

Wednesday, July 8th, 2020

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The Disappearance Of Polymathic Culture & Its Effects

Not so far off in the past, I wrote a piece dubbed, "An introduction To Polymathism", that sought to touch on my interest in those that find or create interdisciplinary connections by seeking skill acquisition in multiple areas, rather than simply one. In the American society, and certainly elsewhere, it seems that we have developed through some means, a mysterious fascination with hyper-specialization. The cost paid for this fixation, as far as I can tell, is that we have lost a place for generalists, and polymaths. As a small aside, I would make a distinction between polymaths and generalists, which is that though polymaths could be considered generalists, I'd give them an additional property of being high or top-level in a handful of different areas, versus merely being decent at a wide variety of different things. One of the great issues that losing a place for generalists and polymaths in particular creates, is that we lose access to highly competent people and minds that can "connect the dots", so to speak, and figure out how x affects y, or how y might affect a. Another question surfaces for me at this point which is, "why should we care about this stuff?" My sense is that not only do we lose the fulfillment that likely accompanies being able to do more than one thing for five decades, but also that the people most hurt by a loss of good sense-makers is the many and not the few. In other words, I think that polymaths find good ways to sketch a picture of the world that people of different walks of life can understand and actually execute from, because they have a wider set of lenses and frameworks to make analogies and the like and can make things more salient. In many ways, I think we can make easy analogies from art to problem solving, such as having more experience and more samples to draw from making it easier to create something deep, beautiful, compelling and unique, since one has more tools to work with. I'd say something similar is true of drafting stories or illustrations that can

often be essential to really getting things to stick in people's minds.

As the title of this essay suggests, what I'd like to do is get into why I think polymaths have either disappeared, or at least left the eye of the public and the mainstream. It would certainly be easy to discuss all of the upsides that I think having more polymaths, caring more about them, and encouraging the development of polymaths may have on the world, but first allow me to layout some context with a seeming digression. As discussed previously, I think one of the things that contributes to the apparent lack of polymaths is our focus on specialization. Something that strikes me right away, is that though specialization is in some ways at odds with polymathism, it does not appear to be a root cause of the apparent decrease in polymathic presence. Still though I ask, "why are we so interested in specialization in the first place?" One of the general reasons or perhaps excuses I hear, is that because of the rapidly increasing complexity of various fields it's merely impractical for anyone to be excellent at a myriad of things, thus they must study only one very specific thing. However, another thing that I think is playing in the background, that I'm writing this in part to talk about, is why polymaths might be or seem antagonistic to the schemes of the current institutions. To quickly pull this out of the territory of conspiracy theory, I'm not going to pretend to read any minds. What I'll try to do is analyze incentives and make what I hope are some educated guesses as to what is happening and why. To say a bit more about the other things I think play a role here, one crucial insight required in my sense to figure out why institutions do what they do, is recognizing the idea that those in power expectantly wish to remain in power much of the time. There are likely aspects of their lives that are not the least stressful they could be, but I think one only need glance at loss aversion to recognize that losing standing and powers that one previously held is often quite painful. That said, who is it that's in power? Well as we probably know the majority of institutional leaders are of course boomers and beyond, I'd argue merely because of the time logistics. I'm not one of these types per se that thinks leaders being boomers is suspicious in some way, given that usually age is supposed to come with proportional increases in status and responsibility. The problem is that I think we live in a world with

too many older people making decisions, who may be removed from the problems of the generations currently maturing, which makes it hard for us to plan based on the real problems of the present era and future.

Before I attempt to elaborate on where I think we've gone wrong with respect to our current leaders and representatives, I'd like to offer a few disclaimers. For starters, I'm not a member of some particular institution, I'm more of a freelance canon, second I'm going to get things wrong and that's okay. I'm trying to think and theory-craft what I think may be happening, so please think about what I'm saying and always feel free to offer other ideas, edits, or critiques and what have you. This is meant to start a conversation, not end one. Getting back to the main topic, one of the things that has screwed us I think, is that rapidly changing technology and new types of problems that operate at global scale have emerged that I don't believe we were dealing with much before the modern era. The most global problems that we have dealt with in recent history might honestly be world wars. Of course war is quite a big deal, but it's also somewhat easy to wrap one's mind around. Understanding that someone, somewhere threatens your way of life, ostensibly at least, is quite simple, or understanding that your country would really like x resource is quite simple. Contrast that with wrapping one's mind around creating something like preemptive regulation for AI, or addressing clean sustainable energy, or even something that seems simpler like global warming, and then more complex and abstract things like immigration and globalization, or creating new, modern economic models, it's damn simple in comparison. I realize some of those bullets could be viewed at many levels particularly just at national level, but the issue is that in order to get some of these things the way we may want them I suppose, I think could require a more global cooperative effort. Having said all of that, I'm not claiming that generation z or the millennials are necessarily more qualified to tackle these issues, but the younger among us, I think are more adapted to rapidly changing environments in a way that the older among us are not. In other words, the call then is to bring younger people, with a good head on their shoulders mind you, into the meeting rooms and in some positions of consequence such that we can have solutions that are more dynamic

and adapted to the issues facing us.

Bringing this all back to polymaths, put simply I think they are the people most needed in the current moment, and what's problematic is that we have effectively taught three generations that polymaths are out, and we need big teams of specialists working on every problem. The problem here for me, is that there is something that a person with multiple specialties can do in their mind, over the course of their life in moments when the teams both are and aren't together that doesn't happen merely by getting a bunch of experts in a room for two hours. The deep understanding of one's expertise is something not easily exported to someone who has no real understanding of that thing. By having multiple expertise in a single mind, one is able to use the entirety of other sets of experience as reference when thinking about something rather than piggybacking off a small, probably not well understood point raised by another expert in the room. Essentially what I think we should look to do is both seek out polymaths, and do a much better job of encouraging those who lean towards it to pursue it. Something I touched on briefly that I didn't quite expand upon is why polymaths might be dangerous to institutions. This is incredibly relevant to figuring out why we aren't seeing more of them and also to reopening the channels to accept them. I think polymaths might be dangerous to the institutions because many of our corporations, colleges and systems from my perspective, are run by a number of deeply embedded mistruths that are known but not called out by anyone leading the system or tenured, and are poorly understood or unknown to younger people coming into institutions. Polymaths for a number of reasons, I'd say are probably more disagreeable, which we can get into in a moment, and would be more likely to point out the mistruths and try to fix them. This isn't a certainty by any means, just conjecture, but I think that polymaths are often interested in creativity, productivity, and competence, and not in politics and playing any below the board sort of games. I think this may be the case, in part due to my experience with polymaths, but also because frankly we have a finite amount of time and energy in our lives and to be good in many different things, requires not just turning up positive production in one's life, but also turning off the bullshit. Another way of saying that is one must find the

signal and really ignore most of the noise. Another thing that I think happens, is that when you get really good at numerous things you start to see that being kind and honest and having integrity is not only one of the most fulfilling ways to live, but also perfectly rational in many ways. One starts to understand that thinking about nothing but money may make one richer, at least in a monetary sense, but poorer in other senses, and may also greatly reduce longevity of operation. If you're a greedy asshole your opportunities will decrease overtime or eventually cease as soon as any major event hits. No one stands by those people when things really get going, and this realization, I think makes it clear how silly being selfish and manipulative actually is, because it's just mal-adaptive behavior. To me this is a long way of explaining that polymaths due to their greater wisdom may favor longevity and continued prosperity for themselves and the system, over get-rich-quick flavored schemes that may sometimes take place in institutions.

Something else that I'd like to hit properly, is the idea that polymathism is unviable for most people from a mostly pragmatic perspective. There is a norm that suggests someone who does many things can't be good at all of them, except this leaves a few things out. One, this sort of assumes that progress is constant as one moves up a competence or learning curve, which it obviously isn't. Second, it ignores the value that having other skillsets, tools or frameworks adds to learning new or different skillsets. Lastly, there is something being really good at three things say buys you, that being in the top 10 of one thing doesn't, which is the ability to access underappreciated or under-considered angles. Essentially my argument is not that everyone should invest only in being a polymath, but that there is an underutilized superpower to having polymaths be part of any discussion especially in the presence of single domain experts. Another idea that I'm currently labbing and thinking about, is whether the human brain, I guess in general, is adapted to more generalist or polymathic type behavior or prefers specialization. My current thoughts are that it likely varies from person to person, and is a matter of adaptation and someone's memetic profile rather than just genetic profile, and perhaps varies meaningfully across different cultures or populations. My sense however, is that not only do many people seem to really click

with making lots of connections measured by keeping and raising engagement, but people also seem to learn really fast when we favor a polymathic system in my experience. I'm not telling people to be biased towards polymathism per se, but merely to keep the mind open for it. One advantage that I do think it may confer, is that when one becomes fatigued in one area, it may still be possible to switch tasks and access a different attention and energy bundle to allocate to that new thing. In doing this you can extend productivity and learning, with less headache and stagnation in my experience, and pick up some other skills while you're at it.

I sense that I could say much more about this topic, but I think I will let this be the end of this installment in the "Exploring Polymathism" series. I appreciate you sitting through my ramblings, and I hope this serves as some good food for thought.