Hey everyone. This is Jeff, and today I am interviewing Robert Greene about his new book, *Mastery*. Robert is the best-selling author – the international best-selling author of several books including *48 Laws of Power* and *The Art of Seduction*. And today we’re going to talk about Robert’s new book, *Mastery*. Hey Robert, thanks for doing this with me.

Thanks for having me, Jeff. My pleasure.

So, *Mastery* is a book about how you find your calling, is that right?

Well, it’s a book about not just being good at what you do, but being great. It’s sort of the – I call it the ultimate form of power, the highest level of intelligence we can reach. And it’s generally the fruit of a lot of practice, and diligence, and persistence. It’s not the fact that you’re born a genius, or that you have a larger brain. It’s the level of dedication and persistence and patience. But at the root of all that is what you correctly note is knowing what your life’s – what I call your life’s task. It’s choosing a career path that meshes with your deepest interests in life, what sparks your deepest levels of curiosity. And if you do manage to follow a path like that, then you’re naturally going to be more patient. You’re naturally going to be more persistent. You’ll know how to deal with all of the crap that people throw at you. So, that’s really the key to the whole game.

Yeah. Yeah. I love that. I heard an interview that you did, I think, with Copy Blogger maybe close to six or eight months ago. And I was really challenged by it, because you talked about your calling as a writer, your – the season of life that you’re in, where you’re really trying to be as great at your craft as you can possibly be. And that was really challenging to me. Can you talk a little bit about how you became a writer, at which I know is kind of an interesting story in terms of how you got published, and how *48 Laws of Power* became this crazy runaway success. But can you just talk about the process of you becoming a writer and where you’re at in that season of your own craft?

Well, I’ve been – ever since I was a kid I wanted – I knew I wanted to write. So, and I maintain in the book that usually people have a sense of these things when they’re very young. But I never really knew exactly what I should be writing. So, at first I thought I’d write a great novel. Then I got into journalism. And I didn’t really like journalism because what you wrote didn’t really last very long. You know? It could be forgotten three days later. Then I got into Hollywood, and film, and television. And that lasted longer, but you would write something, and then 20 other people would come on top it and change everything that you did. So, you had no control.

And, so, I was in my mid-30s. I knew I wanted to be a writer. But I hadn’t found where I fit in this world. And, then, just by – sort of by coincidence, I suppose, I met this man who is a book packager. And he asked me if I had any ideas for books. And I ended up kind of improvising that day what would turn out to be the *48 Laws of Power*. But the important thing was I could sense that this was like the perfect
fit for me. I could write something that would last. I would have complete control of it. I could put in all
of the research, my love of history that I had developed over many years. I could put into a nonfiction
book but also really work to helping people.

And, so, what I say the lesson for this is, and I have other people in Mastery who follow a similar
paradigm is that it doesn’t matter – you don’t have to find exactly what you want early on in life. It can
be a voyage, a journey that takes a few years. As long as you have a general sense of the direction you
need to be headed, and which for me was writing. And you develop skills. Because if you just waste your
20s – if I had wasted my 20s and this man asked me for book ideas, it would have been useless. But I had
spent my time learning how to write, writing under a deadline, gaining skill in the craft. And when the
opportunity came I could exploit it. So, that to me was the lesson. And, now, you know, some 17 years
later I feel like I’m sort of in the best position I can be in. And I definitely, you know, honed – I think I’ve
honied my craft over these years. But the main thing was, I was ready when that opportunity came.

J: In the book in Mastery you talk about the ideal apprenticeship which is essentially what you’re
talking about here, you know, not wasting your 20s or your earlier years in becoming a professional
whatever, investing into becoming that great artist, musician, scientist, whatever, so that when the
opportunity comes, you’re ready.

R: Yeah.

J: Can you talk a little bit more about apprenticeship? So, how had you been apprenticing? If this
was the opportunity, what were you apprenticeships like?

R: Well, the first thing is to get my concept of the apprenticeship. I mean to any of that. You can
pretty much throw out what you learn from school, or your parents, once you enter the real world,
because it’s a totally new environment with new rules, new ways of learning. And the problem is, we’re
not prepared for that.

And, so, you know, for me, personally, I made some mistakes. And I learned the hard way.
Mostly, I was a bit naïve and didn’t understand that people out there can be sometimes manipulative
and political. And, so, I have a chapter in the book that your apprenticeship really includes knowing how
to work with people and not being so naïve.

But the main thing is, you want to be developing skill. I said that earlier. That’s the key thing in
the apprenticeship phase is learning, learning, learning. Not making money. Not getting fame and
attention. The more you learn in this apprenticeship phase, the more you’re prepared for those
moments that will eventually come to you.

And, for me, it was just simply writing. I kept writing. I mean I didn’t know what it was. And I had
some success. I was published in Esquire and other magazines. And I developed the skills that I would
later really need, which is to be able to write under a deadline, to be able to be professional and write in
a professional manner, know how to – and skills in organizing which are really critical for any business
that you’re in.
So, you know, I might – from my parents’ perspective I looked like I was lost. And they were ready to give up on me. But really, truth, I was developing all the things that would later be very important for writing a big book.

J: Yeah. So, when you write a book, you – it seems that you do a lot of thorough research. I mean this book is full of amazing accounts of Charles Darwin, Benjamin Franklin. You pull from a lot of different parts of history to talk about how people throughout history found their callings, how they—

R: Yeah.

J: —apprenticed under a mentor. Can you talk about your research process a little bit? How do you set out to write a book going from picking the topic to doing all the research that you’re doing to actually writing it?

R: Well, the reason I go through so much research is, I really, really want to nail the subject that I’m dealing with, whether it’s power, or warfare, or whatever. And, so, I’m just – I just feel like I can never read and do enough research. So, my process is something I’ve developed over the years. I – for this book I read everything you can read about the neuroscience of how the brain learns, about how we become creative. And, then, I read biographies of all of the greatest masters that I consider worth reading: Di Vinci, Charles Darwin, Einstein, Henry Ford, you name it.

And then, I interviewed nine contemporary masters so that it wouldn’t just feel like this is a historical book. I wanted to give it a modern context. So, I interviewed nine people in different fields: architect; Santiago College Frava, the boxing trainer; Freddy Roach, the U.S. Air Force pilot ace; Caesar Rodriguez.

And the main thing was the organization of this vast amount of material. Because most often people can get kind of over submerged by their own material. So, I’m an organization freak. I put everything – all my ideas, all my research onto notecards. Notecards organized thematically. And before I’ve ever written a page, I have shoeboxes full of these elaborate notes. And, so, I have all my research really tightly organized.

And then, I can explore. I’ve got everything I wanted to know about Di Vinci there on my cards. I look at them. And now I can write with a heavy research and really feel like I know the person deep down inside. And it frees me up. I’m in command. I’m the master of my material as opposed to the material mastering me.

J: Yeah, that’s really interesting, because you cover this in the book. Each chapter has like this reversal where maybe you kind of go against the grain in terms of what is sort of the commonly-held knowledge about the topic that you’re discussing. And at one point in the book you talk about the stereotype, especially the artist stereotypes. So, talking about Mozart where, you know, or Coltrane talking about this idea that some of history’s greatest artists were crazy, or drug addicts, when they
were creating their life’s best work. And you’re talking about something that I think a lot of artists, and writers, and creative struggle with which is this idea of organization.

R: [Laughing]

J: But in the book you say that it’s actually the opposite, that people don’t create their best work when they’re hooked on heroine. They don’t create their best work when they’re going crazy.

R: Well, it’s a terrible, ridiculous myth. And it’s also a great secret. And it’s – if we looked behind the scenes and we saw Einstein spending hour after hour thinking about this one problem, or if we saw the hours of practice that Mozart put into his music, or John Coltrane into playing the saxophone, you can go on and on for all of these people, it would almost not seem so glorious, so mystical, so – we love the myth of the artist just creating out of nothing.

Also, it gets us off the hook. We can say, “Well, I wasn’t born a Mozart. How could I possibly do it?” Or Coltrane, it was just the heroine when in fact Coltrane said he did his worst music when he was on heroine. And the myth is there, or the repeat thing that people don’t realize is the greatest jazz artist ever, John Coltrane, in a medium known for its spontaneity was a practice freak. This man practiced harder than anyone ever had practiced before on the saxophone. Perhaps besides Charlie Parker who was his great idol. This man practiced hours, and hours, and hours every conceivable genre of type of jazz music. And that’s what made – led him to be so wildly creative, and even spontaneous, in the end.

So, I really, really set out in this book to deflate, debunk that ridiculous myth that it’s something someone’s born with, they’re just insane, or they take drugs. And I show it applies to Albert Einstein. It applies to dance and Martha Graham. It applies to sports and Michael Jordan or Bill Bradley. On and on down the line. The effort and years of practice that you put in lead – will let you now suddenly become much more creative and intuitive.

J: Yeah, you say – you say this. Here’s a quote, “Understand, to create a meaningful work of art, or to make a discovery or invention, requires great discipline, self-control, and emotional stability.” And you just talked about this idea of, basically, putting a frame around your art, whatever it might be. Can we personalize this for a second? Are you somebody who has always had a penchant for organization? Or is this more of a discipline for you?

R: Well, I’m kind of schizo a little bit. I mean on the one hand I sometimes find it hard to organize the simple things about me. But for some reason when it comes to research, or a book, or something creative, I actually really enjoy the structure part. And I think I make this point. I made it in my war book, and in this book, that you’ve got to get over this idea that somehow the structure of a project, or how you organize your – the people that you manage, is boring. Actually, structure or organization is incredibly sexy. And that’s where anything great is built. I show in my war book that Napoleon Bonaparte’s genius was organizational. He knew how to organize the greatest army that ever existed on the planet up to that time.
And it’s actually quite fun to be structuring a book like it’s a building, or, you know, like a piece of architecture. I put a lot of energy and pleasure into it. There’s some tedious stuff, a lot of tedious stuff. But it pays off when you start slowing shaping the book.

You know, a lot of things fail in life. And this could be a business, a book, or a film, because people run out of energy. They start off with a great idea. It seems wonderful. Other people love it. But they fail to do the hard work and organize and structure their thoughts and get all the way to the end with that same energy.

So, I make the point that being organized frees you up and allows you to get to that finish point with as much as energy and desire as you had in the beginning.

J: So, what if somebody isn’t like you, they didn’t know from a very early age that they wanted to write? You know, I meet a lot of people who are in their 20s, and even 30s saying, “I don’t know what I want to do with my life.” How do they find the one thing, the one craft that they can discipline themselves in so they can start moving towards mastery? And I know lots of people are sort of jacks of all trades. Would you encourage them to just pick something? I mean, how do they navigate those waters?

R: Well, I’m maintaining that you do know it, that there is something in there. Everybody is born unique genetically. Your brain is wired differently than anybody else. And when you were a kid, it meant that you were drawn to certain subjects. For me, it would have been history, and writing, and literature. Others it’s going to be sports, or games of strategy and competitiveness. You know, I maintain like great athletes it’s not just maybe basketball that interests them, but it’s winning. It’s the competitive angle that a Napoleon or a Michael Jordan has. For others, it could be music, or math. When you’re a kid, it was there. And you know it. And you felt it. It was before your parents infected you with, “No, you got to go to law school, or go to medical school.” And it’s before your peers started infecting you with, “This is a cool job. This is where you want to go.” And before you started thinking about money. It was there. And, so, my book is how to – I show you how you can get back in touch with that.

Also, you know, in life as you get into your 20s, you discover things that you don’t like which is a very important lesson. You know, I talk in there about Paul Graham, for instance, the great Silicone Valley entrepreneur, one of the masters I interviewed. He learned getting his PhD in computers, engineering at Harvard that he hated academia. He would never go into anything bureaucratic. Seeing the negative side of what you don’t want is very – can be very helpful.

And, also, when you look at the – get online, or you read a newspaper, there’s a subject that your eyes are drawn to, that makes you just so curious you want to learn. Those are the signs of something inside of you.

And the main thing you want to do is, you don’t want to give up what you’ve been doing for the past 10 years and suddenly say, “No, I’m going to be a rock star. That’s what I was meant to be.” You’ve got to build on what you been doing already. You’ve got to take the skills that you’ve been acquiring and maybe something that wasn’t suited to you, and find a way to adapt them. And find your way towards a path that’s more in alignment with this life’s task.
So, for example, I met a woman who interviewed me actually. She had gone to law school, and she became a lawyer, and she hated it. And she really had wanted to become a writer. And, so, finally, she got the guts to quit law and write about legal issues. And that was the best thing she could have done. Instead of trying to write a novel, she now wrote journalism about legal issues. Then, she was able to start writing about other things. Now, she’s writing a novel that is a courtroom novel. You know, those are the kind of small steps you take towards moving in the direction of what I call your life’s tasks.

J: So, what sort of distractions will we encounter as we’re heading towards our life’s tasks? So, you talked about your parents, or even just the world kind of giving you these ideas of what it means to succeed in life.

R: Yeah.

J: What challenges do we face in really finding that task?

R: Well, oddly enough, it’s really your ego that becomes the biggest obstacle of all. And you think that’s counterintuitive. Like, well, some of the masters I’m talking about, don’t they have large egos. But even if you read Steve Jobs biography, which I recently finished, the guy isn’t motivated by attention, or fame, or money. He’s motivated by the love of his work.

J: Right.

R: And to an obsessional level. And that’s what made him sometimes kind of unpleasant to be around. So, the biggest obstacle you face when you enter the work world is you think the game is about getting attention, being liked, having other people pay attention to you, making money. And that’s not – and that’s going to really mess you up later in life. Because it’s going to prevent you from learning the skills that you need to learn.

It’s almost a Zen-type thing where you’re almost egoless. You’re really motivated by the love of this particular question, or subject, or problem that’s facing you. And it might sound cliché. It might sound touchy-feely or something. But I swear to you, all of the masters I interviewed, all the people I researched, they all share that quality.

What can happen to you is if you get success early on in your 20s you start thinking, “Well, it’s all about being in the limelight, getting people’s attention, repeating what I did before,” and you lose connection to the actual – it’s the work itself that matters. And if you put that energy into the work, into learning, the money will come. The fame will come. You may not even want it, because you work so much. But I guarantee you that that kind of drive and persistence will bring much more money and fame than if that became your original motivation.
J: Is this what you’re talking about where you’re – there’s a story about Bobby Fisher in the book where you talk about this heightened awareness, where all of these masters had this moment where they just saw the world differently. Is this what you’re talking about where they just beginning to focus more on the work than the fame, or the accolades, or money?

R: Well, they’ve always been sort of focusing on the work. So, if you take a Bobby Fisher, the great chess master, you know, this kid put insane numbers of hours as a young man, because he loved chess. And at some point, I maintain, that he had this feel for the chess board that just surpassed anything anybody had. He could sense not just the moves that he needed to make, or what his opponent could make, but a whole feel for the game as it evolved. He could see in advance the whole dynamic. And, then, kind of make the killer move.

It’s the same thing that happened in warfare with a Rommel or Napoleon, the same thing that happened in business, or an invention with Thomas Edison, or Steve Jobs. So, all along these people are absorbed in their work for its own sake. They don’t go at it saying, “I’ve got to be a master. I’ve got to become this great person.” Eventually, it happens to them.

And, so, I talk in the book about Yoki Motzawoka, this amazing woman engineer, robotics engineer genius. She’s a contemporary figure. And she never thought of money, or where she would end up. She just simply acquired all of these skills in computers, in artificial intelligence, in neuroscience, and, then, suddenly she made this great invention with a prosthetic arm. And, now, Google now contacts her saying, “We want you to be part of our genius group here.” And, now, other companies start contacting her. You go do the legwork, and people will come to you, and power will come to you.

J: So, let’s close with this as our last discussion topic.

R: Yeah.

J: Somebody’s listening to this, maybe they’re in their 30s, 40s, 60s, 70s, whatever. I mean you said at one point it’s never really too late to find this—

R: Yeah.

J: —life’s task. So, let’s say somebody is listening to this, and they’re going, “Man, I missed it. I didn’t take advantage of my 20s, or 30s. I didn’t apprentice. I wasted my time. I pursued what the world told me to pursue. I listened to my parents. I became a lawyer. I’m lost. How do they reclaim this pursuit of their life’s work?

R: Well, you really have to have had some kind of skills that you acquired. If you are in your 40s, and you haven’t really gained any patience, or persistence, you haven’t learned skills, it’s not going to be very easy. I don’t want to – this is not a book to sugar coat it. This isn’t like The Secret where I’m telling
you things that you want to hear. There is some great stuff as far as the powers that you’re going to get. But I’m not going to sugar coat it.

You need to have at least some level of skills in certain things, number one, just to develop the habits that you need in order to get your life back on track. But let’s say that you have developed skills to some extent, but they’re just not what you really wanted to do in life. You’ve got to go through this process. You’ve got to go back and look at yourself.

The problem that we have now is, a lot of people aren’t in touch with who they are. They’ve been on Facebook too much, too much social media. They listen to what other people are doing. Their attention is all outward focused on what others are doing. And they have no sense of who they are, or what they need to be doing. So, you need to take time, and step back, and look at yourself deeply and say – this is actually what I loved when I was a kid. I know it. I knew it. I knew it when I came out of college, but I took a wrong step.

You’ve got to be honest with yourself. And, then, you’ve got to find a way to get back on that path however late it is in life. So, let’s just say, for instance, you’re in your 50s, and you didn’t do what you wanted to do, but you wanted to be a writer, and you didn’t actually do the writing. You know in your free time, in your spare time, you’re going to go take some classes in it. You’re going to, you know, at night instead of wasting time playing video games, you’re going to practice writing. Getting back some skill level, and the ability to learn skills. Just the sense that you’re going to do that is going to make you feel so much better knowing that you are on the right path.

And you’ll slowly develop momentum, and it will feel right, and maybe if you do it for three or four years, practicing the writing – I’m just giving that example – maybe by the time you’re 55, you’ll be able to start writing things and make some money off of it and change the course of it. It’s not a big, dramatic change. It’s small realistic steps in the right direction. And a realistic reassessment of who you are, and where you want to go.

J: The book is called Mastery. The author is Robert Greene. Robert, how can people find out more about you and about Mastery?

R: Well, there’s my Web site: http://PowerSeductionAndWar.com. The “and” is spelled out. So, Power Seduction and War dot com. Got a blog there. I also have a link to my new Mastery Web site which will tell you all about the new book. But that pretty much covers it.

J: Thanks so much for your time, Robert. And it was a pleasure talking with you.

R: Thank you so much for having me Jeff. My pleasure.