

SAMPLER

the Vigorous Mind

**Cross-Train Your Brain to
Break Through Mental,
Emotional, and
Professional Boundaries**

Discover the Power of *Kaizen* and

- **expand your world**
- **explore your talents**
- **energize your life**

INGRID E. CUMMINGS

the **Vigorous Mind**

**Cross-Train Your Brain to
Break Through Mental,
Emotional, and
Professional Boundaries**

Ingrid E. Cummings



Health Communications, Inc.
Deerfield Beach, Florida

www.bcibooks.com

**Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data
is available through the Library of Congress.**

©2009 Ingrid E. Cummings

ISBN-10: 0-7573-0698-5

ISBN-13: 978-0-7573-0698-3

All rights reserved. Printed in the United States of America. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording, or otherwise, without the written permission of the publisher.

HCI, its logos, and marks are trademarks of Health Communications, Inc.

Publisher: Health Communications, Inc.

3201 S.W. 15th Street

Deerfield Beach, FL 33442-8190

Cover design by Andrea Perrine Brower

Interior design and formatting by Lawna Patterson Oldfield

CONTENTS

PART ONE

- 1 How to Use This Book, and How I Came to Write It.....3
- 2 Bridging the Fulfillment Gap21
- 3 Using Kaizen to Triumph in Twenty53

PART TWO

- 4 Imperative #1: The Curiosity Imperative:
Don't Take "Yes" for an Answer81
- 5 Imperative #2: The Individuality Imperative:
To Thine Own Self Be True—Or Not103
- 6 Imperative #3: The Selectivity Imperative:
Be Selective but Open-Minded—There *Is* Enough Time131
- 7 Imperative #4: The Empathy Imperative:
Share the Riches.....161
- 8 Imperative #5: The Stretch Imperative:
Put Something on the Line.....177

- 9 Imperative #6: The Spirituality Imperative:
Peak Experiences and Constructing a Worldview201
- 10 Imperative #7: The Courage Imperative:
The Audacity to Be an Amateur.....219

PART THREE

- 11 The Beauty of Being an Autodidact237
- 12 Systems Thinking:
Thriving as a Generalist in the Workplace.....263
- 13 The Omnibus Omnivore293
- Acknowledgments.....317
- Index319

BRIDGING THE FULFILLMENT GAP

A generalist is somebody who knows less and less
about more and more until he knows nothing about everything.
A specialist is somebody who knows more and more about less
and less until he knows everything about nothing.

—Anonymous

The human brain has not evolved to create specialists. It has evolved to create people like Mitch Albom and Leonard Lopate and Kristin Chenoweth, each of whom we'll meet in this chapter. In order to survive as a species, *Homo sapiens* had to be good at lots of things. Our long-ago ancestors did everything well: find food, establish shelter, even draw on their cave walls as an outlet for expression. Our hardwiring evolved to consist of both a rational, scientific side and an artistic, expressive side. To this day, we all persist in having the *ability* to do everything well, even though we may identify more with either our rational or our artistic side—each, perhaps, to the exclusion of the other. In an era characterized by an overabundance of readily accessible information, it would be a shame to not explore both sides of our brains.

Even if you're fortunate enough to have a talent for music, for instance, I firmly believe that you can become an even better musician if you study a little architecture. What happens is that you begin to see an amazing interconnectedness between things—the artificial walls between fields of study drop away. The fixed laws of geometry and math that govern the construction of a building also govern the time signature on a piece of music. A building's floor plan can be represented as an equation of unyielding angles and numbers; likewise, there are only so many beats in any given measure in a piece of music—mathematically, you're bound by that delimiter. In both music and architecture, once you've honored the "givens," you're free to add flourishes in the form of grace notes, trills, and sharps . . . or architraves, crown molding, and fluting. Ultimately, you'll experience the big epiphany, the dizzying metaphor: music "is" architecture.

For example, Bill is an accountant who races motorcycles on the weekends. Despite the rather startling juxtaposition, the reality is that the devil-may-care, *Easy Rider* facet of Bill's personality loosens up his perspective on debits and credits and helps him become a more competent (even more creative) C.P.A. Or consider a priest who studies improv. Improvisation helps Father see beyond the surface of things to perceive motivation and subtext

and to draw people forth, not to mention enabling him to be a better speaker from the pulpit. So cross-training one's brain—taking up activities quite unlike what you ordinarily do for a living—is actually an eminently practical endeavor.

We tend to turn a blind eye to the panoply of choices available to us, probably because we're in a constant, overstimulated state of overwhelm. There exist more books, magazines, and blogs than anyone could ever hope to read; five hundred channels on television, and not

"Listen to your life.

*See it for the fathomless mystery
that it is. In the boredom and pain of
it no less than the excitement and
gladness: touch, taste, smell your way
to the holy and hidden heart of it
because in the last analysis,
all moments are key moments
and life itself is grace."*

—Frederick Buechner, theologian

all of it lousy, contrary to prevailing opinion; plays, movies, classes; restaurants, parties, festivals. Rather than revel in our choices, too many of us turn inward in defeat, frozen in a state of indecision/nondecision, choosing the comfort of the couch over a strategic selection of the world's treasures, all available for the asking. Choice can indeed be "de-motivating." Shoppers offered free samples of six different kinds of jams were more likely to make a purchase than shoppers offered free samples of twenty-four, according to author Barry Schwartz in *The Paradox of Choice*.

The Cognitive Revolution

It is an article of faith these days among academics, athletes, lawyers, physicians, and professionals of all stripes that the way to get ahead is to ignore the smorgasbord of interesting diversions the world offers and to instead focus on a single pursuit. For those who think generalists have faded away, gone off to the Land of a Little of This, a Little of That, behold Leonard Lopate, radio talk-show host and so-called five-star general of generalists. "I think that almost every topic in the world has an interesting angle," says Lopate, who has been called a conversational acrobat. Lopate has hosted *The Leonard Lopate Show* on WNYC for more than twenty years. It's a daily broadcast conversation of uncanny breadth that serves as an on-air salon of New York's intellectual life. Through the years, Lopate has interviewed poets, actors, physicists, novelists, comedians, painters, chefs, and former presidents—sometimes all in the same week—as well as dancers, scientists, historians, grammarians, curators, filmmakers, do-it-yourself experts, and more. He has spoken with John Updike, Doris Lessing, Bill Bradley, Mark Morris, and Francis Ford Coppola. While every good talk-show host has to be able to chat about a range of subjects, Lopate seems to go for "maximum thematic dissonance" between segments. For example, during one recent broadcast, he started with a discussion on Senegalese hip-hop; moved on to chat about Hindu-Muslim relations in Gujarat, India; and then spent a few minutes on the composer Harold Arlen before wrapping up with a conversation about a

“Try to know everything of something and something of everything.”

—Lord Brougham (1778–1868),
British statesman

documentary on Hollywood’s role in shaping public opinion about the Holocaust. “He can leap from literature to baseball to quarks,” says a friend. “He’s a polymath because it’s in his bones.”

Talk-radio host Mitch Albom calls himself the “Renaissance man of Talk Radio.” He’s the bestselling author of *Tuesdays with Morrie*,

a nationally syndicated sports columnist, and an accomplished songwriter and lyricist. As if that weren’t enough, his background includes stints as an amateur boxer, nightclub singer, and pianist. Albom’s profoundly moving experience with an old professor helped Albom get back in touch with his Renaissance-style capacity for wonder. “With Morrie, I was transported to being the way I was back in college—wide-eyed. That was Morrie’s magic.”

Susan Sontag (1933–2004) was an American “new intellectual,” writer, and leading commentator on modern culture. She wrote innovative essays on diverse subjects such as camp, photography, AIDS, and revolution, as well as having published novels and short stories and written and directed four feature-length films. She had a great impact on experimental art in the 1960s and 1970s. Said Sontag in the *New York Times*, “I’m interested in various kinds of passionate engagement. All my work says to be serious, be passionate, wake up.”

The Detrimental Drift

Anthony Kronman, writing in *Education’s End: Why Our Colleges and Universities Have Given Up on the Meaning of Life*, notes that graduate students are taught to accept the limits of specialization and to see them as the price that must be paid for the opportunities they afford. It’s a steep toll. The loss of wholeness is dehumanizing.

Without question, the further you persevere through the university system, the more narrow your scope of scholarship must necessarily become. We all

start out in grade school studying the full spectrum of subjects: reading, science, music, writing, physical education, art, math, history, social studies. If you continue to plod through the scholastic system all the way to the promised land of the Ph.D., though, you will be required to abandon any notion of broad-based study. You will be obliged to declare a specialty, in the form of a doctoral thesis—an area of study of such constricted scope that it may seem almost comical. Here are a few examples of doctoral theses. Their titles betray the inch-wide, mile-deep nature of advanced academic study:

- Women, Property, Power, and the State in Medieval England, 1154–1227
- A Protestant Theological Inquiry into a Classical Confucian Idea of Offering Sacrifices to Ancestors
- Agent-Based Simulation of a Recreational Coral Reef Fishery: Linking Ecological and Social Dynamics
- An Exploratory Look at Career Criminality, Psychopathy, and Offending Persistence: Convergence of Criminological and Psychological Constructs?
- A Study of the Cross-Cultural/Racial Ministry of a Korean Immigrant Pastor in the United Methodist Church
- Between East and West: The Bulgarian Francophone Intellectuals—Julia Kristeva, Maria Koleva, and Tzvetan Todorov
- Defining the Mobilization of Social Capital for Low-SES Minority Youth Participants in the Summer Bridge Program by Program Leaders

This isn't ludicrous, of course. The necessity is quite self-evident. With the sheer amount of knowledge that's available to us expanding exponentially every year, no one can reasonably expect to attain the status of expert other than in a limited field. Thomas Jefferson was said to know everything there was to know in his era. Probably the same is true of the leviathan Leonardo da Vinci. But in our era, let's be realistic: mastery of *all* isn't in the

cards. So to truly do a subject justice, to thoroughly give it its due, you must chip off just a tiny fragment and then pulverize it into a state of atomic dissection. We've likely seen the last of bona fide Renaissance men such as Jefferson and da Vinci. Nevertheless, broadening the scope of one's interests is not only meaningful, possible, reasonable, and relevant, it represents a vital component to living a more balanced and satisfying life.

According to the aptly named website Shift Happens, studies show that half of what engineering students learn their freshman year will be obsolete by the time they're juniors. The half-life of a specialist is now measured in weeks or months, so it's obviously incumbent upon specialists to keep up

with advancements in their fields. But specialists are in danger of making themselves obsolete by burrowing into a field that is so constrictive that everything they've learned quickly becomes outdated and useless. Bobby Fong, president of Butler University, predicts that 40 percent

"Failure is only the opportunity to more intelligently begin again."

—Henry Ford (1863–1947)

of students will eventually work at jobs that do not now exist, because "the contours of life are changing so quickly."

The Frenchman Boris Vian (1920–1959)—novelist, poet, playwright, songwriter, jazz trumpeter, screenwriter, actor, and general scourge of anyone failing to have enough fun in Paris in the postwar era—said, "One should be a specialist in everything." He did his best to live up to this dictum.

Young children are often asked what they want to be when they grow up. (Comedienne Paula Poundstone quipped that adults are always asking kids what they want to be when they grow up because they're looking for ideas.) However well-meaning, this question suggests that children must begin to eliminate possibilities at the time when they should instead be learning of the very existence of those possibilities. In any case, how can we expect children to know what they want to do in their adult careers, especially those among them who are budding generalists? Childhood should be the bastion of sweeping possibilities.

College students are encouraged to declare their majors earlier and earlier. And if you dare to declare an undergraduate major in liberal arts, you're likely to be hooted off the quad. You may as well proclaim you're majoring in "You want fries with that?" These days, the prevailing belief seems to be that a formerly respected, well-rounded college degree in liberal arts is tantamount to unemployment, and it's this sad fear and loathing of liberal arts that's turning undergraduate education in our country into vocational education. College is not about getting a well-rounded education anymore; it's about getting your ticket punched so you can grab the fattest job and paycheck you can possibly manage.

While the total number of bachelor's degrees rose by almost 40 percent between 1970 and 1994, the number of degrees in English *declined* by 40 percent, according to *Harvard Magazine* in a 1998 article titled "Humanities in the Age of Money." And it may get worse: only 9 percent of high school students today indicate an interest in majoring in the humanities. One university was so desperate to restore enrollment in its College of Arts and Sciences that it hired an advertising firm to come up with a "Think for a Living" campaign. Some of the slogans they came up with include:

- Do what you want when you graduate or wait two years for your midlife crisis.
- Insurance for when the robots take over all the boring jobs.
- Okay then. Follow your dreams in your next life.
- Yeah, like your parents are so happy.

Writing about the Renaissance revival in the *New York Times* in 2002, William Norwich says, "Since World War II, when technology and science

*"The nearest way to glory—
a shortcut, as it were—is to strive
to be what you wish to be
thought to be."*

—Socrates (c. 470–399 BC)

helped America win the war and maintain its freedom, both academia and business have rewarded compartmentalization, aiding and abetting the widening division between things literary and things scientific.” Steven B. Sample, the president of the University of Southern California, witnessed the same thing in 1993. Bemoaning the demise of the Renaissance man, Sample observed, “This increasing shift toward specialization led inevitably to the abandonment of the classical curriculum. Knowledge was no longer associated with virtue, nor with religion or gentlemanly ways. Instead, knowledge became associated with power, wealth, prosperity, and political dominance.”

My contention is that the abandonment of liberal arts learning is damaging to the intellectual and psychological health of the individual, and I am promoting a return to the broad-based exploration we were all offered in our tender years. It’s almost inevitable: *adults drift once they emerge from formal education*. Once you’re saddled with the detritus of adult life—bills to pay, spouses to please, kids to raise, bosses to placate, lawns to mow, houses to clean, meals to cook, jobs to tolerate, deadlines to meet—the most we think we can do is wistfully recall what a wonderful thing it was to be continually exposed to a flow of new topics, new people, and new points of view. Even if school wasn’t exactly Mecca, we never appreciated it for what it was, did we?

This book, on one level, is a love song to the poor, downtrodden, beleaguered liberal arts. I’m nostalgic for childhood, when we were not only free to study anything we wanted, but we were obligated to, as part of an educational system (even if a mediocre one) that recognizes it’s appropriate, healthy, desirable, and vital for children to learn about all kinds of diverse subjects, even though we may never end up working in those fields. Who knows what value this “forced” exposure to all things may have engendered? Maybe Bill Gates’s nimble brain was molded and nurtured based on an early exposure to topics that seemingly had nothing to do with the future field of computer science: music, poetry, literature, biology. I would like to think so.

Our society exposes its youth to a broad range of subject matter because broad learning is the very foundation of education. I contend that adults

would be more well-rounded if they heeded less the siren call of “riches in niches” and returned to the intentional diversity of education found in the lower grades.

Divergent Thinking

Gurus in the world of business advise us to diversify our financial portfolios in order to maximize our profits. Yet, those same business gurus preach the mantra of “specialization” and “finding your niche.” That business paradigm (specialization equals success) is not the optimal model for squeezing the most fulfillment out of our personal lives. Just as diversifying one’s portfolio can maximize one’s monetary gains in the business world, diversifying leisure-time activities can lead to long-term gains in one’s personal life. Being a generalist holds great promise, especially because the world is such a boundlessly engrossing playground for those with agile, curious minds. Having that kind of mind is a fortuitous gift. So few of us are tending to the big picture; most of us are caretakers of such a narrow slice of the pie that you can actually astonish your colleagues by presenting an astute macroanalysis of a given topic. With all the information (and misinformation) floating around, somebody needs to play the role of gatherer and analyzer. For example, if your business is computer software, someone on your team should possess the ability and desire to look up from his or her keyboard at the wider world beyond, antennae quivering, sniffing the breeze for opportunities and threats, poised to generate linkages and perceive trends that could impact the software business—to notice the advantageous circumstances in Africa, the spiraling increase in video gaming among baby boomers, the myriad applications for voice recognition software. This person is blessed with a restless and omnivorous imagination. Consider this colleague to be your extrapolator, the member of the team who perceives the intersection of trends in software development with trends in population growth, demographics, fashion. I hope it’s obvious that this kind of “intersectional thinker” should be regarded as a priceless member of your team.

It's for exactly this reason that you have to appreciate the generalists. But it takes all kinds, and a world full of generalists is certainly not what we're after. There's a Japanese proverb that says if you try to chase two rabbits at once, you'll lose both. So we generalists must pay proper homage to our mirror-image brethren.

Generalists view the world as if from an airplane flying at thirty-six thousand feet, and thus excel at identifying opportunities and threats. Specialists are implementers, thriving at the grassroots level. Specialists are subject to the bias that comes from soaking in their own vat of expertise. For example, surgeons tend to recommend surgery. Exercise physiologists counsel exercise. Massage therapists advocate for massage. Specialists generally default to a reductionist view of the world. It may fairly be said that this kind of excessively narrow, reductionist view of our planet's environment has contributed to our global-warming crisis. When you're thinking only about your individual needs, it's easy to slurp up more than your share of oil, for instance. If you're focused just on today and your desires, it's easy to dismiss recycling, wind power, electric cars—these are big-picture ideas, the kinds of ideas that are all about conserving resources for everyone and developing new energy sources for the future. Gaia theory, which proposes that living and nonliving parts of the earth are viewed as a complex interacting system that can be thought of as a single organism, is a generalist theory—a theory about the connections between things.

Science writer Gary Taubes, writing in *Good Calories, Bad Calories*, his monumental work of scholarship about the myths of the weight-control industry, had this to say about the damaging effects of specialization:

“Evolution of medical science has suffered enormously, although unavoidably, by the degree of specialization needed to make progress. ‘Each science confines itself to a fragment of the evidence and weaves its theories in terms of notions suggested by that fragment,’

*“Vision without action is
merely a dream. Action without
vision just passes the time.
Vision with action can
change the world.”*

—Joel A. Barker,
independent scholar and futurist

observed the British mathematician and philosopher Alfred North Whitehead. ‘Such a procedure is necessary by reason of the limitations of human ability. But its dangers should always be kept in mind.’”

Generalists, on the other hand, frequently fall victim to their own blind spots. Generalists are subject to missing nuance due to their lack of in-depth expertise. Generalists typically are not grade-A implementers or detail hounds. So specialists are about depth; generalists are about breadth. At the risk of oversimplifying: generalists define problems and specialists solve them. Clearly, generalists and specialists complement each other. You want some of both at work. You want some of both in your own makeup, ideally.

“I force specialists to speak in terms that I, a generalist, can understand,” says Susan August, a technical analyst at InnoPath Software in Silicon Valley. “It’s my job to collapse the ‘Tower of Babel’ that specialists construct around themselves.”

“At last count there were more than twenty thousand different disciplines, each of them staffed by researchers straining to replace what they produced yesterday,” says John Burke, host of the long-running British television show *Connections*. “You are more than likely to achieve recognition if you make your particular research niche so specialist that there’s only room in it for you. So the aim of most scientists is to know more and more about less and less, and to describe what it is they know in terms of such precision as to be virtually incomprehensible to their colleagues, let alone the general public.” Hence, the role of the generalist—to translate and transcend.

Yet, I think it’s instructive to consider leaving behind the binary notion that you must be one or the other, generalist or specialist. A blend of the two ways of being is possible. I call this third way the “Vitruvian Capability,” named after the *Vitruvian Man*, Leonardo da Vinci’s famous 1492 journal sketch of a nude male figure superimposed in two positions, arms outstretched, legs akimbo. The positioning strongly suggests an incorporation of both depth and breadth. The sketch further calls to mind a unification of art and science, given that the *Vitruvian Man* is simultaneously inscribed in a circle and a square—strongly evocative symbolism from history’s preeminent Renaissance man.

Welcome to the Great Brain Gain

The *Vigorous Mind* offers a social critique and inspiring self-improvement guide designed to repel mental undernourishment, unfulfilling careers, untapped talents, and unexplained boredom. Through its one-of-a-kind program of cross-training the brain—exploring seemingly unrelated activities to build a more involved and interconnected set of mental muscles—*The Vigorous Mind* will enable you to expand your world, explore your talents, and energize your life.

Exploring various interests through cross-training—from art and literature to science and business to language and music to sports and crafts—stimulates your mind to its full Renaissance capability, a condition crucial to attaining peak professional and personal potential.

But is it possible to be a “Renaissance person” in our time-crunched modern era? The ancient Eastern philosophy known as *kaizen* makes it achievable, calling for as little as 20 minutes daily of cognitive stimulation. *The Vigorous Mind* offers you a *kaizen*-fueled cross-training program so you can:

- Put the brakes on “mental malnutrition,” or “the blahs,” and remain intellectually sharp and emotionally healthy.
- Move past the rut of overspecialization by becoming a big-picture thinker, and develop a richer, more engaged life.
- End the cycle of listlessness, depression, and anxiety associated with underusing your brain, and banish the misuse of your leisure time.
- Create a more lively, complex brain that’s geared to longevity, and achieve enhanced brain functioning and plasticity.



Ingrid E. Cummings is a journalist, radio show host, educator, author, coach, trainer, and principal of Rubicon Communications LLC, a communications consulting firm. She lives in Indianapolis. Contact her at www.thevigorousmind.com.

\$14.95 US



**Health
Communications, Inc.®**

www.hcibooks.com

NOT FOR SALE

ISBN-13: 978-0-7573-0698-3
ISBN-10: 0-7573-0698-5



51495



9 780757 306983