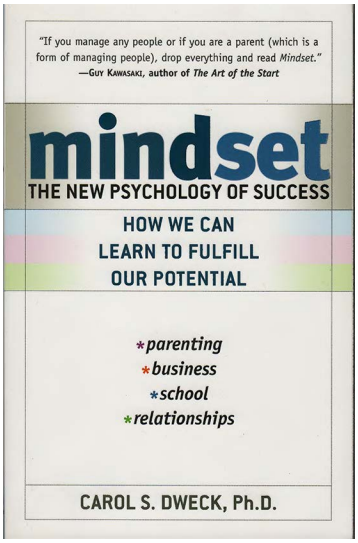
# Cello

## Growth Mindset

by Teresa Richardson

*"Congratulations. You have completed your singular goal of making progress."*

This is one of my favorite things to say to a student in a lesson. I take such pleasure in saying it with a smile as I see a wash of relief come over the student's face. Success! The inherent implication is that the student has just passed a pass-or-fail lesson. It also expresses my expectation that the student make weekly progress, and that any amount of progress is acceptable. For the slower-moving student, it sets the bar. For the student who is a perfectionist, it reassures them and validates their efforts. I want to reinforce that their playing is improved despite errors, and in my eyes, that improvement is success.




Several years ago, I read a book that positively changed my outlook on my ability, my teaching philosophy, and on learning in general, entitled *Mindset: The New Psychology of Success* by Carol S. Dweck, Ph.D. The premise of the book is that there are two mindsets: fixed mindset and growth mindset. In a fixed mindset, the individual believes that their personality, intelligence, and character are inborn qualities. A person possessing a fixed mindset may believe that occurrences in their life result as a direct measure of their competence and worth. On the other hand, in a growth mindset, the individual believes that their qualities can be cultivated through effort and experience. Persons possessing a growth mindset, instead of labeling themselves, take on risks and challenges, and are persistent. Dweck believes that developing and maintaining a growth mindset is key to learning to fulfill our potential.

When I was a graduate student at Indiana University, I took three violin pedagogy classes with Mimi Zweig. She swears by something she calls a "nonjudgmental approach." The idea here is that a mistake or mishap should be regarded only as information, not as a judgment. I did not fully understand the meaning of this at the time, but I have come to regard this as imperative to optimal learning. After botching a tricky passage, someone might easily spiral from, "I can't play this part," to "I will never be able to play this piece well," to "I am a terrible musician," and arrive at "I am a failure." Surely we have all been there at some point! I have felt that way after unsuccessful auditions. Zweig's idea is to take the mistake only at face value and reframe it as a learning opportunity: What can be done differently to prevent recurrence?

Fixed mindsets are prevalent both in American culture and in music culture. Dweck says that those with fixed mindsets view early attempts at an artistic pursuit, no matter how fruitful, to be indicative of talent and future in that endeavor. She says, "Just because some people can do something with little or no training, it doesn't mean that others can't do it (and sometimes do it even better) with training." Musical talent tends to be construed simply as a magical, God-given ability. As a result, the effort required to achieve excellence is sometimes discounted or ignored. Those who believe they possess talent may expect to be able to play an instrument well without realizing that great effort is necessary to fulfill their potential. These students are among the most frustrating to teach since there is a vast divide between where they are and where they could be!

I am convinced that instruction is most effective when the teacher believes in the potential of the student. It is a disservice to the student to be labeled as either "talented" or "untalented." Dr. Shinichi Suzuki's "Every Child Can" philosophy truly originates from a growth mindset. His method is based on his belief that, "Musical ability is not an inborn talent but an ability which can be developed. Any child who is properly trained can develop musical ability just as all children develop the ability to speak their mother tongue. The potential of every child is unlimited."

One of my goals as an educator is to revolutionize the learning process for any student who claims to be a perfectionist. Perfectionism rears its ugly head in the path of progress. It stems from a fixed mindset and creates misery, frustration, and perpetual dissatisfaction. Perfectionism causes students to be judgmental, impatient, and feel a constant need to prove themselves. Any student benefits from objective problem-solving and breaking down complex problems into step-by-step sequences. Especially for perfectionists, patience, persistence, and baby steps are the only way to go! Celebrating each small success is incredibly important.

During the past year, I have sometimes felt discouraged or disillusioned. Never before in my life have I felt so very "nonessential!" Revisiting my core missions helps me feel reassured. Students are still learning music appreciation. They are taking ownership of their skills on the instrument and are learning how to be patient with the learning process itself. Music aside, learning how to learn is an invaluable, lifelong skill that we teach. The student who signs up for music lessons gains a life coach.

> "I have been told I play with the ease of a bird flying. I do not know with how much effort a bird learns to fly, but I do know what effort has gone into my cello." –Pablo Casals, *Song of the Birds*

*Teresa Richardson, cellist, is Assistant Principal of the Minnesota Opera and teaches at North Star Cello Academy. She previously taught at MacPhail Center, St. Joseph's School, University of St. Thomas, and University of Wisconsin-Eau Claire.*