

The Dimensioned Mind

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(Illustration by Herman Versteeg, created with AI)

Often, an uncomfortable confusion arises when people cannot place you in a box. They simply cannot *fit* you anywhere, and that is unsettling to some. A person may present at an academic conference on Friday; compete at a world-class ballroom event on Saturday; and, on Sunday, ride with a motorcycle club down the Pacific Coast Highway. This person may be as comfortable disassembling a greasy V-twin engine as writing assembler on an 8-bit computer or assembling a Raspberry Pi breadboard. He may walk away from the status and security of leading global engineering teams at a major corporation to start a boutique bilingual preschool from nothing. Such a person is often misunderstood. People want to know which of those worlds of talent and interest is the real one. They grow quietly frustrated when no single answer is offered.

Living that reality brings a different kind of frustration entirely: not one of identity but of profusion—finding almost everything interesting, being pulled in too many directions at once, and struggling to prioritize one fascination over another when the world keeps offering more. That restlessness is both a gift and, at times, genuinely difficult to live with. For a long time, that difficulty felt, to me, like a character flaw, a kind of cognitive restlessness that more disciplined people had somehow outgrown.

But what looked like a butterfly fluttering aimlessly from flower to flower was, it turns out, something far more purposeful than it appeared.



Growing up in an environment where completing high school was genuinely exceptional, I could see the flowers from the ground but was not yet able to reach them. I was crawling toward knowledge and opportunity with the drive already present inside me, even while being told, explicitly, that certain places were not meant for people *like us*. A caterpillar knows, in some wordless way, that it is not yet what it will become.



Even the most beautiful butterflies start out as caterpillars.

The transformation does not arrive in a single moment. It comes through thresholds crossed one at a time: being a first-generation high school graduate in an environment where that alone was exceptional, attending a university where the unspoken norms were entirely opaque, and meeting in boardrooms and professional contexts in which others had been trained from childhood how to belong—while I was taught from childhood that people like us *don't* belong. The rules for me had to be reverse-engineered in real time while simultaneously performing with competence within the environment. It would be dishonest to romanticize it.

But displacement teaches. Moving through environments that were not built for you develops a particular kind of translational intelligence, the ability to communicate across registers, to find the human logic underneath the institutional logic, to recognize that a global team of data engineers and a small team of early childhood teachers are—at the level that actually matters for leadership—navigating the same fundamental challenges: trust, meaning, and the basic human need to be understood.

The displacement forged the range. The *not-belonging* built the bridges.

And then the butterfly emerges... not aimless, though it appears that way. It flutters from flower to flower, following its curiosity across domains that seem to share no common logic. The interests

appear disjointed. There is no single credential that explains the trajectory. From the outside, the movement looks scattered. And for a long time, from the inside, it could feel that way, too. The doubt is real. The question of whether an interest is genuine depth or simply an inability to focus stays present longer than is comfortable.

But something else was happening, invisibly, all along.



Each time the butterfly moves from one flower to another, it cross-pollinates. It carries something with it. An idea from one domain is deposited into another. A method is borrowed and transformed. A way of seeing that had no business being in this new place somehow illuminates it completely. The knowledge from ballroom dancing genuinely changes how one understands nonverbal communication in leadership. The study of civilizations that rose and collapsed across millennia genuinely changes how one thinks about institutional fragility. The experience of disassembling a V-twin engine genuinely changes how one approaches patience and physical problem-solving. Each domain feeds the others. Nothing remains isolated.

And what accumulates, over time, is not merely a collection of experiences. It is something more structured than that. Every cross-pollination creates a connection. Every connection strengthens the ones around it. What emerges, eventually, is a mental web of knowledge in which everything speaks to everything else—not aggregated but multiplied. The web not merely connects the parts; it transforms them.

This convergence does not happen automatically. It takes time, sometimes decades, and it requires something more than simply accumulating experiences. There is a profound difference between expansion and escape that is not always easy to recognize from the inside. A mind drawn toward novelty can mistake motion for depth. Activity can become avoidance. Reinvention can become an attempt to outrun oneself rather than

develop oneself. The person who moves constantly between fields without ever synthesizing them is not living a richer life but a more crowded one.

What distinguishes genuine multiplicity from mere accumulation is synthesis: the ongoing work of finding the connective tissue between domains, of asking not merely *what* something is but *how it speaks* to everything else one knows. The butterfly flutters and cross-pollinates. And the cross-pollination, over time, generates something that holds.

There is also the matter of how expertise from unexpected domains gets received. In a graduate management seminar, a familiar exercise is presented: stranded at sea, limited items, rank them by survival priority. The intended lesson is that group deliberation produces better outcomes than individual judgment. What the exercise does not account for is the possibility that one participant might carry genuine domain knowledge—from years of interest in survival skills and certification as a scuba rescue diver—that is entirely invisible to the group. The individual rankings are significantly superior to any group's, not because of sharper abstract reasoning but because of knowledge no one in the room has a framework to recognize. It is discounted before it can be examined.

The pattern repeats. While watching a popular televised dance competition, viewers offered comments about technique, foot placement, and weight transfer of one of the competing couples—casual remarks, barely registered by those present. The observations came from someone who had arrived on a rugged motorcycle, whose competitive dance background was entirely unknown to the room, and who happened to be a serious graduate student at the time. Three identities, but the two that were known did not suggest dance expertise. The comments were politely ignored until a credentialed judge offered a nearly identical assessment, at which point the dismissed comments retroactively became insight.

The expertise was always there. What was missing was a legible credential to make it visible.

This is one of the quiet costs of a multifaceted life. Genuine knowledge that arrives in unexpected packages tends to be discounted until independently verified. The box people cannot place you in is the same box that would have vouched for what you know.

What takes a long time to understand is that the inability to fit a single category is not a developmental failure. It may simply reflect a different way some minds are built to connect. Many people who are constitutionally multifaceted spend years interpreting their own breadth as disorder—too curious, too broad, too difficult to categorize. The self-doubt has a particular flavor: not simply *Am I good enough at this one thing*, but *Do I have the right to claim understanding across several domains simultaneously*? That question can take a very long time to answer.

The answer, when it finally arrives, is quiet rather than triumphant.

The butterfly has not stopped fluttering, but it can finally see the web its cross-pollination built. And it can recognize, at last, what it always was becoming.

