

Sunday October 7, 2012

If you borrow, make it better

By Jim Taylor

Plagiarism is a dirty word. The mere suspicion of plagiarism can destroy the credibility of doctoral theses, shatter professorial dreams of tenure, and tarnish the reputations of novelists and columnists.

Plagiarism simply means using someone else's words as if they were one's own – in a sense, taking credit for another's work without giving credit.

As an obscure cartoon once warned academic authors, "Derive carefully!"

The mud of plagiarism has recently splattered one of Canada's best known newspaper columnists. Margaret Wenté writes three columns a week for the *Globe and Mail*, which calls itself "Canada's national newspaper."

In July 2009, Wenté wrote a column about Harvard Professor Robert Paarlberg, author of several books on biotechnology and the politics of food production.

Media critic Carol Wainio, adjunct professor at the University of Ottawa, writes a blog called *Media Culpa* that tries to hold journalists accountable for their manifold sins of omission and commission. Wainio asserted that Wenté's column had copied not only the content, but some identical wordings, from a column by Dan Gardner in the *Ottawa Citizen* a year earlier.

Reasons for similarities

I feel a need to defend Margaret Wenté. Not because I agree with her columns. But because I think she's being unfairly singled out. There is no writer (at least in the popular media) who doesn't plagiarize to some extent.

There, but for the grace of God...

Okay, you get the picture. In this column, you might have noted, I have already borrowed three times from unspecified sources.

Wenté has apologized: "There is a sentence from Mr. Gardner's column that also appears in my column. The only explanation is that I put it in my notes, then put it in my column. That was extremely careless..."

Carelessness, I can understand. When I interview an authority, I scribble notes frantically. I try to distinguish the person's direct quotes from my own comments. But if I don't write that story for several days – or, sometimes, several months – it can be hard to remember which was which.

I can also understand that two independent columns might seem similar. People who do dozens of interviews rely on well-rehearsed words to convey their message. It's hardly surprising that two writers relying on the same source might separately produce similar texts.

Of course, I'm being charitable. I'm assuming that's what might have happened with Wenté and Gardner.

If, in fact, Wenté deliberately stole Gardner's words to save herself work, she's comparable to an intestinal parasite. And if she thought Gardner expressed some thoughts better than she could, she should have given him credit.

Too much attribution

But there are limits to giving credit.

I've heard sermons in which every second sentence was attributed to some theologian. I don't want to know that preachers have done a lot of reading on a subject. I want to know what they have to say to me, right here, right now.

The same with newspaper columns. I want to read a relevant message. I don't want to waste my time and words reading endless acknowledgements.

A single column on a complex subject may require digesting a 75,000 word book to a mere 750 words. Not attributing every fact, finding, or insight to the original author does not mean I'm attempting to claim them as original.

Indeed, I sometimes wonder if I have ever had a truly original idea. My role, generally, has been to show connections with ideas that others have had first.

I contend that every writer borrows. Perhaps not intentionally. But we cannot help making use of words from other writers.

Before we write, we read. We talk. We do research. A good column depends not just on the immediate event, but on years of experience that enable us to sift truth out of bafflegab and bumblespeak.

If a phrase from a long-ago novel, play, or poem provides exactly the metaphor I need, I will use it. But I cannot always identify the source of words and phrases buried in the back corners of my mind, words that impressed me when I first encountered them.

I may not even realize I'm quoting someone else's memorable turn of words.

Building on others' efforts

Sometimes, I admit, I will deliberately exhume a familiar phrase or image, to draw an alert reader's mind to what Shakespeare or Dickens or the Bible also said about it.

Why not? Two Christian gospels – Matthew and Luke – plagiarized large chunks from Mark and an anonymous collection of Jesus' sayings. Shakespeare swiped plots from previous playwrights. Other writers repaid the compliment by borrowing from him -- Leonard Bernstein's *West Side Story* is a musical reprise of *Romeo and Juliet*.

Imitation, they say, is the sincerest form of flattery.

Which is why beginning writers deliberately imitate a favourite writer's voice – whether it's James Joyce or Ernest Hemingway, Gerard Manley Hopkins or e.e.cummings.

All writers borrow and build on other writers' words. It only becomes plagiarism when we don't bother writing something better with them.

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YOUR TURN

If you chase stories on the Internet, you'll have discovered that quite a few writers delighted in writing about Kate Middleton's, umm, exposure – usually just barely skirting the bounds of decency. See what I mean about the difficulty of avoiding double entendres – there's two in one sentence!

Warren Harbeck couldn't resist adding more: "Re your Sept. 30 article on Kate, wouldn't you agree – and forgive the pun – that on subjects like this, it's always better to see both sides?"

Clare Neufeld picked up on my closing line, "if you don't want people to know what you're doing, don't do it."

"I used to subscribe to this adage, too, even extending it to matters of faith, saying, 'if in doubt, don't do it.' However, I have found [these adages] to fall short, as most 'do/don't' laws inevitably do. I would rather that we continue the endless, fraught with fears and delights, challenge of learning and teaching discretion, based on the grace of commitment to verbal, written, or unwritten social contracts, etc."

Diane Robinson noted the same closing line: "Your final comment accurately sums up living in today's world. It's not just photojournalists, amateur photographers, and paparazzi that have cameras anymore. In today's world, it seems that everyone (or almost everyone) has a cell phone....and most if not all phones have camera capabilities, so.....whether we are trashing property during the Stanley Cup riots, taunting a school bus monitor, or taking our clothes off at someone's private estate, we can -- and should -- not be surprised when our actions are captured by the lens and then shared with the world! Is it an invasion of privacy? In some cases: yes. Should the individual's privacy be invaded? In some cases: yes...certainly when they are breaking the country's laws and/or society's social/moral/ethical parameters.

"The message? Think twice before you do [whatever] because sure-as-shootin' (pun intended) a camera is watching you."

Steve Roney agreed with my views, in general: "Public figures deserve the same right to privacy as anyone else, and Kate Middleton was not given it. The photographer probably should have been prosecuted as a Peeping Tom.

"More generally, I think any person's private life is, by definition, private, and not legitimate news. It should make no difference if that person is himself or herself famous. Calumny and gossip are not news. I'm not sure I see any exceptions, including the one you give, of Protestant televangelists. Their conduct is still a matter between them and their employers, that is, their denomination or congregation, and not anyone else's business. Not news.

"Unless, that is, a law is broken. Then I suppose it becomes legitimate news."

Finally, Constance St. Hilaire wrote a note of appreciation to those of you who write me, after each column. "As much as I appreciate how so many of your articles support or expand or sometimes challenge my own ideas, I especially appreciate the other readers whose educated and compassionate comments remind me that there is hope for the future of humanity."

I'll second that.

PSALM PARAPHRASES

I have started including a psalm paraphrase for the coming Sunday with my Soft Edges column, on Wednesdays. Why not on Sunday, you ask? Well, partly because psalms seem to me to fit better with the general mood of Soft Edges, which is more likely to deal directly with faith-related matters than these Sharp Edges columns. And partly because Soft Edges is about 250 words shorter than Sharp Edges, and so including the paraphrase on Wednesday won't make the e-mailing quite as long.

That does mean that if you want to receive the paraphrase, and are not on the Soft Edges mailing list, you'll need to subscribe. No charge, just send me a message, jimt@quixotic.ca. Or you can subscribe automatically by sending a blank e-mail to softedges-subscribe@quixotic.ca.

TECHNICAL STUFF

This column comes to you using the electronic facilities of Woodlakebooks.com.

If you want to comment on something, send a message directly to me, at jimt@quixotic.ca.

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You can access several years of archived columns at <http://edges.Canadahomepage.net>.

I write a second column each Wednesday, called Soft Edges, which deals somewhat more gently with issues of life and faith. To sign up for Soft Edges, write to me directly, at the address above, or send a note to softedges-subscribe@quixotic.ca

PROMOTION STUFF...

If you know someone else who might like to receive this column regularly via e-mail, send a request to jimt@quixotic.ca. Or, if you wish, forward them a copy of this column. But please put your name on it, so they don't think I'm sending out spam.

For other sources worth pursuing, try

- David Keating's "SeemslkeGod" page, www.seemslkegod.org;
- Alan Reynold's weekly musings, punningly titled "Reynolds Rap" -- reynoldsrap@shaw.ca
- Isobel Gibson's thoughtful and well-written blog, isabel@traditionaliconoclast.com
- Wayne Irwin's "Churchweb Canada," an inexpensive service for any congregation wanting to develop a web presence, with free consultation. <http://www.churchwebcanada.ca>
- Alva Wood's satiric stories about incompetent bureaucrats and prejudiced attitudes in a small town are not particularly religious, but they are fun; write alvawood@gmail.com to get onto her mailing list.
