

Chapter 1

Introduction

She was black. And poor. Still she rose remarkably from a life of discrimination and abuse in 1950s America to become a key figure in the civil rights movement. She was at the heart of the struggle, a prominent campaign organiser who worked for both Martin Luther King Jr. and Malcolm X prior to each of their assassinations. Even after the historic Civil Rights Act of 1964, this young radical would continue to be at the forefront of the fight for social justice and women's rights.

Her continuing interest in social causes led her to take a job as a globe-trotting journalist, first for *The Arab Observer* in Cairo and then the *Ghanaian Times* in Accra. Extensive travels allowed her to satisfy her linguistic curiosity, and she would come to know a variety of European, Middle Eastern and West African languages. By the end of her life, she was considered an eminent historian of African-American affairs, with 30 honorary doctorates and a professorship at a major American university.

Accomplishment in politics, journalism, history and languages is a familiar, albeit impressive, career route. But what if I told you that the same young lady was also a professional Calypso dancer, a Tony Award-nominated theatre actress and an acclaimed film director who also happened to write

a Pulitzer Prize–nominated screenplay? And all these accomplishments are not even what she's most famous for.

Ultimately, she was known as a literary giant – an outstandingly popular and critically acclaimed poet, playwright and novelist with 30 bestselling titles of fiction and non-fiction to her name. She published several volumes of poetry, for which she was nominated for the Pulitzer Prize and were especially popular among African American women, which have also been recited to mark key events in modern history such as the inauguration of a US president, the death of Michael Jackson and the 50th anniversary of the United Nations. But it is her autobiography – published in several volumes – that is arguably her most important work, and is considered a significant contribution to the understanding of African American experience in the twentieth century. And yes, we're still speaking of the same lady!

In awe of her accomplishments, I contacted, her requesting an interview for this book. To my dismay, she passed away shortly after. Known to us as the great Maya Angelou, this poetess, playwright, author, singer, composer, dancer, actor, filmmaker, journalist, polyglot, historian and activist was a breed of multifaceted human that is now worryingly in danger of becoming extinct: the polymath.

This book is about the full realisation of human potential. As such, it calls for a revolution of the mind, led by an age-old species of human known as polymaths, sometimes (although erroneously) referred to as “Renaissance men”. The most concise way to define them is:

Humans of exceptional versatility, who excel in multiple, seemingly unrelated fields.

That's the superficial definition. Put differently, polymaths are multi-dimensional minds that pursue optimal performance and self-actualisation in its most complete, rounded sense. Having such a mindset, they reject lifelong specialisation and instead tend to pursue various objectives that

might seem disparate to the onlooker – simultaneously or in succession; via thought and/or action. The inimitable complexity of their minds and lives are what makes them uniquely human. As such, they have shaped our past and will own our future. This book explains how.

While one might be able to argue a certain neurobiological distinction to standard *Homo sapiens* (we now know there is a correlation between behaviour, personality and the size and structure of the brain) the reference to a ‘species’ or ‘breed’ in this context is largely metaphorical. So who actually qualifies as a polymath? Although there are many versatile people who operate – to varying extents and with mixed success – in different fields, the point at which the versatile operator, or the dabbling dilettante, becomes a true polymath depends on the level of accomplishment or mastery attained in each field taken with the sheer *variety of fields altogether*.

Let us take the case of the notorious nineteenth-century Italian adventurer Giacomo Casanova. By the age of 25, he’d already had short but lively careers as a court lawyer, soldier in the Venetian army, violinist for the San Sanuele theatre, professional gambler, physician to Venetian noblemen and clergyman in Rome. Following a period of scandal, imprisonment, escape and social climbing on the Grand Tour around Europe, he gained a reputation among Parisian nobility as an alchemist, became a spy for the French government, sold lottery schemes to European governments and then spent his last years in Bohemia as a librarian in Count Waldstein’s household, where he wrote the illustrious memoirs that would make his name synonymous with womanising. What a colourful life! But do Casanova’s illustrious pursuits qualify him as a polymath? Or did he fall short, spreading himself too thin and failing to make any real contribution in most of the fields in which he operated?

Or what of American fraudster Ferdinand Waldo Demara, who assumed various identities over a lengthy career as a serial impostor in the mid-twentieth century. Without the necessary qualifications, he worked deceitfully (but indeed successfully) as a ship’s doctor, a civil engineer, a sheriff’s

deputy, an assistant prison warden, a doctor of applied psychology, a hospital orderly, a lawyer, a child-care expert, a Benedictine and Trappist monk, a newspaper editor, a cancer researcher and a teacher. Here was a man of great variety; but did he demonstrate the necessary *depth* as well as breadth to be called a polymath?

Technically, the polymath usually excels in at least three seemingly unrelated fields ('poly' being more than two). But in reality, to suggest that someone 'has excelled in' or 'is accomplished in' a particular field would be a relative statement. Accomplishment – just like happiness, success and intelligence – comes in various forms, and is a generally subjective state of being. Conventional manifestations of accomplishment, however, usually include any one or a combination of the following: critical acclaim, popular recognition, financial success, publication or exhibition of works, qualification or award, demonstrated skill and experience. But even assessing accomplishment simply in terms of a profession or academic discipline is a rather insular and limited way of viewing the polymath. A human being is much more than her "profession" or field. Many-sidedness comes in many forms. So the real polymath has a type of mind and approach that is far more substantial and holistic, as we will explore later.

In any case, one must be careful not to throw around the label of 'polymath' too loosely; there is a difference between simply being multitalented and being a genuine polymath, just as there is a difference between being intelligent and being a proven genius. A multitalented individual does not necessarily utilise or bring to fruition those talents to accomplish things in the fields that correspond to each talent. That said, few people realise that the term applies to a host of different types of individuals, including those that may not have been thought of as polymaths before.

In all cases the prerequisite, as mentioned earlier, is an 'exceptional cross-domain versatility', but the greatest, most influential, most self-actualised polymaths are essentially self-seeking, holistically minded, connection-forming humans characterized by a boundless curiosity, outstanding intelligence and wondrous creativity.

Of course, every human is born with multifarious potential. Why, then, do parents, schools and employers insist that we restrict our many talents and interests; that we 'specialise' in just *one*? We've been sold a myth, that to 'specialise' is the only way to pursue truth, identity, or even a livelihood. Yet specialisation is nothing but an outdated system that fosters ignorance, exploitation and disillusionment and thwarts creativity, opportunity and progress.

Following a series of exchanges with the world's greatest historians, futurists, philosophers and scientists, this book weaves together a narrative of history and a vision for the future that seeks to disrupt this prevailing system of unwarranted 'hyper-specialisation'. Indeed, it reveals that the *true* specialist is actually a polymath.

There is another way of thinking and being. Through an approach that is both philosophical and practical, we will set out a cognitive journey towards rediscovering and unlocking your innate polymathic state. Going further, this book proposes nothing less than a cultural revolution in our education and professional structures, whereby everyone is encouraged to express themselves in multiple ways and fulfil their many-sided potential. Not only does this enhance individual satisfaction, but in doing so, facilitates a conscious and creative society that is both highly motivated and well equipped to address the complexity of twenty-first-century challenges.

To take the reader on that journey, this book will follow a very particular structure. To begin, we need to understand that in different societies and at different times, polymaths have always existed and indeed were some of the most influential figures in world history, instrumental in shaping the modern world. This is particularly important, as today we live in a highly specialised society which discourages (almost suppresses) the polymath, as well as any memory of her existence. While this status quo suits a select few (who are happy to divide and conquer by using specialisation as a tool of control), it comes at the expense of human fulfilment, intellectual freedom and societal progress.

Most importantly, sapiens will simply vanish unless we cultivate the mind in a way that makes us indispensable to Project Earth. With machine

intelligence and the so-called technological singularity looming (not to mention nuclear, environmental and economic catastrophes that are more imminent), the world has little choice but to see a revival of the polymath, as it is only this species of multifaceted, complex, creative, versatile and inimitable human that will have any value or relevance in a highly complex, automated, super-intelligent future.

So what to do? First, we must all recondition our minds to be able to think and operate like the polymath, adopting the timeless traits and methods demonstrated by countless polymaths throughout history. We must then identify those polymaths still living to seek out lessons on how to unleash our own polymathic potential and resist the hyper-specialisation forced upon us by the system.

Finally, we must seek to change the system itself – its prevailing culture, educational curricula and pedagogy, social structures, institutions, work environment and indeed its general worldview – and replace it with one that breeds and encourages polymathic minds and ushers in a new global generation of polymaths. It is only these optimally functioning, highly creative, self-actualised minds that can take stewardship of the future and steer humanity towards a progressive tomorrow. It requires nothing less than a revolution that is both cognitive and cultural; the following chapters aim to awaken your consciousness, so that you, too, might join it.

Let us be clear from the start: polymaths are not members of an exclusive club, order or society – every human has the potential to become one. In fact, ‘becoming’ is perhaps less accurate than ‘reverting’. We are all inherently multifaceted beings and clearly demonstrate this disposition during childhood; whether or not we remain that way into adulthood is determined by a cornucopia of cultural, educational, political and economic influences. So for the individual, to be a polymath is in essence to be true to your primordial self; it is to unlock the glimmering potential of an otherwise slumbering mind. The first part of that process is to compute and internalise a fundamental fact: that polymaths are a timeless people.