

Renaissance Man

by: Thomas C. Salander

The student was fourteen and his attendance had been slipping. One evening after class, his father was talking with me while the students were changing their clothes. I mentioned his son's spotty attendance and the father explained the many activities his son was involved in, all of them eating into the boy's available time. He did not mention the many hours I knew his son spent playing computer games. When I wondered if so many activities might be excessive and may not allow time to master any one thing he responded that it was good to be well rounded with a variety of interests. "After all, we want our boy to be a Renaissance Man."

The Renaissance most of us refer to was the third in a series of societal "rebirths" that moved Europe from the middle ages to what we call modern times. The Renaissance Man was cultured, educated, and proficient in a wide range of studies such as music, painting, sculpture, science, engineering. This was different from the average man of the day who usually was expert in only one field — often the same one as his father — and knew little of anything else. The actual term "Renaissance Man" was coined at the beginning of the 20th century and, when used to describe a present day person, meant someone with proficiency in more than one field.

A hundred years later, we have elevated the concept of the Renaissance Man to one of those unquestionable ideals that is both misunderstood and misapplied. The social commentator and science fiction writer Robert Heinlein described the modern day Renaissance Man this way:

“A human being should be able to change a diaper, plan an invasion, butcher a hog, conn a ship, design a building, write a sonnet, balance accounts, build a wall, set a bone, comfort the dying, take orders, give orders, cooperate, act alone, solve equations, analyze a new problem, pitch manure, program a computer, cook a tasty meal, fight efficiently, die gallantly. Specialization is for insects.”

Note that more than half of these activities require a significant depth of knowledge to ensure even mediocre success, and Heinlein had little patience for mediocrity.

The problem today is twofold, first in scale, and then in depth. First, the scale of everything from information to entertainment options has grown by orders of magnitude in the six centuries since the Dark Ages ended. By one estimate, an average Sunday New York Times holds more information than all the known information at the time of the Renaissance. Occupational opportunities have grown far beyond what your father did or to which he could apprentice you. The number of occupations that come into and go out of existence during the current forty year work-life exceeds all the occupations available during the Renaissance. Recreational opportunities during the Renaissance were limited and often revolved around your immediate neighborhood.

Now we import sports and games from around the world and spend hours driving to an event. The mind-numbing effects of tv have only been available for about fifty years and we now average several hours a day feeding that addiction. Computers may be a useful tool, but the recreational aspects may prove far more time consuming.

In short, the problem now is not too few options but too many.

Is it possible to be a Renaissance Man in the 21st century? Yes, but it does mean re-thinking — or rediscovering — what that actually means. While the challenge in the Renaissance was

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to develop more breadth of knowledge and experience, the challenge now is to develop more depth.

Depth of understanding does not come quickly, it does not come easily, and it does not come mindlessly. To acquire such depth requires time, dedication, and sacrifice.

As martial artists we recognize sacrifice — *sutumi* — as an integral part of our practice. Beginning students initially see sutumi as the grand and flamboyant throws like *tome nage* practiced by higher ranks. Gradually they come to see sacrifice in the simpler moves, the giving way that puts an opponent off balance. Later still, the serious student begins to see — and perhaps practice — sutumi in the behavior that avoids a confrontation; sacrificing the satisfaction of being “right”.

But the serious student usually only gets that way by sacrificing in other ways. Two or three nights a week on the mat for years or decades can only be accomplished by giving up other opportunities. It also requires going against the cultural norm.

This does not mean the serious student must be one-dimensional. It does mean limiting some options to pursue others to greater depth. During the Renaissance the striving was to move beyond proficiency in one field and to embrace a wider view of the world. Today the challenge is to limit our activities enough to allow us to develop proficiency in a few. Today's Renaissance Man is challenged just as much as his (or her) 15th century counterpart. The challenge is different, but no less important. We need more Renaissance men and women, the kind that truly meet Heinlein's challenge:

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