

You Do Not Need More

Accessing what is already there

We live in a culture that places great value on development. We are encouraged to acquire more knowledge, improve our skills and become more confident, resilient, productive and effective. There is much to appreciate in that. Human beings are capable of learning throughout their lives, and knowledge, practice and experience genuinely expand what we are able to do.

Yet in more than forty years of working with people, I have often encountered another side of development. Sometimes people already possess much of what they are looking for. They have knowledge, ability, sensitivity or experience, but somehow cannot fully access those qualities when they need them most. That gradually led me to ask a different question. Not only what someone still needs to acquire, but also what may be preventing what is already there from becoming available.

Talent, skill and freedom

This distinction first became very clear to me through sports. Talent matters. We are not all born with the same possibilities. Some people have an extraordinary sense of movement or rhythm, while others show a natural sensitivity for language, music, creativity or human relationships. Talent creates possibilities, but it does not determine what will eventually become of them.

Knowledge and skills have to be acquired. An athlete trains for years, a musician practices, a surgeon studies and refines techniques, and a teacher learns through education and experience. This requires effort, repetition, discipline and time. There is no reason to romanticize that process. No amount of confidence can replace preparation, and no amount of feeling can replace the work required to become skilled at something.

But when talent and acquired skills are both present, a third element becomes increasingly important: freedom. Someone may have trained for years and still discover that, under pressure, less becomes available than they know they are capable of. The issue is then no longer simply whether the ability exists, but whether there is enough freedom to express it.

Most of us recognize moments like this. An athlete becomes tense during a decisive moment. A musician starts consciously controlling movements that normally happen naturally. A speaker becomes so aware of being judged that words become difficult to find. The knowledge has not disappeared and years of practice have not suddenly been erased. What has changed is the person's relationship with what they can do.

Pressure may narrow attention. Fear can increase the need for control. Self-consciousness may interfere with actions that usually unfold with much less conscious effort. Paradoxically, the stronger our desire to succeed becomes, the more difficult it can sometimes be to remain free enough to allow our abilities to come forward.

More is not always the answer

When something does not work, our instinct is often to look for something that can solve it. Another course, another book, another technique, another strategy or another explanation. Sometimes that is exactly what is needed. There are things we simply do not know yet and abilities we have not yet acquired. Development certainly includes learning.

But there are also moments when adding more does very little. Someone may understand perfectly well that they need to set a boundary and still find themselves saying yes. Someone may know that they are sufficiently prepared and nevertheless become overwhelmed by doubt when they have to perform. Someone may long for closeness while automatically withdrawing when another person comes near.

In such situations, the difficulty may not lie in a lack of knowledge. It can become more useful to explore what actually happens when the familiar response appears. What happens inside me when I try to set that boundary? What am I afraid might happen if I disappoint someone? What changes when the pressure rises? What have I learned to protect myself from?

Those questions move development in another direction. Instead of immediately asking what needs to be added, we become curious about what may be standing in the way.

The meaning of ont-wikkelen

There is something in the Dutch word *ontwikkeling* — development — that has become increasingly meaningful to me. It can also be heard as *ont-wikkeling*: an unwrapping.

Of course, development cannot be reduced to uncovering what was already there. We genuinely acquire things throughout life. We learn language, gain knowledge, practice skills and develop capacities through experience. These things are not simply waiting fully formed somewhere inside us.

But alongside that process of acquiring, another movement takes place. As we grow up, we also adapt. We learn how to protect ourselves, what is expected of us, how to belong and how to avoid being hurt. We take on roles and develop ways of responding that help us find our place in the circumstances in which we live. Many of these adaptations are useful, and some may once have been necessary.

The difficulty arises when what once protected us begins to restrict us. A child who learned to adapt closely to others may later find it difficult to recognize their own boundaries. Someone who discovered that control created safety may struggle when life asks for trust. A way of responding that made perfect sense in one period of life can continue long after the circumstances that made it necessary have changed.

Development can then take the form of *ont-wikkelen*: gradually becoming aware of these layers and discovering which of them still belong to the life we are living. Not tearing them away and not judging them as mistakes, but allowing them to become less determining when they are no longer needed.

In that sense, growth is not always about becoming more. Sometimes it is about becoming more available to what is already there.

Beyond performance

I first recognized this movement clearly in sports, but over the years I began to see it everywhere. In relationships, people may have a deep capacity for closeness while earlier experiences make it difficult to allow another person near. In creativity, something may long to be expressed while fear of judgment keeps it hidden. In work, someone may have the knowledge and ability to lead but become so occupied with expectations that they lose contact with their own judgment.

The same can happen in therapy. People understandably arrive hoping that I can give them something they are missing: more confidence, greater strength, certainty or a solution. Sometimes new knowledge or new skills are indeed helpful. But increasingly I have learned not to assume too quickly that something is missing.

Before asking what needs to be added, I want to understand the person who is sitting in front of me. What is already there? What has this person learned? What has helped them survive or adapt? And what may now be preventing them from living as freely as they could?

That shift may seem small, but it changes the therapeutic relationship. The person is no longer primarily someone with a deficit that needs to be repaired. They become someone whose life has taken shape for understandable reasons and who may now be able to discover other possibilities.

My work is not about adding

I cannot give someone a talent they do not possess, replace the years of practice required to acquire a skill or decide what another person's life should look like. What I can do is help create circumstances in which someone may begin to experience themselves more clearly.

That may mean noticing what happens beneath an explanation they have repeated for years. It may mean recognizing an old way of protecting themselves at the moment it occurs. It may mean feeling a boundary before automatically crossing it, or discovering what changes when they no longer have to work quite so hard to become the person they think they should be.

Over the years, this has become one of the simplest ways in which I can describe my work: *my work is not about adding, it is about uncovering.*

I do not mean that everything a person will ever need is already somewhere inside them. We need other people. We need knowledge and experience. We continue to learn throughout our lives. But sometimes what we need most is not something new. Sometimes we need greater freedom to live with what is already ours.

Becoming more fully yourself

Perhaps this is why I have become increasingly cautious about the idea that personal development is primarily about becoming a better version of ourselves. There is always more to learn and life will continue to change us, but the endless pursuit of improvement can also carry a subtle message: who you are now is apparently not yet enough.

There is another possibility. Alongside everything we continue to acquire, we can become increasingly familiar with ourselves. We can learn to recognize what matters to us, what affects us, what genuinely belongs to us and what we may have carried because it was expected. We can become curious about which ways of protecting ourselves are still necessary and which have begun to stand in our way.

There is no final version of ourselves waiting at the end of that process. Life keeps moving and so do we. But perhaps development does not always ask us to become more and more.

Sometimes it asks us to uncover enough to become more free to be who we are.