The Rebirth of Renaissance Thinking and Modern Day Polymaths

J Well, for every great person, great artist, great inventor, great entrepreneur, there was at least one person, if not many people, who said they were doing it wrong, or they weren’t good enough, or they were failing in somebody else’s eyes.

[Music playing]

A Welcome to The Portfolio Life with Jeff Goins. I’m your host, Andy Traub, and this is the show that helps you to pursue work that matters, make a difference with your art, and discover your true voice. What if you didn’t have to be great at one thing? But instead, you had the freedom, the permission, to pursue more than one interest? And what if pursuing more than one area was in fact the best thing you could do for your personal and professional development?

Well, today Jeff Goins talk about people who pursued more than one area of interest and how they paved the way for we should live today.

[Music playing]

A Jeff Goins, thank you for joining me today.

J Andy Traub, good to be here as always.

A We’re going to talk about something that – it’s a word that people, frankly, they don’t know. It’s a polymath.

J Uh-huh (yes).

A It’s not a dinosaur, right?

J I don’t know that it sounds like a dinosaur.

A I think it always sounds like a dinosaur.
J [Laughing] OK.
A But thanks for making me feel bad.
J It’s not a dinosaur.
A It’s not a dinosaur. And it is what can I go Wikipedia on you for a minute? Can I—
J Do it.
A —read the definition?
J Yeah.
A Then I want to talk about how you spun this which is beautiful. “A polymath is a person whose expertise expands a significant number of different subject areas. Such a person is known to draw on complex bodies of knowledge to solve specific problems.” It was first used in the 17th Century, and it’s used to describe great thinkers.

And why did you want to write about polymaths, other than you’re kind of geeky when it comes to words?

J Well, you know, Andy, that on this show we like to talk about how you do more than one thing, that how your craft is not just one thing. It’s a few things. And I like the definition of mastery — the more modern definition of mastery — that I tend to appropriate to how I approach my work; and how I see a lot of people, especially in the information age where technology and another skillset are often being combined.

I think of mastery not as being a jack-of-all-trades but being a master of some as opposed to one. And, honestly, I think this idea of just being really, really good at one thing is becoming more and more outdated. But I also think it was not the only way that we mastered a craft. And, so, if you look back to the Renaissance era especially, you had what were called polymaths. You had these people like Leonardo Di Vinci is probably one of the most-famous examples where he was an architect, and he was a painter, of course. He was an inventor. He was prolific in both the arts and the sciences, and those things in modern times tend to not go together.

And I think that really comes about as a result of being in this industrial age for 100 years where you put everybody into a factory, and everybody has one job. And it’s all about efficiency.
A Uh-huh (yes).
J Well, I mean, obviously, we know that factories are closing down and computers and robots are doing all of those tasks now. And, so, what are human beings going to do? Well, I think we’re going to see a resurgence of what is called a polymath, people who have multiple interests, combining them in interesting skillsets in a way that adds value to the world. And I actually think this is the way
most human beings are wired, not just to do one thing but to do a few things, to be multifaceted creatures who borrow from different disciplines and combine them in an interesting way.

And especially with the kind of work that we talk about on *The Portfolio Life*, you know, more creative kind of work. I think that kind of combined skillset is more essential than ever before.

A So, let me speak to what fear might be say inside of the heads of the person that’s listening right now. I think fear might be saying to them, “You’re having a hard enough time being good at one thing, and now Jeff is saying you need to be good at more than one thing.” Speak to that fear where someone says, “How am I supposed to master more than one thing?”

J Well, I think that the interesting thing about that, and you and I are a lot alike, Andy, in that some people may look at us and say that we have ADHD, and those people are right. But, also, in addition to that, I think there is a—

A What were we just talking about? I’m just kidding.

J [Laughing]

A Sorry, go ahead.

J Anyway, let’s talk about squirrels.

A So, in addition. Some people think we have ADHD, but you’re going to spin it.

J But I think there’s, for a lot of people, ADHD or not, there is an energy that is brought to the work that you do when you switch tasks. Now, if you switch tasks too quickly, or the tasks aren’t that related to each other, it can create mental exhaustion. So, if you’re working a job and your boss comes up to you like every 15 minutes and tells you to do something new, just as you’re starting to gain traction, that can become exhausting.

And, so, I think we all have different thresholds for tolerance, for task switching. But most of us don’t want to sit at a computer, or a desk, or stand up, or do the same thing whether it’s blue-collar or white-collar work, whether you’re swinging a hammer or crunching numbers, most of us if we do the same task for eight hours a day, it’s exhausting.

A Right.

J But if you do a few different tasks, and you switch throughout the day, it actually brings more energy. And I think it actually makes you better. I was surprised when I found out that most, quote, unquote “full-time writers,” professionals that I looked up to when I was an inspiring author, did not write for eight hours a day. They wrote for one, two, maybe three hours a day. The most I could ever find was like four or five hours. And it was really, really intense. And they had lots of breaks in between.

So, if you’re finding yourself struggling with mastering one skill, maybe the answer is because you need to be doing a few skills. And each of those skills is going to complement each other. And,
certainly, I think there are legitimate opportunity costs in doing three things versus one thing every day. But I also think that the result of that, if you pick the right few things to do, the results far outweighs the costs.

And in my case I am a writer who uses technology and business to really get my ideas to spread. And, so, those kind of three areas: the creative side, the technology and marketing side, using things like blogging, and social media, and podcasting. And, then, the business side, making things sustainable so that I can make a living to be more creative and feel free to write a book and not being worried if it doesn’t sell.

I mean there’s a certain amount of freedom that I’ve created for myself by mastering – or at least beginning to walk that road. I wouldn’t call myself a master in any of those things. But combining them, I have made what I do very unique from what other people do which, obviously, causes the work to stand out. But I have also found out that I don’t want to just sit at my computer and write all day long. I get a certain thrill out of the interaction that the writing that I do, and the effect that it has on the audience—

A Right.

J —as well as some of the business and technology side. I’m not saying that’s what everybody listening has to do, but I think there are other complementary areas of interests that can actually be undergirding and strengthening the existing skillset that you have—

A Yeah.

J —if you just give yourself permission to do more than one thing. You might just find that you end up doing that one thing much, much better when you begin borrowing from other disciplines.

A And, so, the encouragement for all of us is that – well, actually, let me ask you a question instead of guessing here. The amount of energy we have can be used in a lot of different ways, obviously. What’s the difference between the jack-of-all-trade and those who pursue mastery in just a few areas? What is the difference between, more specifically, in the habits of that person, or the mindset?

J Yeah, I think it really comes back to this idea of what it means to be a Renaissance person. So, a Renaissance man or Renaissance woman is not somebody who is just well-versed in the arts. And it’s not somebody who does everything kind of OK. It’s somebody who is looking at the intersection of ideas and finding how these different crafts, or these different things that seemingly are very different aren’t actually that different, that there are areas of overlap.

And there was a book that came out a while ago, gosh, maybe close to 10 years ago called The Medici Effect. And it was by a guy named Frans Johansson. And in that book he talks about the capital I, Intersection. And he talks about how science, and art, and culture, how all of these different things tend to work together. When you have breakthrough insights in the fields of academics, in the fields of science, literature, whatever, it’s usually not just one person. In fact, I think he would argue that it’s
never one solitary genius. It’s always an intersection of ideas, and people, and cultures that create something that the world has never seen before.

The Renaissance was one of those periods in history where you had a bunch of bankers. The Medici family were bankers in Florence, Italy in the 15 and 1600s. And you had artists like Michael Angelo, Rafael, Leonardo, all of the Ninja turtles were there except for Splinter. I don’t know where he comes from.

A He came later.

J Then you have people in the sciences and something that people don’t realize about Michael Angelo is that in that era it was against the law to look at naked dead bodies. And you didn’t have live models initially. And, so, how was Michael Angelo going to paint or sculpt which is what he started out as a sculptor, how was he going to sculpt David?

Well, he would break into the morgue, and he would look at these cadavers, and he would draw them so he could understand—

A Wow.

J —the muscles, and how the — and he would cut people apart. Again, this was thought to be heresy. And this was God’s creation. You don’t mess with that. He’d cut up bodies and stuff. And he would see what things looked like on the inside so he could create them more— That’s a little gross. But that’s an intersection, right? He’s taking science — I mean, he’s doing an autopsy so he can sculpt a sculptor made out of marble. And that’s the intersection that I’m talking about.

And, so, how do you do this practically? I think you have to look at complementary interests. And I would recommend — this is what I do — just follow what fascinates you. Follow what fascinates you at a certain point. Limit yourself, because one of the things that I’ve gotten into recently is just history, the world history of how this thing influenced this thing, influenced this thing. And you can go into endless regressions, because something always influences something else.

And, so, at a certain point I go, “OK. OK. I’ve just got to cut myself off. And I’m going to study this period, or this time.”

A Right.

J Or basically the origin of this idea. But I would say follow what fascinates you. And limit yourself. And always be flexible. Always look for new opportunities that come your way. And ask yourself, is there some intersection here between this new idea, or this book that I’m reading, or this YouTube video that I watch and the work that I’m doing right now?

I think the typical thing for people to do is go, “Oh, no, no. That’s science. Or that’s math. Or that’s art. And I don’t do that. I do this.” And the reality is, if you want to do breakthrough work that’s
going to change the world, or your industry in some small or big way, it’s going to require some sort of intersection. You borrowing from some other field and applying it to a new context.

A Right.

J And that really is Renaissance thinking.

[Music playing]

A I hope it’s an encouragement to folks is that the areas that you might seek mastery in could be something as simple as – it could be videos. It could be the use of video and being a writer. If you combine those two things, you could be completely and totally unique as a writer, right? And we were just talking about Chris Tucker. And I think something that he’s done really well is, he’s good at building a scalable business, but he is also good at personal branding.

So, how did that help him when he went to go write a book? Obviously, he had something to write about. He had a subject matter, but he also knew how to sell it, right?

J Yeah.

A And it’s those two things that he’s figured out. And he’s working on others. But why is it, Jeff, that we will tell ourselves that not only can I not master one thing, there’s no way I am going to master two or three? Why do we talk ourselves out of being in this group of people? Maybe I’m the only one. But we say, “I can’t be a Renaissance person, right?” Are we just spending our time doing the wrong things? Or we talking ourselves out of it?

J Well, I think, it comes down to your definition of master or mastery. I would first of all say, forget about mastery. Don’t worry about that. Because what does that mean? That a certain group of people are going to say that you’re great? Well, for every great person, great artist, great inventor, great entrepreneur, there was at least one person, if not many people, who said they were doing it wrong, or they weren’t good enough, or they were failing in somebody else’s eyes. So, you have to be careful with that, I think.

But, really, I think it comes down to what is the work that I want to do, and how can I make a contribution to the world that will, hopefully, make a difference and maybe even be remembered not for my sake necessarily but for the sake of the work. I mean, that’s my hope.

And, so, if you are worried about mastery, I think probably what that is, is fear of failure, fear of trying something new and it failing. But here’s the flipside. Here’s the really fun, exciting news. If you say, “Well, I’m a videographer who also writes plays, and performs them for my community theater,” you very quickly start to niche down and set yourself apart. And when you start dabbling in other areas two things happen, I think.

One, you become more unique because you’re not just the writer guy. You’re the writer guy who talks about marketing and business or whatever. Or you’re not just the video guy. You’re the
video guy who loves creating your own little cartoon animation sequences, or whatever. So, you stand out. You give people something to talk about that makes you unique, which is good.

But, then, the other thing is because you’re dabbling in other areas, you all of a sudden widen your reach. So, in one way you’re niching down, because you’re getting really specific about what you’re doing, and you’re creating some core uniquenesses. In another way you are basically tackling other business verticals, or other industries where – in my case, I’m a writer. So, I have a lot of people that I follow and connect with who are just writers. They just want to write books.

But, then, because I do online marketing, and online business, I’ve started to gain a following in those areas where people are watching me trying to figure out, “How is he going to market this?” And I’ve started to make some friends in that industry. And same thing with the ecommerce world.

And, so, all of a sudden, you’re not a jack-of-all-trades, and you’re not all things to all people. But you’re a master of some. And you’re a few things to a few different groups of people. And that can be really, really powerful when these people who don’t know each other start getting introduced to each other by you.

I interviewed Louis Schiff a while ago about his book, *Business Brilliant*. And he said, “If you want to do something that’s just a big breakthrough,” he says, “You need to introduce two groups of people who don’t know each other, who aren’t talking to each other. And you’re the middleman.” He said, “That’s how you make a lot of money.” And he pointed to Apple. I thought that was interesting, “Who is Apple introducing each other?” He says, “Well, they’re introducing engineers, people who could build stuff to artists, people who knew how to make things beautiful.” And what is Apple known for? Well, beautiful products that just work. It’s not just the beauty. It’s also the functionality and intuitiveness of it.

And I think by doing that, it also set Apple apart from the competition, obviously. But, over time, appealed to not just the artsy, fartsy people, although it certainly did that. But, also, people who just wanted their machines to work, or just wanted to open it up and get to work. And, so, they widened the net by doing something that was seemingly very specific. But when you borrow from different disciplines, people in those different areas start to pay attention to you.

And, again, go back to the Renaissance. I read about this regular dinner that the Medici family, one of the richest families that Renaissance had, and they would have people like Machiavelli who was a political writer, basically, and Michael Angelo, and all these businessmen and politicians, and artists, and writers, and they all came together to discuss ideas. And what they were really talking about was, they were talking about ancient Greek culture and how they could bring that back to Medieval and what would become the Renaissance, back to Medieval Europe.

And that was really, really powerful. What were they doing? All they were doing was trying to do something that happened hundreds and hundreds of years ago and trying to bring it back to their current context, a Golden Age. But when they brought it to their current context it wasn’t just a
rehash of ancient Roman or ancient Greek culture, it was something new, because they were using
the skills and resources that they had available to them. And I think that can be really, really powerful.

Now, the truth is, Leonardo Di Vinci probably could have been a better painter if that’s all he
did his whole life. But that’s not what fascinated him. And what is he known for today? Doing a bunch
of different, very interesting things. In many ways he is known as an inventor, sketching out these
flying machines, and all of these incredible things that were way advanced for his time.

If he had just focused on one thing because he was afraid of failing, think of all the things that
the world would have missed out on. People still don’t realize all of the things he created. He used to
create torture, and war machines, for the king of France. And he was an architect. He did a lot of
really different and interesting things that contributed to culture in some good ways, and maybe not
so good ways.

But I think the question you should be asking yourself is not, what if I fail at this, or what if I
just really, really want to be good at this one thing, but what does the world miss out on if you stay
stuck in your one area of interest? And how can you start borrowing from different times in history,
different cultures, and different areas of study to make what you’re currently doing better, more
interesting, and appealing to more people?

Well, I hope that is a challenge of encouragement to you who are listening that you have
some things, it is plural, some things that you are passionate about. And that is good. And if you can
take that energy and start to work on your mastery of those different things and, then, find a
connection that there could be – that intersection could be the unique place that you have carved out
in the world that will help other people make that connection.

So, Jeff, it’s been fascinating to see you grow in those different areas. And there are others
who, I think we know, that would say, “Well, I only do this one thing.” But in reality the people we
know that are really successful have found a way to master a couple of things.

Yeah.

And I’m thinking of the most successful people in the world, they were not just great
engineers. Or just great investors. I read about Warren Buffet earlier in his life that he was good at
getting other people’s money.

[Laughing]

So, his first businesses failed. But he was able to get other people to trust him to give him
their money and, then, invest it for them. And, so, what’s that other skill that he was able to master
that connected his wisdom in investing and, then, also getting other people’s money.

Yeah.

So, we’re all capable – it sounds like – of that. It’s not saved for – and that’s why I appreciate
you fleshing out that Wikipedia description. A lot of us could read that and go, “Oh, that’s for the
Renaissance.” No, we have a modern-day Renaissance, thanks to the Internet, thanks to our connectivity, thanks to our freedoms. A lot of us listening to this show have tremendous freedoms that we can go pursue more than one thing. We’re not stuck on an assembly line. We have our nights and weekends to go pursue other things. And I appreciate you talking about this idea, this kind of person because, frankly, I had never heard of it before. And on a more personal level, it freed me from some guilt of going, “Gosh, I really should just do one thing.”

J Yeah, yeah. No, I mean, I think this is the future. And more and more we’re going to need people who are not necessarily jacks-of-all-trades but are masters of some. And, so, if you can get on that boat sooner than later, you’re going to be ahead of the curve.

A Absolutely. Well, folks, let us know how you are becoming a polymath. And we all – first thing is, we have to get comfortable calling ourselves that. So, let us know, what are you pursuing, some different areas that you’re pursuing mastery in. Because that, in that intersection of those two things, and you bringing and combining those two things in your own unique way, that is where you have a unique contribution to the world that, frankly, the world is missing out on.

So, let us know. On Twitter Jeff is @JeffGoins. And you can always use the hashtag, #PortfolioLife. You can find this episode on http://Goinswriter.com. And, as always, we always appreciate you leaving a review on i-Tunes. That helps other people find the show.

Jeff, I’m going to ask one sort of curveball of a question. If you could add one new mastery, area of mastery, this is not prepared. So, you’re allowed to stammer and stutter and I’ll edit it out. But what’s a new area you would like to start to pursue?

J Uh, uh, uh, uh, uh.

A [Laughing]

J I’ve actually been thinking about this. So, I started out as more of a polymath and, then, got focused on writing. Some people know my story know that when I graduated from college the first job that I had was traveling with a band as a guitarist which isn’t much of a job. But it was a lot of work. And most of my life I’ve been a musician not a writer. I’ve always written kind of in the margins of life. But music was the thing that I thought I would do. And that’s kind of fallen to the wayside. And I’m picking the guitar back up. But before all of that what I really loved doing was drawing. And I was thinking about this next book idea that I have that’s going to be a lot about some of the things we’re talking about on this show, and particularly in this episode.

But I thought, “Man, wouldn’t it be cool if I could like do my own illustrations for my next book.” Now, don’t hold me to that, because they might not be very good. But one of the things I thought about adding to my portfolio of skills is drawing, just getting back into visually expressing my ideas. Because we live in this very visual age where I’m hiring people, or doing favors for friends to design something for me, or illustrate something. And I thought, “You know, wouldn’t it be great to be able to have this skillset, this skill at my disposal on the set of things that I do?”
So, that’s one thing I’d love to get better at is drawing.

A We look forward to seeing that, Jeff.

J Oh, my goodness. All right. All right. OK.

A Well, folks, thank you for taking the time to spend with Jeff and I today. We look forward to your feedback. And I look forward to hearing what you are doing in your life to continue to build a portfolio life. Jeff, thank you again.

J Thank you Andy.

[Music playing]

A So, what are your areas of interest? We want to know. You can find this post and, then, comment on http://GoinsWriter.com, or let Jeff know on Twitter. You can mention him using the @JeffGoins name and the hashtag: #PortfolioLife. I’m Andy Traub, and on behalf of Jeff Goins, thanks for spending some time with us.

Now, go build your portfolio.

[Music playing]

Resources

- *The Medici Effect* by Frans Johansson
- *Business Brilliant* by Lewis Schiff
- *Designing Your Own Apprenticeship: How to Build a Team of Mentors*

What will the world miss out on if you stay stuck in your one area of interest? How are you a polymath? Share in the comments