

Need Inspiration? Just Look Around

Dreams, determination, talent, and guts are critical to be successful in the world of sports.

From the Olympic gymnast to the star quarterback of a high school football team, all good athletes possess these attributes. Since elementary school, they have spent countless hours chasing their ambitions, developing their skills, and learning the ins-and-outs of their sport. [6-foot-11-inch](#) center [Nikola Jokic](#) of the Denver Nuggets may owe his height to genetics, but without desire and competence on the court, he'd be just another face in the crowd, albeit a towering one. While women's sports today are under attack from transgender men [competing](#) against women, the actual female athletes have dedicated years to training.

In [*Being a Ballerina: The Power and Perfection of a Dancing Life*](#), this drive toward excellence is very much in play. Here, Gavin Larsen shares her story from her days as an 8-year-old learning the basics of the barre to her adult life as a professional dancer. She recounts the physical pain required to become a first-rate ballerina, the enormous amount of time that goes into preparing for any production, the never-ending efforts to improve her artistry, and the inevitable disappointments—from failing to gain a position with a dance company to falling on stage.

Larsen's memoir is a great read for anyone interested in ballet or learning the story of a girl who overcomes her fears and the obstacles in her path to pursue her dreams.

Being a Ballerina is also a hard-hitting reminder of a singular truth: A combination of rigorous training, mastery of a skill set, and the fierce pursuit of self-improvement breeds

champions.

This notion of excellence has a long history. The Greeks knew it as *arete*, a word broadly applied to people and things. A well-built house, a superb wrestler, or a fast horse might be possessed of *arete*. But the Greeks and their cultural progeny also honored *arete* as it applied to human endeavors, the practice of the virtues, and the fulfillment of one's potential.

Male Roman citizens aimed at *virtus*, that Latin version of *arete* designating manliness, courage, and a strong character. The knights of the Middle Ages who were obedient to a code of [chivalry](#) and the priests, monks, and nuns who lived austere lives followed the ideals of Christian *arete*. Additionally, women down through the ages who instilled virtue and courage in the hearts of their daughters and sons—and who themselves practiced what they preached—were as stouthearted as any warrior, nobleman, or saint.

If we evaluate the state of our nation today solely from the headlines or the posts we read online, we might conclude that this paradigm for excellence is dead and buried. Many of our politicians and celebrities have attained [fame, power, and wealth](#), but few of us would acclaim them for their virtues. Many people judge others based on their status as a minority (or a majority) rather than by their potential or their achievements. The many universities and schools that have elevated [equal outcomes](#) over superior performance in the classroom diminish or destroy human potential.

On the other hand, if we look instead to our immediate world, we see *arete* being practiced all over the place.

Here in Front Royal, Virginia, for instance, are several people in the trades with stellar reputations built from their skills and their character. A homeowner recently lavished praise on one of these builders, describing how the man and

his crew showed up after a January storm, scraped snow from the roof they were replacing, and completed the job two days ahead of schedule. Four mothers I know quite well work mightily to teach virtues to their children and give them an education that will stand them in good stead for the rest of their lives. All three priests at the local Catholic church give their time and effort so unstintingly that those who observe them wonder at their endurance and fervor.

Some of these folks may have never heard the word *arete*, but all of them are practicing it. To one degree or another, they bring to their vocations those same attributes found in a quarterback on the playing field or in Gavin Larsen on the stage: determination, grit, and a noble vision.

And all these people, so very different from one another, share one other quality in common: joy. You can see it in their faces and hear it in their voices. They have found [meaning](#) in what they do, which is one of the key ingredients of happiness and satisfaction.

If we need models of excellence for inspiration or emulation, let's start by looking for them in our own backyard.

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