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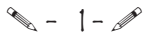
Pencil

by: Ingimar DeRidder



The Pencil

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Introduction

I would like to introduce you again to the ordinary pencil. No doubt you have met before, but perhaps it did not make a good first impression on you. Let's take a closer look at the pencil.

Paul was eight years old when he came face to face with his baseball idol. He was walking with his father next to the Polo Grounds on a non-game day. The normally crowded stadium concourse was deserted. Not a soul was around when suddenly an unmarked side door opened and out stepped Willie Mays.

I myself remember the triad of Mickey Mantle, Duke Snyder and Willie Mays that fed the rivalry of devoted fans between the Yankees, the Dodgers, and the Giants. No one caught a popped up fly ball like Willie Mays, no one, and there he was. Paul was stunned. "Hey Willie, can I get your autograph?" asked a star-struck youngster. "Sure kid, ya got a pencil?" He did not. He patted every pocked and looked desperately at his dad, who was also searching for a writing instrument to no avail. They looked around to see if anyone else was nearby from whom they could borrow a pencil. There was not. With that Willie looked at the boy and said, "Sorry kid, ain't got no pencil, can't give no autograph." And with that Willie walked away. †

That experience changed Paul's life. He never left his house again without a pencil. To my knowledge he never met Willie again or got that autograph (as far as I can tell), but Paul became a professional writer. He wrote because he had a pencil, and never left home without it.

I have learned many things about life from the simple pencil and here are just a few.
Behold the Pencil. Like every good life-

1. It must have a point.
2. It is simple.
3. It is humble.
4. It must be sharpened.
5. It can make a mark.
6. It has an eraser.
7. It is intelligently designed.
8. It is useful.
9. It is valuable.
10. It must be lifted up.

† *The Red Note Book by Paul Auster*

1. *A Pencil must have a Point.*

So should we. Some people try to find the point all their lives. What's your point? Why are you here? Seminaries teach aspiring preachers that a good sermon should have three points. I have heard many three point sermons. I also have heard many, I'm afraid, that had no point. A sermon without a point is a pathetic thing. A life without a point is worse.

Everyone should "get to the point." Beating around the bush will get you nowhere. The Apostle Paul said, "*This one thing I do.*" He was a man who was focused. His life had a point and a purpose. It is all too easy to go around aimlessly and do things that are "pointless." Every life is a gift made on purpose for a purpose. Our job is to find our purpose and fulfill it. That's the point.

What we are good at, what we love to do, what helps others and makes things better, this is the point. Some people were born to teach, others to sing. Some people have found their polar star and they know which way is North. Other people sail without sun, without compass, without a point and without purpose. They are lost.

This does not mean we are to be pianos with one key or one note. That would be boring. Whatever we do should have a point however. Sometimes

the point is to reach the summit. Sometimes it is get out of the valley. Sometimes the point is to relax and renew our strength. Sometimes the point is to learn something new or master a task. We should never do something that is pointless or points us away from the main point.

We end up in the direction we point. It is as simple as that. Before Lot moved his family into the infamous city, we are told he “*pitched his tent toward Sodom.*” Without judging I can say we end up in the direction we point; therefore the point is important. A pencil without a point is pointless, but put a point on it, and now you have something. Anything is now possible. Did you get the point?

2. *A Pencil is Simple.*

Keep it simple. William Shakespeare describes the imagined last moments of Richard the III's reign. In the battle of Bosworth, Richard cries out "*A horse, a horse, my kingdom for a horse.*" This gave rise to the poetic proverb "*for want of a nail, a shoe was lost. For the want of a shoe a horse was lost, etc.*" Little things and simple things hold the world together, and they will hold us together as well. Don't make things complicated. Keep things simple

The acrostic K.I.S.S. could stand for "Keep it simple, silly"! That is good advice. The simple things are the most wonderful and beautiful things. A circle, a sunset, a summer breeze, a smile. A simple thank you or simply saying "I'm sorry." A simple line drawn in the sand that calls men to decision, a simple raise of hands that can "settle the question." The master-teacher that "made it simple" for us. These are all simple things that are powerful, poetic and profound. That simple tune that dances in your head, and makes heavy work light. The proverb that is simple and causes you to say, "enough said." A simple three point sermon is easy for a sheep to follow. A pyramid is simple. Sure, pyramids are large and complex in many ways, but they are based on a simple principle of geometry that has stood through millen

nia. There is something beautiful in the lyrics of the Shaker hymn *"It's a gift to be simple, it's a gift to be free."* A simple handshake that becomes a man's bond. The good things, the best things are simple things. The truth is simple. A lie, on the other hand, is complicated, convoluted and complex. The fine print in a contract is not simple. The U.S. Tax Code is not simple. Building an Atom Bomb is not simple. The best stories are simple stories. Jesus taught deep and profound truth with parables. A simple walk on the beach can be more memorable and relaxing than following the crowd.

A pencil is a simple instrument. It is the mid-wife that assisted at the birth of millions of great ideas. It was there when little thoughts were planted like seed corn. The simple pencil has at times been like a magic wand. The simple pencil has been the dream-catcher that caught a thought before it evaporated and disappeared forever. The simple pencil has been the first instrument taken up by a Rembrandt or Leonardo. It is little, it is simple, but it is wonderful. It is shaped like a lever, and as Archimedes said, *"give me a lever and a place to stand, and I can move the world."* A simple person with a lever or a pencil, if used properly, might just move the world. The pencil reminds me to keep things simple.

3. *A Pencil is Humble.*

There is something special about humility. Not the Uriah Heep variety, but the real thing. Like the golden ra-tio, humility is just plain beautiful. I am no expert on humility to be sure, but I pray like David that God would keep me from presumptuous sins. Humility comes from the word humus, which basically means “dirt.” A humble person is down to earth. He is grounded, unconscious of his own presence or importance. Humility is Christ washing the disciple’s feet, because no one else thought to do it. Pride on the other hand is presumption on parade. It is preposterous. God uses humility as a catalyst to make good things happen. He resists the proud.

Some “make a show of it,” others just show it and it is done. Some “put on airs.” Some just fly. Some promenade their credentials and promise more than they can deliver. They are all thunder and no rain. Others just quietly get to work.

The little lead pencil is a humble instrument. The lead pencil is not lead, by the way. It is finely ground graphite mixed with clay. Graphite is a carbon compound and a cousin to the one other natural polymer found in nature, the diamond. Graphite is a light weight substance that can withstand temperatures over three thousand six hundred degrees Celsius. That is why it is used

to line the inside of furnaces and on brake linings on cars and trucks. It is used in steel manufacture, brick making and is an excellent conductor of electricity. It is also used in pencils.

Few people consider how special graphite is or how important is the pencil. Like the lead (graphite) pencil, man was also made from clay. It was only when he became proud that he made a mess of things and missed the mark. The Bible says *“humble yourselves in the sight of the Lord and He will lift you up.”* Be real. Be honest. Be humble. Don't be pretentious. God gives grace to the humble.

4. A Pencil needs to be Sharpened.

Be Sharp. A sharp mind works better than a dull one and a sharp mind works even better with a sharp pencil. Sharp is a metaphor for prepared, precise, distinct. Fine lines require a sharp pencil point. Ordinary use wears a pencil down. A pencil can remain sharp for only so long. Then it must be carefully sharpened again and again and again. So it is in life and with any skill or talent.

A good pianist is always practicing and thus sharpening their skills. A lawyer, an accountant, a teacher, an engineer must remain current. They must be sharp. The Bible speaks of how a dull axe makes work hard. A dull knife is more dangerous than a sharp one. It requires more force and the slightest slip can result in severe injury. We talk about someone becoming “rusty,” or of someone losing their edge. “Sharp as a razor,” we say. The days of razor straps are gone, but in life, remaining sharp can mean the difference between failure or success, winning or losing, making the cut or being cut.

Calling someone a “sharp pencil” is a compli

ment. No one wants to be a Dull Dan or a Dim Wit. Proverbs says *“As iron sharpens iron, so a man sharpens the countenance of his friend.”* A real friend will influence and encourage us to be better, greater, sharper. Some people just wear you down. Find people and activities that hone you, not harm you.

Ah, but here is the real secret about sharpness. We become sharper when we are challenged. Our enemies make us sharper than our friends. Adversaries look for our weakness and try to use it for their advantage. We would do well to listen to our critics. There is probably some truth in what they are saying. They see our faults quicker than we do. On the battlefield and on the basketball court it's the same. The opposition knows where we need improvement more than we do. Doing the hard thing instead of the easy thing makes us sharper. Taking the hard class rather than the easy one makes us smarter. Putting our nose to the grindstone gives us the edge. A sharp blade, a sharp pencil or a sharp person is ready for action, ready for duty. Being sharp is better than looking sharp. Be sharp.

5. A Pencil Can Mark a Mark.

Touch the pencil to the surface of the piece of paper. Using the pencil (not the pen), and write. Because it is in pencil, it does not have to be right, at least it might not start out right, but write anyway. Write it down, not in ink (that may be too intimidating or require a commitment or making a promise you can't keep); write it with a pencil.

The Ten Commandments should be in stone or on smoking tablets written by God on Mount Sinai. Pencils are for Genesis not Exodus. It's for beginning. Pencils are for new ideas, crazy ideas, laundry lists, grocery lists and bucket lists. Pencils give good ideas a trial run. They allow words to practice on the JV before Varsity takes over the court. Pencils allow your ideas to play in the little league, perhaps on the back of a paper bag before they try out for the Majors and you peck out your "War and Peace" on an old Remington typewriter or computer keyboard. Pencils are for dribbling before you take the jump shot. In pencil you can have a brain storm with little danger of damage. You can dare to be outrageous or ridiculous or let your imaginary hair down. Once you write it down you can stare at it, examine it, leave it overnight and see what it looks like in the morning.

Pencils are great for "Things to Do lists." Things

to Do lists, are the best open-secret for success. One by one these “Doers” “do it,” and get things done. Write it down in pencil. Doing so will prevent the budgeter from impulse buying. ‘Nope! can’t get it because it’s not on the list.’

A pencil is the perfect medium for a first date with ideas. You don’t have to kiss on the first date. It’s time to get to know each other a little better. You don’t have to marry an idea that is still in pencil. Pencils are great at making marks. The carpenter measures and then measures again and then makes a mark. He draws a line. Then he cuts the board following the line. The artist often picks up the pencil before he touches the brush. He sketches an outline. The head, tilted just so. The one hand resting upon the other. Most songs begin in pencil long before the score is printed and published. Little black circles are placed here and there to mark the music on a scale.

Every life is a story we write ourselves. Everyone will leave a legacy. Start with a pencil. Practice your letters and your penmanship. Practice writing wonderful words like: faith, hope, and love. Soon you will transcribe what you have written with the humble pencil into movable type or the copperplate of convictions and character. Then when you are sure, (then in ink) put your John Hancock on your own Constitution.

6. *A Pencil has an Eraser.*

I would like to personally thank the person who thought to put an eraser on the end of the pencil. None of us are perfect. Everyone makes mistakes. Only God never says “Oops.” We, on the other hand, need to turn the pencil of life around and erase the wrong choice of words. Erasers are for “do-overs.” To err is human, to forgive is divine. Erasers are very forgiving. I myself wear out the eraser long before the pencil’s real estate runs out of wood.

In life we all make mistakes and when we do we, need to correct them if possible. God gave us the ability to say “I’m sorry, please forgive me.” We can say “Excuse me, I beg your pardon.” Our face may blush pink like a pencil’s eraser when we say it, but if accepted we can try again and start all over. Now some mistakes are more serious than others. If we set our paper on fire an eraser is not going to do the trick. “Sorry,” might not keep you out of jail or from getting that speeding ticket, but in many of the ordinary mistakes of life, “Sorry” can go a long way.

A misspelled word, a line that is crooked, something that could and should be better, cries out for an eraser. Erasers have often been bitten off

or chewed, but that is not what they are for. They are there to say, "I've got your back," They say, "Go ahead, write; I'm here for you." As little children we learned the ditty from our mothers: "If at first you don't succeed, try, try again." The human race needs erasers. Don't be afraid to try, and if it's in pencil- no big deal, erase it and "try again."

7. A Pencil is Intelligently Designed.

We are fearfully and wonderfully made. A pencil is an example of intelligent design. There is a history of the lead pencil. Think of it. A column, a ribbon of carbon mixed with various complements of clay encased in a delicate container of wood. It is an invention of genius. Pencils hold up even after the most abusive treatment. They work in the hot humid tropics as well as in the arctic. They write upside down as well as right side up and sideways. The grocer could touch the point to the tip of his tongue before converting a brown paper bag into a grocery bill (I remember those days). You can put a pencil in your white shirt pocket and it won't leak (for some reason a ball point pen will not leak until you put it in the pocket of a white shirt). You can put it behind your ear and it will stay there until you have a good idea. You can put it in a pencil box and come back to it fifty years later and it will write as good as new. What an example of intelligent design a pencil is.

Whether you give the credit to Mother Nature or Father God, life is filled with examples of intelligent design. None no more so, than a per

son. Encased in a wondrous container of flesh and bone each man has a core of potential and possibilities. Spirit is mixed with clay to make man more durable and dynamically graphic than graphite and capable of greatness, goodness, and with God's help, grace.

As an instrument, it's hard to beat the pencil for its genius. There is a Nobel Peace Prize that came because of the invention of dynamite. No prize has been awarded to the pencil, but in the right hands, a pencil is more powerful than any man made weapon.

8. *A pencil is useful.*

Make yourself useful. Be useful. Place yourself at the disposal of those who could benefit from your help. Be available. Some are fancier than you. A gold or silver Parker Pen is impressive and a Monte Blanc may be the instrument of choice to sign a will or contract, but when someone is frantically patting his pockets and looking around for something to write with, a pencil will do. A calligrapher may prefer a goose quill cut with a pen-knife, but maybe the goose has been cooked, feathers and all. In the time of need, be the pencil or Jonny on the spot. Be ready to be used. Illuminated letters look beautiful and have been painstakingly set on parchment or in some Book of Hours, but the pencil is more practical and just as beautiful when it enumerates “what’s for lunch today.” The pencil is a useful instrument. People used to draw as a matter of fact. Most people carried a little pocket book into which they drew maps of the seaport they visited. They would jot down the temperature, wind direction, or the price of wheat. They would record, (to the penny) expenditures of the day. 2 Cents for a licorice, 5 Cents for nails, and 10 cents for a spool of fancy thread, leaving a balance of \$1.28. It’s all there in the little ledger recorded in pencil. In life it is wise to keep close accounts. A pencil is great for keeping accounts. Try to be useful. Pay attention to little things. Make little

get around. Keep notes so you don't forget and so you can show others what you saw and what you learned. Like the simple pencil, be useful along the journey.

9. *A pencil is valuable.*

A pencil is valuable, but not expensive. Value is more important than price. The sooner we learn the difference the better off we are. Money spent buying a pencil is well spent. Having said that, there is a big difference between the cost of something and the value of something. Learning to get the most for your money is an education in itself. Some people are experts of getting the most out of life. They are experts of seeing the worth, potential, and the practicality. A Lexus is more impressive than a Ford Fiesta. A Timex is not going to turn heads like a Rolex, but a Rolex will not give twenty-five hours to a day. A Lexus and a Civic must both observe the speed limit. A pencil could be worth its weight in gold if some business man needs to write down a name on the spur of the moment and the battery on his i-phone (with sound recorder, camera, and internet browser) is dead. “Does anyone have a pencil?”

10. A pencil must be lifted up.

A pencil is designed to fit in someone's hand. Let God take you up. Be His instrument, be His tool. A pencil is just a tool. It can write good or evil. It can be the start of great things. A doodle can be the beginning of a "do." A pencil in the right hand can write righteousness. Leonardo di Vinci took up a pencil to sketch out fantastic ideas and dreams. His notebook is filled with magic. Many of his drawings depicted inventions that would not see the light of day for hundreds of years when some other genius used the master's pencil marks as kindling for their own life's work. Walt Disney used the pencil to draw Steam Boat Willie, despite the stern looks of his teacher, and those pencil lines would evolve into Mickey Mouse and the Magic Kingdom.

If Walt Disney, Michael Angelo, and Leonardo de Vinci could do such wonderful and amazing things with a pencil, imagine what God could do with a man or woman that was simple, humble, available, and willing to be "taken up" and used by the Almighty. What I've learned about life from the pencil I've seen a hundred times over in my own life. God wants us to get the most out of life. Let Him lift you up.

Final Thoughts.

Pick up a pencil and it can become a time machine, a compass, a teacher, a guide, a warning or a witness. It can not only record the way, but each step along that way. It can leave a trail through the forest like bread crumbs some Hansel and Gretel can use to find their way home. Use it to write down the address where you found a great idea. No battery is required, no charging station, no power grid. You don't have to plug it, boot it up, or turn it on. All you have to do is make a mark and record your thoughts, your dreams. Write it down and the words begin to become flesh. Your imagination suddenly appears right before your eyes like little miracles of creation. The Bible says that, "In the beginning was the Word." The words, (the Logos) was God's idea, and then, one of His creatures had a good idea and created the pencil.

One Last Point

So what's the point? A pencil is a seemingly small and insignificant thing that is an inanimate instrument.

Without trying to get too deep or philosophical, so are we. We are instruments. We were made for something good by God, and for God. We are nothing until God lifts us up to use us.

When Christ was crucified, Pilate wrote an "inscription" or a description and affixed it to the cross. Some did not like what he wrote and wanted him to change it. He said, "What I have written, I have written." One day everyone will have to say the same. There will come a time when the Teacher will ask everyone to put down their pencils and pass in their papers. Then it will be too late to erase, change, or rewrite what we have written.

Now is the time to write. In the end, what we have written will be history, but the person who allows God to "take him up" will have a story with a happy ending. It is the story of what (with God's help), we learned and what we did with what we learned. What we did by the grace of God or to put it another way, what we allowed God to do with us.

Without God there is no teacher, there are no grades, and there is no one who will care one iota a hundred years after you are gone that you even existed. Without God there is nothing.

Everyone is in the middle of writing a story. Read what God wrote. Read God's Word, the Bible. Read what Jesus Christ said and what He did, and what his followers wrote about Him. Once you decide that God is "Right," and that God is "Good," allow Him to show you what He can do with small seemingly insignificant things. Allow Him to take you up and write something beautiful and something good.

It does not look like much 'till someone takes it up, and then this little chosen thing - like an overflowing cup can become a channel for wisdom, to help men open doors, or a water fall from which surprise and blessing pours; it may become a chisel to carve a heart of stone, or write down the directions to help a child come home. It might become a catalyst, creating change for good, a little small unnoticed thing, a tiny piece of wood. Sometimes it's used to pictures draw, or cause someone to look with awe, to cipher, figure, or to record, to mark a line, or find the Lord.