

Multipotentiality in a World of Multiple Challenges

Of all questions made on a regular and exhaustive basis to any child, there is none more common than the infamous "what do you want to be when you grow up?" The question arises almost always with unpretentiousness, in the most different environments, from the visit to the doctor who only wants to explore the conversational capacities of the little patient, to the family reunion where the old aunt approaches the kid in search of an excuse not to talk with the adults in the room. Faced with this question at an early age, the child quickly develops the necessary social tools to delight adults with their unusual responses: from firefighters to magicians, from superheroes to dancers, from princesses to truck drivers, all the answers are valid and well accepted by the questioners who listen to the revelations of the future alternative professionals with a sincere smile and with an exchange of understanding glances with the nearest adults. In this process, children develop a wide range of future options that seem all equally valid and possible. There seems to be no important difference between the boy who wants to be a cardiologist and the girl who wants to be a fishmonger in the local market. As time passes and the child begins and progresses in school, the picture begins to change. The big question remains, but unusual responses start to be looked at with evil eyes. If the boy says that he wants to be a plumber, the answer is still received with an empathetic smile, but soon will be accompanied by recommendations that indicate that he must choose a better profession, one that gives money and more status: one that is more respectable. Confronted for the first time with the impositions of the future, the child changes his thinking, forgets options of more weird careers and focuses on the commonly respectable professions: doctors, teachers, lawyers, or architects. These are all viable options that make adults smile, and since the child is not mature enough for static decisions, can still manage to hop between different options without fighting with his early convictions. Time passes and the age of decisions closes in. Suddenly, it is necessary to separate the waters, and the child, this time now an adolescent, needs to narrow the options and decide what he really wants, which area of knowledge he prefers, in which category wants to be inserted. Often still involved in an aura of immaturity, young people are forced to decide between exact sciences, technologies, social and human sciences or arts. The answer "I want to be this **or** that" is no longer acceptable, and saying "I don't know what I want to do" is considered a scandalous response and a sign of inability to make decisions. There is a need to choose a specific hallway and close all other doors, board on a specific profession and focus all attention on it, forgetting other interests. Then, college arrives as the definitive leap for the individualization of the professional career. The most prolific years of the young adult's mind are spent on a continuous exercise of specialization, focus, elimination of knowledge and abilities that do not relate directly to what they have chosen for life. "I'm going to be a doctor," the student thinks, remembering the time when he dreamed being a circus performer; "I'm going to be a lawyer", reveals the young woman while she closes in the attic the paintings she made as a teenager, while she still dreams of being a painter. Dreams are lost and forgotten, efficient professionals are created, but soon they forget how to be dreamers and visionaries. The entry into the professional world definitively closes the cycle, the young employee focuses on his career and progression, getting involved in the irreversible paths of adult life: marry, find a home, buy a car, have children, progress in the chosen profession until the age demands to put an end to the

cycle of the working life. Distractions are discouraged, hobbies which go too far from the professional focus are seen with mistrust, and basically, these few phases sum up the ordinary lives of man and women, good professionals and good citizens.

Amongst the social tangle that creates millions of equal, systematic and predictable professionals within its safe zone, an unexpected group of people emerge that cannot be fitted into the imposed canons. People for whom the choice of a specific and definitive professional career is difficult due to the wide range of possibilities, people who like to leave their options open but to whom the simple act of choosing an occupation or the work they will develop for many years, even for the rest of their lives, is simply a scary and reductive perspective. People who go through childhood, adolescence and even university without being able to answer the big question indicated at the beginning of this essay, fearing societies' impositions and subjected to an individual professional branch, people who can never be defined as "this **or** that " but rather as "this **and** that", individuals who see the world with different eyes, face problems from other angles, and overpass issues with another kind of determination. These individuals are called **Multipotentialites**, and are the ones who can make a difference in the future world.

Multipotentiality

Multipotentiality is a free definition that refers to all those who have two or more outstanding or remarkable talents as well as an interest in several areas of knowledge, having the ability to develop specific abilities in two or more professions through life. This characteristic can be spotted at an early age and most children classified as "gifted" are possibly multipotentialites. Their developed intellect and their never ending curiosity make them fantastic candidates to succeed in multiple areas of knowledge. This condition can be considered both a blessing and a curse to the child and his parents. On one hand, these children present a huge amount of realistic options for future careers, but on the other hand, many of them will be facing several problems to make a definitive decision in their life, which is always imposed by traditional society. Particularly in the later years of school and the early years of college, these young people will suffer greatly from the multiple possible exits available to them, whose selection can be a source of stress. Most of these young individuals pursue an endless list of dream careers and feel like they have potential to do several things. Often these options that face them cannot be developed in parallel in a peaceful way (at least from the point of view of a strict labour society). Unfortunately, there are a great number of those who, even against all instincts, follow a common path and forget their pretensions to be multiple. Many young people want to change the world and have ideas for it, but they do not find any pre-existing niche where they can just fit and do it; others feel too young to focus on a talent that they have not yet developed and improved properly; still others decide to forget all imposed standards and study different areas, sequentially or in parallel, thus achieving to jump from one career to another throughout life.

The latter strategy is, in fact, an option for multipotentialites: keeping open doors not only allows several options for career advancement, but also guarantees a state of mind that contrasts with the pressure of choosing and following a predefined path. Another good option is to select a professional career as the main one and maintain or develop a set of talents as hobbies, rather than trying to create specific career paths to

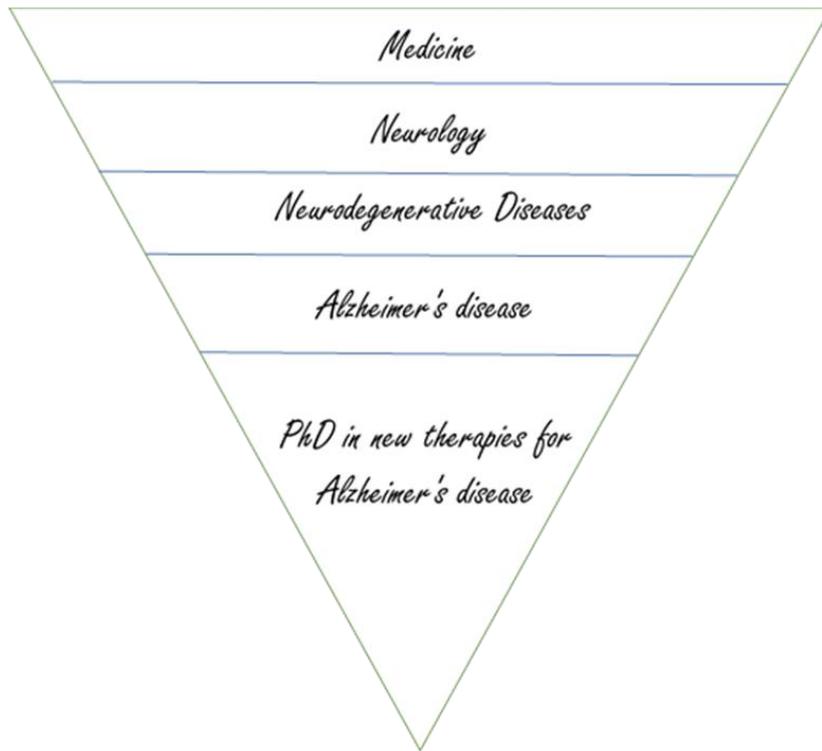
all of them. Working in a law firm should not stop the multipotential of being a musician in a local orchestra, or painting pictures in the free time, or even writing and playing music with family or developing an amateur science lab in the basement. By maintaining multiple interests working as hobbies, the multipotentialite is free to explore and develop all of the interests and talents while choosing one of them as the most prolific to keep his monetary support.

Renaissance Soul and Mozart

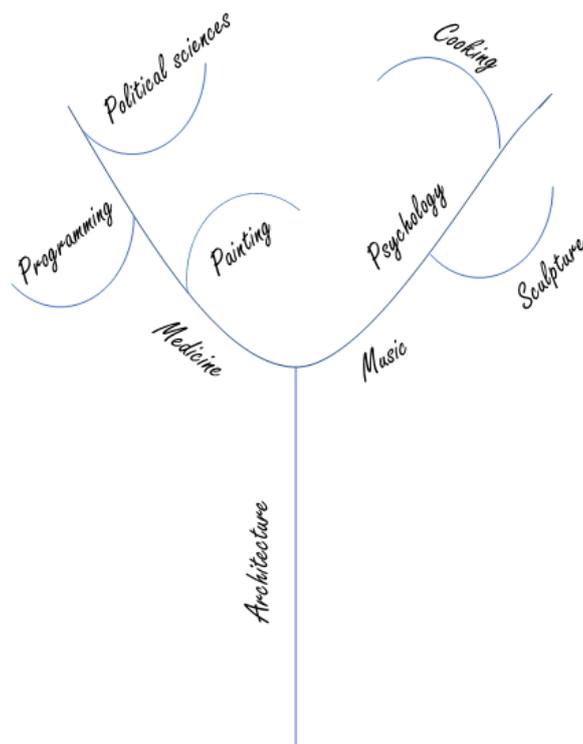
There is a general idea that for a person to excel in a certain area of knowledge, he has to narrow his focus, choose an interest, cling to it, and let go of all others. It is common to think that the scientist who developed an important theory in the area of cosmology devoted his entire life to studies in that field. That the writer who received the Nobel no longer did anything during his life but to write incessantly until he finally reached success. It's an image that is institutionalized on our schools at an early age: that in order to succeed at something, it's necessary to give up on everything which is not directly related to that particular something. Multipotentialites, unlike the experts, not only have the gift of nurturing various interests in different areas, they are also able to distribute their attention to all, simultaneously. They don't feel the need to choose a single thing to focus on and succeed. On the opposite, it is the combination of these different interests that allow them to achieve unexpected and extraordinary successes. The great obstacle to these people is that only a minority of those with multiple interests can interconnect them in order to achieve or create something meaningful. This ability is neither taught nor explored in schools or colleges, even less to happen on work environments, where the main motto is mostly to specialize in something.

The multipotentialite explores multiple interests in infinite areas, expanding the range of options rather than narrowing interests and skills. In her 2006 book "The Renaissance Soul", Margaret Lobestine calls the multipotentialites as Renaissance souls, a clear allusion to the Renaissance man, the polymaths, individuals who attempted to develop their skills in all areas of knowledge, both physiologically and physically, in social and exact sciences and arts. One of the most well-known polymaths is Leonardo Da Vinci but also Battista Alberti, the latter who once stated that "a man can do all the things he wants". In our modern definition, a man with a Renaissance soul lives variety and enjoys expanding his intellectual reach instead of narrowing the focus, gravitating towards what energizes him at every moment. Instead of expanding a single field infinitely, the renaissance soul prefers to move on to the next subject since, in his view, he dominated a particular subject and it's time to move on to the next challenge.

A Renaissance soul should not be confused with an academic of a particular area who has been exploring different themes during his life. The academic usually begins his career in an expansive area of knowledge but progressively narrows the area to focus on a very specific theme inside which he develops his efforts throughout life, but under the auspices of the great common theme.



The multipotentialite has a multi-direction, non-steerable course of study, just like a multi-branch tree growing in multiple directions, stretching with no specific organization, depending on the needs and interests at the moment. The branches intersect constantly, changing direction unexpectedly or abruptly just stop to grow.



Opposing to the Renaissance soul, Mozart soul arises, representing the ones who concentrate all their attention on a certain area aiming to become masters on it. These individuals follow a single career path, gaining more and more lifelong experience. Certain academics, researchers, artists, or scientists represent clear examples of this group. Our modern culture tends to evoke "Mozart individuals" more intensely than Renaissance souls. An individual whose interests change continuously throughout life is often classified as unstable and unable to stabilize. This is precisely the biggest concern of all multipotentialites, the fact that, despite all the interests, there's always a tendency to get bored once they have mastered a certain subject. For a multipotentialite, finishing something is very different from the given interpretation of society. These individuals are willing to learn something new up to a point, depending on what they intend to do with that knowledge, but they rarely become true experts. Instead, their personal will is to jump to the next learning project since the latter is done. Still, several Renaissance souls have been successful in their lives, such as Benjamin Franklin, who as well as inventor, also published many research articles in multiple areas while simultaneously was actively involved in the political issues of his time.

Multipotential Qualities Vs Skills

To have a skill is to be expert in something. Multipotentialites are skilled in different subjects to various degrees, depending on their passions. Having a skill is highly valued on the wide working market: the worker is expected to have a specialty and to perfect his skill throughout his career, evolving and becoming better at what he does. This model, while oversimplifying the view of the modern worker, does not differ much from reality. It's a model that emerged during the industrial revolution, an epoch where it made sense that each person played a specific function within an industrial system, resulting on a general idea that remained until our days. While having skills on a particular matter is important, sometimes detaining certain qualities is more valuable than being (or becoming) an expert on a certain subject. The multipotentialites present several of these devalued characteristics that explain why many inventors throughout history have mastered the corridors of several areas of knowledge. Multipotentialites qualities predispose them to innovation.

By presenting contextual thinking, multipotentialites are able to foresee all the implications of a given problem, thus making more informed and framed decisions. The background in several disciplines and areas of knowledge allow them the freedom to jump between different modes of thought and to communicate within the particular languages of different areas. This way, they can sail peacefully between distinct groups, improving communication and comprehension amongst them all, thus also becoming a plus if they work in larger multidisciplinary teams. Even though they are not experts in all the areas they work with, knowing something substantial about all of them, make them able to rarely count on outside help, unless it's really beneficial for them to go and ask for it. This makes them much more independent individuals and more self-sufficient than most experts.

Multipotentialites are so accustomed to enter new areas and subjects while acquiring new knowledge that they become, irony aside, a specialist in the art of learning. The more experience they accumulate in "being a beginner," the faster they

become good professionals at a particular matter. Their experience to learn different subjects also makes them less intimidated when the time comes for them to face new challenges. In addition, since knowing something substantial about everything, multipotentialites rarely start anything from scratch, just because much knowledge is transferable and permeable between areas, working as background knowledge. The passion for learning means literally devouring information in order to quickly achieve a high level of proficiency. The passion for learning not only has an impact on acquiring knowledge for its own sake; it also positively affects people who surround the multipotentialite individual. Their enthusiasm for learning makes them excellent leaders as they become able to reach people on a more emotional way. Multipotentialites are able to be true planners and innovators, bringing unlikely projects to life thus creating new and more fun ways to solve problems.

But, of all the amazing abilities manifested by multipotentialites, the most important of all is probably their ability to synthesize, to combine different areas of knowledge to create something totally new in this interception. This interception is the place where new ideas arise, where the knowledge of a given area is applied to solve a problem in a completely different branch. The innovation arises!

The life path of a multipotentialite is never linear or obvious: there is a constant search for new discoveries and constant learning. Whenever a Renaissance soul opens a door, he knows that this new access to a hallway will surely lead to several new doors. Doors that should always be kept open. They rarely follow a linear career as recommended by the traditional society. There is a constant quest to experience more, to live more and to become more. In each moment of pause, whenever for some reason the multipotentialite has to interrupt the discoveries and constant learning, there is a feeling of despair, a craving, confusion, and a fear about the interruption of intellectual growth. Basically multipotentialites do not stand the idea of choosing something for life. They know they are much more than that. They are fully aware that they cannot be everything at all times, but they do sure know that they can always be a little of anything they want or even dream of.