THE TOTAL ENVIRONMENTALIST
Aldemaro Romero

Once upon a time, there were people who pretended to know everything. After all, most of the world’s knowledge was condensed in a few books. Those people were called polymaths (from the Greek poly- meaning many and manthos, to learn). They not only had an encyclopedic knowledge, but also an understanding deeper than that found in an encyclopedia; they were experts in many fields.

As time passed, and with the exponential increase in knowledge associated with the Renaissance, being a polymath did not seem to be an option. Today, we see “experts.” The usual TV “talking heads” are consulted on a very narrow field of knowledge, and, to the amazement of audiences, still shed doubts on their own knowledge. People in “Academia” are the first victims of “expert” specialization. In order to obtain promotion and/or tenure in an academic institution, one’s field of expertise must become so specialized that only a handful of people around the world are in a position to judge it.

Then, in came E.O. Wilson.

Edward Osborne Wilson was born in Alabama in 1929. He would become one of the most renowned scientists of the Twentieth Century. His way of making connections between different fields of knowledge raised eyebrows from time to time. His book Sociobiology, in which Wilson tried to explain social behavior among animals by emphasizing the role of genes in their behaviors, brought the wrath of Harvard’s radical left upon him. Roger Lewontin and Stephen J. Gould literally conspired to attack Wilson’s ideas at every possible opportunity, no matter if that meant dismissing physical attacks on Wilson.

The far right wasn’t any kinder. Their vociferous electronic pamphleteers, Rush Limbaugh, alerted his listeners about this “dangerous man” whose teachings may turn brains into liberal thinking machines.

In 1998, Wilson published Consilience: The Unity of Knowledge. Wilson’s message was clear: let’s bring down the barriers that separate the
natural sciences, the social sciences and the humanities, and use unity to try
to understand the world around us.
In Gaia, Wilson shows us that humans at the end of the
Twentieth Century can be polymaths. Furthermore, he points out a fact
known to people working in the environmental arena but rarely articulated
in public: in order to fully understand environmental problems we need to
see those problems in their full ecological, economic, political and ethical
dimensions.
For those of us who have been working on environmental issues
for years, we have come to understand that if we want to tackle
environmental problems we need to know a little bit about everything.
In the past 30 years, Environmental Studies programs in the U.S.
have flourished. Having been designed with the purpose of developing a
holistic view of the environment, they ended up with an anthropocentric
viewpoint. Soon, they were criticized for producing graduates with an
ocean of knowledge that was just a few inches deep.
But by reading Wilson, one gets the idea that both breadth and
death are attainable. Thus, the question is: can we produce the polymaths
of the Twenty-first Century?
Anyone can be a polymath as long as one has the right motivation.
A polymath is not a person ready to compete in the TV show, “Who wants
to be a Millionaire?” A polymath is a person who usually does not think of
himself as smart, just curious. If one is curious, knowledge will come. Not
by sheer memorization but rather by trying to make connections between
apparently unrelated facts.
I believe polymaths can be generated in college. Not through
memorization, but rather through incubating a habit for learning, for the
sake of joy.
No other field is as appropriate for such an endeavor as the field of
Environmental Studies — where facts are provided by many different fields
of knowledge — each using different methodologies.
But Environmental Studies graduates should go even further. They
have a social responsibility and they need to go beyond making
connections. They need to be visionaries, because in the heart of the true
visionary lies a realm of reality known only to those who share in the
dream.
How can we teach blossoming visionaries? Literacy is needed in
the field of Environmental Studies. Students need to read, and read a lot.
They also need to listen to and respect those who have had experiences,
regardless of whether they agree with them. We also need to teach our
students the virtue of integrity.
As a faculty member teaching Environmental Studies, I believe that all faculty have an obligation to directly work in the intellectual and ethical development of our students. We should be particularly interested in ensuring that we maintain the high ethical standards. In a time and age when mediocrity and vulgarity are everywhere, when the heroes of the media are entertainment celebrities or sport brats, we need to be conscious of the fact that people who serve in educational institutions, particularly faculty, are role models for students. As Socrates said, "virtue cannot be taught; it can only be set by example."

If you can't meet these standards, then forget about being a faculty member or a potential polymath. In other words, if you can't stand the heat, get out of the kitchen.

The true polymaths of the future should not only be intellectual giants, but they should also have motivation, integrity, and honesty: values we strongly believe in.


**This is a written version of a presentation I gave during a series of talks entitled "World Thinkers: An Intellectual Odyssey," which took place at Macalester College on March 2, 2000.**