

Learning by Imitation

The previous articles called “An Honest Man” made me aware of the distinction, if there is one, between learning and imitation.

On *60 Minutes*, Michael Bubl  revealed that he had gotten to the level of international star and triple Grammy winner by imitating the greats (Frank Sinatra, Tony Bennett, etc.) from when he was 7 years old. Instead of formal instruction, he was encouraged by his grandfather to memorize a few of the “standards” and then a few more, until he was so comfortable singing that he claims he feels more at home on the stage than at home itself.

In many fine art schools of the past and today as well, students were assigned the task of spending a day or two at a museum with pad and charcoal copying the masters. I learned human anatomy as a kid by copying Superman and Captain Marvel’s exaggerated muscles. With a lack of formal gymnastic instruction in high school, my friends and I imitated parallel- and high-bar moves of the more experienced guys in the bigger high schools and colleges. Today, we all know of kids who work in the backyard imitating an impossible flying kick from a kung-fu movie until they convince themselves (and us) that it was not so impossible. We learned to speak by imitating our parents, we learned to walk not only because our legs are genetically designed to do so, but also because our parents walked. To a large extent, learning is accomplished by imitation.

Ah, but so is impartial or imprecise learning. When it was new, TV imitated radio and, to a lesser extent, the stage and the movies. Original TV did not have the audience’s imagination that came with radio nor the visual effects of the big screen; instead, its broadcasts were often stage shows, either variety programs or live dramas. Eventually, TV found its niche by taking what was relevant from the other genres and discarding or at least de-emphasizing the rest. In karate, Miyagi learned from Higashionna but added his own flavor and research in a way that made Goju integrate rather than imitate Naha-te. Mabuni clearly preserved the teachings of both Itosu and Hiashionna, but Shito kata, although imitative, are distinct from Shorin and Goju forms. They look uniquely like Shito kata because Shito successfully integrates aspects of its two root styles.

Successful integration is the stage that many apparently successful imitators never achieve. Sure, there are kids who can kick better than seasoned martial artists and there are artists who self-taught themselves into greatness, but there are many more who, talented or not, missed the important step of integrating their self-education and their innate talent in such a way that the results were both impressive and whole. To this day, I can draw a muscle-bound superhero better than most professional cartoonists, but I could never work for Marvel or DC because I can’t draw much else. The backyard kicker can do his favorite 3 kicks better than most TKD stylists, but he can’t spar or defend himself. Grandmaster Selmo Pochedenz may have learned Aikido, Shotokan, and Escrima before he began his MoPoDo style,

but he does not integrate its material so that its adherents, if there are any, would not be better served by studying its component parts separately, thus letting the integration happen in their own heads.

I never ceased to be taken aback by some styles' versions of the Pinans or other kata. It is obvious to me that one of their teachers simply imitated the outside form of the kata, never receiving instruction in its details or meaning, and therefore pass on a weak, almost meaningless version of something that should be rich in potential value.

But many of us first learned a kata or a waza by copying a book or video, if not a teacher, so what is the distinction between those who successfully learn by imitation and those who imitate, fail to integrate, and as a result, pass down more Poo Doo than does MoPoDo?

More on this next week.