

# Evaluating "In Defense of Being Average"

Post by "Elayne" of June 14, 2019 at 12:33 PM

JJ, I would say the pleasure or pain is in the details, and I am hesitant to generalize about specialization, lol.

Which approach works best for pleasure depends on the temperament of the individual, the skill level, and the resources of the social environment. For instance, a one-instrument specialist who achieves remarkable skill, such that he can be sufficiently paid, and who does not get bored with that one instrument and in fact prefers it to something like hog butchering-- that person would be well advised to keep on specializing. He can contract out the generalist work.

But if there are not people around who can cook his food, tile his floor, etc, to the standard he wants done... perhaps he would be happier to put some of those practice hours into a few other skills.

Most people would probably classify me as a generalist, in that I have a wider than typical variety of interests and skills-- I do not have a single-minded passion that I have pursued. However, this has not for me translated to mediocrity of skill level for all of those interests. For some or maybe even most, sure. For instance, I've done competition ballroom but remain very much an amateur-- I did it just for fun, and that attitude was a big part of what made it fun. I had no concern about the outcome, other than not injuring my partner. I don't need to earn money with it. Same with singing-- I can stay on pitch, harmonize, and do solos in my Chorus, but I am not interested in becoming a professional level singer.

For other things, it is relatively easy to become highly skilled without all that much time investment. For instance, I have hand-made quilts with 14 even stitches per inch, exactly cut and pieced-- because you can't get more exact to the unaided eye, after a certain point. And because I have done so much cooking, I have a feel for it, and I can out do most restaurant meals for a small group. I'm not saying I'm top chef-- but neither am I anywhere close to mediocre. Getting good at cooking has paid off big time in terms of pleasure, on a daily basis! Along the way, because of curiosity, I have learned to do things like roast my own coffee in my garage, using a drum roaster. That's something you can spend a LOT of time learning, but even a moderate time investment pays off with an amazing jump in pleasure of taste, well beyond mediocre.

In my pediatric work, I am a "general pediatrician"-- but in this case, because the amount of available knowledge is not as much as you might think, and because I am constitutionally curious, I have taken time to learn a lot of depth about many of the body systems. The only things I need to refer to specialists are for procedures I don't know how to do-- I didn't train to

do surgery, EEGs, etc. However, the depth of knowledge I can access about the various organ systems is substantial, and I have taken advantage of that... plus, unlike the specialist, I am able to put findings in one system into context with the whole body-- which has led to my occasionally making diagnoses that excellent specialists completely missed.

Sometimes, I have known things that specialists in a field did not know, even in their field-- for instance, when one of my family members had what looked like a low neutrophil count, which was a known side effect of the medication he was taking, his specialist was alarmed. He was going to stop the medication, which was the only thing so far that had helped my family member. However, because of my wide-ranging reading habits, I remembered a phenomenon with this particular medication where the morning blood count can differ from the afternoon, and if the afternoon count is normal there is no need to worry. Pseudoneutropenia. I brought the specialist the articles, he rechecked my family member's lab test in the afternoon, and it was all fine.

If a person is a generalist in several activities with reasonably accessible depth of skill for moderate time investment, it is possible to be as good or nearly as good as a specialist who chooses only one activity. The difference will show up more if it is a specialty where the time needed to excel would rule out many additional activities.