



Written by [William F. Jasper](#) on November 20, 2012

Movie Review: The Pencil Has Spoken!

In this age of the Internet, iPads, smart phones, GPS, cloud computing, and phantasmagorical CGI animation, what wonders might one possibly unlock from studying a pencil? Yes, the common, lowly, old-school, wooden pencil. What can it possibly teach us moderns of the digital age, many of whom rarely even pick up one of those ancient cedar and graphite relics anymore to scrawl on processed cellulose?



Well, if this very ordinary instrument could speak, *he* might tell us that his humble appearance belies a very extraordinary reality. He might explain to us what a complex and elegant marvel he truly is and how his very existence and the multitude of processes that created him teach us some very wonderful truths about our human family and life on this planet.

Ah, but this mundane fellow *has* spoken, and what an eloquent spokesman is he! In a beautifully animated six-minute film, the Competitive Enterprise Institute (CEI) has brought to life Leonard Read's [I, Pencil](#), one of the classic essays of free-market thought in the 20th century.

In announcing the release of *I, Pencil*, the movie, on November 15, CEI noted — as Read had explained in his original essay — that no single person on Earth knows how to make a pencil, and yet, many billions of them are produced every year and distributed throughout our entire planet.

“The pencil, like most modern wonders, is the end product of an intricate chain of human activity that spans the globe,” notes the CEI press release. “There is no mastermind dictating the making of a pencil; not even the CEO of a pencil company could tell you exactly how to make one.” The CEI release continues:

It takes the little bits of know-how of thousands of individuals — loggers in California, factory workers in China, miners in Sri Lanka, and everyone in between — to bring an ordinary wooden pencil into being. By trading their skills and labor for wages, these individuals each bring the pencil a step closer into being.

This is the miracle of the free market. People who are strangers to each other — who might even hate each other if they ever met—are cooperating every day to produce goods that others want, need and enjoy. Markets compel men and women to voluntarily arrange themselves into efficient patterns of production through the pursuit of their individual self-interests. Without this constant spontaneous cooperation, the modern wonders of our world would not exist.

I, Pencil, the movie, communicates this important concept in an exciting animated style. It is a brilliant aesthetic achievement; a successful synthesis of thought, sight, and sound to convey a simple, but profound, message to a general audience in an attractive and accessible manner.

***I, Pencil*, the movie**

This is a wonderful movie that can serve as an excellent classroom stimulus in junior high, high school,



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and college. And to advance that effort, the folks at CEI have also produced two short follow-up films featuring commentaries by University of Illinois Professor Deirdre McCloskey, George Mason University Professor Walter E. Williams, Samford University Assistant Professor Art Carden, and Foundation for Economic Education (FEE) President Lawrence W. Reed.

CEI's "*I, Pencil* Extended Commentary: Connectivity" focuses on how a simple voluntary interaction in the marketplace involves conversation, connectivity, and cooperation among millions of individuals worldwide. In "*I, Pencil* Extended Commentary: Spontaneous Order," the commentators return to confront that perennial bugaboo of humankind: central planning. After all, how can we possibly expect that someone will invent the pencil and figure out all the sizes, colors, and types that are needed, and in what quantities, and where they are needed, and when — unless there is some mastermind, or some government agency to command it? Right?

Or, for instance, how would the mail ever be delivered without a government monopoly such as the U.S. Postal Service? Leonard Read tackled that particular specimen of central planning in his original 1958 essay. He wrote:

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."

Is Read's faith in free people to solve the problem of mail delivery without a government mastermind ill founded? Not at all, as he points out:

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!

And, of course, Federal Express, UPS, and other private delivery services prove every day that the *I, Pencil* principle of spontaneous order applies as surely to mail delivery as to virtually every other product and service we commonly utilize.

I, Pencil Extended Commentary: Connectivity

**I, Pencil Extended Commentary: Spontaneous Order**

CEI spokesperson Nicole Ciandella informs *The New American* that CEI intends to release an additional three commentary videos. This eventual video quintet will make for an excellent classroom encore to both the *I, Pencil* movie and essay.

In 1946, Leonard Read founded the Foundation for Economic Education (FEE), the nation's oldest free-market organization. Through its monthly magazine, *The Freeman* and its innumerable books, pamphlets, seminars, and audio and video presentations, it has had an enormous impact for promoting free-market, classical liberal, and libertarian thought. Among FEE's renowned publications are *The Law* by Frederic Bastiat, *The Theory of Money and Credit* by Ludwig von Mises, and *Economics in One Lesson* by Henry Hazlitt. Other heavyweight authors and lecturers at FEE have included Frederich Hayek, Walter Williams, Milton Friedman, Hans Sennholz, F.A. Harper, Murray Rothbard, and a host of other luminaries of free-market thought. However, perhaps none of these towering intellects reached as many people with the message of freedom, as did Leonard Read with his simple story, *I, Pencil*.

FEE president Lawrence Reed offered this benediction for CEI's film adaptation of Leonard Read's timeless tale:

For more than half a century, Leonard Read's classic story has opened eyes and changed minds by the hundreds of thousands. It humbles even the high and mighty as it reveals the wondrous achievements of individuals whose contributions are coordinated by nothing more than incentives and market prices. This film guarantees that the insights of Read's humble pencil will continue to work their magic for many years to come!

This reviewer could not agree more. It was more than three decades ago that I first came upon Read's "family tree" conversation with the sagacious Pencil. Flushed with the conceit born of freshly minted college degrees and the interminable philosophical disputations endemic to academia, I had considered myself a genuine "intellectual." Read's brilliant and guileless essay left me dumbfounded and humbled at my own ignorance of some of the most profound and astonishingly self-evident facts and principles of human action.

In the opening paragraph of his story, the illustrious Pencil quotes G. K. Chesterton's sage observation, to wit: "We are perishing for want of wonder, not for want of wonders." Indeed, we are awash with gadgets, gizmos, and high-tech wonders galore, but fail to appreciate the glorious wonder all about us. *I, Pencil*, I am happy to say, played a key role in enlightening this writer and enkindling in me a new sense of wonder so many years ago. I have no doubt that CEI's film rendering of this enduring classic will do the same for countless new viewers for many years to come. And that is something for which to be especially thankful, since a more widespread absorption of its lessons betokens a future more prosperous, moral, and free.



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