

## Breadth before Depth

*Range: Why Generalists Triumph in a Specialized World*  
David Epstein (Riverhead Books 2019), 339 pages

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*Range* opens with the familiar (to me) story of Tiger Woods and the less familiar (to me) story of Roger Federer.<sup>1</sup> The book highlights two different stories about highly successful professional sports figures. Tiger's interest in golf began before age one and he specialized by age three. Roger specialized as a teenager after participating in various sports other than tennis during a "sampling period."<sup>2</sup>

Books about sports are not my typical read and I wondered whether to keep reading. But then the author, David Epstein, mentions working with military veterans—in particular, Pat Tillman Scholars. As a veteran myself, I was intrigued by Epstein's experience with these veterans who were embarking on a career change, leaving the military behind, and transitioning into a new field via college or graduate school. Epstein explains that many in this audience were "late specializers or career changers," and that they expressed concern over their circuitous paths.<sup>3</sup>

In preparing for these talks with veterans, Epstein learned that the early versus late specialization has applicability beyond sports. He offered the veterans some comfort by explaining that avoiding early specialization through their military service was actually a positive and by reframing their non-linear paths as "a unique advantage"<sup>4</sup> built on "inimitable life and leadership experiences."<sup>5</sup> Though the stories about sports sensations

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<sup>1</sup> DAVID EPSTEIN, *RANGE: WHY GENERALISTS TRIUMPH IN A SPECIALIZED WORLD* 1 (2019). The very first line: "Let's start with a couple of stories from the world of sports." *Id.*

<sup>2</sup> *Id.* at 7.

<sup>3</sup> *Id.* at 10.

<sup>4</sup> *Id.*

<sup>5</sup> *Id.*

Tiger and Roger were interesting, the discussion about the Pat Tillman Scholars hooked me. Not only were these examples not about sports, but I have had the pleasure of teaching Pat Tillman Scholar Ashley Nicolas at Georgetown Law. With this connection, I was interested to read more.<sup>6</sup>

As lawyers, judges, legal scholars, and other legal communication audiences, you will likely find something of interest that is relevant to your own work as writers and communicators, even if your interests don't include sports and veterans. The book, as you might expect, includes a broad range of examples involving music, science, education, and technology. You'll recognize many of the examples and broaden your understanding through new stories or greater context for the stories you thought you knew.

Epstein's thesis is that specializing too soon has opportunity costs and there is value in intentional breadth and diverse experience. Specialization should only come after diverse experience, and with specialization, there is room for range to make the specialization even more valuable. The thesis applies to sports, but only as a starting point. There is a broader relevance to this world "that increasingly incentivizes, even demands, hyperspecialization."<sup>7</sup> We need conceptual understanding that can be applied to new areas rather than overreliance on narrow procedures. Acknowledging that sometimes the Tiger model is the right or best model does not undermine the value of the Roger model—"people who start broad and embrace diverse experiences and perspectives while they progress. People with range."<sup>8</sup>

The book proceeds in twelve chapters, the first two setting up how we became convinced of the need to specialize and defining the kind (predictable and fairly simple) and wicked (unpredictable and more complex) worlds. In a "kind world," specialization works because there are patterns. Once familiar with the patterns, decisionmaking is governed by the boundaries. For example, in golf, chess, and firefighting, "a learner improves simply by engaging in the activity and trying to do better."<sup>9</sup> Specialization is a strength in kind environments because of the patterns. A "wicked" environment, on the other hand, may be boundless. "[T]he rules of the game are often unclear or incomplete, there may or may not be repetitive patterns and they may not be obvious, and feedback is often delayed, inaccurate, or both."<sup>10</sup> In these wicked environments, siloed

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<sup>6</sup> On a personal note, I was also interested because I am a veteran and have found myself explaining my circuitous path toward my career in law teaching and scholarship. Thanks to Epstein, I now understand that I've tried to justify or explain away things that are actually unique strengths! *Id.*

<sup>7</sup> *Id.* at 13.

<sup>8</sup> *Id.* at 14.

<sup>9</sup> *Id.* at 21.

<sup>10</sup> *Id.*

experience fails by focusing on procedures and patterns when conceptual application is needed. Success in the wicked world requires “conceptual reasoning skills that can connect new ideas and work across contexts.”<sup>11</sup>

Chapters 3 through 10 develop the parameters of the kind and wicked worlds and offer examples that support range over specialization. For example, Chapter 6, “The Trouble with Too Much Grit,” explores how committing to something despite not enjoying it or being bad at it gets in the way of learning and growth. Grit makes people want to stick it out; never quit. But Epstein explains that quitting can be good.<sup>12</sup> As one example in Chapter 6, Epstein discusses the many failures of Vincent Van Gogh—he failed as a “student, an art dealer, a teacher, a bookseller, a prospective pastor, and an itinerant catechist.”<sup>13</sup> He dabbled in drawing and painting. All of his experience—and failures—added up to the moment he discovered he loved painting and started experimenting with new techniques. Had he committed to any one of the previous vocations out of a pure no-quit attitude, he would not have had the opportunity to discover his own style of painting.

Chapter 6 also uses the Army as an example to demonstrate the flawed model of persistence at all costs.<sup>14</sup> Epstein describes Angela Duckworth’s study intended “to predict which incoming freshmen would drop out of the U.S. Military Academy’s basic-training-cum-orientation, traditionally known as ‘Beast Barracks.’”<sup>15</sup> Duckworth’s study determined that the “the Whole Candidate Score—an agglomeration of standardized test scores, high school rank, physical fitness tests, and demonstrated leadership” used for admission decisions was “useless in predicting” who would quit.<sup>16</sup> The likelihood of quitting was instead associated with grit, measured as “work ethic and resilience” and “knowing exactly what one wants.”<sup>17</sup> In discussing the results, Epstein asks “whether dropping out might actually be a good decision.”<sup>18</sup> Relying on input from Beast alums, Epstein suggests that for some of the cadets who dropped out during Beast, they were not failures. Instead, these dropouts realized they were not a good fit for the Army; they determined that their abilities or

11 *Id.* at 53.

12 *Id.* at 132.

13 *Id.* at 124.

14 In this example, I experienced a first: one of my former Georgetown Law students, Pat Tillman Scholar Ashley Nicolas, was quoted in the book! *Id.* at 134, 139.

15 *Id.* at 132.

16 *Id.* at 133.

17 *Id.*

18 *Id.* at 135.

interests were not a match, and so they left. Even though quitting Beast suggested less grittiness in Duckworth's study, Epstein's point is that the decision to quit was a success, reflecting persistence in finding a better fit.

In the final chapters of the book, Epstein offers some approaches to building range over specialization. In Chapter 11, Epstein discusses the *Challenger* disaster. Many readers likely have an indelible memory of watching the Challenger explode while sitting in a classroom, making the discussion here particularly compelling and painful. Through the lens of how specialization can be limiting—and deadly—Epstein explains how NASA's overreliance on quantitative analysis led to the decision to go forward with the launch. There was other information available “that could have helped NASA avert disaster.”<sup>19</sup> That information “was not quantitative” and therefore ignored.<sup>20</sup> Shedding light on how specialization can result in disaster is a tangible example of what Epstein suggests we do: drop, reimagine, or repurpose familiar tools so as to competently “navigate an unfamiliar challenge.”<sup>21</sup>

So, why should lawyers, judges, legal scholars, and other legal communication audiences read *Range*? For affirmation, inspiration, or disruption—or, if you're lucky, all three.

If you have a circuitous path behind you or are in the midst of one, you can feel confident that those varied experiences are adding up to unique strengths. Instead of trying to justify why you did something that seems inconsistent with your current career or scholarship, think about how that experience adds to your perspective. You can also affirm your decision to quit something that was not a good fit and subsequently changing jobs or employers to find a better fit.<sup>22</sup> This perspective could also be helpful to law students stressing about committing to and following a particular career path while still a law student when the reality is there are many paths to success and many ways to define success.

*Range* can also serve to inspire you to broaden your experience or get better at something by trying other things. Read articles that are outside of your interest area.<sup>23</sup> Doing so creates opportunities to see broader themes or apply by analogy one area to another. Seek some experience in an area of law that is new to you, perhaps through pro bono work.

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<sup>19</sup> *Id.* at 243.

<sup>20</sup> *Id.*

<sup>21</sup> *Id.* at 250.

<sup>22</sup> *Id.* at 131.

<sup>23</sup> *Id.* at 282 (quoting MD-PhD Arturo Casadevall: “I always advise my people to read outside your field, everyday something. And most people say, “Well, I don't have time to read outside my field.” I say, “No, you do have time, it's far more important.” Your world becomes a bigger world, and maybe there's a moment in which you make connections.”).

Take up a hobby. For many people, the circumstances surrounding the pandemic created an opportunity—if forced—to try new things. Those new things may add up to improvements in other areas, as suggested by the data connecting scientific brilliance and broad interests in creative areas outside science.<sup>24</sup>

There’s also an engaging sense of disruption in reading *Range*, realizing that what you thought you knew or understood about something is incomplete or even wrong. One of the most disrupting parts of the book for me was reading about analogical thinking and realizing I have been doing it, thinking about it, and teaching it in a too circumscribed manner. Analogical thinking is more than comparing precedent to new facts to justify a conclusion. It “takes the new and makes it familiar, or takes the familiar and puts it in a new light, and allows humans to reason through problems they have never seen in unfamiliar contexts. It allows us to understand that which we cannot *see* at all.”<sup>25</sup>

In line with Epstein’s example-filled book, take my experience as an example—I read *Range*, a book outside my scholarly area (and even outside my interest as a voracious reader of fiction and nonfiction), and it’s had a significant impact on how I am thinking about reading, writing, lawyering, law teaching, and advising students on careers. I’m thinking that I can read more broadly as I continue to develop my scholarship. I can find concepts in other areas of law and even other subject areas and use those to engage more deeply with my own writing. I can look outside the group of scholars who write in “my area,” and try to write outside my area as a way to encourage broader thinking. This book review, in fact, is an example of me expanding my range!

Lawyers should consider switching jobs, trying new practice areas, or just trying new techniques, to expand their understanding of effective concepts of law practice. Advocates might want to consider incorporating some of the concepts demonstrated in Amanda Gorman’s inauguration poem<sup>26</sup> by using rhythm, pacing, and cadence to better tell their clients’ stories.<sup>27</sup> There is value in taking a “meandering path,”<sup>28</sup> and we should encourage that for the overall strengthening of the legal profession.

24 *Id.* at 32–33 (“Scientists and members of the general public are about equally likely to have artistic hobbies, but scientists inducted into the highest national academies are much more likely to have avocations outside of their vocation.”).

25 *Id.* at 103.

26 AMANDA GORMAN, *THE HILL WE CLIMB: AN INAUGURAL POEM FOR THE COUNTRY* (2021).

27 See, even this list of things we might do demonstrates how *Range* has broadened my thinking. I’ve been a lawyer for sixteen years and a law professor for fifteen years. It has never occurred to me to look to poetry for ideas about how to strengthen advocacy. Acutely aware of the limits of specialization as I was midway through *Range* on Inauguration Day, I was struck by how many concepts exist around us just waiting to be applied in a new context.

28 EPSTEIN, *supra* note 1, at 153.

In advising students about career paths, I now want to talk to them about the possible myths of “demonstrating an interest” to be able to get a job. For years, I’ve heard and repeated the advice that goes something like this, “If you want a public interest job, you’ve got to demonstrate your commitment to public interest on your resume.” In other words, before you get your first public interest law job, you need to have had one already. But, based on my reading of *Range*, I think I want to encourage students to use their “non-demonstrative” resume to their advantage, by identifying their diversity of experience as a value-add rather than a dealbreaker. And employers may want to similarly reassess their views on hiring students who may have specialized too early by intentionally seeking candidates with diverse experiences, even when there may be an apparent conflict between a former career and the prospective position.

I encourage you, even if you decide not to read this book, to do something outside your norm and expand your range. Epstein recently expanded his range of experience by taking over the former “How To! With Charles Duhigg” podcast. In announcing this new project, Epstein describes it as “a generative experiment,” that can teach him “more about [his] own strengths, weaknesses, and interests.”<sup>29</sup> It’s just the kind of experiment *Range* suggests we all try.

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<sup>29</sup> David Epstein, *Some Personal News: I’m a Podcast Host!*, THE RANGE REPORT, Jan. 26, 2021, <https://davidepstein.com/some-personal-news-im-a-podcast-host-2/>.