

Think Bigger: A Generalist Manifesto

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Our world is full of forces pushing us towards specificity. Open a newspaper and it's divided into topic sections. Go to the bookstore and it's divided into subject categories. Go to school and the classes are all in separate fields. Get a degree and you have to study in a particular major. Get a job and you have to work at a particular task.

The world needs specificists, of course, but it also needs generalists. And we see precious few of those. It's not hard to see why: try to do something big and everyone will try to talk you out of it.

"That's impossible," they'll say. "Do that and you'll only drive yourself crazy."

"If that worked, don't you think someone else would have done it?"

"With all due respect, what makes you the expert on that subject?"

Tell someone you're working on a dissertation about the mating dance of the East African dung beetle and they won't bat an eye. It would be the height of impoliteness to ask "Is that really worth spending three years on?" — even if that's exactly what you're thinking. But set your sights a little bit higher and people have no problem knocking you down. "Come on," they'll say, furrowing their brow, "do you really think you're going to be able to pull something like that off?"

Don't listen to them. People are afraid of grandeur; it challenges the status quo. But you shouldn't be. "Look up more" should be your motto; "Think bigger" your mantra.

The first step is to recognize your place in things. If you study beetle mating habits, look at the larger mating patterns your studies fall into, look at the big picture of animal behavior, ask where you fit in the bigger question of what it means for an animal to behave. This is what I mean by "Look up more."

But if you do this—and I believe you will—then you'll find it hard to stay satisfied with your dung beetle project. You'll start wondering if you could move on to bigger things. Perhaps just a little bit bigger at first—analyzing a few more types, discussing a few more implications—but soon you'll notice that others have left the field wide open for the truly big picture stuff and you'll start wondering why it's not there that you should stake your claim. This is what I mean by "Think bigger."

Sure, at first it'll be frightening biting off more than you've ever had to chew. But the fear will soon give way to exhilaration and the extra work involved will

be paid for in the additional notoriety, in the joy of knowing that you've made a real difference. After all, do you really want to spend the rest of your life studying dung beetles?