



***“The most original thing a writer can do is write like himself.
It is also his most difficult task.”
— Robertson Davies****

Dear Faithful Reader,

I was first struck by this Robertson Davies quote because it so reminded me of a line from Warren Bennis, the master of leadership, that Dan Rockwell and I used for an epigraph at the front of [The Vagrant](#):

“Becoming a leader is synonymous with becoming yourself. It’s precisely that simple, and it’s also that difficult.”

I relate to both observations.

My earliest writings were pretty clumsy efforts, often wordy and tedious, as though I were trying to sound more learned than I really was. And I think most of my early efforts at *living* were not much different. Well-meaning but clumsy, weighed down by the baggage of their own striving.

It seems to me that I spent an inordinate amount of time and energy in my youth doing my best to be someone else.

One day, when I was perhaps 7 or 8, I was playing with my friends at school in the thin woods bordering the school grounds, when a buddy of mine happened to throw a good-sized rock. Aimed at what, I’ll never know, but what it struck was me, in the head. It bled profusely (as head wounds do) and I was whisked to the infirmary. Within minutes my mother, a teacher there, rushed to my side, panicked, to see if I was alive and conscious.

I made a joke out of it.

“I’m fine,” I said, and then put on an elaborate pantomime of being anything but fine, and then added, “No, but seriously, I’m fine.” (I think I was riffing off some comedy routine I’d recently seen on TV.)

It was only later that afternoon, in the car going home, that I realized how furious she was with me—and how terrified she’d been. Somehow I’d thought it was my job in that urgent moment to be entertaining. All she’d wanted was to know that her son was okay.

It took a rock to the head for me to realize that what another person wanted from me was simply *me* — not some character from television.

Even so, I passed through my teens and twenties (and thirties and forties, if I'm being honest) cycling periodically through various identities, guises, and *dramatis personae*. I suppose we all do, to some extent, or there wouldn't be so many enduring words of counsel from so many lauded voices through history urging us to stay the course of authenticity.

There is, for instance, Nietzsche, who for his final book, *Ecce Homo*, chose this subtitle: *Werde, der du bist* — “How to become who you are.”

Or Ralph Waldo Emerson, who wrote, “To be yourself in a world that is constantly trying to make you something else is the greatest accomplishment.”

Or Ted Geisel, aka Dr. Seuss: “Today you are You, that is truer than true. There is no one alive who is Youer than You.”

This theme goes all the way back to ancient Greece and the great lyric poet Pindar (yes, Pindar!), who wrote:

Become who you are by learning who you are.
(γένοι' οἷός ἐσσι μαθών)
—*Second Pythian Ode*, line 72

It seems as though it ought to be a simple thing, doesn't it? To become, or simply be, oneself? And yet evidently it's a challenge, and from the looks of it, an ageless one.

Perhaps this is why it is so important that we have heroes.

We think we gravitate to a certain figure because we want to become like them, but in fact, it is because they remind us of who it is we really are. We resonate with them because they resonate with us.

My December wish for you: that you take a few moments every day to consider how you can make 2024 a fuller, richer expression of who you are than ever before.



P.P.S. Possibly my favorite line about being who you are is this: “Be yourself; everyone else is taken.” Ironically, this fabulous quote is usually attributed to Oscar Wilde — yet there is zero evidence that Wilde himself ever actually said or wrote these words, or anything close. So it's a quote about being yourself ... attributed to someone else! (Yikes.)

* ABOUT THE WRITER

William Robertson Davies was not only one of Canada's most preeminent literary figures, he was also one of the most energetic and prolific authors of the twentieth century, period.

His live readings and lectures were enormously popular (sold-out halls were standard fare). He was active as a critic, editor, scholar (an expert on Shakespeare, among other topics), actor, professor, humorist, essayist, playwright — and, mostly famously, a compelling novelist of prodigious output, best known for his Deptford Trilogy (Davies tended to write in trilogies). He was awarded numerous medals, honors, and awards (among them an honorary doctorate from Oxford). He was the first Canadian to be inducted into the American Academy and Institute of Arts and Letters. There is a park in Toronto named after him. And so on.

While Davies was viewed in some quarters as the epitome of traditional British and European cultural values (as one writer put it, “a crusty Victorian who built Massey College into a quaint simulation of Oxford with its ‘high table’ meals and snuff-taking”), this is hard to square with the sheer exuberance and dazzling range of experimentation he brought to his writing. Davies was equally fascinated with the mundane details of everyday life, on the one hand, and Jungian psychology, archetypes, myth, and magic, on the other.

I mean, you gotta love a novelist who shoots his protagonist dead in the very first sentence — and then moves the story *forward* from there, taking the rest of the book to relate what happens to his now-dead character after that. (This is his penultimate novel, *Murder and Walking Spirits*.)

Davis is sometimes credited, among scores of other distinctions, as being one of the early forerunners of what has been called “slipstream fiction,” a sort of postmodern blend literary fiction, fantasy, and elements of science fiction.

Yet with all his achievements, the man is nowhere near as well-known to American readers as his American counterparts — an odd bias that extends across the Atlantic. Davies observed more than once that the British view of “colonial” (i.e., Canadian) writers was somewhat dim. For example, a review of one of his books in the *Times* of London began this way:

“To speak of a good novel from a Canadian writer sounds like the beginning of a bad joke.”

And that was a *favorable* review.

“With friends like that,” Davies commented, “who needs enemies?”

It reminds me of a story about Kate Atkinson — who is, full disclosure here, my favorite novelist of all time.

When Atkinson's first novel, *Behind the Scenes at the Museum*, came seemingly from nowhere to win the prestigious Whitbread Book of the Year prize in 1996, a number of established (and male) writers expressed shock and dismay that a "woman's book" written by a first-time novelist could have beaten out, among others, Salman Rushdie. One of the Whitbread judges, even while praising the book, gave it this left-handed compliment:

"I don't know if Kate Atkinson knows she was being very postmodern."

Considering that Ms. Atkinson spent four years working on a doctorate in postmodern American literature, it seems pretty likely that, yeah, she knew. Atkinson went on to win the Whitbread (then renamed the Costa Book Awards) twice more, for *Life After Life* in 2013 and two years later for *A God in Ruins*.

Robertson Davies left us in 1995, his last trilogy unfinished. Atkinson is still going strong. They are both my heroes.

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