punch. The songs themselves, his repertoire, were really beyond category. They had the infinite
sweep of humanity in them. Not one mediocre song in the bunch. Woody Guthrie tore everything in his path to pieces. For me it was an epiphany, like some heavy anchor had just plunged into the waters of the harbor.”

Dylan listened to Guthrie for the rest of that day “as if in a trance.” It was not only a moment of revelation about Guthrie; it was a moment of truth for Dylan. “I felt like I had discovered some essence of self-command, that I was in the internal pocket of the system feeling more like myself than ever before. A voice in my head said, ‘So this is the game.’ I could sing all these songs, every single one of them, and they were all that I wanted to sing. It was like I had been in the dark and someone had turned on the main switch of a lightning conductor.”

By traveling to New York City to find like-minded people, Dylan was looking for himself. By discovering the journey of Woody Guthrie, he began to imagine his own. Like Newton, he saw further because he stood on the shoulders of giants.

**Circles of Influence**

Tribes are circles of influence, and they can take many forms. They may be scattered far and wide or huddled closely together. They may be present only in your thoughts or physically present in the room with you. They may be alive or dead and living through their works. They may be confined to a single generation or cross over them.

Nobel laureate Richard Feynman spoke of ultra-miniaturized machines long before anyone had any thought of creating such things. Years later, Marvin Minsky, inspired by Feynman’s idea, became the founding father of artificial intelligence and moved the conversation forward. Then K. Eric Drexler approached Minsky at MIT, and asked the esteemed professor to sponsor his thesis on miniature devices. That thesis served as the foundation for Drexler’s pioneering work in nanotechnology. Through an extended, multigenerational tribe, a concept that critics dismissed as purely science fiction when Feynman introduced it became a reality.

When tribes gather in the same place, the opportunities for mutual inspiration can become intense. In all domains, there have been powerful groupings of people who have driven innovation through their influence on each other and the impetus they’ve created as a group.

Sociologist Randall Collins writes about how nearly all great philosophical movements came via the dynamics of tribes. In ancient Greece, the history of philosophy “can be recounted in terms of a series of interlinked groups: the Pythagorean brotherhood and its offshoots; Socrates’ circle, which spawned so many others; the acute debaters of the Megara school; Plato’s friends, who constituted the Academy; the breakaway faction that became Aristotle’s Peripatetic school; the restructuring of the network that crystallized with Epicurus and his friends withdrawing into their Garden community, and their rivals, the Athenian Stoics, with their revisionist circles at Rhodes and Rome; the successive movements at Alexandria.”

If it can happen in ancient Greece, it can happen in Hollywood. The documentary *Easy Riders, Raging Bulls* examines the “raucous, inspired, and occasionally sordid cultural revolution” that led to the reinvention of Hollywood filmmaking in the 1960s. In a few short years, the bobby socks and beach blankets that characterized wholesome 1950s Americana were replaced with sex, drugs, and rock ’n’ roll. Inspired by the French New Wave and British New Cinema, a new generation of directors and actors set out to revolutionize American cinema and make films that expressed their personal vision.
The breakthrough successes of landmark films such as _Easy Rider_, _The Godfather_, and _Taxi Driver_ gave these filmmakers unprecedented financial and creative independence. The box-office and critical success of their films forced the old guard of the Hollywood studio system to relinquish their power. This became the age of a new breed of iconic filmmakers such as Francis Ford Coppola, Robert Altman, Martin Scorsese, Peter Bogdanovich, and Dennis Hopper.

With each success, the filmmakers gained greater creative control. They created a culture of feverish innovation as each inspired the others to explore new themes and forms for popular movies. This newfound freedom also gave birth to an explosion of excess, ego, soaring budgets, and a seemingly endless supply of drugs. Eventually, the filmmakers’ mutual support and encouragement degenerated into intense competition and bitter rivalries. The emergence from this culture of blockbuster movies such as _Jaws_ and _Star Wars_ changed the landscape of Hollywood films once again, and creative and financial control returned to the hands of the studios.

The power of tribal clustering was clear too in the period of wild invention surrounding the software industry that accompanied the dawn of the personal computer. Silicon Valley has had a huge impact on digital technology. But, as Dorothy Leonard and Walter Swap have noted, it’s surprisingly small geographically. “Viewing the valley from the flight approach to San Francisco International, one is struck by how small the region is. As Venture Law Group’s Craig Johnson notes, Silicon Valley ‘is like any gas that is compressed; it gets hotter.’ Its tribes overlap socially and professionally based on work discipline (software engineers, for example), organizational affiliation (Hewlett-Packard), or background (Stanford MBAs or South Asian immigrants). The most skillful players do not have to travel far to make deals, change jobs, or find professional partners. John Doerr of Kleiner Perkins is fond of saying that the Valley is a place where you can change your job without changing your parking spot.

“Shared values also bind longtime Silicon Valley natives. The personal convictions of the Valley’s remarkable innovators, who created not just a company but an industry, still echo through the community. Bill Hewlett and David Packard influenced the older generation directly; many of them were early employees. Through this old guard, collegiality and high standards for performance are being carried down to next-generation entrepreneurs.”

Other examples of tribes inspiring individuals to greater heights abound: the sports teams—the 1969 New York Knicks, the “No Name Defense” of the undefeated 1972 Miami Dolphins, the 1991 Minnesota Twins—that performed as a collective that was more distinguished than any of the individuals; the Bauhaus movement in architecture in the early decades of the twentieth century. In each case, the physical clustering of a tribe of creative individuals led to explosive innovation and growth.

The Alchemy of Synergy

The most dramatic example of the power of tribes is the work of actual creative teams. In _Organizing Genius: The Secrets of Creative Collaboration_, Warren Bennis and Pat Ward Biederman write of what they call “Great Groups,” collections of people with similar interests who create something much greater than any of them could create individually—who become more than the sum of the parts. “A Great Group can be a goad, a check, a sounding board, and a source of inspiration, support, and even love,” they say. The combination of creative energies and the need to perform
at the highest level to keep up with peers leads to an otherwise unattainable commitment to excellence. This is the alchemy of synergy.

One of the best examples of this is the creation of Miles Davis’s landmark album *Kind of Blue*. While music lovers of every sort widely consider the recording a “must have,” and legions of jazz fans—and classical and rock fans for that matter—know each note of the album by heart, none of the players on that album knew what they were going to play before they entered the studio.

“Miles conceived these settings only hours before the recording dates and arrived with sketches which indicated to the group what was to be played,” pianist Bill Evans says in the original liner notes to the album. “Therefore, you will hear something close to pure spontaneity in these performances. The group had never played these pieces prior to the recordings and I think without exception the first complete performance of each was a ‘take.’” In fact, the songs that appear on the album are all the first full takes, with the exception of “Flamenco Sketches,” which was the second take.

When trumpeter Davis gathered Evans, along with tenor saxophonist John Coltrane, alto saxophonist Julian “Cannonball” Adderley, pianist Wynton Kelly, bassist Paul Chambers, and drummer Jimmy Cobb in the studio in 1959, he laid out the scales—itself somewhat revolutionary, since jazz at the time was traditionally built around chord changes—and turned on the tape recorder. Each of these players was an active participant in the tribe moving jazz in new directions at that time, and they’d worked together in the past. What happened during the *Kind of Blue* sessions, though, was a perfect storm of affirmation, inspiration, and synergy. These artists set out to break barriers, they had the skill to take their music in new directions, and they had a leader with a bold vision.

Their improvisational work that day was the result of powerful creative forces merging and creating something outsizethe ultimate goal of synergy. When the tape started rolling, magic happened. “Group improvisation is a further challenge,” said Evans. “Aside from the weighty technical problem of collective coherent thinking, there is the very human, even social need for sympathy from all members to bend for the common result. This most difficult problem, I think, is beautifully met and solved on this recording.” The music they created in those next few hours—working with each other, playing off each other, synchronizing with each other, challenging each other—would last several lifetimes. *Kind of Blue* is the best-selling jazz album of all time and, nearly fifty years later, still sells thousands of copies every week.

Why can creative teams achieve more together than they can separately? I think it’s because they bring together the three key features of intelligence that I described earlier. In a way, they model the essential features of the creative mind.

Great creative teams are diverse. They are composed of very different sorts of people with different but complementary talents. The team that created *Kind of Blue* was made up of extraordinary musicians who not only played different instruments but brought with them different musical sensibilities and types of personality. This was true too of the Beatles. For all that they had in common, culturally and musically, Lennon and McCartney were very different as people, and so too were George Harrison and Ringo Starr. It was their differences that made their creative work together greater than the sum of their individual parts.

Creative teams are dynamic. Diversity of talents is important, but it is not enough. Different ways of thinking can be an obstacle to creativity. Creative teams find ways of using their differences as strengths, not weaknesses. They have a process through which their strengths are complementary and compensate for each other’s
weaknesses too. They are able to challenge each other as equals, and to take criticism as an incentive to raise their game.

Creative teams are distinct. There's a big difference between a great team and a committee. Most committees do routine work and have members who are theoretically interchangeable with other people. Committee members are usually there to represent specific interests. Often a committee can do its work while half the members are checking their BlackBerry or studying the wallpaper. Committees are often immortal; they seem to persist forever, and so often do their meetings. Creative teams have a distinctive personality and come together to do something specific. They are together only as long as they want to be or have to be to get the job done.

One of the most famous examples of powerful teamwork is the administration of President Abraham Lincoln. In her book *Team of Rivals*, Doris Kearns Goodwin tells the story of Lincoln and four members of his cabinet, Edwin M. Stanton, secretary of war, Salmon P. Chase, secretary of the treasury, William H. Seward, secretary of state, and Edward Bates, attorney general. These five men were unquestionably part of the same tribe, passionate in their desire to lead and move America forward. However, each of the four others had opposed Lincoln openly and bitterly prior to his presidency. Stanton once even called Lincoln a "long armed ape." Each had strongly held positions that sometimes differed greatly from Lincoln's. In addition, each of them believed they were more deserving of the presidency than the man the people elected.

Still, Lincoln believed that each of these rivals had strengths the administration needed. With an equanimity difficult to imagine in current American politics, he brought this team together. They argued ceaselessly, and often viciously. What they found in working with each other, though, was the ability to forge their differing opinions into sturdy national policy, navigating the country through its most perilous period through the effort of their combined wisdom.

Lost in the Crowd

There's an important difference between being in a tribe as I'm defining it and being part of a crowd, even when the members of a crowd are all there for the same reason and feel the same passions. Sports fans come to mind immediately. There are vociferous and passionate fans all over the sports landscape—football devotees in Green Bay, soccer (or as those of us from the rest of the world know it, *football*) enthusiasts in Manchester, ice hockey zealots in Montreal, and so on. They cover their walls, their cars, and their front lawns with team paraphernalia. They might know the regular lineup for their local teams when they finished in fourth place in 1988. They might have postponed their weddings because the date conflicted with the World Series or the European Cup. They are dedicated to their teams, rhapsodic about their teams, and their moods might be dictated by the performance of their teams. But their fandom does not place them in a tribe with their fellow fans, at least not in the way that I'm describing it here.

Fan behavior is a different form of social affiliation. Some people, including Henri Tajfel and John Turner, refer to this as social identity theory. They argue that people often derive a large sense of who they are through affiliation with specific groups and tend to associate themselves closely with groups likely to boost their self-esteem. Sports teams make fans feel as though they are part of a vast, powerful organization. This is especially true when the teams are winning. Look around at the end of any sports season, and you'll notice team jerseys of that season's champion
sprouting all over the street, even in places far distant from the team’s home city. Fans boast their affiliation with victorious teams much more loudly because at some level they believe that being associated in a tangential way with such a team makes them look better.

The social psychologist Robert Cialdini has a term for this. He calls it Basking in Reflected Glory, or BIRGing. In the 1970s, Cialdini and others conducted a study about BIRGing and found that students at a number of American universities were much more likely to wear university-related clothing on the Monday after their school won a football game. They also found that students were more likely to use the pronoun we regarding the team—as in “We destroyed State on Saturday”—than they were if their team lost. In the latter instance, the pronoun usually switched to they—as in, “I can’t believe they blew that game.”

The point about BIRGing as it relates to our definition of tribes is that the person doing the basking has little or nothing to do with the glory achieved. We’ll give a tiny bit of credit to the effect of fan support if the fan attended the actual sports event. Though serious sports fans are a notoriously superstitious lot, only the most irrational among them actually believe that their actions—wearing the same hat to every game, sitting perfectly still during a rally, using a specific brand of charcoal during the tailgate party—have any impact on the results.

Membership of a fan group—whether it’s the Cheeseheads or Red Sox Nation—is not the same as being in a tribe. In fact, such membership can create the opposite effect. Tribe membership as I define it here helps people become more themselves, leading them toward a greater sense of personal identity. On the other hand, we can easily lose our identity in a crowd, including a group of fans. Being a fan is about being partisan; cheering or jeering and finding joy in victory and agony in defeat. This might be fulfilling and thrilling in many ways, but it normally doesn’t take you to the Element as a means of self-realization.

In fact, fandom is in many ways a form of what psychologists rather awkwardly call “deindividuation.” This means losing your sense of identity through becoming part of a group. Extreme forms of deindividuation lead to mob behavior. If you’ve ever been to a European soccer match, you know how this can apply to the sports world. But even in more benign versions, it results in a sense of anonymity that leads people to lose inhibitions and sometimes perform acts they later regret, and in most cases do things outside their normal personalities. In other words, these actions can take you far from your true self.

My youngest brother Neil used to be a professional soccer player for Everton, one of the major teams in Britain. Whenever I was in Liverpool, I would watch him play. It was an exhilarating and often terrifying experience. Football fans in Liverpool are very enthusiastic, let’s say. They are passionate about winning, and when things on the pitch aren’t going as they’d like, they willingly offer tactical advice from the terraces. It’s a form of mentoring for the players, and often for the referee too. If Neil failed to place a shot exactly where the fans wanted it, they would scream words of encouragement. “Poor shot, Robinson,” they might say, or, “Come on, you can do better than that, surely.” Or words to that effect.

On one occasion, there was an hysterical outburst from someone immediately behind me, offering a robust criticism of my younger brother’s tactics in words that implicated my mother and, by extension, me. On instinct, I whirled around to deal with what was clearly a question of family honor. When I saw the manic fan’s size and facial expressions, however, I agreed that he was probably right. Crowd behavior is like that.
Look, Listen, and Learn

Some spectators really are skilled critics, and what they think about an event can genuinely help others to make better sense of it. The domains of literary criticism, music journalism, and sports commentary all have distinguished members whose words speak to us deeply and who belong to tribes passionately dedicated to extending the discourse. This is different from simple fandom. It is a performance in the service of fandom that has definable levels of excellence and the makings of a true calling. Sportscaster Howard Cosell called one of his autobiographies *I Never Played the Game*, yet he served for decades as one of the most important and influential voices in the U.S. sports world.

My guess is that Cosell found his Element in sports, even though he wasn’t an athlete. He knew he could enhance the average fan’s sports experience, and found a greater sense of who he was in doing so. Cosell once said, “I was infected with my desire, my resolve, to make it in broadcasting. I knew exactly what I wanted to do, and how.” He was one of a key group of enthusiasts who became active participants in the world they admired by bridging the space between the players and the audience.

And in every crowd and every audience there may be someone who is responding differently from everybody else—someone who is having his own epiphany, someone who sees his tribe not on the bleachers around him but on the stage in front of him.

Billy Connolly is one of the most original and one of the funniest comedians in the world. He was born in a working-class area of Glasgow, Scotland, in 1942. He struggled through school, which he mostly disliked, and left as soon as he could to become an apprentice welder in the Glasgow shipyards. He served his time there, learning his trade and also absorbing the ways and customs of working life on the banks of the river Clyde. From an early age, Connolly loved music and taught himself to play the guitar and the banjo. Like Bob Dylan, growing up at the same time and an ocean away, he was captivated by folk music and spent whatever time he could listening and playing at folk clubs around Scotland. He also loved the pubs and the banter of Glasgow nightlife, and made regular visits to the cinema, to Saturday-night dances, and to occasional live theater.

One night Connolly was watching the comedian Chick Murray on television. For more than forty years, Chick Murray had been a legend of comedy and music hall. His droll, acerbic wit epitomized the laconic take on life that typifies Scottish humor. Billy took his seat, ready for a riotous session with the great man. He had all of that. But he had something else—an epiphany. As he rolled around in his seat, he was acutely aware of the hysterical pleasure, the emotional release, and the lacerating insights that Murray was detonating around himself. For Billy in Glasgow, this was as much of a turning point as listening to Woody Guthrie was for Bob Dylan in Greenwich Village. He realized that it was possible to do this, and that he was going to do it. He began to separate from the crowd and to merge with his tribe.

Billy had always talked to his own small audiences between songs. Increasingly, he found himself talking more and singing less. He found too that the audiences were getting bigger. For many comedians of his generation, he went on to become the doyen of freewheeling stand-up comedy. His work has taken him far from the shipyards of the Clyde into packed theaters around the world, into award-winning movies as an actor, and into the minds and affections of millions of people.

Like most of the people in this book, he found his way not only when he found his Element but also when he found his tribe.