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THE TOTAL ENVIRONMENTALIST

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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-*, many; and *mathanein*, 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 pamphletist, 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 *Consilience*, 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 depth 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 oneself 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.