Happy Problems

by

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Most of a writer’s difficulties are what my father used to call “happy problems.” When we would come to him in anguish, lamenting some difficult decision that loomed before us, he would respond, “Poor kid — you’ve got happy problems.” This meant all our choices were good ones, and our anguish lay in our inability to see this.

An early version of this conversation (when I was ten) might go like this:

“Daddy, I really want to just go down in the woods and make a fort, but Pat says his dad wants to take us swimming, and we don’t get to go very often. What should I do?”

“You poor kid,” he said. “You’ve got happy problems. Don’t worry, you’ll figure it out.”

A later version (when I was 39, and passing through a divorce) went like this:

“Daddy, I know I’ll meet other women, but it won’t be right, and that will be hard, and they’ll be unhappy, and I’ll keep searching.”

“It sounds great,” he said.

And it was, and it wasn’t. Happy problems.

The point for a writer is not to brush away difficulty, Pollyanna style, with some thin, good hope. The point is to embrace the whole opportunity of writing, and say, like the Friar in Romeo and Juliet, in the midst of great distress, “There art thou happy … there art thou happy.” Writing is difficult work, but it is your privilege to have the treasure of the language ready. There art thou happy. True originality is elusive, but no one experiences the world quite as you do. There art thou happy. No one can really help you, but this isolation will make bold the best of your quiet self. There art thou happy.
For a writer, happy problems reside in the lucky hardship of finding ways to do what no one has ever done. To be original, one must embrace happy problems: all this feeling, all this memory, all these ways I could say what I almost know.

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The Happy Problem of Originality

It gives me uncommon joy to come across rich originality in an unexpected place, like this single, Shakespearean sentence in the *Audubon Society Field Guide to North American Wildflowers*, by Richard Spellenberg (Knopf, 1979):

After the summer heat dries the low mountains, driving most wildflowers to seed and browning the grasses, Red Shrubby Penstemon begins to flower, providing a final source of nectar before the hummingbirds must seek food higher in the cooler mountains or, if late in the season, migrate south.

Can facts ever be original? Alone, no. But a new connection among a constellation of dispersed facts is always original. There lies the pleasure of discovery and creation.

You and I have felt the despairing sense that everything has already been said. Then comes the moment when you realize the very abundance of precedent is just one of many muses. If you go into the material as yourself, you will find an original way. Haven’t we all heard that derivative, but highly original country song:

Blame it on your lyin’, cheatin’, old dead-beatin’,
two-timin’, double-dealin’, mean mistreatin’, lovin’ heart…

Once that line is before us, we realize it waited a long time to be discovered. It took an omnivorous look at old materials for a writer unafraid to create a completely new song.

When you set out to create a fictional world, your most startling effects may be the rearrangement of known elements. I take my cue from the news. If I were making not a story or poem, but a new nation, how could I be most original? I want to be as creative as officials from Abkhazia, a break-away former Soviet republic: as one of their first official acts, leaders of the new nation printed a postage stamp filled with the grinning faces of “Marx” and “Lenin” — in this case Groucho Marx and John Lennon. In one stroke, despite their great difficulties ahead, these pioneers expressed a break with history, a love of art, a tie to the West, and a sense of humor. This makes me wonder what moves in my own writing could catch that kind of verve and crazy originality.

We are talking about improvisation here — knowing an old tune (Marx and Lenin), but not quite playing it as it has been played before — at all. In some ways, the more familiar the material, the more stunning your creative shift may be. A friend writes me to describe a Cherokee game called “Flip the Coined Phrase.” It seems that part of Cherokee culture is pleasure in linguistic stunts, a game of verbal gymnastics — conducted both with close friends and ardent enemies. The game goes like this: start with a common phrase, and begin to juggle the words in all ways. The cliché “Talk is cheap” soon becomes “Talk is cheap, but good conversation is priceless.” Or “Talk is cheap, until you dial long distance.” You might begin with, “I love you,” and travel past “Why do I love you,” to “How do I love thee, let me count the ways,” and “It’s a miracle I still love you,” and “It’s a wonder I love you despite your faults,” to arrive finally at “The wonder is not that I love you despite your faults; the miracle is that I love you despite my faults.”

The writer says something new by listening to the cliché as if listening to a “problem student”: somewhere inside that sours lies great wisdom. How to tease it forth? The poet Charles Simic once wrote, “The dream of every honest cliché is to enter a great poem.” Yes. The happiness of this process makes me giddy. I want to say to the language: Give me your tired, your stale, your deadened words yearning to breathe free, and I will make them citizens in the new land.

Like a discouraged writer, a teacher might have the feeling that everything has already been taught. But even here lies a bonus. Going to class, meeting a new group of students, I need to be totally original by
making the most of all my most recent learning. And
I need every member of the class to help.

Coming into class, I might begin, “Hey, you all, I just
overheard Christy say and did anyone see that line of
graffiti outside? and by the way, what have you been
reading? has anyone written something recently that
puzzled them? listen to this letter I just received, it
occurred to me, what did you notice on your way to
class? who is stuck on a piece of writing? Really? Let’s
talk about that.”

I find with these questions and oblique nudges that
my teaching reflects my experience as a writer. New
ideas do not come from nowhere. Rather, a trigger in
recent and seemingly ordinary experience may spark
a train of original ideas as if from nowhere. The search
for originality is not a struggle but a realm of play. As
Oscar Wilde said, “Life is too important to be taken
seriously.” Time is short, the stakes are high, and our
only option is spirited and playful exploration. As a
writer, I find myself faced often by this lucky despera-
tion: in a busy day, with only five minutes to write,
what’s fresh in my notebook, most new and strange?
The writing of an essay on my life journey through
music began with a piece of graffiti a student first
reported:

      To do is to be.
      — Camus

      To be is to do.
      — Sartre

      Do be do be do.
      — Sinatra

The Happy Problem of Secrecy
Some things are too private to tell. Some of our best
stories are family secrets. We might hurt others by
telling them, we say. It’s not our place to reveal them,
we say. And yet secrets are also what we long to tell.
It seems to me that we should write secrets we are
ready to tell. If our stories are not in some way secret,
they are not very interesting. And if they are secrets
we are not yet ready to tell, we shouldn’t tell them. But
the boundary seems to shift daily between secrets we are
not and secrets we are ready to tell. Yesterday, this
was too private. Today, it’s ready. Tomorrow, it may
seem ordinary.

My father wrote every day for some fifty years. And
yet, a month before he died, I asked him some tough
questions, and he told me things I don’t believe he had
ever told anyone. And I haven’t found them in his
writings. Though he seemed in good health that sum-
mer of 1993, for some reason I was moved to sit down
with my father and grill him: “What ever happened to
your father? What was it like when you came back
home, a pacifist, after The War? And what about your
mother — how was it for her after your father died?”

“She’d been left at the Poor Farm,” he said. “No one
came. There was no one there who knew her. When I
got there, she looked at me. ‘Billy,’ she said, ‘you have
to get me out of here.’ And I wanted to say, ‘Of course
I’ll get you out of here.’ But I didn’t know if I could....”

And then something happened I had never seen. My
father cried. Quietly, without moving. His big fist was
still on the table.

“I haven’t told anyone,” he said. “I guess I was wait-
ing for someone to ask.”

I put my hand on my father’s hand. He didn’t move,
stared straight ahead. He, the writer every day for
fifty years, had never told me the moment that gripped
him so. He looked at me. A month later, he was gone.

As a writer now, I must ask myself for the deepest
things. If I don’t ask, maybe no one will. At my desk
in the early morning: “Kim, what secret are you ready
to tell — simple and direct — right now?”

If our stories are not in some way secret, they are not very interesting.

The Happy Problem of Form
Often, when a piece of writing begins, we don’t know
what it is. This is inefficient. This is probably unpro-
fessional. And this is unavoidable, if we want to live
by happy problems. For the discovery of form from
the originating vantage point of unruly content is
happy hunting. What does a given fragment of expe-
rience want to be?

In the middle of a film, it strikes me that the close-up
on a big screen — a face ten feet tall — makes any
cinematic story psychological, and returns us to that
time in childhood when proportion felt out of control.

What to do with that quirky thought? Is it an essay, the
beginning of a movie review, a poem that gives the
film version of a moment from childhood? Or is that
part of a conversation inside a short story? If the
answer is “story,” then is it a new story, or is this the
perfect new element in a story I already have in
progress?

These questions form our happiness as writers. For
“happiness” in the original sense is simply “hap,”
events, “what happens.” To be happy is to be in
keeping with events unfolding around me. This is the
Tao of the writing craft: Don’t fight. Don’t suffer. Be
with.

The writer Kawabata ended his career by rewriting
one of his novels as a short story. He had to take that
long path — from idea, to novel, to short story — to get
the concise tale exactly right. In my own practice,
short stories were a mystery until I realized that such
works were my kind of essay. Essays were easy, essays
were hard, until this bridge appeared. But without
struggling with my teacher’s version of “the essay,” I
might never have found my own.

One student told me, “I write about something in
poetry because I don’t know what to say about it in
talk.” Others use poems as rough drafts for essays, or
glean favorite lines from prose journals to smuggle
into poems. All this clumsy shuffling is exactly what
we should be doing when we set out to learn the form
a given episode of writing is trying to be. A student
once told our class, “I keep thinking I’m going to learn
how to write short stories, but by the time I finish one,
all I have learned is how to write this short story. I still
don’t know how to write stories. I guess I’ll just
have to keep learning, story by story.”

The Happy Problem of Confusion

“I just don’t get it.” Remember in school when you
said that sentence to yourself in despair, or to a teacher
in hope? Translation: “Dear teacher, would you please
get it for me?” Well, no, a teacher can’t “get it for you.”
What do you do when you just don’t get it?

As a writer now, I move sideways, try something
oblique, bring in new material, start over with gusto.
Not getting it means I must be doing original work.

The feeling of not getting it is a good sign, not a
paralyzing signal. The writing is hard because I am
seeking connections that I did not know before — that
nobody knew before. To proceed under such condi-
tions is the hardest thing to do and the only thing
worth doing.

The feeling of not getting it is like rain for the dry-land
farmer — uncomfortable as you hunch on the tractor
seat, but the best thing for the ground. This anxious
feeling is the growing place. To be an expert — as-
sured — is death to the process that creates expertise.
For expertise comes from not knowing — yet.

I feel I am something of an expert on salutary confu-
sion, having lived with its oblique cacophony for
years. My wife says I get quiet when I have something
big coming up — a speech to give, a new class about
to begin, an essay brewing. “If I didn’t know you,” she
says, “you might seem depressed. But that’s not it.
You’re gathering new stuff, that’s all. You need to get
nervous to do it the way you like.”

So, happy confusion is my nourishment. I’m not the
chef standing at the stove reading a recipe. I’m the
sauce itself, bit by heat and spice, all mixed up and
cooking.

The Happy Problem of Error

Sometimes a fertile source for invention is to hear
something wrong, or read something wrong, or make
a “false” connection in mind, and then to recognize
the original creation you have just made. In the weav-
ing studio, someone calls across the room, “Will you
help me when I dye?” But, of course, in my hearing
I spell that last word “wrong,” and suddenly feel ready
to write a story to contain the plea, “Will you help me
when I die?”

Listening to country music with the volume just a
little too low can bring gold. Those lines you almost
hear, and have to make up to make out, belong to you.
Of course, with country, you never know whether you
heard a line or made it up, so familiar is the sweet
realm of cliché, “Like butter on bread, she spreads her
love around...” Did I invent that, or hear it?

“She’s a split level woman, I’m a mobile home man...”
For years I thought I had made that up, then I learned
otherwise. But anyone might make up such a gem by

—continued on page 35
Hearing the buzz of another's words, and being reminded that here, too, lies freedom. And classical music is not immune to such surprise. I once dozed fitfully through an entire live cantata, enjoying the lyric lines I half-heard, only to learn during the applause that the entire text had been in German -- the lines I "heard" in English I had invented: "Turn around and share my sleep." I had to feverishly try to write down the lines I got "wrong," because they belonged to me.

These minor examples point me in the direction of more profound "error" and greater magnitude of resulting discovery. As a child, for example, I apparently got several family stories wrong, lived with my own versions for forty years, and now stand in rich possession of personal myth: Jesus called my own relatives to fish a Nebraska lake during a great storm.

I like that. And Uncle Miley, was he really struck by lightning after returning home on Valentine's Day from three years on the road? History happened. I write what I know, because my knowing is shaped by creative selection. "Error" may be the small door to the great realm: how we might live.

I realize now that another name for my father's "happy problems" is the "negative capability" of Keats, that ability to be "in uncertainties, mysteries and doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact & reason" (Keats' letter to his brothers George and Tom, December 21, 1817). To not know, to be troubled, but not to anguish over this trouble — in fact, to relish it — this is the good luck of happy problems.

So go forth, embrace your happy problems of invention and creation. Mystery and difficulty are your greatest fortune.

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