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Yellow Pencils

Common, soft yellow pencils serve as extensions of our minds, and as metaphors for people. In Squaw Valley's Blithe Arena during the Feast of Tabernacles festival of 1973, I listened to a sermon about why I should not be ashamed of being identified as a yellow pencil, alike to everyone there, alike in belief, alike in customs, alike in our pursuit of righteousness. Seven thousand were in attendance. As I looked around at a figurative sea of faces, I knew I was like everyone there in that we were all individuals, there because salvation is individual. A metaphor only works until it is closely examined.

But that minister, Ron Kelly, wasn't alone in using that metaphor. It has also appeared in Congressional rhetoric, in print, in innumerable other sermons, with negative and positive connotations, which is why I want to spend a little time with it.

Pencils are, still, given away at state fairs and auto-parts stores. They are cheap, simple sticks that transform the ideas of students and businessmen, engineers and poets into tangible text to be shaped and crafted, polished and faceted. They are tools of the most elemental design. And while little thought is today given to how pencils are made, their manufacture was, two centuries ago, a hand industry much like forging nails.

In Colonial America, literacy was valued by both Massachusetts Puritans and Virginia planters. Literacy was necessary for Bible study and to survey land, and it had to be taught. Books were published. Schools were established. And though quills from barnyard poultry were readily available for pens, better grades of ink, imported from England, were expensive and poor grades weren't worth using. The writing tool of choice as more and more people scribbled on foolscap was the pencil, believed first used during the Italian Renaissance. And pencil making became an important cottage craft.

The materials were essentially the same then as today. Thin wood strips of New England white cedar were laboriously split and whittled or shaved half-round or octagonal until, when rolled between the fingers of the pencil maker, they felt right. The flat sides, handplaned smooth, were then grooved with a scratch-all, a tool not usually seen today. Into this groove was packed the *lead*, a mixture of clay from, perhaps, under the garden and soot from the chimney, kneaded together until it felt and looked like flour cracker dough. With the still-damp mixture packed into the groove cut the length of one or both cedar halves, a little glue was smeared along the outside edge of the groove. The pencil was then clamped together. In the morning, it could be used to figure profit margins or record the account of a serpent mesmerizing a blackbird. The pencil was personal. It really was an extension of its user's mind.

Making pencil lead was dusty, dirty work, especially when graphite became the general replacement for charcoal. Henry David Thoreau claimed he suffered permanent lung damage from the dust while working in his family's pencil business as a child. Nevertheless, the business was lucrative enough that Thoreau continued it throughout his adult life, working at it part-time.

Incomplete census and tax records don't allow scholars to accurately determine the number of pencil makers in the colonies. Many pencils were undoubtedly made by their users. Many more were made as a sideline by artists and artisans. What can be said with certainty, though, is that each pencil represented a significant expenditure of hand labor.

But times change as do people. Cottage crafts all but died with the maturing of the industrial revolution. That yellow pencil I buy from Wal-Mart comes packaged with eleven others as if individualism no longer exists. And perhaps it doesn't--

Amidst the whine of headrigs and resawing, incense cedar logs from the slopes of California's Siskiyou Mountains are slabbed, planked and milled into ever smaller strips until they are slivers of their former selves. The process is nearly fully automated. Huge frontend loaders stuff truckloads of logs into flailing debarkers, where the chains scourge gnarled limbs, leaving century-old trees round and raw. Link conveyors drag logs through the double-cut bandmill, through edger saws, past trim saws and eventually to kilns without being touched by a single human hand.

Across the country, in a small upstate New York plant, graphite processed from Pennsylvania coal is slurried and pumped into mixing vats where clay from southern Ohio has already been screened, ground, and leached. The consistency of the graphite/clay mixture, carefully monitored by computerized panels in isolated cubicles, varies less that one-half percent as more than twelve tons of mixture is daily extruded in a continuous process from each vat. The moisture content of initial extrudings, twelve centimeters in diameter, is 65 percent, about like that of children's mud pies. But moisture decreases with subsequent extrudings until it is 20 percent at 1.5 millimeters diameter. The graphite/clay mixture, appearing bone dry and now in spaghetti-like bundles of varying lengths, looks like the pencil lead familiar to everyone.

Cedar strips from California and bundles of *lead* from New York, joined by brass ferrules rolled in New Jersey and eraser material from St. Louis, are shipped to an automated plant in Franklin, Kentucky, where 70 percent of America's pencils are made, regardless of brand name. Wood and lead, wedded in long strips, slide through paint basins, pass under heating coils, and are sheared to length as they shoot by electronic counters at 30 miles per hour. They are then tipped upright. The ferrule is forced onto the top end of each pencil length—it receives a pellet of eraser material, which is crimped into place a millisecond before the finished pencils are graded, labeled and boxed. They are never touched by anyone.

As I sat in Blithe Arena, what I knew was that everyone there wasn't at work even though it was a weekday. Kids weren't in school. I wasn't on Hart Mountain hunting deer where I had been the year before. And the folks in Tahoe Vista thought we were nice but awfully strange.

Whether purchased at an office supply or a discount house, pencils today are as impersonal as paper clips or rubberbands. Motorized sharpeners sit hungry on desktops, near cans that collect half-length pencils thought too short to use. Pencils are loaned without concern for their return. They are left beside computer screens, or where they rolled under drafting tables. They seem to multiple in children's toy boxes and on the floors of daycare centers. They go on sale when school begins each year. They seem all alike—when was the last time anyone encountered a hard spot in an American pencil? The automated plants produce countless identical, high-quality pencils each year. Perhaps the only aspect of American pencils that hasn't changed since each pencil was hand crafted is their continued use as metaphors for people.

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