

Secrets of the Renaissance Soul: How to Make “Too Many Interests” Work For You

Sample Chapter

Chapter One: Telling A Ben Franklin From A Mozart, A Swan From A Duck

Do you feel a pang of envy when someone says, “I’ve always known exactly what I wanted to be ever since I was a kid”? Do you consider yourself a dilettante because you have so many interests but have never become an expert at any of them? Or are you an expert at something but find yourself dreaming of pursuing something else, something that doesn’t fit in with other people’s expectations of you? Do career books and life design workshops fail you because they insist that you identify a single passion or goal?

WHO ARE RENAISSANCE SOULS?

In a nutshell, we are people whose number one career choice is “Please don’t make me choose!” and whose underlying passion is to constantly redefine our passions. We are people who pick up one thing and drop something else as frequently as we need to--lucky people who, if left to our own devices, can never be bored for long.

Yet at first glance we don’t feel so lucky. In fact, we seem to have a problem, an inability to pick one specific career path and happily stick with it. This “problem” can wear several, seemingly contradictory, faces. Some Renaissance Souls change areas of endeavor frequently only to have their expanded repertoire of skills held against them when they go for job interviews. Others have successfully climbed one particular career ladder only to be inexplicably miserable at the top. Still others stay with waitressing,

temping, or other entry-level positions to avoid choosing any one path to the top. They tend to work at positions far below their abilities, struggling with the resultant low pay and security. Let's look at some examples of what I mean.

Staying at the bottom to avoid choosing a path to the top

Marcie saw me after a hectic day as a receptionist for a busy medical practice. She was a bit late because her ancient station wagon had broken down again, and she had to borrow a car. "That's the bottom line reason why I'm here," she told me. "I need to earn more money. I need to find a career and get moving. I can't be scheduling pediatric appointments for the rest of my life unless I want to be a bag lady when I retire!"

When I asked Marcie what else she'd done with her life, she went on at length. After "working herself silly" in college, pursuing a double major in astronomy and French and also being exceedingly active in theater, she had taken a break by traveling abroad for a year. Then she'd worked as a waitress to pay off the money she'd borrowed to travel, and then she'd worked as a set person off-off-off Broadway. And then she'd been a nanny and then worked in a travel agency and then... "Well, you get the picture," Marcie said. "My parents are getting tired of explaining to people, 'Oh, Marcie just hasn't settled down yet.' And it's true. I have never picked just one thing and stuck with it. How could I? I have no idea what that one thing could possibly be... Anything I think of makes me think of at least two other things as well. So I go on filling my time with unsatisfying dead-end jobs, like the one I have now."

A variety of successes barring entry to a new field

Unlike Marcie, Ben had successfully developed many of his artistic talents. A published poet, he was the recognized leader of a popular band when I met him. He arrived at his first appointment feeling stuck and very angry. "I just don't get it," he almost yelled. "I've been talented at just

about everything I've put my mind to. I have letters of reference that would turn most people green. But just because I have done lots of different things, just because my resume is unconventional—the woman yesterday called it a 'hodgepodge,' if you can believe it—no one wants to hire me! I've gotten really intrigued by financial planning management. But even when I say I'm willing to take an entry-level position, everyone keeps asking me if I took any business courses in college or whether I've ever 'been in sales.' 'Everyone in the art world is in sales,' I say, but they just don't get it. I never even make it to the second interview... Is it a crime to be multi-talented?"

Reaching the top, and hating it

Contrary to Marcie and Ben, James had a résumé to die for but also felt very stuck when he came to his first career session. Wearing an elegant three-piece suit and driving a shiny black Lexus, he exuded success. He had entered the family construction business as a young man and had shown a great flair for the financial, construction, and human resources sides of the business. By the time I saw him he was running a hugely expanded enterprise. As he approached his forty-fifth birthday, everything seemed to be going his way. Except...

Except that Jim was now avoiding going to work. Avoiding doing outreach calls. Avoiding working on the upcoming five-year plan. Not answering his phone. His wife was concerned and referred him to me. What was the matter?

"To put it bluntly, I'm bored silly!" Jim finally blurted out. "I just cringe inside when I think of spending the rest of my life on proposals and bidding and merging and schmoozing and hiring and firing. I know I'm good at it all, and I know most people would love to be in my shoes. But I'm not most people. In fact, I've never been like 'most people.'"

Jim talked about how he had enjoyed the first five years of his career, learning the business and developing his talents. "But, between

you and me, I hadn't even been there five years when it began to go stale. Now and then something like computer blueprinting would come along and I'd get jazzed for a bit. But basically I knew even then I had lost the spark. That was the period when I got all interested in the green revolution in agriculture, and picked up Italian too—I love learning new languages! Anyway, I wanted to leave... and do something else. But that isn't what grown men do, certainly not any men I know, not any responsible men... So I stayed.

"But now I am about to be forty-five, and I just can't do it anymore. My family thinks I'm nuts to want to walk away from success, but I'm just shriveling up inside... This can't be all there is to my life, there's too much else I want to try..."

Jim, Marcie, and Ben are not isolated examples. In the thousands of sessions I have had with clients who want to redesign their lives, I have seen some of the most gifted, curious, multi-faceted people floundering. Why? Why should people with multiple interests, skills, and talents have such a tough time? Are they flawed in some way? Do they have a problem that has yet to be identified?

No.

The *problem* is that their inability to pick one specific career path and stick with it shouldn't really be labeled a "problem" in the first place! Here's why.

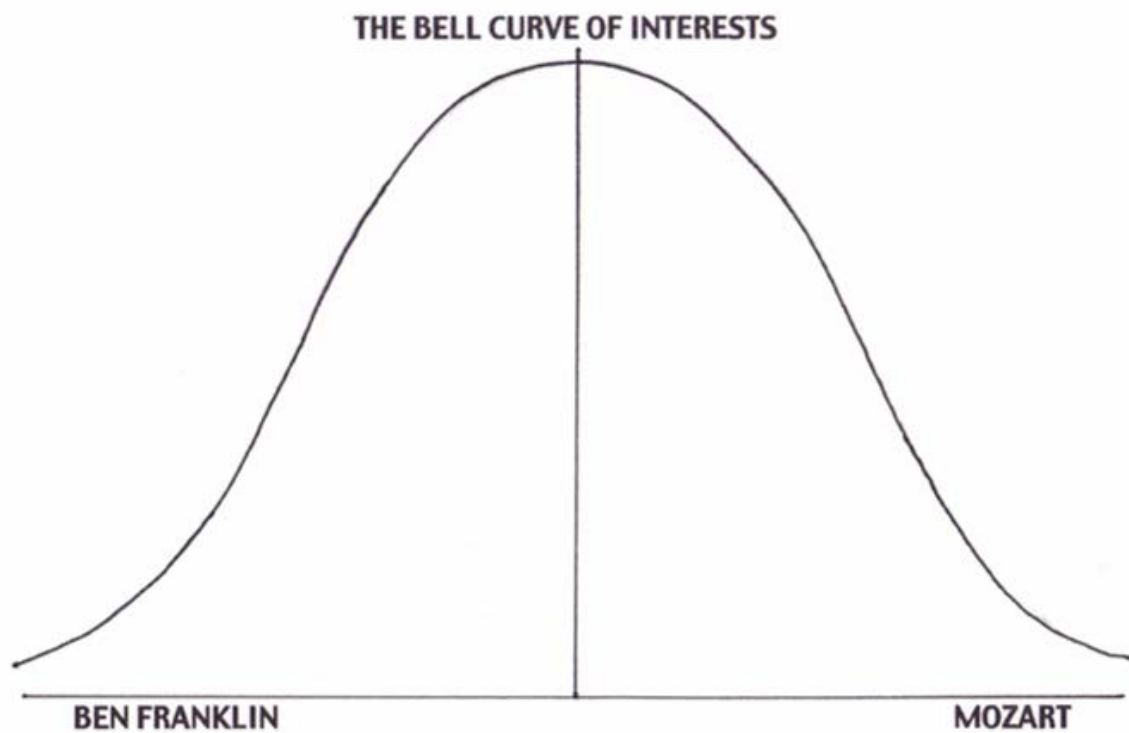
THE BELL CURVE OF INTERESTS

Picture a bell curve of the human race, where the ends represent two extremes and the "bell" in the middle represents the bulk of humanity. [See diagram below.] At one end of the curve, you have people like Mozart, consumed only with music, music,

and more music. He would never have needed a self-help book or career workshop to figure out what he was interested in and what he wanted to do with his life.

At the other end of the bell curve are people like Ben Franklin. If he were alive today, and had played his key role in the drafting of the Declaration of Independence, the recruitment folks at Harvard's J.F.K. School of Government would eagerly try to pin him down to a career in government. But what about his strange fascination with kite and key experiments? Forget government, now it's the folks at MIT who want to interest him in a career in science, right? But no, it turns out Ben wants to go to France to study French culture and language! Great—get him a job at the U.N., or with Berlitz. But wait—he also has plans to design a post office!

As the bell curve demonstrates, there's a continuum between the Mozarts on one end, who have one lifelong passion, and the Franklins on the other, who have many disparate passions. Is one personality type any better than the other? Would we want a culture without either the Mozarts or the Ben Franklins? Of course not. And yet the Franklins of this world are written off as the lesser beings—as “dilettantes” and “dabblers.” The Mozart types are defined as the norm, and those of us on the Ben Franklin side of the curve are not given the positive reinforcement and role models we need.



DUCK OR SWAN?

In Hans Christian Anderson's children's story "The Ugly Duckling," the egg of a swan gets inadvertently left in the nest of a group of ducks. As the swan grows, surrounded by ducks and with no swans as role models, it desperately tries to conform. The ducks see its normal swan behavior as failure, because by duck cultural standards, the long-necked, all-white creature just doesn't fit in. The poor swan feels hopelessly ugly and flawed until it finally sees some other swans flying overhead and its vision of life's possibilities changes dramatically. Suddenly what seemed to be the shortcomings of "ugly duckling" are recognizable as the strengths of a normal swan.

Until recently, those who naturally focus single-mindedly on one pursuit or career track have been the ducks of America's culture, while those who thrive by pursuing multiple passions have been the out-of-step swans. During much of the last half century, when many of our parents, teachers, and bosses developed their expectations, business largely preferred one-focus, career-ladder types from Mozart's side of the bell curve. Corporations thought it would be easier if they got college-educated workers to pick a major at twenty and to come work for them at twenty-two as an accountant, programmer, or manager. Similarly, blue-collar workers at Ford or General Motors were expected to turn the same widget year after year, give or take model changes, until they got that pension at sixty-five. Not surprisingly, American success stories reflect this predominant duck culture. We hear about Bill Clinton wanting to be President since he was eight years old and assume that, if only we could focus in on one thing so clearly, we too would arrive at the top of the heap.

Unless we understand this historical/cultural bias, we Renaissance Souls are likely to feel deeply flawed. Dr. Rick Jarow, author of the brilliant and inspiring *Creating the Work You Love: Courage, Commitment, and Career*, put his finger right on it when he observed that, in this culture, "If you don't have a vision of what you want to be when you grow up, then you are markedly inferior." Even people "in our corner"—parents, friends, spouses—push us to choose just one thing, showering us with remarks along the lines of "Dear, I do hope you find what *it* is that will make you happy and just do it!"

Being cast in this negative light can lead to a lifetime of self-criticism and self-doubt for Renaissance Souls. Many of us caught up in the dominant culture spend our lives hoping that we've finally found the single thing to focus on for the rest of our work lives. So what happens when we once again want to move on to a new interest that has inspired our curiosity? We question our decision-making ability instead of understanding that having new interests is an important part of who we are.

America is a richer place because Ben Franklin pursued all of his many interests, and we will live much richer lives—giving those around us the gifts of our many talents—when we too give full rein to our Renaissance Souls.

WHAT KEY CHARACTERISTICS DO RENAISSANCE SOULS SHARE?

Renaissance Souls have three primary characteristics:

1. We prefer variety to concentrating on just one thing.
2. Our process involves widening our options instead of narrowing our choices, and going more by what our energy feels like than by what our schedule says we should be doing

3. After we succeed at something, we often opt for going on to something new rather than expanding on that success.

Let's look at one characteristic at a time.

Characteristic #1: Variety Over Concentration

In our culture, we often assume that to be passionate about something requires us be unswerving in our focus. We picture the fanatical scientist working away day and night in the laboratory or the obsessed writer pouring out her soul in a romantic garret. Implicit in such images is the idea that once we commit to our own **strong** passions we will have to give up all the other things that we love.

This is absolutely NOT the case. Renaissance Souls are quite capable of bringing a passionate attention to a variety of interests, often simultaneously. My client Carlie is both a professional clown who entertains children and a Holocaust educator who gives talks on the lessons of Auschwitz. Another, Cindy, spends part of her time showing visitors from France the hidden joys of Boston and the rest of her time on importing antique china from England for sale to American collectors. My client Don, meanwhile, combines his passion for the outdoors with his mission to work with troubled inner city teens.

Don's friends and family weren't terribly helpful when Don set out to create a second career after retiring from running a successful restaurant. When his wife learned that Don wanted to help kids who were facing difficulties similar to ones he'd faced as a boy, she suggested he get trained as a social worker. When his friends heard that Don dreamed of finally spending time white water rafting and rock climbing and living in the

great outdoors, they suggested he start a business to take outdoor enthusiasts on trips to the wilderness. Did Don force himself to go back to school for an M.S.W.? Or did he work on a five-year business plan for an adventure travel agency? No, Don is now the happy owner of a beautiful camp in wild northern Maine, where he provides activities that strengthen families during the summer and outward-bound experiences that challenge inner city kids the rest of the year.

Renaissance Souls can also pursue their varied interests sequentially, on a short-term basis or over the course of years or even decades. As my client, Isaac, a sculptor, says: "I love both my sculpting and the challenge of connecting with the world of art connoisseurs who are interested in what I do, but these are two completely different interests. So some weeks I devote myself completely to sculpture, living, eating, sometimes even sleeping in my studio, while other weeks I'm one hundred percent focused on getting out there and hustling, to put it bluntly. And then, of course, there's the pedantic business side of things—paying bills and all that. If you saw me then, you'd think I was born to be a secretary. I use that as a break between the other two activities, which are so intense."

Other Renaissance Souls pursue their variety of interests seasonally. My client Betsy, with her love for gardening *and* quilting *and* making a difference, is a good case in point. During the winter she makes unusual baby quilts to sell over the Internet. In early spring she offers quilting projects specially adapted with Velcro for seniors with arthritis in their hands. From late spring through early fall she has a position developing outdoor gardening and landscaping projects with prisoners. Then in late fall she gives seniors quilting workshops.

My own sequential pursuits have been long-term. When I was into teaching, I was committed to teaching. Five years later, when I was engaged in political activism, I was completely focused on that. My career as an activist was followed by a decade of being the full-time owner of a bed-and-breakfast inn. And ten years later, instead of innkeeping, I'm counseling clients and writing about the Renaissance Soul.

As Renaissance Souls, then, we need to *honor our delight in variety* and *combine our interests* rather than choose among them. How do I know this is true? Because in my ten-plus years of coaching Renaissance Souls, I have not met any who seek to draw sharp lines between their career and their life: they want to enjoy it all.

Characteristic #2: Widening Our Options and Going With Our Flow

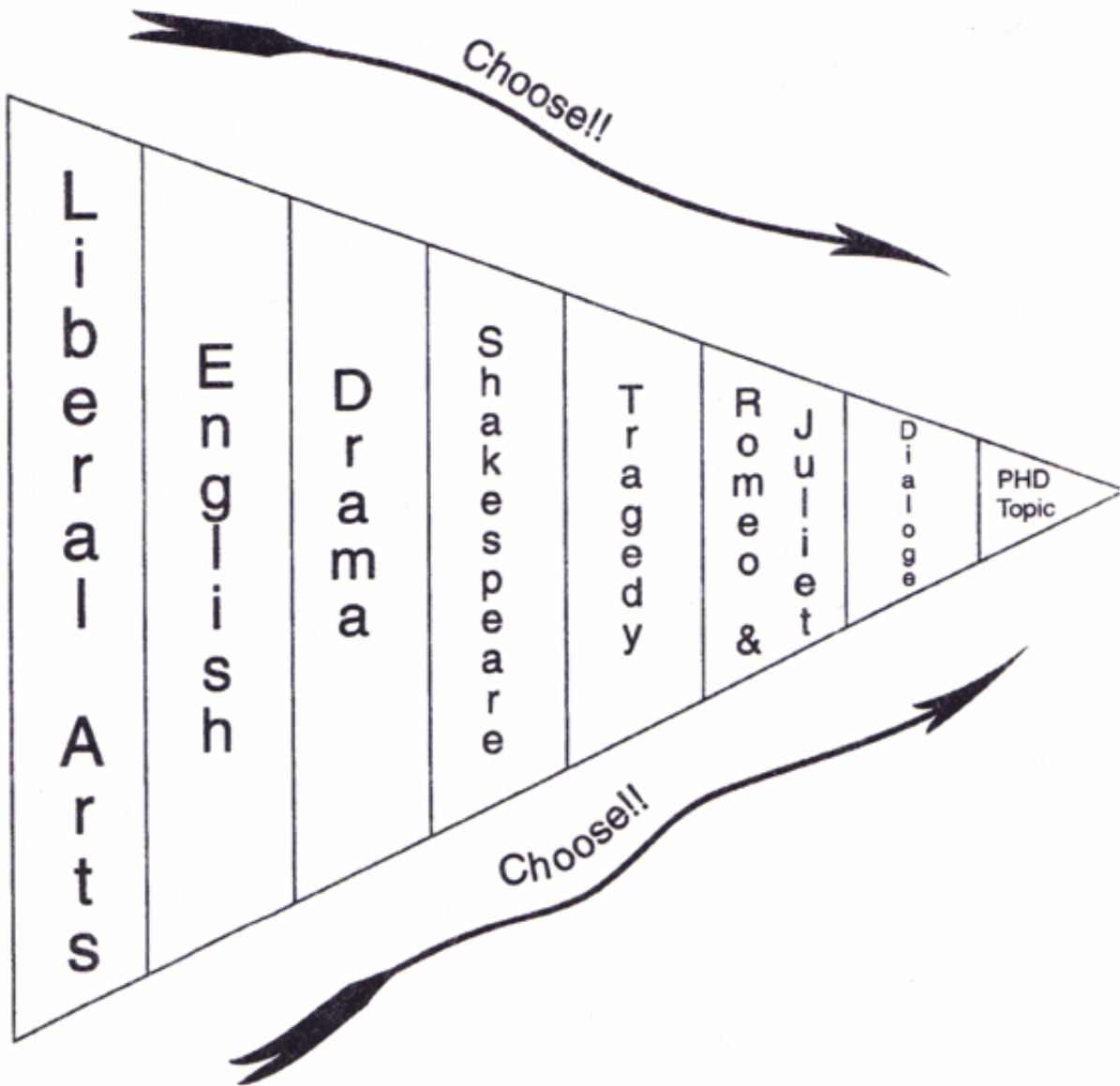
While pursuing a variety of interests, we Renaissance Souls opt for widening our options instead of narrowing our choices. We are not like academics, for example, who have no trouble starting out in Liberal Arts, narrowing that down to English Literature, narrowing *that* down to Elizabethan English Literature, narrowing *that* down to Shakespeare, narrowing *that* down to tragedy, narrowing *that* down to *Romeo & Juliet*, then narrowing in on dialogue, until pretty soon they can effectively define their doctoral thesis topic. (See diagram below.) Nor are we like those business people who find it comparatively simple to do a five-year business plan because they have a very clear picture of the specific product, the specific market, the specific niche, and the specific role they expect to be involved with.

A diagram of the Renaissance approach to life looks far more like a tree branching out in myriad directions, some branches overlapping, some intertwining,

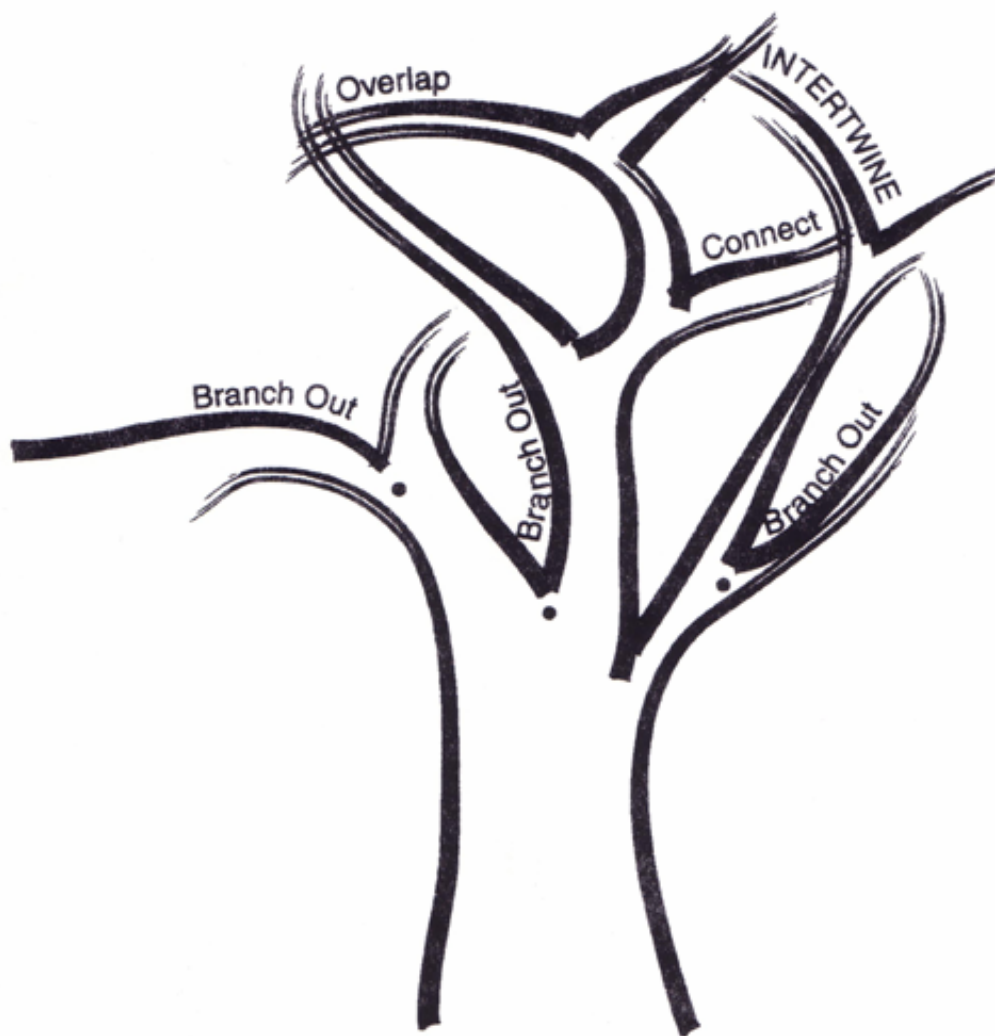
some just finding their own merry ways to the sunlight. (See diagram below.) For example, when I started my bed-and-breakfast in 1978, at a time when the only Americans who had heard of B&B's were those who had traveled in Europe, there was no way for me to know that I would end up starting the first national apprenticeship program for aspiring innkeepers. But I did it because it nourished my need for a change of pace from innkeeping to teaching. And when I started that program there was no way for me to know that it would get written up in the *New York Times* and launch me as a national speaker on the subject. But off I went on speaking gigs around the country, because at that point in my growth the ham in me loved a bigger audience! And when I was starting my most recent business, *Alternative Approaches*, there was no way I could have drawn up a business plan incorporating writing and speaking about *Renaissance Souls* because I had not yet listened to enough clients to become intrigued by this phenomenon.

Thus evolving and branching out, rather than focusing in and narrowing down, is the name of the game for *Renaissance Souls*. For us, stepping into this wider world from that of the one-goal career ladder is like leaving a dark narrow tunnel and entering a lovely light-filled room that seems filled with possibilities.

Specialists Are Comfortable With This:



RENAISSANCE SOULS ARE MORE COMFORTABLE WITH THIS:



To put it another way, Renaissance Souls don't often follow a linear, predictable process. We not only constantly discover ways to change direction but we also respond eagerly to new possibilities that stretch us in directions we had no idea we'd follow. My client Kitty, for example, was happily pursuing her new business, helping individuals and

corporations record their histories. Then the tragic events of September 11th occurred. People were seeking ways to commemorate the disaster. What is Kitty doing now? No longer working primarily one-on-one with individuals, she now heads a national organization of volunteers working on capturing the life stories of hundreds and hundreds of victims.

Clearly, opening one door creates the possibility of opening more. The tree branches out ever more fully. Renaissance Souls don't climb up one specific career ladder, nor do we pursue our goals in a prescribed linear progression. Rather, we swing open our gates onto wider and wider horizons. We focus less on "Will this step take me closer to a target goal" and more on "Will this activity, enterprise, involvement take me closer to the interests that currently nourish me?"

During this process, Renaissance Souls are more likely to be governed by our own energy than by any schedule, calendar, or "To Do" list. If we were self-employed insurance salesmen wired like ducks, we might write down "Cold calling" in our Day Planner for every Thursday morning from 9:00 to 12:00. And every Thursday morning, rain or shine, that's exactly what we would do. But being swans, what happens? We might write the same thing in our planners, and on Thursday morning, if we have cold-calling energy, we'll be dynamite cold-callers. But—and this is a pivotal but—should we not feel that energy, in two seconds flat we'll be walking our dogs, making out donation checks, or any of the other million and one things we find interesting and worthwhile at that particular moment! While this approach can be frustrating when we are trying to keep a commitment, it is a fundamental truth about how we operate. Fortunately, there

are time management strategies we'll explore further in Section III that allow us to work this way and still be productive and successful.

Characteristic #3: After We Succeed, We Opt for Change

When Renaissance Souls become successful, we opt for change instead of expansion. A duck with a successful hotel does what? Builds a chain! A swan with a successful hotel is just as likely to sell it and go into photography or Medieval Studies.

When my client Amy had her first session with me, she was a very well known caterer. What did this Renaissance Soul do with her success? She happily left the field to work both here and abroad as a representative of a major dictionary publisher. For Renaissance Souls, "Been there, done that" is our mantra.

WHAT THE RENAISSANCE SOUL IS NOT

Being a Ben Franklin rather than a Mozart, a swan rather than a duck, represents only one key aspect of our personality. It does not indicate whether we are neat or messy, whether we procrastinate or get things done early. People on one side of the interests curve are no more or less likely to be intelligent, famous, successful, healthy, or loved than those on the other side. In attempting to define the Renaissance Soul, however, it is important to counter several powerful myths that have attached themselves to the image of the Renaissance Soul personality.

Myth #1: Renaissance Souls Are Geniuses

The Renaissance Soul is not to be confused with genius. It's true that the Renaissance swans we are likely to have heard about are people like Leonardo da Vinci and Ben Franklin, but that doesn't mean they're the only ones out there. We've heard of them because they were geniuses—just as we've heard of Mozart because he was a genius. My clients say to me, "But Margaret, I'm no Ben Franklin!" My response: "Renaissance Souls don't have to be brilliant at everything they do. After all, we don't expect everyone on the Mozart side of the bell curve to be a child prodigy!"

Myth #2: The Renaissance Personality is a Disorder or Dysfunction

Renaissance behavior is not to be confused with seemingly similar behavior patterns that may or may not accompany it. At some points in our lives, for example, we may have issues we are trying to avoid thinking about. One way of carrying out this avoidance is to stay busy, busy, busy. Never sit down. Never stop. Both Mozart and Ben Franklin may well have behaved this way at some point in their lives.

Similarly, as we are becoming more and more aware these days, some people suffer from Attention Deficit Disorder. They may have many things going on in their lives in any given minute, hour, day, not because they are Renaissance Souls but because that is how their nervous system is organized. This can affect anyone. In fact, one of the seminal books on ADD, *Driven to Distraction*, by Edward M. Hallowell and John J. Ratey, includes an entire paragraph documenting how Mozart suffered from ADD!

In addition, there are some people who, for psychological reasons, prefer making no choice to making a mistake. This may make it hard for them to choose houses, cars, partners—and careers. Thus, they may seem to be a Renaissance Soul. However, once

this personal issue gets resolved (through therapy, self-help groups, prayer, or other personal growth methods), they may turn out to be either ducks or swans.

Myth #3: Renaissance Souls Are Destined for the Poor House

Having a Renaissance Soul does not condemn you to poverty. The message we have grown up with is, "Want to make money? Be a lawyer, a plumber, a chemist, a chef, a doctor, a professor." We're taught that once we've picked our ladder, started at the bottom, and, in linear fashion, proceeded step by organized step to the remunerative top, we will make ourselves rich and our families proud. The supposed flip side of this coin? If you become one of those Renaissance Soul, dilettante, jack-of-all-trade types, you'll sacrifice any chance you may have had for income and security.

We shall look more closely at the question of economic security in Chapter Five; however, because I know how this myth can prevent Renaissance Souls from claiming their rightful identity, I want to touch on it at least briefly right here. Certainly there are lawyers and plumbers and chefs and professors for whom the directive to pursue only one thing has paid off. But the idea that everyone on the Mozart half of the bell curve will be financially successful and everyone on the Ben Franklin half will inevitably suffer financially is a false one. Let's not forget that it was Mozart who died in such poverty that he didn't even have a headstone for his grave, while Franklin died successful and wealthy!

IN SUMMARY

Renaissance Souls, then, are people whose *preference* is for variety over concentration; whose *process* involves widening their options rather than narrowing

their choices as they go with their energy flow, and whose *success* involves moving on to something different rather than going on and doing more of the same. Renaissance Souls are not required to be geniuses, do not necessarily have disorders such as ADD, and are not doomed to a life of poverty or economic insecurity.

My clients and workshop participants always smile knowingly when we get to this summary. They easily relate to the three characteristics identified. They are also relieved that the way they naturally go through life is healthy, not dysfunctional, and does not require them to be geniuses to be successful. Nevertheless, some people may still have doubts about claiming their Renaissance Soul. In the next chapter we'll explore these doubts, and I'll offer some affirming ways to think about each one.

[Note to editor: The following quiz should be boxed]

ARE YOU A RENAISSANCE SOUL?

Answer the following questions with your first gut response:

1. Do you find lots of different things interesting and worthwhile? Yes No
2. When you really understand how something works, where it fits, or how to do it, do you lose interest in it? Yes No
3. Do you hate the expectation that there's only one answer to "What do you want to be when you grow up?" Yes No
4. Do you find it more fun to think up ideas than to focus in on the details that actually make them happen? Yes No
5. Do you describe yourself as a "dabbler"? A "dilettante?" Yes No
6. Do you find it almost impossible to answer to the question: "What do you picture yourself doing in five years?" Yes No
7. Do you find it difficult to do a meaningful long-range business plan? Yes No
8. Do you have a hard time choosing? Yes No

9. When you've figured out how something works, would you rather share that knowledge with others than become a specialist in one aspect of it? Yes No
10. Did you have trouble picking a college? A major? Yes No
11. Were you able to pick a major, but decided not to stick with that field much after college? Yes No
12. Do you have a job where you feel competent but feel there's something more you haven't been able to identify? Yes No
13. After even just a year or two of doing something, do you begin feeling the itch to move on to something else? Yes No
14. Do family members often say, "Oh, X just hasn't settled down yet. S/he's always trying something different. I wish s/he'd just figure out something s/he's interested in and *stick to it!*" Yes No
15. Do you have lots of unfinished projects and yet happily move on to starting something new? Yes No
16. Do you distrust your own decision-making ability because you "definitely knew" you wanted to be an X, and then you "definitely knew" you wanted to be a Y, and then you knew you wanted to be a Z, and then.... Yes No

While each person is different, if you checked "yes" for eight or more of these questions or had strong "Yes" checks by at least five of them, you can proudly identify as a Renaissance Soul!