

essay

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Suicide, Genius, and Karma

I came upon a peculiar intersection these last two days. On the first day I received the question. On the second day I got the answer. It was an unusual alignment of things in my life; generally speaking, they're never so clear. The question came in the form of an article in the New Yorker about the crushing death of David Foster Wallace. For those that don't know, read a book! No, seriously, for those that don't know, it may be reasonable considering that his works tended to be anywhere from 500 to 1500 pages and were genuinely monsters in terms of complexity. But then, that was certainly a significant portion of their genius. We live in a very, very complicated world, whirring parts and flying formations and all, and it is almost unimaginable for a work of art to capture that. The authors that can are almost tragically intelligent and in the case of Wallace, the blueprint of his intelligence had a fatal flaw and he took his own life.

His death (several months ago) raised many frightening questions in me that luckily I was able to pretty much completely ignore. This re-surfacing of his death, though, in all the detail that D. T. Max was able to collect, raised all those terrifying questions again and just as I was about to put them to bed, I ran into a talk by Elizabeth Gilbert at TED. I had heard of the title of her most recent book, "Eat, Pray, Love" somewhere in the ether. It is one of those works that is past its tipping point and is becoming impossible to avoid---not that I would. In fact, after seeing such a genuine sincerity and concern in her talk, I will very likely be counted among her future readers.

In brief: somewhere along the way, as the mass of mostly since silenced humans marched along, we made a dramatic shift in the way that we viewed artists. We began to endow them with the power to create their artwork. Now hear me out, because this idea is so grounded in our current belief structure that the only striking thing about it is its sheer obviousness. And it is in fact hard to imagine that it was any other way, but, in fact, as Gilbert brilliantly observes, it used to be muses and geniuses at work. The artists wasn't really responsible for truly great works of art---he or she had been touched by divinity. To use Gilbert's words, "the artist showed up to work." And she thinks that there was a benefit to this outlook: it acted as a psychological barrier for

the artist, to some extent protecting them from the enormous pressures that can mount when one begins to *muse* (ha!) on the potential impact of a work of art.¹ Gilbert and Wallace both expressed enormous doubts about their ability to do anything worthwhile in the face of their own so-called "genius."

I have to make an aside here before I continue with Gilbert's own concern about her point of view. That aside is that I worry that we have to be careful about exaggerating the coincidence of artists who are depressed and commit suicide with those that engage in art without those extreme tendencies. 11% of the population of the United States committed suicide in 2005. That's more than 1 in 10 people and frankly a larger ratio than the ratio of creative people that I know (something closer to 1 in 100). Maybe artists tend to be melancholy. I get that. But maybe more people are artistic and don't know it---which in my mind is an equally tragic problem.

At any rate, Gilbert, during her talk, had an obvious concern about her own point of view: it's magical. It's a little bit like Daniel Dennett's Intentional Stance---useful as an instrument but careful study of it reveals that it resembles nothing like the truth.² Now there are philosophical problems with Dennett's Intentional Stance and there are psychological problems with believing that there are elves in your apartment that are helping you write. There just are not spirits informing this essay. Sorry but there aren't. But this presents a larger problem here then. Even if there aren't spirits imbibing the work of an artist, why would we necessarily still hold the artist *entirely* responsible?

I've been thinking a lot---a *lot*---about a different formulation of the idea of Karma. The typical notion of Karma (at least in the West) is something along the lines of the ways that it's portrayed in the popular TV show "My Name is Earl," namely that Karma is a kind of moral system: that the good that you put out into the world will be revisited on you and so will the bad stuff you do. I think this is a tragic oversimplification of a much more subtle idea. Luckily I'm not out of pop-culture references yet and we can instead look to "The Matrix: Revolutions" to gain some clarity.³ In the third part of the Matrix, Neo is confronted by a computer program that talks about it's Karma---what it was *made* to do. It is important to accept what you were made to do. And on a grander scale, it is important for each of us to examine what forces have made us into who we are, forces that we had no control over. You did not choose your parents, the town you grew up in, to a lesser extent the friends you had, the toys you played with,

the things that you accomplished that you were scolded or rewarded for.⁴ What waltzes in to your life, what events transpire are only fractionally under your control and it is very often the things that we simply did not see coming that have enormous impacts on us.

It's not hard to conceive of a work of art as an aspect of this brand of Karma, the occurrence of a transcendent thought that has a lot to do with happenstance and being in the right place at the right time---or of the right view in the right mindset. The world is a rational and describable system. But it is also a maddeningly complex, contorted and chaotic system when you are in the middle of it. That a work of poetry or a song should arrive on your mental doorstep one day isn't something you should entirely take credit for. I, for one, have often thought of some of my own ideas as really annoying---nuisances to be written down so I could move on to something more satisfying. Of course, as an artist you never really know which ideas are the good ones, so you should treat them all with the same respect you would treat a house guest (even though you might bad mouth it behind its back).

Elizabeth Gilbert, in her talk (that second link is a hint, folks) spoke of a poet that she'd interviewed, named Ruth Stone. Ruth described how a poem would come to her in the fashion of a storm in the distance. She could feel it coming and she would run for her house just in order to get a piece of paper to get it down. When I heard that, I was reminded of "The Illusion of Conscious Will" by Daniel Wegner which cites some interesting (though debatable) experiments that show that the neurological basis for decisions in the brain may begin before we are consciously aware of them. You can actually think of it as a storm of activity that begins in the brain and results in you thinking, "Oh, I've got an idea!" It's a bit of a loopy debate as to who started what, but that's beside the point for the moment. It's also a hard line to take and it invites all kinds of what will surely be rabid debate about free will and the like, but don't take the hard line then.

You are (and this much is undeniable in the face of the evidence) a system of systems. Some of them do what you want. Some of them don't. One thing is for sure: your ideas do not arrive in your mind from out of an ether. They arise, rather, from brain matter on "up," from associations, from memories, from experience, and from novel combinations and plays on those things---from imagination. But questioning how much control you have over your imagination

is a useful psychological tool that doesn't have to involve elves or spirits. It is the barrier, the buffer, that I think Gilbert is looking for that can keep things like guilt and disappointment at bay, since "you" (whatever *that* is at this point in the conversation) can't be entirely to blame for whatever it was that you came up with. This is, now that I think about it, one very important reason why the freedom of expression should almost never be deterred (cries of fire in movie theaters notwithstanding, quid pro quo, etc. etc.)

What Gilbert is looking for is noble. She is asking that individuals consider that their responsibility is and should be bounded (within the art of expression, at least). *Show up to work*. That aspect of creativity can simply never be emphasized enough. But when you look at what you've created, remember that you are a fleeting glimpse, a system in motion---that what you created yesterday will be entirely different if you do it again tomorrow from scratch. Know that you have some control but not total control. Too many artists get God complexes, frankly, and this is the dark side of thinking that you do have total control---a dark side that will inevitably lead to disappointment. To borrow a metaphor from Timothy van Gelder, you are a governor, a system dynamically coupled to your own experience. When it is your creation at stake, remember that in that moment, you *are* your Karma.

Appropriate listening: "Fix You" by Coldplay, "Winter" by Joshua Radin, and "Parallel or Together" by Ted Leo and the Pharmacists.

1. You know what else I just realized? i just watched an episode of Joss Whedon's "The Dollhouse" in which one of the main characters was a singer who wanted to be assassinated while on stage. Really! It makes one wonder about the power of the subconscious. Well... no it doesn't.
2. I will attempt to describe the Intentional Stance in as brief a manner as possible, which will ruin it, since it's the nuances that are fun. But, if you are observing a ball rolling down a hill and suddenly it turns left and then pauses and then starts

rolling back up the hill, you might be very inclined to grant that ball some power of sentience. You might be wrong, but it's not a bad bet.

3. Yeah. I look to the Matrix for clarity. What's it to you?
4. Have you ever considered how many people missed their calling by years just because a teacher was in a bad mood? I try not to think about it--it becomes infuriating. Here's the lesson in short: don't *ever* make fun of someone's dancing. You've no idea the terrible power of your criticism.