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Originality

Peter Kennell

I like to call myself an author, though I don't really have any grounds for doing so, or any adjectives to attach to that definition. As far as "good," "bad," "boring," or "interesting," I'm just as happy to let other people decide what to attach if they call me an author. As one of those strange people who enjoy reading and writing about worlds which never existed to begin with, one of the things I value highly is originality, the ability to imagine and create something new rather than following the worn old path laid down by generations of others. However, I have struggled with originality from the moment I first picked up a pen and paper for one very simple reason. As King Solomon, one of the wisest men to ever walk this earth, stated so succinctly, "There is nothing new under the sun.

True to this principle, originality has always been something of a holy grail to the arts, an ideal always sought but never quite attained. After all, only God has the power to create something truly new. Nevertheless, authors have never stopped striving for this ideal, and I personally believe that the closest to achieving it one can come is when he finds a worthy idea as his quill, dips it deep into the well of his own imagination, experience, and understanding, and writes by the light of the Creator's guiding star. Thus I seek to emulate this pattern. Though true originality is an unattainable goal, I still cling to the idea that there is always a way to make something more original, more unique to my own experience and understanding, than my previous work. Unfortunately, this idea is often extremely difficult to put into practice; in order to create works unique to my own experience and understanding, I have to first seek to understand myself. This task has proved nearly as impossible as achieving true originality. Nevertheless, in the process of pursuing it, I feel that I have grown both as a writer and as a person.

This journey has by no means been simple, nor was I quick to gain this insight. My aspiration to originality and ensuing search for self-understanding has been a lifelong struggle rife with failures and

setbacks that is only now beginning to see some small progress. In order to really describe this process, I'll have to turn back the pages of time to my youth, when I learned to love to read.

My enjoyment of reading is central to my desire to write. After all, why would I want to create something that I couldn't enjoy? Fortunately, I revel in a well-written book; the act of reading it is so much more complex and subtle than watching even the most expertly executed film. The use of language, layers of meaning, and vivid descriptions reveal things about the characters, the setting, and even the author that an image on a screen never could display. However, given other circumstances, I might never have learned that love.

My life through the end of high school could be described as "isolated" in the truest sense of the word. I was separated from the nearest other children my age by miles of rural countryside, with no reliable contact with others beyond my own family and no television, cell-phone, or other easy access to the outside world. Some might consider this a dull and unenviable way to grow up; I don't. This isolation defined me, shaping me into the person I am today. Without it, I most likely would have missed out on three surpassingly amazing friends who shared a house and a childhood with me. Besides, I might have been cut off from more typical and modern forms of entertainment, but I had access to a vast library of black ink on white and yellowing paper.

Though the library I mention could likely compete with many smaller real libraries in number of books, it is not actually a library but rather a farmhouse; I refer to the home where I grew up. Picture for a moment a large, white house in the middle of the cornfields of central Illinois. The house has grown over the years, much as the crumbling palaces of ancient kings once did; parts of it are well over a century old, while other parts have stood for less than a decade. I could go on for hours about the cool shade of the maple and apple trees, the gardens abloom with blazes of hue, the dim, musty old barn and its empty loft, the aroma and flavor of fresh-baked cookies in our grandmother's kitchen next door, the dappled sunlight and birdsong falling warmly through the branches of the trees and entering my window, and the sleepy scent of the illuminated dust motes floating by the windows on quiet afternoons, but none of that is truly relevant at the moment. What matters are the books; our

house contained shelf after shelf of them. Nor were they restricted to the shelves, spilling over into racks on the floor and onto the tables and filling boxes. You could not walk into any room in my house without seeing numerous books. One wall of my room was nearly covered with bookshelves from floor to ceiling, and there were still more elsewhere in the room. These books were as diverse as they were numerous, ranging in topic from textbooks on metallurgy and biology to children's fiction, in age from the nineteenth century to last year, and in complexity from *War and Peace* to the very most elementary readers. There were books outlining art, literature, history and society, as well as volumes of every genre of fiction imaginable. These, together with my parents' influence, set the stage for my interest in reading.

My parents were actually the root of all the circumstances that led me to enjoy reading. Their own love of reading gave rise to the books in our house, which they had collected over the years. My father, who can finish a six-hundred page novel in a single day, has been especially involved in the assembly and consumption of those books, though my mother is in no way exempt. Both of them strongly encouraged me to read prolifically throughout my childhood. In fact, one of the most powerful incentives for me to pick up a book and eventually a pen as a child came indirectly from my father when he would call us together and bring a story to life. His lively and expressive manner of intonation would animate the worlds of the stories in a way that brought out the subtle humor hidden on a page. Thus my sisters and I would sit and listen and laugh at the ludicrous notions of cowardly dragons and melting wizards, and revel in the wit of Bilbo's riddles, even as we took in the glorious descriptions, the masterful words, and the sweeping unfolding plots laid out before us by our father's voice. Those stories became the fire that set a great, rising wind under the wings of our imaginations.

That updraft whetted our appetite for more, and soon my sisters and I were reading those books on our own, our minds transported to faraway worlds where heroes fought and dragons danced the skies even as we turned the pages of the books and filled in the pages of our minds. Soon, just as hearing hadn't been enough, simply reading wasn't enough anymore either. We wanted to create, to make dragons dance and heroes fight against terrible evils, just like in the books we read. Somehow, with childlike simplicity, we thought we could make

even better worlds than the ones in the stories.

This desire ushered in a long stage of our childhood in which my older sisters and I drew maps and argued back and forth, inventing and counter-inventing the lore and culture of imaginary worlds on the spot. We competed childishly to see who could make the best and most complicated world, sometimes even acting out the parts of the peoples living in the worlds we made. As we grew older, though, just talking about these worlds became somehow boring and empty. I think each of us was subconsciously reaching out, searching for something more.

I can't point to the exact time we found that something; probably because it was there all along, and we simply needed a little insight to realize it. Whatever the case, my eldest sister was soon writing down stories and poems, giving her worlds a more tangible form. My second sister soon followed with stories of her own. I was a good deal slower, sitting back and watching my sisters write their stories while I still clung to the fabricated realities in my mind. One day, though, I got an idea stuck in my head that wouldn't go away about a boy who receives a mysterious magical book as an anonymous gift. After several days of this idea nagging at the back of my mind, I relented and started writing; by the time I was finished, I had the first eight pages of a story. I continued to work on that story over time, and it grew into almost fifty pages of pure drivel before I finally discarded it as unsalvageable. That was my first failure, and looking back, I can see that the problem that killed it was a total lack of originality. At this point, I was basically just blindly imitating what I had seen. Even the original idea for the story was derived from another story I had read somewhere else.

Though that story was a total failure, it still held value in that it helped me learn the basics of what not to do. To write a good story, I couldn't take an idea and forcibly graft stock plotline segments together on it to make a whole. Stories are like fruit trees in a way; you plant the seed, and they grow, slowly, naturally, but steadily. Depending on the work you put into them, they may eventually bear fruit, and the more care provided, the better the fruit brought forth. Using this analogy, my first tree was a lifeless mockery of the term; instead of letting it grow, I pieced together a motley assortment of dead wood from other trees and cut it off at the roots to graft on the unsightly thing I had made. Needless to say, I got no fruit as a result,

only experience.

Following that failure and others like it, I learned to grind the ideas up more finely, mix them more thoroughly, and paste them into the shape I wanted with linguistic varnish. Unfortunately, this form of “creative writing” was anything but creative; I was still just recycling other, greater authors’ work, parroting back the status quo I had seen so many times. The more I read, and the more I wrote, the more I was unable to avoid this fact. Time and time again, I came across plot devices I had used, characters far too similar to my own, and sometimes even the same names I had so carefully invented. Once, I told one of my sisters, “My stories are just a bunch of stolen ideas ground up and mashed together finely enough to be unrecognizable.” The gist of her reply was, “That’s what all stories are these days; all the new ideas were taken ages ago.” I clung to that idea. I told myself that it was fine to be unoriginal, because at least I wasn’t alone in it, and I lied to myself.

That lie became a roadblock, and my writing stagnated as I wore a rut walking up against it. If human originality can be defined as using the special properties and experiences God has given us to create something unique, this point was the lowest on my journey towards it; I churned out recycled ideas, pasting them uninventively into the pages of bland, mediocre prose, and tried not to be concerned with the emptiness flowing from inside me. The volume of my writing steadily dropped off as I began to lose interest in the stories I was “creating.” Eventually, however, the lie weakened. Though I began to neglect my pen, I never set aside my books; in their pages, I saw my own unoriginality reflected, but I also saw the authors’ own creativity, reflecting back my failings all the more. Their shining originality and the way it continually shed light on the blandness of my work created a nagging doubt within me, a remote spark piercing the shadows behind the wall I had built between myself and my true desire. That tiny light grew into a seething flame which slowly cut through the foundations of the barrier before me. As it collapsed, I was forced more and more to become honest with myself. Finally, I had no choice but to face the truth. I realized that I didn’t just want to forge sawdust tales; I wanted to write stories that moved people to think, to feel, and to aspire. I wanted to write meaningful stories that told stories of their own. I wanted stories that I could say I owned, not stories I just borrowed. I wanted my

creative writing to be truly creative, not just a formula, but an art. I wanted originality. Unfortunately, I hadn't the faintest idea how to gain it.

Though I didn't know how to achieve originality, I was able to recognize it and admire it. Therefore, I couldn't help but envy and look up to authors like the apostle Paul, who could state the truth in such a boldly radical and original way, yet at the same time do so with such complex and subtle layers of meaning. In contrast, there was me, a boy whose skill fell far short of his vision. I sought to both entertain people and move them, and to show them through my work an ideal. This was clearly a horribly large goal for a little boy from outside a little town in a little corner of the country with little experience. Nevertheless, Paul, in his own inimitable fashion, reminds us time and time again that we are all imperfect and all equal before God. Therefore, even if I was imperfect, if there was a chance that I could create something that had worth and changed lives, was there any reason for me not to try? However, despite my resolve, I still couldn't seem to write anything that I could call "mine."

It turned out that Paul had the answer to my problem, and I just didn't know it. Every beautiful word that Paul wrote was Inspired, breathed by God Himself as He carried Paul along and guided his thoughts. Paul's originality was born from Inspiration flowing from the Original Source of all things. What I gained was nothing so majestic and holy, but I did eventually find inspiration of a far more worldly level, or rather, it found me.

By inspiration, I mean those tiny flashes of insight from a new and unique perspective that everyone has from time to time. Though these are highly unpredictable and seem to come and go as they please, I believe that it is one of a creative writer's goals to harness these and convey them to his or her readers. I, at least, have never managed to write anything remotely worth reading without some inspiration. I can point to one specific instance in my life as the first time I experienced inspiration and recognized it for what it was.

This first flash of inspiration came suddenly and unexpectedly, as such flashes are wont to do. One day while my family was gathered around our dinner table, we were discussing authors, eventually coming to the topic of works published posthumously by authors' families. One thing that we touched on rather heavily was the fact that many of these works were published against the authors' own

wishes. I found myself wondering what kind of story might lie behind such circumstances. Why hadn't the authors wanted those works published, and what drove their families to deny their wishes? In life, there's a story behind everything you hear about, and every dry obituary you read in the paper is the period closing the sentence of someone's earthly tale. At that time, I was dwelling on the story that lay behind the facts in such cases.

Suddenly, I had an idea. What if there was a compelling reason behind one such author's desire? What if there was a book kept unpublished because its secrets were better left buried in a desk in a dusty empty room? And what if the act of publishing this book brought forth terrible vengeance? I followed the thread of this sudden flash of inspiration, and at the end I found a story.

After I left the table, I sat on our couch for a while, thinking this idea through and arranging my thoughts. Then I went to my room and began to write, but not the story on my mind; not yet. I wrote character descriptions, plot outlines, and ideas, and drew sketches and family trees. If I was going to do this, I was going to do it right.

Early in this planning process, I discovered that inspiration didn't solve all of my problems, or even any of them; it simply opened a door. After all, inspiration doesn't write books; authors do. Even when the Author of Life Inspired our forefathers to scribe His Word, He used the innate talents within them to shape it. No more was this story going to write itself. In order to give it life, I had to reach deep within and far without, drawing on my own experiences where I could, and relying on my knowledge and imagination where I could not. In this way, even as I shaped my work, I was shaped by it. As I drew on my experience, bits and pieces of me inevitably found their way into the characters, setting, and plot both intentionally and subconsciously. Viewing my family as of utmost importance apart from God himself led me to make familial relations the driving emotional force behind the plot, and elements of my relationships with my own family members manifested themselves in the relations between the characters. In order to do this similarity justice, I had to consider on an even deeper level how I felt about my family and how I would react in certain situations involving them. Other comparable parallels sprang up throughout the plans. Since I grew up in isolation, I placed the setting of the

story and its background in isolation as well in order to be better able to understand my characters, and in turn had to peer into the core of my being to identify the ways in which isolation had molded me. Aspects of my own personality found their way into the personalities of the characters; I was artistic and intellectual, therefore so was the protagonist. In this I had to strike a balance between creating my characters in my image and not making them into replicas of myself. They had to have a shadow of who I was within them so that I could associate with them in order to write their story, but at the same time, they needed to be their own unique selves, separate and different from my own nature, in order to truly come to life within the pages. After I had identified the ways in which they corresponded to and diverged from me, I had to look at myself and ask several difficult questions. What really matters to me? What motivates me? How do I feel about this topic? How would I react in this situation? What, in the end, really makes me who I am? Only when I answered these questions and many more like them could I start from the traits I had given my characters and have them answer the same questions through my work.

Planning that story was exhausting, time-consuming, and a powerful learning experience for me. Finally, though, I thought I was ready. I was wrong.

It turned out that the planning process had just been a pale shadow of what was to come. I had a full plan for the story before I set the first word down; by the end of the first chapter, it had changed to some extent. By the end of the third chapter, I had revised it significantly. By the end of the fifth chapter, I had discarded most of the second half and started over. Sometimes I would write entire chapters at a time, and others I would go for over a month without writing a single word. Even the end result was far from satisfactory. I was continually revising parts and even rewriting them altogether, trying to improve on the inherent flaws that were so obvious once I went back and looked them over. In addition, the story as a whole was rife with problems that couldn't be easily fixed. By its very nature, it was slow-paced and reflective to an extent that made it difficult for people to enjoy it. As my mother said once after I gave her a part of it to read, "This is good, but there is an awful lot of small talk. Maybe you could try to make it more streamlined?" At the time, reluctant to change something I had already worked so hard on, I responded,

“All of this ‘small talk’ is actually necessary foreshadowing for later in the plot.” Of course, reviewing it later, I discovered that it was not.

For all its failings, though, this story was undeniably mine. It was a tree that grew in its own right from my idea, with roots running deep into the soil of my experience, a far cry from the rootless sawdust tree-sculptures I had made before. Out of this story I gained a style and a tale that I could rightly call my own, at least far more so than what I had before. I had taken one small step, by the grace of God, towards originality.

In the two years since I started to write that story, I have found several more stories to call my own, but that one will always hold a special place inside of me. It is about two-thirds finished at the time of this writing, as life and other such matters have interfered, but I thoroughly intend to complete it someday. God willing, I may even finish several more like it, but with better execution and hopefully more originality. Maybe they will even, in some small way, come to properly convey what I wish them to.

I would like to say that I am growing closer to my goal, but if anything, I’ve just begun to realize how far away from it I really am. The simple truth of the matter is that my stories still are not really original. Likely, I will face this endless quest until I lay down my pen for the final time or lie down for the final time. I understand that humans as finite, created beings can never attain true originality; we can never truly create something new. However, as we strive towards the Original, the Author of creativity, perhaps we can grow ever so slightly closer to true originality ourselves. We can never reach the summit, but that really only means that no matter how high we get, we can always strive to climb a little higher. Though that is by no means an original thought, I don’t believe it’s a bad one.