Why do Some People Succeed and Others Fail?

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It's Aspen Ideas to Go from the Aspen Institute. I'm Tricia Johnson. Someone who uses passion and perseverance to reach goals has grit, says psychologist Angela Duckworth. To prove the power of grit, Duckworth study cadets at the Military Academy West Point. She wanted to see if grit predicted whether a new student would drop out or stay enrolled during a high attrition period at the school. She administered her grit scale on the cadet's second day.

So the day that you get your haircut, for example, and then we waited to see, you know, who would make it through the highest attrition periods of training and then who would...
The analysis showed grit was an incredible predictor of who would make it through the school's challenging times. Ahead, Duckworth explains how grit, not talent, is the secret to success. Aspen Ideas to Go brings you compelling conversations hosted by the Aspen Institute. Today's discussion is part of the Murdock Mind, Body, Spirit series from Aspen Community Programs. In her work on grit, Angela Duckworth didn’t just study West Point cadets. She looked at teachers working in some of the toughest schools, young finalists competing in a national spelling bee, and high achievers succeeding in a variety of careers. She wrote a book about the insights she learned. In “Grit,” she talks about how grit is more about consistency, not intensity, and how her childhood influenced her decision to research grit. And today she also talks about the different forms of perseverance we practice in life and especially now during the pandemic. Duckworth, who’s a MacArthur Fellow and leads the nonprofit Character Lab speaks with Aspen Institute president and CEO Dan Porterfield. Here's Porterfield.

Dan Porterfield 02:08
What if we start by letting our audience get to know a little bit about you, yourself. How did you grow up? And what led you to gravitate towards psychology into this, you know, human centered research?

Angela Duckworth 02:23
So Dan, I was born in Philadelphia, actually down the street. So I’m in Philadelphia today. And I was born in Philadelphia, my parents immigrated from China in their 20s. And I was the third of three children and found myself in a family that was quite occupied with achievement. And I think it was my dad, more than my mom, who every morning and every night, you know, and every hour in between was just thinking about success and his own kids’ success, their lack of success, which one of us was most successful. How do we compare to our cousins in Boston? Not well, by the way. How successful was he as a chemist? Would he win the Nobel Prize? No. And I think that gave me a personal obsession with, you know, human achievement, that took a different turn from my dad’s in the following way. You know, my dad really, you know, thought a lot about who was smart, which of his children was the smartest, how smart were his kids compared to the Boston cousins and so forth. And I knew when I was a little girl, that I wasn't the smartest person in the family, I knew I wasn't even the smartest kid in my home room. And I guess I had a sense of statistics where I was like, I'm not the smartest kid in my home room. I cannot be
the smartest person in the world, or even close. And what I came to study as a psychologist is the psychology of effort, which is very different from the psychology of like, everything comes easily to me, or the psychology of natural ability, and a lot of what I do, but not all is on this one characteristic that does influence how much cumulative effort people put towards what they do, and that is grit. The combination of passion and perseverance for especially long term goals. So grit is all about stamina over over months and years. And it’s not at all related, it turns out, to talent. So when you measure like, physical talent, and you measure grit using, for example, questionnaires, the correlation usually is zero.

Dan Porterfield 04:36
So interesting that you found your way into this through the lens of of sensing what your own assets were, in the dynamic of how your family thought about it all.

Angela Duckworth 04:47
Well, you know, there is this expression in academia, that research is usually ‘me’ search, and you’re either studying what you have or you’re studying what you don’t have, but there’s some very personal connection. I think that goes beyond academia. So much of, you know, what people pursue in their lives is very related to their story. And, you know, the idiosyncratic way that their story is being told, and then, you know, your work becomes like another chapter in that. But for me it is, you know, fairly personal in that sense. And, you know, I don’t think I’m the only person who like, looks to their left, looks to the right, and realizes, you know, that natural ability is not going to be, you know, what puts you, you know, not just ahead of other people, because that’s not really the way I think about it. But just like, you know, closer to what you want to do with your life.

Dan Porterfield 05:40
Was there in your own life story, and in your undergraduate years, your graduate school or early work, was there a case where you yourself looking back, say that, that this idea of passion plus persistence, in pursuit of a long term goal, that was you?

Angela Duckworth 05:59
Ah, like, was I gritty? You know, I think I had half of grit before I had the other half. And then now that I’ve been, you know, thinking about this, with a lot of other people, and actually, I’m a, as you know, Professor, so I get to, you know, hang out with, you know, 18 to 22 year olds, I’ll say this, I think a lot of people come to it the way I did. For me,
perseverance came first, you know, I was a hard worker. Growing up, I was a hard worker in high school, I was a hard worker, probably, to some extent in middle school, or even elementary school. You know, I didn't mind showing up early, I didn't mind staying late. I didn't mind you know, trying hard. And learning, you know, from feedback. Okay, that was a little more challenging. But you know, I could do that. The part of grit, which I think is actually more elusive, for most people, as it was, for me, was a sense of what to work hard to act. Right. So yeah, I've got perseverance. But Can somebody please give me a passion. And I had, you know, 10 years, Dan, between graduating from college, and the Epiphany, hey, I should be a psychologist. And during that decade, you know, there were a lot of tortured, you know, you know, sessions with myself with my journal with my husband, about what to do. So for me, perseverance came more easily than passion. And I find that again, and again, with the, with the young people that I talk with that there’s so many people who feel like they have a work ethic, they're reasonably resilient, but they do not have a sense of purpose or direction.

Dan Porterfield 07:38
So let's look at the elements of the equation, if you will, for a second. What do you mean by passion? Like having something that motivates you to give your best and do your best and be your best?

Angela Duckworth 07:50
Well, when I say passion, I mean, in a very particular way, for grit anyway, and the research that I do, it’s really about the consistency of the direction you’re working in over long periods, as opposed to the intensity. And maybe the word passion is, is, is something that sounds like intensity, like, wow, this person, like on a scale from zero to 10 really likes this thing, a 10. But what I’m talking about is, you know, you talk to someone, they’re like, you know, what, I’m really interested in veterinary medicine, you’re like, oh, wow, that’s great. And you have a conversation with them. And then, you know, six months later, they’re still interested in veterinary medicine. And a year later, there’s a, and then five years later, they’re still in veterinary medicine, and like, 10 years later, they still want to be a vet. And so that’s the consistency of passion, the, you know, abiding devotion to some purpose. That that I mean, and I think that intensity is great, but I think actually, it’s consistency that is, you know, that rare thing that, you know, Isaac Newton, for example, you know, when asked, and maybe when introspecting as to how he discovered the laws of mechanics that govern rigid objects, which, you know, many scientists had wondered, you know, like, how can we understand, you know, like, how fast an apple is gonna fall from a tree or, and, and Newton observed that many scientists would think about this problem. But after a week, a month, a year, five years, they walked away from that
problem, and they worked on another problem, which is, you know, perfectly reasonable thing to do, because it was a very hard problem, but he never walked away. So I think there is this, you know, are you willing to just like keep chipping away at something in this devoted, loyal sort of sense. And, and that is something that I craved then, but didn’t have. So I wanted to have something that would, you know, keep me engaged for really the rest of my days, but I didn’t. I didn’t know what that would be.

Dan Porterfield 09:56
Thank you, what a beautiful answer. So let’s go to the persistence part for a second, and I heard you mentioned both hard work and resilience. And so I suspect both are elements of what you mean by persistence.

Angela Duckworth 10:10
I think of persistence, as a little p persistence, and then uppercase p persistence. And let’s start with resilience because it turns out, we’re in a global pandemic of historic proportions. And so we’ve all had a little practice, I think, whether it was wanted or not in, in resilience. Resilience, when scientists talk about it, it’s really the ability to overcome adversity. And then scientists will quibble as to whether resilience means, you know, before the adversity, you were here. And then adversity happens and then you bounce back, just like resilient sounds, you know, you bounce back to the same level. And some scientists would say, you know, resilience is really bouncing back to some new level that’s actually higher, where you’re stronger or better, your relationships are more meaningful, something’s better after the adversity. But regardless, that’s what adversity is -- a response to challenge a response to, you know, failure, setbacks. And that’s why I call it like uppercase p, or capital P perseverance, because it is this kind of like, well, in the face of, you know, real challenge, how do you do? But then there’s lowercase p, perseverance, which is what you need every day, no matter whether it’s a good day or a bad day, which is to keep chipping away, you know, hard work style that Andres Erickson, the cognitive psychologist, better known for the 10,000 hour rule, which I’m happy to talk about. He called it deliberate practice, but that is the the practice where you are constantly trying to improve at least one thing and usually just one thing with you know, focus, and then with feedback in this, you know, repetitive way that he found to be true of Olympic champions, like those we watched for the last two weeks, but also Nobel Laureates, or, you know, Scrabble championship players, chess masters, prima ballerinas, and on. So I think you need both kinds of perseverance.

Dan Porterfield 12:09
So passion plus persistence in the pursuit of goals, especially long term and meaningful goals, that is grit. And then your research, you’ve looked at examples of where grit seemed to be the decisive quality, that allowed for achievement or success in realizing those goals. And you looked at all kinds of endeavors in which grit proved to be decisive. And we talked about some of those endeavors and how you sort of proved the power of grit.

Angela Duckworth 12:42
So the first really ambitious field study that I did, I think I was second year graduate student, when I thought, you know, I want to study whether grit predicts dropping out or staying in at West Point, which is the nation’s oldest military academy. And you know, whether you’ve been to the campus of West Point or not, you’ve probably heard of it. And you might know that, you know, you need top test scores on top grades, so they’re very often valedictorians. But you’re almost always a varsity athlete. I mean, very often, you’re a captain of a varsity sport, very often, you’re a captain of three varsity sports while getting top test scores and grades. And then there’s the matter of the president or vice presidential presidential or congressional nomination just to apply. So it’s a pretty elite group of women and men. And yet they have these periods of training, especially the very first summer training, which is the highest attrition period during your four years. And it occurred to me that after spending what really end to end is about two years of an application process, you know, clawing your way into this place to drop out in the first two months might be, you know, dropping out too early, at least for some not for all. So I studied that by administering the grit scale in cooperation with the generals at West Point, and the superintendent there, to the cadets on the second day that they had arrived. So the day that you get your haircut, for example, and then we waited to see you know, who would make it through the highest attrition periods of training and then who would even graduate with their diploma to serve in the US Army for five years, which is the requirement. And we just did a meta analysis which we published in the Proceedings of the National Academy of Science. And it says that grit is a strikingly good predictor and astonishingly reliable predictor of who will make it through the high attrition periods as well as all four years. And it’s not related to West point’s measures of intellectual or physical talent. And those measures of talent do predict certain long term outcomes but they are not a very good predictor of sticking it out during the periods of West Point where you know, many of the cadets are are dropping out.

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Dan Porterfield  
So I've heard lots of educators in all different levels of work, working together and theorizing. How might we foster grit? What do you think about that concept of the promotion of the activation of the teaching of grit?

Angela Duckworth  
Well, I've got two daughters, as you know, Dan, and one is 19, and one is 18. And I do want them, you know, to be grittier than less gritty. There are other things, by the way, as a mother, that I would like more, you know, that are, you know, honesty, kindness, empathy, and so forth. But do you do I want them to be gritty, of course, because I think that knowing what excellence is, in your own life is a wonderful thing. You know, we all watch the Olympics, right? Why do we watch the Olympics, it's, I even cried the commercials at the Olympics, right? Like, you know, I find it truly inspiring to see what these athletes can do. But I want to go further than that, and say that, like, every young person can achieve excellence, like anybody can learn to do something and with that pride of saying, like, you know, yeah, like I did that well, and to be on that journey to like, and I think I can do it a little better tomorrow, right? Like, I think every young person should and can aspire to that. So I want my daughters to, to have that sense of excellence in their own lives as well. I think as a parent, one of the things that I see parents do not well, that I would like to see done differently is, you know, very often parents are very impatient for their kids to, you know, get on a track, it's like, it feels too late, if you haven't started baseball, by the time you're 14, if you don't know that you're going to be a science major, by the time you're 16, there's this kind of premature, you know, path setting. And one of the things that psychologists I think would agree on is that one very important developmental condition is autonomy. You know, kids need to make choices, even five year olds, when my daughters were in kindergarten, and I wanted them to learn to practice and, and one of them to learn how to, you know, stick with something, even when they felt like they wanted to quit, we, you know, said, you know, in the Duckworth family, everybody has to do a hard thing. And that will require you to finish what you start if you start track as my daughter did, and you decide, after your very first track meet, as Lucy discovered that she doesn't like competing with other kids. big discovery, very interesting, very important. But I said, Well, you know, it's great that you learn that you only have seven more weeks to go, because she signed up for track and I was not gonna let her just say like, okay, I've changed my mind on the on the second day, even then, here's where respect for autonomy comes in. I didn't choose for her to do track, she chose track, my daughter's
knew they had to do a hard thing, but I never told them which hard thing, you know, they were five, and they’re like, I want to do this, I want to do that they have ideas. So I think one of the first things that parents need to remember, but also one of the most enduring things that parents need to remember is that, you know, your kids are individuals. And as Bill Damon at Stanford, who runs the Center for adolescence, there is very wise thinker on this. Nobody has ever become great doing what their parents told them to do. And I would agree entirely.

Dan Porterfield  18:55
And sometimes people that think that what you’re saying is just keep pounding your head, just keep working hard, keep working hard. They miss that other point about the passion, which comes out of autonomy and comes out of a sense of agency. So still, let’s let’s just for a moment, imagine we were, you know, starting a school together, you and me, and it was going to be called the pan Aspen Institute School. And we were hoping all the people listening in, we’re going to maybe send their kids here. What Well, what would we do in our school, say, as a pre sixth grade, some of the things you’d say are good to do in an educational setting that foster that combination of passion and persistence.

Angela Duckworth  19:32
I love this thought experiment, we should absolutely start a school. You know, here’s my you know, thought about like what, what I see is a through line in healthy, thriving, really not just healthy development, but thriving and young people. Two things. You know, one is I think, like all young people need at least one extremely stable, unconditional loving relationship in their life. I mean, it is very hard to develop into one whole person, unless you feel like somebody, like just loves you no matter what, and unconditionally in the sort of center of the universe way. I think for many of us, it’s their parents, but I think, or our parents, but I think, you know, in some of the people I’ve studied, it was a high school trigonometry teacher, in one case, a volleyball coach, and another pastor. It’s, it’s somebody who, who really is there for you. So I think stable, human relationships are the foundation for all healthy development. The second thing is, I think kids, especially as they get into their middle and high school years, they do best when they’re into something, you know, is it skateboarding? Is it programming? Is it social justice, you know, whatever it is, no, there’s an infinite number of things, but, but what I really worry about is the 16 year old who’s not into anything, you know, that there’s just like, you know, they’re just sort of incredibly bored, and disengaged, in and out of school. So what Jackie and I were talking about, and maybe this would be the premise for, you know, high school, if we ever got together and started one, which is, you know, can we, you know, help young people, you know, find something that they can
get into, and I spent a lot of time with admissions officers, including my admissions officer who led me into Harvard in 1988. And Fitz, as he’s called, would say that it’s not that you we want to make sure that every 16 year old is still doing the same thing. When they’re 26 and 36. And 46, they’re probably going to get into something else, right, you know, they discover something new in the next chapter of their lives. Nevertheless, I think developmentally to get into something to to know what practice is like to try things that are hard to feel what it’s like to go deeper. You know, there’s so much of this, like, tick tock video culture, where it’s like, you’re just skimming the surface, you want something for two seconds. But what I like to see a young person do is at least in one thing, to come back to it and to come back to a year after year just for the sake really of experiencing depth of passion. So how to do that is another story. But you know, we would have a lot of late nights together. If we ended up doing this, that’d be fantastic. And

Dan Porterfield 22:17
I’ve certainly seen exactly what you just said on point two, in the college context, where the major the independent study, the significant campus leadership, the participation on athletics team, and more can provide that kind of a proving ground that you have to stick-to-itiveness to really go deep. So take a minute for the audience to maybe address the question of a growth mindset, which Carol Dweck has popularized. And it, like grit, you know, now is part of the everyday vernacular of educators and families. How does the notion of a growth mindset connect to the notion of grit?

Angela Duckworth 22:58
And I’ll tell you about what growth mindset. Her really revolutionary idea, I think, really is, it’s a belief, a growth mindset is a belief, a theory that a human abilities, like intelligence can change, that they are fundamentally malleable, that if for example, I say, Dan, you know, I’m helped me get smarter, about, you know, politics, how we get smarter about math, that you won’t look at me like, I’m crazy, you’ll think like, Oh, yeah, let me help you at smarter you believe that I could literally be smarter in those things. The opposite is a fixed mindset, which is the deep down belief that, you know, sure, you can learn skills, but you can’t really change how smart somebody is at anything. And what Carol has discovered in her in her research, and you know, her students who are now you know, all grown up and very eminent themselves, including people like David Jaeger, is that it is in the face of challenge when growth mindset matters most. I mean, when you’re winning everything, it probably doesn’t matter all that much which mindset you have. But when you stumble and you fall, and you screw up because of your own mistakes or adversity happens to you that a growth mindset gives you a rational reason to get up and to like, look back and learn something and then move forward. Whereas a fixed mindset tends to
encourage like hiding behavior, like I just don't want anyone to realize that I'm not as smart as they think. And to avoid challenge and risk taking grit and mindset or growth mindset are positively correlated. And last thing I'll say on that is they are positively correlated over time then. So when we follow young people longitudinally, for example, adolescence, and you measure growth mindset and grit, growth, mindset and great growth, what you find is that one leads to the other in this kind of virtuous cycle.

Dan Porterfield  24:43
One thing I've observed is that sometimes educators themselves have a fixed mindset. And so they project to students that they believe their abilities are fixed, which then can reinforce that belief in students and Is that something you've seen? Or is it something we have to watch out for?

Angela Duckworth  25:03
You've put a finger on exactly what I think Carol and many of her collaborators are working on right now, you know, having established that these mindsets can very powerfully determine our behavior and our motivation, and our success. She now wants to ask like, well, how would we get kids to have a growth mindset. And, for example, I remember when I was in college, so this is now what three decades ago, and I was trying to get a an after school enrichment program started where we would like I don't know, build solar powered hot dog cookers, after school, etc. And as I was told by the principal, I went, you know, classroom to classroom knocked on the door, and they gave me like, you know, two minutes to make my commercial. And I would do my song and dance and say, it was gonna be really great. And we were gonna make a solar powered hotdog cooker out of tin foil and a cardboard box. And I remember this one teacher, Mr. C, because one kid was like, I'll do it. And he was like, oh, not you. She means the smart ones. And I was like, wow, you have to be with this person every day. So absolutely. And I think most teachers get into teaching, because they do have a growth mindset. And they believe in the potential children to get smarter and to learn. But I do think we have to, you know, probably ask ourselves, you know, what unintended messages did we inherit? And what unintended messages are we passing along, you know, and we casually say things without really reflecting.

Dan Porterfield  26:24
So you wrote, you did research for a period of time, you wrote a book that has had profound influence. I could talk about how it's influenced people. I know, sometimes individual human students have said, I'm gritty, and they mean that in such a positive way.
And sometimes whole bodies of work, like I think the remaking of the SAT exam, that David Coleman led, was in part done to emphasize the virtue and value of practice, which you’ve commented on as such an important part of growth -- of growth, both a growth mindset, I would say, but also grit. But still, at the same time, you’re a dynamic thinker. So you put a big idea in a big book in 2016. And before that, in other ways, and people give you feedback, and you do more research. So what’s evolved for you over the last five years on in this concept?

Angela Duckworth 27:20
A few things. I’ve grown a bit and even I’ll say, changed my mind, because I was wrong, a little bit, maybe I shouldn't even qualify, I was wrong five years ago. So one of the things I wrote about in 2016, was that when I look at a really gritty person, right, again, think of your favorite Olympian, since the Olympics, just, you know, we’re with us. Or think of your favorite, whoever that you admire, that I would say, Oh, these people have a goal hierarchy, you know, underlying what they do, they have a top level goal, they have a compass, they have a reason why they’re doing everything. And then that drives a kind of like, you know, pyramid like structure where like, then they have mid level goals, you know, this, right, we need to be in 10 years, and then then they have like, five year goals. And then they have these to do lists, goals that are at the very bottom, they’re like this, I got to do this afternoon, this week. And to me, that made a lot of sense. And to some extent, I do think it’s true of somebody who in full maturity, you know, has a sense of clarity and purpose, but also like how it connects to their everyday task list. But here’s where I think I was wrong. I think that there really are very few people, if any, who really have like a pyramid of goals, you know, written down or not even written down. And here’s the reason why I think we can have a compass of like, the kind of thing that you are working on, Dan, I know you do you have a tilos, I do to use psychological science to help kids thrive, like, that’s true. So that’s at the top, I absolutely have a to do list. It’s very detailed, actually. But if you ask me, um, Angela, what exactly are you going to be working on in five years? Right? If you say, August, but five years from now, so 2026? What are you gonna be working on what I don’t like? I don’t know, Dan, like, I don’t know what’s gonna happen between now. And so what I think I was wrong on is that even though you can have a tilos, you know, compass, these are my values and interests as we’re working, even though you should have a to do list and frankly, I think you should have like a one two or three year plan. I don’t think anybody has much in the middle. So there’s this big gaping space, you know, that is not at all like a pyramid. So I think I was very much incorrect on that. And I say this because I’ve tried to talk people through their pyramids and help them create pyramids. And I’ve talked to very successful people about their goals. And I think it was Danny Kahneman, the Nobel laureate, who said to me recently, because I was trying to map out what I was going to do, and he just said, at some point, almost laughing. He was
like, Angela, do you really think you’re going to know what you’re going to be doing in three or four years? He said, I don’t. And I was like, hmm, good point. So anyway, that’s a that’s a big revision. The other thing if we if we want to get into it is I think there have been legitimate criticisms of this like, you know, Carol And grit approach from those who feel like it draws attention away from structural changes, you know, race and class issues in this country. So we can talk about that.

Dan Porterfield 30:11
Say a word about that. That was next to ask you about.

Angela Duckworth 30:16
There have been scholars, but also just, you know, humans, right, who just have been thoughtful and, and I’m thinking of, you know, for example, Bettina Love who’s a professor of education, you know, who’s said, you know, I think some of these words that we use, like grit, and character can be problematic, if misunderstood. And also, I think, you know, again, I think these are legitimate perspectives, they can make it seem like all you need is like a sense of personal agency, you know, and nobody needs to make society more fair or equal, nobody has to take care of like, you know, changing zoning ordinances, and public school funding, and, you know, other things that are like just objective realities, that make it very, very difficult for some people to succeed in our society. And I think that is, you know, a very important voice to be amplified. And I would hope that anytime I talk about, you know, a kid developing a growth mindset and learning to have a passion and figuring out how to practice the way experts do that it would not only not take away from a concern for like the contextual supports that a human being would, but also that we would put more money and more attention more than money. I think about my own daughters, I think they grew up to be pretty gritty people. How did that happen? My, my husband, I, you know, and their lives you’d like they like, there was so much investment in their context. So context and character ought not be thought of as either or, I think context and character ought to be thought of as both/and.

Dan Porterfield 31:56
I read a study not too long ago that sort of suggested that, because of the presence of racism, some very successful Black men and Black women, but it was focused mostly on men, even as they achieve are also experiencing tremendous daily stress that’s unhelpful to their physical health.
Angela Duckworth 32:21
There are researchers, I'm thinking of, you know, the Northwestern University psychology researchers Chen and Miller, but among others, who have said -- I think the title some of their papers is like, stress gets under the skin. And in particular, you know, one thing that's really revealing about this research, it's not just that they're like, physiological, immunological, cardiovascular consequences of being chronically stressed. But I think maybe even more relevant to what's going on right now in our country is that being marginalized, socially being marginalized, because of, you know, your identity, can be one of the most corrosive psychological experiences that you could have. So yes, it is bad to want for food, yes, it is bad to be thirsty, but also, this less tangible thing of feeling like you don't belong here, you know, feeling like people don't truly respect you. It's a fundamental human need. And there's a tax that gets paid. So even if you're graduating summa cum laude and your law partner, or whatever, that that they're measuring a cost to that.

Dan Porterfield 33:30
So my amateur answer to that has been, yeah, as a mentor to, you know, a number of young adults, has been to remind them, even as they are striving for success in their goals, and aware of the presence of sexism, homophobia, racism, a variety of isms, that also there are values to nurture within that are about who they are, is not directly related to their success at all. It's about what you said earlier, empathy, compassion, a sense of solidarity with others. Am I giving good advice when I say that?

Angela Duckworth 34:07
I think you're giving good advice. And I think just that you're there for them, right. I think every young person to develop well, to flourish, needs to feel some unconditional love, you know, and to just to be an unconditional friend, you know, even if that's not your role to be the unconditional parent. And to, you know, not have that person feel like their worth is a fragile thing, contingent upon, like, always imperiled. It's just, you know, like the little children's book, The Runaway Bunny. No matter what the bunny does, the mom was like, I'm going to love you anyway. And the bunnies do this, do that, I'm gonna make a sail and I'm gonna run away. And they're like, yeah, but I'm gonna love you anyway.

Dan Porterfield 35:00
Let me ask you about one more thing, which is, I have been privileged to work with 1000s of students and of all different type, and especially at that moment of 18 to 22, and then maybe tracking later. And I think of some of the most gritty students I know, who are who
are people I admire so much, who had a moment whose idea was, yes, I'm passionate about my college education. Yes, I'm passionate for what it means for my community. I'll figure out the exact destiny here, but I'm going for it. And then they have that resilience and that hard work, and something else is needed. And just as the examples in my mind, one is somebody that persisted through a terrible disease in college, and needed a psychologist to work with her, about slowing down the way she was trying to fight disease, or in a second case, a young woman who was pounding your head against the wall, and needed to realize, with some help, that it was okay to get help. She'd never gotten help before. And then a third one, a story that can almost make me cry to tell it, like a young woman who was so passionate about soccer, in college, and college success overall, had a knee injury, couldn't play, and was so devastated, she couldn't function. It turned out with help from a grief counselor that her father's death seven years before, the man that taught her soccer was what came back to her in that moment when she couldn't play soccer, and she couldn't wear his number out on the field. So how does that notion of getting this kind of help outside of what you can do for yourself, in a way, fit with this notion of resilience, and purposefulness?

Angela Duckworth 37:00
So I want to tell all the very gritty people listening, and then also all of you who have like, especially gritty kids, something to watch out for and to take from those three stories, because they're all about how this really strong and amazing person, at some point, has to depend on someone else to get to the next, you know, chapter to get to get through something. And I say this, in part because I think that actually can be a little bit of the Achilles heel of people who are really gritty and strong and didn't like practice longer over, like, what happens when you fall flat on your face, and you feel burnt out or exhausted, or you're going through episodes of depression, or you're injured or whatever it is. And I think it's important to, like, share that every paragon of grit, even the, like, superduper famous ones, you know, that you can imagine at least the ones that I've had an opportunity to study, and to interview like, they all have a story like this, where, you know, they were humbled at some point in their life, and they didn't want to, but they really had to ask for help. And, and not in the way they wanted to wasn't pretty. It was like ugly, crying, you know, it's like, not anything that at the moment they even thought was, like going to end? Well, you know, and I think if you could just know that and tell your kids like, hey, I was listening to this talk. And it's like researchers studies always like World Class performers. And did you know that every one of them, at some point, maybe it happens when you're 16, maybe it happens when you're, you know, 21, maybe you get all the way to 35 without this happening, but then they really need somebody else in their life. And it's often a loved one in the form of a parent or a spouse if you're that old. And then I will say for many people, it's a therapist, or a coach in another way. And I think the lesson from this is that if
the Achilles heel of a really gritty person is that it's hard to ask for help, because you’re used to sort of summoning the will to like, you know, keep going on your own, then at least hopefully, this conversation and those three stories that you told Dan will like you'll have a little pattern recognition. You’re like, Oh, wait, I'm feeling burnt out or I'm feeling not like myself, like, like, this is the point in the story where I used to ask for help like all of the great, great, successful people all learn how to do.

Dan Porterfield 39:20
What a great interview. Thank you so much, Angela.

Angela Duckworth 39:23
Thank you, Dan.

Tricia Johnson 39:27
Angela Duckworth is the author of the New York Times bestseller "Grit: the Power of Passion and Perseverance." She’s a psychology professor at the University of Pennsylvania and co hosts the podcast, No Stupid Questions. Dan Porterfield is the President and CEO of the Aspen Institute. Previously he was president of Franklin and Marshall College. Their conversation was held in early August as part of the Murdock Mind, Body, Spirit series at the Aspen Institute. Make sure to subscribe to Aspen Ideas to Go wherever you listen to podcasts. Follow Aspen Ideas year round on social media at Aspen Ideas. Today's conversation was designed by the Aspen Community Programs team, Zoe Brown, Katie Carlsen, Cristal Logan, and Jillian Scott. Our show is produced by Marci Krivonen and me. Our music is by Wonderly. I'm Tricia Johnson. Thanks for joining me.

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