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Text: Amos 7:7-15, Luke 10:25-37

### *Jack of All Trades*

While some have a direct path to professional success—Tiger Woods, of course, was on path to become a champion golfer since before he could walk—others take a circuitous one. Consider Frances Hesselbein. As a young woman fresh out of high school in the late 1930s, she went to junior college to pursue her dream of becoming a playwright. When the death of her father derailed her formal education, she took a job as an office assistant at a department store to support her family. Later she became a mother and the do-it-all helper for her husband's photography business. When a customer oddly asked for a painting of a dog photo, she bought some oil paints and accepted the challenge to make it herself. A lack of formal expertise never stopped her.

In her 30s, she was told the local Girl Scout troop would have to disband if she didn't take over as the troop leader. Although she didn't have any daughters, she reluctantly agreed. In that role, she fell in love with helping young girls reach their potential. She continued to volunteer with other organizations gaining different leadership experience over the years. When a local non-profit threatened to pull the Girl Scout Council's funding if she didn't take over as the Council executive, she finally accepted her first professional position at age 54.

She would go on to become the CEO of the entire Girl Scouts organization, modernizing its mission, diversifying its ranks, and growing the number of members and volunteers. When she retired from the Girl Scouts in 1990, management guru Peter Drucker said, "She could manage any company in America." In 1998, Bill Clinton awarded her the Presidential Medal of Freedom for her service. Summing up her meandering journey, she said, "I did not intend to become a leader, I just learned by doing what was needed at the time."

I learned her story from David Epstein's new book, *Range: Why Generalists Triumph in a Specialized World*.<sup>1</sup> The book at its core is a reclamation of the old proverb, "Jack of all trades, master of none, but oftentimes better than master of one." Many of us bristle at the notion of being a "jack of all trades," as if it diminishes us. We hear stories of focused, young prodigies like Tiger Woods and assume all work is like golf, a game with defined rules in which we improve from repetitive practice and specialization. What I learned from Epstein was that most successes are more like Hesselbein. They are genuinely interested people who collect a variety of experiences, often taking the road less traveled. Because today's workplace is complex and always changing, a broad base of learning and experiences often prove most valuable.

The tendency to stay in one's lane and hyper-specialize has spiritual implications as well. Epstein's insights prompted me to reconsider the well-known parable of the Good Samaritan in a fresh way. I always imagined the priest and the Levite crossing to the other side of the road to Jericho for a variety of reasons: fear, busy-ness, or at worst a belief that helping the suffering man was beneath them. Yet, if we were to tell this parable anew through lens of specialized work, the priest and Levite would not cross over to the other side of the road. They would keep

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<sup>1</sup> David J. Epstein, *Range: Why Generalists Triumph in a Specialized World* (New York: Riverhead Books, 2019).

moving and stay in their lane. Caring for the beaten man would simply not be their job; better to wait for professionals to come along and let them handle the situation.

Jesus's encouragement of the lawyer to "love God and neighbor" is an invitation to overcome distinctions that keep us from deeper connection with God's creation. It means going beyond our specialties, stepping out of our lane, and letting ourselves be vulnerable from time to time. After all, the Samaritan in the story is the one who has the least responsibility to get out and help. Nevertheless, he exceeds expectation of his tribal and likely also his professional identity—there is no indication that he is a specialized healer as he tends the man's wounds and takes him to the inn to recover. A willingness to move out of his lane, try something new, and let himself be more of a "jack-of-all-trades" allows his higher values to be his guide.

Today's Old Testament text brings to the forefront the prophet Amos, another leader who took a winding path. Amos comes from the village of Tekoa in the southern kingdom of Judah to pronounce God's judgement on the northern kingdom of Israel. Drawing on knowledge of building, he insists the walls of Israel's house are out of plumb with the plumb line of God's righteousness. When the most powerful priests in the land tells him to knock it off and to prophesy elsewhere, Amos responds, "I am no prophet, nor a prophet's son; but I am a herdsman, and a dresser of sycamore trees, and the Lord took me from following the flock, and the Lord said to me, 'Go, prophesy to my people Israel.'" Amos does not assume the mantle of prophet because that is his specialty—he makes it very clear that he has other professional expertise. He prophesies because God calls him to speak out against injustice, and he brings whatever experience he has to the table. If anything, his amateur, jack-of-all-trades style adds to his credibility as a devout servant. He lets his values drive his work rather than the other way around.

There can be no clearer statement of our values and mission than the lawyer's in today's parable: "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength, and with all your mind; and your neighbor as yourself." When we give our full selves to God, we don't just offer up what we think we are good at. We bring our full palette of experience and discern how God is calling us to use them next.

Does this mean you should attempt emergency tracheotomies without training on choking strangers? Absolutely not. There is, of course, need for workers with specialized knowledge. What we can do is indulge our creative passions that lift up others around us. You can be an accountant who also teaches Sunday School, an artist who also advocates for moral city budgets, or a mechanic that also organizes for the humane treatment of immigrants. Professionally, it may offer you insights that help you grow in ways you hadn't imagined. Spiritually, it offers you the harmony that comes with devoting yourself to God.

Sometimes we will even find that harmony when we are simply looking for something fun. When I showed up at college, I did two things. First, I got a job making grill cheeses for the late meal on Thursday and Friday nights in the dining hall. Second, I sought out the crew coach to try rowing. The first move helped ensure that I would always have a few bucks in my pocket. The second allowed me to trying something new, and rowing seemed like it could be a good fit. After all, I knew from going to a few of my older brother's college regattas that they had excellent

snacks. When I first got out on the New Meadows River, I struggled learning to control my oar. Squaring up the blade and dropping it into the water to begin the stroke was easy enough. Removing it in concert with my teammates proved harder. I would often try to feather the blade parallel to the water before extracting it. This would shoot the oar into my stomach, knock me onto my back, and drag the boat to a stop. Coach called it catching a crab, and I had an impressive collection before my first practice finished. I wondered if I would ever learn.

While my diploma lists my major as Greek and Latin literature, in truth it was always rowing. After that first day rowing session, I committed to understanding what made boats move fast through the water. I pushed my body to its physical limits. I learned about being a teammate as we strove to swing together. I learned what it meant to be emotionally invested 100%, to fail, and to make the most of a broken situation. Four years messing around in boats, and then it ended. There was the occasional alumni race but nothing matched the intensity of those college races. Since then, I have been fine with shifting to other things. Rowing was seemingly the most important thing in my life until, well, it just wasn't.

The true advocate for specialization would look at that experience and see nothing but a waste of time. I could have spent all that time working towards my 10,000 hours necessary to become an expert in something else. It was simply a detour keeping me from pursuing my true passion.

But, to borrow the words of Wendell Berry, "the impeded stream is the one that sings." In my heart, I know that my rowing experience shaped me into who I am today. I cannot quantify exactly how it exactly prepared me for my current role. Nevertheless, I often remember the secular sermons of my old coach, a burnt-out Episcopal priest, as I prepare for worship or heated conversations with boat mates as I sit in contentious meetings. Perhaps you can recall moments when you stepped out of your lane that ultimately transformed your journey. Perhaps, just as important, it transformed someone else's, too.

I believe this is how God works in our lives. Surely, we can point to moments that shaped our gifts and values that people would not expect. When we offer ourselves to God and neighbor with our heart, soul, strength, and mind, God makes use of more than just our specialties. God makes use of our whole, beautiful, and flawed selves. Regardless of whether it leads to renown or success, God's call leads us to good work. By offering our full selves, God makes use of skills unbeknown to us that God has been cultivating all along.

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