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## **EXCELLENCE IS NOT THE EXCEPTION**

by Laurie Riley

It's assumed by most people that only a few can achieve excellence. That's why the word exists – to excel in something means to do significantly better than the norm. But it's really more complex than that.

If we look, for instance, at what was considered really good guitar playing by well-known folksingers in the '60's, and compare it with the best accompanists today, there's quite an improvement – the average players today are playing as well as or better than the famous folks did back then! And look what happened to guitar playing after Michael Hedges introduced his style of playing in the '90's. The whole concept of guitar playing changed. The same is true with harping; in the 1980s much of what was considered professional-level playing for lever harpists is now common fare for beginners!

Obviously, excellence is a fluid concept. What used to be excellent playing no longer is, because almost everyone pretty much plays that well now. Does that mean everyone plays excellently now? In the literal sense of the word, no. Because others are now excelling above that new level.

What happens is that when a new player hears a great performance or a good recording, they assume that's normal playing and will assume that's how they should sound; they automatically aspire to play that way and see no reason why they can't. Which of course is a valid thought – there IS no reason they can't attain it, with practice. So the norm keeps raising. It's a good thing.

A related concept to consider is this: to play excellently in performance, we know we have to practice a lot, right? If we practice effectively and we are persistent, we can learn to play really well. But sometimes our apparent level of skill suddenly disappears when we get on stage. Why?

Suppose you've learned a piece and you're reaching a point where you can play it really well under ideal conditions. Or you practice it badly a few times and then very well once. After you've proven to yourself that you can play it well (after all, you just did that once), you stop and go on to another piece. And you expect to play it well on stage?

One or two times of playing a piece brilliantly isn't sufficient! We need to play a piece well many more times than we ever played it badly. In other words, if it took three months to learn the piece, and now you play it well, it will take another

three months of playing it well to surpass the number of times you played it badly. Then add at least another three months onto that, and you might achieve what it takes to perform it well. If you've only played it well, say, thirty times but you played it poorly two hundred times, you have a long way to go before it will become dependably and consistently good. Having the patience to accept this process can lead to true excellence.

The flip side of this coin is that once you have attained a certain level of playing – let's call it a level of 8 out of 10 – you can never sink below a certain level. In your worst performance you might play at a level of 6, but you will never play worse than that. Your skill level is such that you cannot fail.

Here's the secret: your lowest level of playing IS your actual level. One cannot play at their peak all the time. But one can always play at their lowest level or better. If your peak level is really high, your lowest level will be better than average – in other words, still excellent in the literal sense of the word.

If we strive for excellence, we will achieve a level of skill that cannot be degraded. Sometimes we will play amazingly, sometimes less so. But we will always play well.

Practice!

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