

# Einstein: The Passions of a Scientist

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The French philosopher Diderot once said, "Only passions, great passions, can elevate the soul to achieve great things." In his book *Einstein: The Passions of a Scientist*, Barry Parker takes us on an enlightening journey through the private life of Albert Einstein, giving us insight into his great passions and how these passions did indeed elevate his soul to unimagined heights. This shy, impassioned introvert would ultimately achieve immortality as the most influential scientist of all time. Parker, a physicist and prolific science writer, chronicles Einstein's life by focusing on his passions for learning, music, family, women, and world peace.

Einstein confided, "I have no special talent, I am only passionately curious." It is difficult to imagine a man of his accomplishments having no talent, but it truly was his curiosity that would consistently challenge, motivate, and inspire his lifelong scientific endeavors. Parker paints a brilliant portrait of his love of and dedication to the understanding of nature. We see how young Einstein found the physical world full of wonders; at the age of five, his father gave him a compass with the strange movement of a needle that made "a deep and lasting impression" on him. He did well in school, but no curriculum could keep pace with his voracious appetite for knowledge. He devoured every science book he could lay his hands on, reading extensively in philosophy, history, and mathematics. Einstein's study habits and self-discipline were developed far beyond those of his peers. Nearly every waking hour was spent unraveling the secrets of the physical world. A fact was not a fact until he fully understood why it was so.

By the time Einstein had finished high school, he had become fascinated with theories on light, time, space. With few exceptions, his social interaction revolved around the discussion and development of these theories. While he studied at the Zurich Polytechnic, he spent countless hours in coffee shops discussing the works of the leading philosophers and scientists. After graduating from university, he formed the Olympic Academy, a group of three students he used as a sounding board, explaining his ideas and refining his theories. Parker confirms Einstein's obsession with knowledge by examining many letters he sent to family and friends – on one occasion, at the end of one letter filled with scientific ideas, he finally congratulates wife on her pregnancy. Throughout his life, marathon study sessions affected his health. His diet and eating habits were poor and normal periods of rest were virtually non-existent.

Inevitably, the rigors of Einstein's torturous regimen compelled him to retreat from his super-human endeavors

and to seek relaxation in music. Initially, music was simply a chore that required laborious practice and rote memorization, but when he was introduced to the "beautiful" sonatas of Mozart, music became an absolute passion. Later in life, he claimed that had physics not garnered his devotion, he would have become a musician. Einstein loved to play the violin, and often entertained company in his home. He attained tremendous satisfaction from praise of his music and would become terribly upset if his music was ignored or unappreciated. As he grew older, music became a significant tool in fostering relationships with women, friends, and colleagues. The soft notes of his violin transformed him from the "prickly and cocky" student to a "passionate and emotional musician," and allowed him to forge relationships with individuals he would not have otherwise made. Parker presents a good introduction to Einstein's love of music but this passion is not fully developed. Often it is simply described as Einstein's "love of music," but the magnitude and characteristics of that passion are not illustrated.

Musical interludes certainly rewarded Einstein with tremendous relaxation but, as the author beautifully demonstrates, nothing sustained him to a greater degree than the love and devotion of his family. In his early years, he looked to his parents for emotional support and continually strived to please them. He truly enjoyed the comforts of home and enjoyed a good relationship with his family. However, at 15, his ideal life was shattered when his parents relocated to Italy, leaving him in Germany with relatives. He became lonely and depressed; he was unable to study. After 18 months of separation, Einstein quit school and reunited with his family. His mother Pauline was very kind and determined that he succeed. She encouraged his autonomy, independent thought, and, in many ways, his stubbornness. Einstein's father was affectionate, but his business failures and financial difficulties caused him tremendous sorrow and anxiety. His relationship with his sister, Maja, was volatile – they often fought and would not speak to each other for significant periods of time. However, over the years, they became close and inseparable. He cared deeply for his family and managed to juggle his responsibilities with complete and unwavering commitment, always freely giving his time and money.

Although Einstein received unconditional love and support from his family, he had an unwavering need for attention and admiration from the opposite sex. He loved to be around women and rarely missed an opportunity to flirt. Even when he was engaged or married, he enjoyed the company of his female friends and spent

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time with them playing music or going on long walks. Mileva, his first wife and fellow physics student at Zurich Polytechnic, was initially a source of passion and was intellectually stimulating to Einstein. He dearly missed her when they were apart and would count the days until they would reunite. However, once they settled down, their relationship soured, and they separated. Mileva was devastated by the breakup, but Einstein quickly moved on and leaped into a relationship with his cousin Elsa. Elsa, who eventually became his second wife, was a source of stability, but her affection could not alter Einstein's passion for women. Throughout their marriage he continued to see other women and sometimes even asked Elsa for money to fund his trysts. The sole criticism regarding Einstein's passion for women is that Parker fails to discuss any level of intimacy in his extra-marital relationships. We are left wondering if Einstein was simply seeking the company of other women or if he was adulterous.

Einstein's love for his family and women was sharply contrasted by his intense hatred for all aspects of the military. Parker shows how Einstein despised the teachers at his German schools, referring to them as "drill sergeants" who adopted militaristic methods of rote learning with no attempt at true education. Throughout his adult life he developed strong pacifist views, often

encouraging citizens to renounce aggressive military action and to refuse any military service. When Hitler rose to power in the 1930s, Einstein's view adapted as he became a proponent of militant pacifism, supporting military action in the name of peace. Although he did not take up arms during the fighting, he contributed significantly to the war effort by helping family, friends, and many strangers come to the US.

In *Einstein: The Passions of a Scientist*, Parker delivers a well organized, entertaining story that brings to life the extraordinary personality of Albert Einstein. He is no longer simply a scientist, but a man filled with many passions. This book is an easy read, but occasionally, the simple language disrupts the flow of ideas. It does not detract from the content but sometimes requires a second reading. Parker also mentions several times that Einstein loved to explore the outdoors by sailing and hiking, but fails to adequately expand on either of these passions. Despite minor shortcomings, this is an enjoyable book and a must-read for Einstein enthusiasts or those that desire a glimpse into the seldom-explored private world of a scientific legend.

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