

The Dropout with a Doctorate

A class clown who devoted more time to sports than studies, Bill Cosby flunked the 10th grade and dropped out of high school to join the Navy. While rehabbing injured Korean War servicemen as a physical therapist, Cosby took note of the ethic of personal growth in his fellow navy men. In addition to fulfilling their duties as naval officers, many of his peers were also taking high school and college courses via correspondence.

As Cosby watched his friends struggle with schoolwork that he had no trouble comprehending, he came to two realizations. First, he had above-average intelligence. Second, he was committing a “mental sin” by wasting his intellectual talent. Resolved to make use of his smarts, Cosby enrolled in a distance-learning high school program and gained his diploma.

With a high school degree in hand, Bill Cosby hoped to attend college after his four-year stint with the navy ended. His application impressed Temple University, and he gained admittance. Thanks to his exceptional athleticism (Cosby could run a 10.2 second, 100-yard dash), he was awarded a track and field scholarship.

Although his tuition was paid for, Cosby took a job as a bartender to pay for his room and board. His wit and humor connected with customers who demanded to hear more of his jokes. As word spread about the comical bartender, Cosby began receiving opportunities to entertain audiences as a paid comedian.

As his popularity grew, Cosby faced a choice: should he stay in school or pursue a career in comedy? He agonized over the choice, but decided to dropout of school for the second time in his life. He quickly attained fame, lining up performances across America in major cities, appearing on *The Tonight Show*, and recording a comedy album.

Bill Cosby's reputation jumped another level after he was cast in the espionage adventure, *I Spy*. As the show's co-star, he captured three consecutive Emmy Awards for Outstanding Lead Actor in a Drama Series. Yet for Cosby, fame was never the endgame. While he enjoyed making people laugh, he felt motivated by a deeper responsibility. In particular, he was burdened by the plight of children who were poorly educated. In trying to figure out how he could contribute to education in America, Cosby felt the need to increase his understanding of how kids learn. So, as a celebrity in his mid-30s, Bill Cosby went back to school.

Despite not having completed his undergraduate studies, the University of Massachusetts admitted Cosby based on the merit of his career accomplishments. Over the course of the 1970s, Bill Cosby earned his masters degree and doctorate in education. Armed with newfound knowledge Cosby leveraged his talent like never before. He starred in the educational programs *Children's Theater* (NBC) and *Electric*

Company (PBS), hosted *Picture Pages* and *Wake Up* (CBS) and then, in the 1980s, produced and acted in one of the all-time great sitcoms, *The Cosby Show*.

As *The Cosby Show* made its run, Cosby expanded his repertoire by developing his skills as an author. His comical yet poignant writing led to successful books on fatherhood, marriage, and childhood. Now in the twilight of his career, Cosby remains active, lobbying for educational reform and raising funds for educational charities.

Summary

The life story of Bill Cosby attests to the power of personal growth. Having neglected education early in life, in his twenties, Cosby dedicated himself to developing his potential. Getting his high school degree put him back on track in life. Then, even after achieving stardom, Cosby felt compelled to sharpen his mind by going back to college. He didn't rest on his success but kept pushing himself to grow. Later in life, he continued learning—gaining competence as a producer and author.

How does contemplating Bill Cosby's life impact you? Have you made a commitment to personal growth? Do you have a system to aid you in continual learning?



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