

We Contain Multitudes

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FULL TEXT

Headnote

Why do so few of us exercise the many talents with which we are born?

This plant would like to grow

And yet be embryo;

Increase, and yet escape

The doom of taking shape;

Be vaguely vast, and climb

To the tip end of time

With all the space to fill,

Like boundless Igdrasil

That has the stars for fruit.

- from Richard Wilbur's "Seed Leaves" (1964)

John Mangine stands in his basement before a large square canvas, pausing between brushstrokes. He cannot pause long. It's mid-February 2024, and a collection of his bright, abstract acrylic paintings is scheduled to go up in a local gallery in two months. He's not ready for the show, so he works quickly. "Maybe one out of 16 things I do I don't hate," he says. His small unfinished basement teems with canvases and the jumble of a middle-class, single-parent household—a jumbo pack of paper towels, old golf clubs, a box of dog biscuits, a souvenir seat cushion from Super Bowl XXVII. Not a great studio but a good expression of the unruly urgency he lives in.

Mangine is a study in creative adventure. The son of a truck driver and a nurse, he took up painting two years ago at the age of 44. Before that, he was deeply absorbed in the art of photography, itself a relatively recent passion. And before photography, there was craft brewing: he won national homebrew competitions and helped launch a successful brew pub for which he provided the name, the logo, and the recipes for its flagship beers.

It's hard to mistake any of these creative pursuits for dabbling. Mangine is too accomplished—and his commitment to these endeavors too intense—for them to be described as hobbies. Yet Mangine does not make his living from any of them. He is the associate dean for academic support at the college where I taught English for 33 years before retiring in spring 2023. Like most of my colleagues, I first knew him as the person who issued notices on behalf of students with disabilities, granting them extra time on tests and papers, among other accommodations. Mangine himself has ADHD and dysgraphia, traits that for him help explain his affinity for both his job and his creative work.

By some bundle of talent, compulsion, energy, and circumstance, he is pursuing his creative passions fully enough to scramble the binaries we use to rank adult endeavor—vocation and avocation, profession and pastime, career and hobby. He makes some money from his art (he has a side business doing photographic portraits and has sold fine-art prints and a few paintings), but it is by noncapitalist standards that he is making himself an artist. Will he "make it" as an artist and do his art full-time? He'd love nothing more, he says. But he knows he already has something precious and rare: the thrill and fulfillment of being actively multitalented, of living in a state of ranging and ambitious self-expression.

Mangine's example suggests something uplifting: that we all carry within us deep wells of heterogeneous talent, not just for the things that, if we're lucky, we're good at in our jobs, but also other things we could do wonderfully well if

circumstances allowed. The fact that so few Americans actively realize this, however, makes other realities visible: how fully culture and social circumstances suppress this way of knowing ourselves, and how disastrous this self-neglect is in our current moment, particularly for many people whose sense of self and purpose is tyrannized by their smartphones and the distortions of social media. What would it mean if we shifted how we knew ourselves to include a fuller sense of our gifts, if the controlling algorithms of more people's lives included their own creativity?

Multipotentiality. This is the term some clinical counselors and life coaches now use for having many talents. As a scientific descriptor, it often treats the trait as innate or hardwired. For people made to feel odd for plunging into different interests, one after another, the label is more agreeable than, say, flakiness. Emilie Wapnick's memorable 2015 TEDx talk on the challenges and advantages of being a "multipotentialite" gave the term greater currency; it also inspired a long trail of testimonials in the YouTube comments section, some expressing tearful relief and gratitude at the realization that they are not alone. The video is at once a locus of solidarity and de facto confirmation of the outsider status of multipotentialites.

By various baseline measures, we all are born with the potential to develop multiple talents, to nurture different ways of thinking and doing. The synaptic density and plasticity of an infant's brain make cognitive versatility both a birthright and the distinction that explains the endurance of our species. A 2021 study led by geneticists at the American Museum of Natural History and other research institutions identified 267 genes that are unique to *Homo sapiens*, which might account for the genetic advantage underlying "the explosive emergence of creativity in modern humans in the period just before and after their widespread dispersal from Africa and the related extinction of Neanderthals and other human relatives," as study coauthor Ian Tattersall explained. We could adapt, and so we survived. Our being here is our creativity's affidavit.

Let's acknowledge, too, that the definition of the word talent includes a sense of the exceptional that doesn't entirely hold up. If by talent we mean skillful capacity, almost everyone is practicing an assortment of talents every day. Excellent restaurant servers are brilliant at reading faces; generating short, authentically warm conversations with strangers; remembering large orders; carrying giant trays with one hand; and moving through a chaotic space quickly, collision-free, for hours on end.

But few think of waiting on tables as the exercise of multiple talents. That notion is generally reserved for people whose skills have cultural prestige and are widely divergent, making them exceptions that prove the rule about everyone else's supposed monolithic nature. Take Bob Childs, whom Wapnick mentioned in her TEDx talk. He is not only a psychologist but also an accomplished luthier whose violins are coveted by members of world-class orchestras, including the Boston Symphony and the New York Philharmonic. Or consider George W. Bush, who became a painter after leaving the White House and produced what New Yorker art critic Peter Schjeldahl has called work of "astonishingly high" quality, given the former president's late start.

For the people living them, these career shifts and combinations can feel less incongruous. One of my first good friends in graduate school was David Duchovny. After a few years, I lost track of him, and then there he was on TV, in an AT&T commercial. It was like losing sight of a swimmer and seeing him resurface in a different body of water. David has become a TV and film star, of course, but he has also written six novels and released three studio albums. Music is the newest thing. Even before graduate school, though, he thought of himself as a writer. The dream, he told me recently, had been to get a teaching position, get tenure, and write fiction in the summers: "I loved teaching, but I didn't think I could be good at critical writing." The piles of reading we did in grad school never left him, however. "It's like a compost heap, growing over time and getting into my system and mattering to my own writing in unexpected ways." For him, that kind of hidden continuity is "part of the hyphenate experience."

It seems fairest to say that our multiple talents, potential or realized, can lie anywhere along a long spectrum of divergence, like pitches on a trombone slide. Karl Smith, a former student of mine, double-majored in English and physics, then got a PhD in biophysics while busking with a portable typewriter, composing one-paragraph, on-demand short stories, then became a software engineer for Amazon. Before and after all that, he did performative storytelling and science presentations in schools, children's museums, and summer camps. Now Karl mostly works from home, helping to raise his and his pediatrician wife's three-year-old boy while bringing to market a product he

invented last year, a luxe compass customized to point to its owner's most beloved spot on Earth. Karl calls it the Truest North Compass. If the thing takes off commercially, he says he'll do a "couple more invention-y things." Otherwise he'll turn back to storytelling, the truest north he seems to have. Maybe.

Broadly speaking, this country has a history of humoring rather than celebrating the exercise of multiple talents. Since at least the late 19th century, when hobby shifted away from meaning an annoying preoccupation (or "hobbyhorse") to its current definition, amateur endeavor has merited a contained sort of cultural endorsement. Two recent books, David Epstein's *Range* (2019) and Tom Vanderbilt's *Beginners* (2021), widen this affirmation in convincing, thoroughly researched fashion. *Range* argues for the advantages of meandering into one's career through a generalist's range of interests, *Beginners* for the "joy and transformative power" of trying new pastimes as an adult. Both books assert that pursuing activities and interests outside of work isn't just a fun way to relieve stress; it expands who you are and how you see the world. For the same reason, it can also make you more intellectually creative in your profession. Epstein writes that "nationally recognized scientists are much more likely than other scientists to be musicians, sculptors, painters, printmakers, woodworkers, mechanics, electronics tinkerers, glassblowers, poets, or writers."

In all this championing of avocation, however, the primacy of a singular vocation is never really threatened. In pejorative words like dabbler and dilettante, Vanderbilt recognizes culture's grim policing of expertise, one force among the many that push adults away from childhood passions. But in describing his own wholehearted attempts at new activities (singing, surfing, drawing, juggling), his book doesn't imagine a hybrid middle ground where, for example, a 40-year-old might get really good at singing, where Vanderbilt might have to cede some of his professional identity as a journalist to song.

The arguments against taking a hybrid approach to adult occupation write themselves. It's hopelessly impractical, forcing you to compromise on your career and the ascending income, prestige, and dependable health insurance that come with it. Professions require credentials, which require arduous specialized training. Only the very privileged have the time and resources to cultivate multiple talents.

It's surprising how hard our culture labors to make this the end of the story.

It's not an accident that so few adults think of themselves as multitalented, even potentially. Remember all those things you loved to do as a kid? The musician and writer Stephen Nachmanovitch recalls visiting elementary schools and asking classrooms of children, "Who's an artist here?" In the first-grade classes, all the hands would go up, but in sixth-grade classrooms, "all the kids swivel around and point to one kid." Primary and secondary school education in this country is notoriously inhospitable to creativity and "divergent thinking." As Nachmanovitch writes, "Making art, building things, investigating nature, singing, telling stories, playing with mathematics—all these are part of our universal inheritance as complete human beings. Then a grid is laid upon us."

The college where I taught aims to keep the grid loose. For decades, the admissions tagline was "unusual combinations," signaling the school's insistence that students explore their divergent passions or develop new ones. To graduate, students must complete a major and a minor (or a second major) in different divisions or subject areas. Biology and French, math and music, theater and psychology. Students choose their combination, but the divergence is nonnegotiable. For many of them, this call to diverse interests is profoundly appealing. After they graduate, however, their multiple talents fall away, no match for the imperatives of culture and economic circumstances.

Lauren Ottaviani, a 2018 graduate, won two departmental prizes in English and possesses an incandescent soprano voice. "She could have easily gone on for graduate study in music," our choir director assures me. Lauren's love and talent for literary study have since carried her to graduate studies in England and now Belgium. And the singing? She helped lead a student opera ensemble at her school in the United Kingdom, but high-end amateur singing isn't a thing at Belgian universities, so she's not singing. "The guilt is persistent," she says. As it happens, an upright piano sits in her small university office. Like a goad.

I spoke with other former students, all high-achieving English majors who were great at other things—acting, robotics, creative nonfiction. None are exercising these talents now, even minimally (nor are they working in literary or literary-adjacent fields). They are, as the saying goes, getting on with their lives.

What explains John Mangine's commitment to making art? He's not sure. He alludes to the hyperfocus that ADHD can

spur. But 15.5 million adults in this country have ADHD. His late start might matter. "Now, when I'm creating my work, I feel like I'm racing against the clock a little bit. I want to get stuff out there." Most surprising is what hasn't mattered: the absence of art in his childhood, the absence of mentors and even informal training, the unrelenting demands of everyday life (the labor-intensive job, his single parenting, a family budget with no margins). He scavenges for time. He has to.

For most of the rest of us, multitasking is a remote abstraction, something other special people have or give up. Consider how we learn to view the famously multitasking. In Western pop culture, the unquestioned standard bearer is Leonardo da Vinci: painter, inventor, scientist, and engineer. Never mind that these realms of endeavor developed and hardened into wildly disparate fields of professional expertise centuries after his death. Da Vinci's status as the Renaissance man helps explain why being deeply accomplished in multiple fields strikes many people as nearly impossible, the stuff of transcendent genius.

Polymath, the word for people who have mastered multiple disciplines or bodies of knowledge, has a similar effect. By its application (and perhaps its own esotericism), the term ropes off a select realm of the extraordinary.

Nachmanovitch, in an essay about Gregory Bateson (an English anthropologist, linguist, semiotician, systems theorist, and the husband, for a time, of Margaret Mead), warms to his subject by noting other polymaths: Geoffrey Keynes, the renowned William Blake scholar knighted in 1955 for his work in medicine; the Columbia University neuroscientist David Sulzer, also an avant-garde violinist and composer; Dexter Holland, the molecular biology PhD who leads the punk rock band The Offspring; the engineer Judith Love Cohen (mother of the multitasking Jack Black), who as a young woman danced in the Metropolitan Opera Ballet and later became an engineer at NASA, where she worked on the Apollo program and the Hubble Space Telescope. The jaw drops.

Compare these lives with those that many Gen-Zers now contemplate for themselves. Forget polymathy. Getting a single decent job is a consuming worry. According to a 2023 study commissioned by the apparel company Carhartt, "nearly half of this country's young people think 'finding a job that aligns with [their] values' is the biggest 'challenge in today's job market.'" Still, the prospect of a lucrative career is what justifies the enormous expense of college for most families. In fact, as nearly everyone in higher education knows, the motives for going to college and the curriculum by which colleges make clear their "value proposition" have become increasingly vocational.

Meanwhile, alongside this anxious search for employment lies the enduring ideal of a career as a "calling" that in some profound way expresses who we are. This attractive idea has enjoyed a long history of cultural promotion. There are the classic "novels of development" (Dickens's *David Copperfield*, for example) tracing a protagonist's rise from an unpromising childhood to the adult role that, in retrospect, seems preordained, an inevitability sown less by life than by the conventions of plot, character, and reader expectation. Or the folkloric idea that certain kinds of work that our parents do, such as farming and teaching, are "in our blood." Or that most alluring of American ideas, that we all can and should follow our unique dreams.

In his 2005 commencement address at Stanford University, viewed some 60 million times on YouTube, Steve Jobs implored graduating seniors to find work that they love to do, and if they don't find it, to "keep looking, don't settle." The logic of Jobs's command is as absolute and as unconcerned with life's ambiguities and chaos as a summons from God. (The original, ecclesiastical meaning of vocation derives from God's call to figures like Samuel in the Old Testament—*et vocavit Dominus Samuelem*, in the Latin Vulgate.) From a modern secular perspective, this version of vocation implies a destiny of the self. Who you are determines your career. The educator and writer Parker Palmer puts Jobs's dictum not to "settle" another way: we all need to go through the long and often difficult journey to "discover our deep identity—the true self within every human being that is the seed of authentic vocation." Whatever we might think of these ideas, there's no finding in them the promise of multitasking living. No one is telling us, "Don't settle for just one job, just one dream."

Why is it, then, that we also love seeing this narrow view of human possibility exploded? Consider a few famous examples: Harrison Ford working as a finish carpenter when he gets the role of Han Solo in *Star Wars*; Ina Garten writing nuclear energy and budget policy for the White House before buying a specialty-food store and starting her *Barefoot Contessa* career; Kurt Warner stocking shelves at a Hy-Vee grocery store in Cedar Falls, Iowa, and six years

later, leading the St. Louis Rams to Super Bowl glory and being named MVP.

Even more irresistible-and bankable-seem to be stories of "regular people" shocking the world with hidden talents right before our eyes. What else explains the popularity of TV talent shows like American Idol and Britain's Got Talent than their democratic promise: anyone could be amazing. In 2009, Susan Boyle, an unemployed 47-year-old Scotswoman, sings "I Dreamed a Dream" beautifully on BGT and becomes celebrated, both for her singing (her debut album sells 10 million copies) and for what her "discovery" means to so many. In the comments section of a sharp-edged critique of the "Susan Boyle spectacle" in The New York Times, one fan, Marla from Maryland, declared, "Susan is one of 'us,' the average person of the world who has experienced the frustration of being prejudged, who is no longer young and thin, and who, by all odds will never realize their dreams." Think of all the Susan Boyles never plucked from obscurity. Think of us.

This gap between who we are and how the world sees us is not lost on writers. Countless beloved novels immerse us in the inner lives of characters whose innate gifts go unseen by others: George Eliot's Dorothea Brooke, Henry James's Isabel Archer, Mark Twain's Huck Finn, E. M. Forster's Margaret Schlegel, Ralph Ellison's Invisible Man, Toni Morrison's Sethe, and yes, that career builder, David Copperfield-all clad in the pathos of underestimation. These figures often have the cognitive equipment and sensibilities we associate with the novelists themselves, even when one is not the obvious alter ego of the other.

Sometimes stories turn on a character's buried creativity. The protagonist of Ann Petry's 1971 short story "Mother Africa," a scruffy Harlem junkman named Mannie Turner, comes to own a giant metal statue of a naked woman, which he plans to sell as scrap until he cleans it and is stirred by its "dark glowing beauty." Mannie keeps the statue, thinks of it reverently as Mother Africa, and begins to change his life in its honor. What the statue means to him and, in the end, the rupture of that meaning are tied to the traumas of his experiences as a Black American, making Petry's story about a lot more than art. But the story insists on Mannie's own creative force. In mornings of good weather, he sings out his sales pitch as he pulls his junk cart through Harlem-and we hear the music and joy:

He had a big baritone voice and he let it out as he half talked, half sang the words: 'I b-u-y, b-u-y, b-u-y! Ole rags, ole bottles, old sewin' machines!' His voice went up and down, down and up. It cut through, went over, went under, the other sounds in the street-the hum of traffic, monotonous, regular; the low-pitched, high-pitched voices of passersby; the sudden sharp screech of brakes slammed on at the traffic light at the corner. No one ever had an old sewing machine to sell or to give away but he liked the sound of the word and his voice lingered on 'machines,' caressed it, very nearly exhausted the scale on it, as he placed a bit of old metal on his cart.

Of all people, a junkman, with a rope for a belt and personal hygiene long abandoned, cares this much about the sounds of sung words and the beauty of sculpted metal? The story suggests, in fact, that Mannie's rejection of social regulation, his "cutting through" the hurry of other people's lives, grants him the freedom to live his creativity so fully. He has escaped the grid Nachmanovitch complains of. For me, another pleasure of the story comes in Petry's faith that her readers will recognize and relish the junkman's escape.

Enjoying the hidden talents of real and imagined people helps us count the costs of having our own talents buried beyond reach. What is lost? We might start and end with a rich texture of experience: layers of joy and self-knowledge and discovery, a palpable connection to what the Irish poet John O'Donohue called "that wild inner complexity of soul and color of spirit" that can never fully fit into our "work identities." But the deprivation is not just private and individual.

A wider social loss results.

Consider this split screen: the mental health crisis currently enveloping young people, and the rise, these past 20 years, of "makerspaces" or "fab labs." Various kinds of workshops here and abroad, often nested within libraries, community buildings, museums, and schools, these spaces are designed, managed, and resourced to host and cultivate creative labor. According to the nonprofit Nation of Makers, there are now more than 2,000 makerspaces in the United States. They aren't panaceas, but what people get out of using them looks a lot like what so many Gen-Zers painfully lack.

Many makerspaces retain the techie, transgressive flavor of their precursor, the so-called hackerspaces that flourished

in the mid-2000s. They flout the exclusiveness of expertise by inviting all, young and old, the expert and the merely curious, into a collaborative culture of invention, experimentation, risk taking, and support. This egalitarian ethos isn't matched yet by the actual users of such spaces, who are predominantly white and male. Dale Dougherty, evangelist and chronicler of what he calls the "maker movement," recognizes that spaces need to be "more welcoming and inclusive, especially to women, people of color, and people with disabilities." No one should be kept from what these spaces offer. Dougherty has visited hundreds of makerspaces around the world and, as he writes in his 2016 book, *Free to Make*, he has found people from all walks of life with "mindsets" that are active, engaged, playful, resourceful, persistent and resilient. These include lifelong tinkerers but also newbies who never knew that they could sculpt, design clothes, or invent appliances and are free to find out that they can. Failure's fine, too. Dougherty adopts Patti Smith's definition of punk rock: "the freedom to create, freedom to be successful, freedom to not be successful, freedom to be who you are."

Dougherty's book looks a lot like a prescription for the Gen-Z afflictions described by Jonathan Haidt in *The Anxious Generation* (2024). Haidt, a social psychologist, lines up the dire metrics: spikes in rates of depression and anxiety and suicide, surges in levels of loneliness and friendlessness, declines in academic achievement, dating, and sex. The trends began in 2010, long before the pandemic. As Haidt asserts in an essay for *The Atlantic*, the twin culprits are unmistakable: the advent of smartphones, with their "social-media platforms designed for virality and addiction," and the widespread tendency for parents to curtail their kids' unsupervised access to the outside world, to the experience and education that result from play and risk taking and responsibility. Smartphone addiction has hijacked the process by which children build their "social, emotional, and physical competence."

We need "dramatic cultural correction," Haidt writes. For this he turns to figures of authority, brandishing more sticks than carrots: Congress should raise the age of "internet adulthood" to 16, schools should ban cell phones during class hours, parents shouldn't let their kids have smartphones before high school and should keep them off social media until they reach the age of 16. He urges parents to find ways to exchange their children's "screen time [for] real-world experiences involving friends and independent activity." But how about systematically setting kids loose in makerspaces? While we're at it, since so many school districts in this country have had to reduce or cut their art, shop, home economics, and music programs, let's persuade somebody-state and local officials, a cadre of philanthropists-to make supervised, kitted-out makerspaces (of all sorts) as ubiquitous, inclusive, and accessible as those old expressions of municipal wisdom, public libraries and playgrounds. That way, even kids without involved parents could make and play their way into resourcefulness and resilience.

Any comprehensive attempt to address the problems Haidt documents should at least emulate the nurturing elements of makerspaces: the open invitation to creativity, the cultivation of community and mutual support, the destigmatization of failure. David Duchovny told me that a fear of failure had for years made him "miserable." There's no predicting who can dive, headlong and heedless, again and again, into the sea of their talents. We only know that it will be good for them.

On a rainy Thursday evening in April 2024, my wife and I make our way to Hatch Hollow, the small art-supply store and gallery in our little downtown. The night of John Mangine's art opening has arrived. The gallery, used sometimes as a performance space, resembles a large, track-lit living room, with potted plants and area rugs, interesting upholstered chairs and a beautiful curved wooden bench from an old bowling alley.

We're early, and we find John sitting alone on a yellow chair, looking a little trapped. "You don't look happy," I say. John laughs. "Yeah." I remember that this is a new experience for him. He has exhibited photographs before but never his paintings. "Photographs are easy to talk about," he tells me later. "You sort of already know how people see them, so I can talk about technical stuff, what filter I used, why I chose a certain lens for a certain shot. But my paintings? It's so subjective. I don't know where to begin."

Twelve of his works hang in a line along one long wall. It's a joint exhibit-across the room, the facing wall holds a string of small watercolors, representational works by a seasoned painter in the area. A table with drinks and hors d'oeuvres is set up in one corner, and in another a young man quietly plays a guitar and sings.

Eventually, more than a hundred people attended the opening, and many of them said nice things about his work,

John tells me afterward. But he says he's not eager to show his work again anytime soon. The task now is not to think about exhibits, but to return to what music producer Rick Rubin calls the artist's "way of being" and to push the judgment of others out of the studio. Rubin's 2023 book, *The Creative Act*, has become a godsend to John. Even adventurers like him need fortifying.

The painting of John's that I like most wasn't part of the exhibit. It depicts a field of translucent white shapes, imperfect squares and rectangles, connected by wide white lines, all of it laid over more squares of rich blue and red and black, like some aerial view of a bright city shaken into happy disarray. It's still in John's basement, near the dog biscuits.

Sidebar

BEN SLOTE is Professor Emeritus of English at Allegheny College. His scholarship has focused on late-19th- and 20th-century American fiction and culture. Currently he is writing essays and plays.

DETAILS

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