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Leonard E. Read, *“I, Pencil: My Family Tree” as told to Leonard E. Read, Dec. 1958* [1958]

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## The Online Library Of Liberty

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## Edition Used:

*I Pencil: My Family Tree as told to Leonard E. Read* (Irvington-on-Hudson, New York: Foundation for Economic Education, Inc., 1999).

Author: [Leonard E. Read](#)

Introduction: [Milton Friedman](#)

## About This Title:

A charming story which explains how something as apparently simple as a pencil is in fact the product of a very complex economic process based upon the division of labor, international trade, and comparative advantage.

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## Leonard E. Read, I, Pencil My Family Tree As Told To Leonard E. Read, Dec. 1958

Introduction, By Milton Friedman. Professor Friedman, The 1976 Nobel Prize in Economic Science, is Senior Research Fellow At The Hoover Institution, Stanford, California.

Leonard Read's delightful story, "I, Pencil," has become a classic, and deservedly so. I know of no other piece of literature that so succinctly, persuasively, and effectively illustrates the meaning of both Adam Smith's invisible hand—the possibility of cooperation without coercion—and Friedrich Hayek's emphasis on the importance of dispersed knowledge and the role of the price system in communicating information that "will make the individuals do the desirable things without anyone having to tell them what to do."

We used Leonard's story in our television show, "Free to Choose," and in the accompanying book of the same title to illustrate "the power of the market" (the title of both the first segment of the TV show and of chapter one of the book). We summarized the story and then went on to say:

"None of the thousands of persons involved in producing the pencil performed his task because he wanted a pencil. Some among them never saw a pencil and would not know what it is for. Each saw his work as a way to get the goods and services he wanted—goods and services we produced in order to get the pencil we wanted. Every time we go to the store and buy a pencil, we are exchanging a little bit of our services for the infinitesimal amount of services that each of the thousands contributed toward producing the pencil.

"It is even more astounding that the pencil was ever produced. No one sitting in a central office gave orders to these thousands of people. No military police enforced the orders that were not given. These people live in many lands, speak different languages, practice different religions, may even hate one another—yet none of these differences prevented them from cooperating to produce a pencil. How did it happen? Adam Smith gave us the answer two hundred years ago."

"I, Pencil" is a typical Leonard Read product: imaginative, simple yet subtle, breathing the love of freedom that imbued everything Leonard wrote or did. As in the rest of his work, he was not trying to tell people what to do or how to conduct themselves. He was simply trying to enhance individuals' understanding of themselves and of the system they live in.

That was his basic credo and one that he stuck to consistently during his long period of service to the public—not public service in the sense of government service. Whatever the pressure, he stuck to his guns, refusing to compromise his principles. That was why he was so effective in keeping alive, in the early days, and then

spreading the basic idea that human freedom required private property, free competition, and severely limited government.

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## I, Pencil My Family Tree As Told To Leonard E. Read

I am a lead pencil—the ordinary wooden pencil familiar to all boys and girls and adults who can read and write.<sup>?</sup>

Writing is both my vocation and my avocation; that's all I do.

You may wonder why I should write a genealogy. Well, to begin with, my story is interesting. And, next, I am a mystery—more so than a tree or a sunset or even a flash of lightning. But, sadly, I am taken for granted by those who use me, as if I were a mere incident and without background. This supercilious attitude relegates me to the level of the commonplace. This is a species of the grievous error in which mankind cannot too long persist without peril. For, the wise G. K. Chesterton observed, "We are perishing for want of wonder, not for want of wonders."

I, Pencil, simple though I appear to be, merit your wonder and awe, a claim I shall attempt to prove. In fact, if you can understand me—no, that's too much to ask of anyone—if you can become aware of the miraculousness which I symbolize, you can help save the freedom mankind is so unhappily losing. I have a profound lesson to teach. And I can teach this lesson better than can an automobile or an airplane or a mechanical dishwasher because—well, because I am seemingly so simple.

Simple? Yet, *not a single person on the face of this earth knows how to make me.* This sounds fantastic, doesn't it? Especially when it is realized that there are about one and one-half billion of my kind produced in the U.S.A. each year.

Pick me up and look me over. What do you see? Not much meets the eye—there's some wood, lacquer, the printed labeling, graphite lead, a bit of metal, and an eraser.

### Innumerable Antecedents

Just as you cannot trace your family tree back very far, so is it impossible for me to name and explain all my antecedents. But I would like to suggest enough of them to impress upon you the richness and complexity of my background.

My family tree begins with what in fact is a tree, a cedar of straight grain that grows in Northern California and Oregon. Now contemplate all the saws and trucks and rope and the countless other gear used in harvesting and carting the cedar logs to the railroad siding. Think of all the persons and the numberless skills that went into their fabrication: the mining of ore, the making of steel and its refinement into saws, axes, motors; the growing of hemp and bringing it through all the stages to heavy and strong rope; the logging camps with their beds and mess halls, the cookery and the raising of all the foods. Why, untold thousands of persons had a hand in every cup of coffee the loggers drink!

The logs are shipped to a mill in San Leandro, California. Can you imagine the individuals who make flat cars and rails and railroad engines and who construct and install the communication systems incidental thereto? These legions are among my antecedents.

Consider the millwork in San Leandro. The cedar logs are cut into small, pencil-length slats less than one-fourth of an inch in thickness. These are kiln dried and then tinted for the same reason women put rouge on their faces. People prefer that I look pretty, not a pallid white. The slats are waxed and kiln dried again. How many skills went into the making of the tint and the kilns, into supplying the heat, the light and power, the belts, motors, and all the other things a mill requires? Sweepers in the mill among my ancestors? Yes, and included are the men who poured the concrete for the dam of a Pacific Gas & Electric Company hydroplant which supplies the mill's power!

Don't overlook the ancestors present and distant who have a hand in transporting sixty carloads of slats across the nation.

Once in the pencil factory—\$4,000,000 in machinery and building, all capital accumulated by thrifty and saving parents of mine—each slat is given eight grooves by a complex machine, after which another machine lays leads in every other slat, applies glue, and places another slat atop—a lead sandwich, so to speak. Seven brothers and I are mechanically carved from this "wood-clinched" sandwich.

My "lead" itself—it contains no lead at all—is complex. The graphite is mined in Ceylon. Consider these miners and those who make their many tools and the makers of the paper sacks in which the graphite is shipped and those who make the string that ties the sacks and those who put them aboard ships and those who make the ships. Even the lighthouse keepers along the way assisted in my birth—and the harbor pilots.

The graphite is mixed with clay from Mississippi in which ammonium hydroxide is used in the refining process. Then wetting agents are added such as sulfonated tallow—animal fats chemically reacted with sulfuric acid. After passing through numerous machines, the mixture finally appears as endless extrusions—as from a sausage grinder—cut to size, dried, and baked for several hours at 1,850 degrees Fahrenheit. To increase their strength and smoothness the leads are then treated with a hot mixture which includes candelilla wax from Mexico, paraffin wax, and hydrogenated natural fats.

My cedar receives six coats of lacquer. Do you know all the ingredients of lacquer? Who would think that the growers of castor beans and the refiners of castor oil are a part of it? They are. Why, even the processes by which the lacquer is made a beautiful yellow involve the skills of more persons than one can enumerate!

Observe the labeling. That's a film formed by applying heat to carbon black mixed with resins. How do you make resins and what, pray, is carbon black?

My bit of metal—the ferrule—is brass. Think of all the persons who mine zinc and copper and those who have the skills to make shiny sheet brass from these products of nature. Those black rings on my ferrule are black nickel. What is black nickel and how is it applied? The complete story of why the center of my ferrule has no black nickel on it would take pages to explain.

Then there's my crowning glory, inelegantly referred to in the trade as "the plug," the part man uses to erase the errors he makes with me. An ingredient called "factice" is what does the erasing. It is a rubber-like product made by reacting rape-seed oil from the Dutch East Indies with sulfur chloride. Rubber, contrary to the common notion, is only for binding purposes. Then, too, there are numerous vulcanizing and accelerating agents. The pumice comes from Italy; and the pigment which gives "the plug" its color is cadmium sulfide.

## No One Knows

Does anyone wish to challenge my earlier assertion that no single person on the face of this earth knows how to make me?

Actually, millions of human beings have had a hand in my creation, no one of whom even knows more than a very few of the others. Now, you may say that I go too far in relating the picker of a coffee berry in far off Brazil and food growers elsewhere to my creation; that this is an extreme position. I shall stand by my claim. There isn't a single person in all these millions, including the president of the pencil company, who contributes more than a tiny, infinitesimal bit of know-how. From the standpoint of know-how the only difference between the miner of graphite in Ceylon and the logger in Oregon is in the *type* of know-how. Neither the miner nor the logger can be dispensed with, any more than can the chemist at the factory or the worker in the oil field—paraffin being a by-product of petroleum.

Here is an astounding fact: Neither the worker in the oil field nor the chemist nor the digger of graphite or clay nor any who mans or makes the ships or trains or trucks nor the one who runs the machine that does the knurling on my bit of metal nor the president of the company performs his singular task because he wants me. Each one wants me less, perhaps, than does a child in the first grade. Indeed, there are some among this vast multitude who never saw a pencil nor would they know how to use one. Their motivation is other than me. Perhaps it is something like this: Each of these millions sees that he can thus exchange his tiny know-how for the goods and services he needs or wants. I may or may not be among these items.

## No Master Mind

There is a fact still more astounding: the absence of a master mind, of anyone dictating or forcibly directing these countless actions which bring me into being. No trace of such a person can be found. Instead, we find the Invisible Hand at work. This is the mystery to which I earlier referred.

It has been said that "only God can make a tree." Why do we agree with this? Isn't it because we realize that we ourselves could not make one? Indeed, can we even describe a tree? We cannot, except in superficial terms. We can say, for instance, that a certain molecular configuration manifests itself as a tree. But what mind is there among men that could even record, let alone direct, the constant changes in molecules that transpire in the life span of a tree? Such a feat is utterly unthinkable!

I, Pencil, am a complex combination of miracles: a tree, zinc, copper, graphite, and so on. But to these miracles which manifest themselves in Nature an even more extraordinary miracle has been added: the configuration of creative human energies—millions of tiny know-hows configuring naturally and spontaneously in response to human necessity and desire and *in the absence of any human master-minding!* Since only God can make a tree, I insist that only God could make me. Man can no more direct these millions of know-hows to bring me into being than he can put molecules together to create a tree.

The above is what I meant when writing, "If you can become aware of the miraculousness which I symbolize, you can help save the freedom mankind is so unhappily losing." For, if one is aware that these know-hows will naturally, yes, automatically, arrange themselves into creative and productive patterns in response to human necessity and demand—that is, in the absence of governmental or any other coercive masterminding—then one will possess an absolutely essential ingredient for freedom: *a faith in free people*. Freedom is impossible without this faith.

Once government has had a monopoly of a creative activity such, for instance, as the delivery of the mails, most individuals will believe that the mails could not be efficiently delivered by men acting freely. And here is the reason: Each one acknowledges that he himself doesn't know how to do all the things incident to mail delivery. He also recognizes that no other individual could do it. These assumptions are correct. No individual possesses enough know-how to perform a nation's mail delivery any more than any individual possesses enough know-how to make a pencil. Now, in the absence of faith in free people—in the unawareness that millions of tiny know-hows would naturally and miraculously form and cooperate to satisfy this necessity—the individual cannot help but reach the erroneous conclusion that mail can be delivered only by governmental "master-minding."

## Testimony Galore

If I, Pencil, were the only item that could offer testimony on what men and women can accomplish when free to try, then those with little faith would have a fair case. However, there is testimony galore; it's all about us and on every hand. Mail delivery is exceedingly simple when compared, for instance, to the making of an automobile or a calculating machine or a grain combine or a milling machine or to tens of thousands of other things. Delivery? Why, in this area where men have been left free to try, they deliver the human voice around the world in less than one second; they deliver an event visually and in motion to any person's home when it is happening; they deliver 150 passengers from Seattle to Baltimore in less than four hours; they deliver gas from Texas to one's range or furnace in New York at unbelievably low rates and

without subsidy; they deliver each four pounds of oil from the Persian Gulf to our Eastern Seaboard—halfway around the world—for less money than the government charges for delivering a one-ounce letter across the street!

The lesson I have to teach is this: *Leave all creative energies uninhibited.* Merely organize society to act in harmony with this lesson. Let society's legal apparatus remove all obstacles the best it can. Permit these creative know-hows freely to flow. Have faith that free men and women will respond to the Invisible Hand. This faith will be confirmed. I, Pencil, seemingly simple though I am, offer the miracle of my creation as testimony that this is a practical faith, as practical as the sun, the rain, a cedar tree, the good earth.

Leonard E. Read (1898–1983) founded FEE in 1946 and served as its president until his death. "I, Pencil," his most famous essay, was first published in the December 1958 issue of *The Freeman*. Although a few of the manufacturing details and place names have changed over the past forty years, the principles are unchanged.

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## Afterword, By Donald J. Boudreaux

There are two kinds of thinking: simplistic and subtle. Simplistic thinkers cannot understand how complex and useful social orders arise from any source other than conscious planning by a purposeful mind. Subtle thinkers, in contrast, understand that individual actions often occur within settings that encourage individuals to coordinate their actions with one another independent of any overarching plan. F. A. Hayek called such unplanned but harmonious coordination "spontaneous order."

The mark of the subtle mind is not only its ability to grasp the idea of spontaneous orders but also to understand that conscious attempts to improve or to mimic these orders are doomed to fail. "Why so?" asks the simplistic thinker. "How can happenstance generate complex order superior to what a conscious mind can conceive and implement?" In responding to this question, a subtle thinker points out that spontaneous orders do not arise from happenstance: the continual adjustments by each individual within spontaneous orders follow a very strict logic—the logic of mutual accommodation. Because no central planner can possibly know all of the details of each individual's unique situation, no central planner can know how best to arrange each and every action of each and every individual with that of the multitudes of other individuals.

In the eighteenth century, a handful of scholars—most notably David Hume and Adam Smith—developed a subtle understanding of how private property rights encourage self-regarding producers and consumers to act in mutually beneficial ways. Spontaneous ordering forces were thus discovered, and with this discovery modern economics began to take shape.

Over the next two centuries economics achieved enormous success in furthering our understanding not only of industry and commerce, but of society itself. Modern economics—that is to say, economics that explores the emergence of spontaneous orders—is a sure-fire inoculant against the simplistic notion that conscious direction by the state can improve upon the pattern of mutual adjustments that people make within a system of secure private property rights.

But learning modern economics requires some effort—in the same way that breaking free of any simplistic mindset requires effort. It isn't surprising, then, that those economists who've contributed most to a widespread understanding of the subject have been clear and vivid writers, skillful in using analogies and everyday observations to lubricate the mind's transition away from superficial thinking and toward a grasp of subtle insights. The best economic writers cause oncesimplistic thinkers to say "Aha! *Now* I get it!" Skillfully tutored, a simplistic mind becomes a subtle mind.

For its sheer power to display in just a few pages the astounding fact that free markets successfully coordinate the actions of literally millions of people from around the world into a productive whole, nothing else written in economics compares to

Leonard Read's celebrated essay, "I, Pencil." This essay's power derives from Read's drawing from such a prosaic item an undeniable, profound, and spectacular conclusion: it takes the knowledge of countless people to produce a single pencil. No newcomer to economics who reads "I, Pencil" can fail to have a simplistic belief in the superiority of central planning or regulation deeply shaken. If I could choose one essay or book that everyone in the world would read, I would unhesitatingly choose "I, Pencil." Among these readers, simplistic notions about the economy would be permanently transformed into a new and vastly more subtle—and correct—understanding.

[?] My official name is "Mongol 482." My many ingredients are assembled, fabricated, and finished by Eberhard Faber Pencil Company.