*ST. ANDREW'S CHURCH*
*MEDIA DESIGN TRAINING FOR VISUAL WORSHIP*

# THE PREP

## Objective: Prepare yourself for studying a new thing

When I began designing graphics, it began with a little instinct, a few happy accidents, and lots of imitation. I had a few successes early on, then I tanked. Nothing looked good. Nothing felt good. So I embarked on a journey of self-study and examination, and now I know that a couple dynamics were at play.

First observation: After my initial good fortune, I suddenly was starting to compare my work with the work of 'real' designers and seeing things come up short. Knee-high to an ant short. I expected as much, given my lack of experience or training, but I was consumed with comparing my work to others, and it flattened me. Fortunately, as I mentioned above, I was on this journey of self-examination, and was in the midst of Jon Acuff's book Quitter. He told me:

**"Don't compare your beginnings to someone else's middle or endings."**

Jon gave me permission to accept that many, nay, most people will be better than me. He gave me permission to not be as good as my friend Matt who graduated from SCAD. Jon gave me permission to consider I was actually at the beginning of something new, and that thought stirred my spirit. And in his book Do Over, Jon gave me permission to be envious of their skills, but in a good way, in the way that stirred me to want to do better.

Second observation: While comparing is a no-no, there is great value in observing other people's work, both to figure out what you like, and to figure out why it works. Everybody is influenced by someone else. It has to work that way. There's only One who can create from nothing; everything else is created out of something. I began to delve deeper into this process of "re-creating", that is, using other peoples ideas, methodologies, designs, etc. I've developed a whole theory about sharing work, leveling the playing field, the filter that is me, and the pie which keeps getting bigger, but that's material for other lessons. I began to embrace "community" over "competition" and to appreciate the skill of other people. That good kind of envy, let's call it admiration, led me to ask myself, "What did they know that I didn't?"

Further, if there is nothing new under the sun, and if I was going to allow myself to imitate other peoples' work, I needed to understand the difference between copying/plagiarizing them and being influenced by them. When does an idea become mine? Mine enough to deliver a product to a client? How could I come up with fresh ideas that aren't blatant ripoffs? A few people helped straighten this out in my mind.

First, from the ad master himself, Don Draper: In season one, Don gives some advice to Peggy Olsen that sums up much of what I've learned and am still trying to apply:

**"Just think about it. Deeply. Then forget it. An idea will jump in your face."**

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I've learned much from Don, putting aside the revolving couch and the over-filled ash trays and endless flowing scotch. For example, the Kodak Carousel pitch from season 1 episode 13 is worth a few minutes of your time and I watch it every once in a while to be reminded of the importance of story-telling in making a connection.

For more consideration of this life-imitating-art-imitating-life cycle read Mitchell Sahlfield's post titled The Don Draper Method of Productivity where he unpacks this "think deeply" concept as a productivity tool. Take a minute to read it, and be sure to scroll down to the important part at the bottom of the post, where the author takes this statement apart. I don't know if art imitates life or life imitates art, but I do know I have had my best ideas in the shower after hours of examining other peoples' output, some deep thinking and lots of research.

Eric Spiekermann presents this same idea in this excellent video*. He's the king of typography and the video is worth your time. At least watch it to the 5:15 mark to see his heart. Bottom line for me, everybody is influenced by someone else, even the greats like Spiekermann, and as he says:

**"My life's work isn't what I've done, but it's the people I've influenced."**

There will be more time later to unpack what it means to "think deeply." It is not for the faint of heart as Cal Newton, author of Deep Work, explains in an interview with Srini Rao on The Unmistakable Creative podcast. Cal summarizes beautifully the importance of training yourself to think beyond the ping. This is a long podcast. Consider it extra credit. Or read the book.

(Update: This video is no longer available, but the gist of Spiekermann's premise is to read, research, and draw from many sources. Then put them away and go to sleep. Wake up in the morning and design something using your recollection of the ideas. That's what you can call your own. In effect, your ideas are the sum of the ideas of the people who influence you. And you have the opportunity to influence others in this never-ending chain of creativity.)

# "So what's the plan, Phil?"

In the midst of the longing to be a designer, not knowing where to turn, and being over 50 and not relishing the idea or expense of going back to school, this blog post by Karen Cheng showed up. It's a plan for self-study in design. She gave me a plan to follow and she gave me hope that my lack of credentials didn't make me illegitimate.

Within hours, thanks to Karen and Amazon, my first step toward following a plan was taken. Her first recommendation might be the best first investment I ever made. After spending time with Mark Kistler's You Can Draw in 30 Days book and a sketchbook, suddenly I understood shadows and lighting and perspective. Suddenly, I felt confident sketching. Suddenly, I had a tool in my toolbox to traverse that rocky path from my mind to a product.

From there, it's been a trip around the internets, learning from this vast collection of creative material and unwitting teachers the likes of Seth Godin, Todd Henry, Blaine Hogan, Steven Pressfield, Andy Crouch, Austin Kleon, Brian Koppelman, and more.

That's where I am. This has been my path. Yours will look different. You will follow other people. But getting started means getting some confidence in what you are doing. Getting started means allowing yourself to be influenced by the greats.

So where do we start? For our journey together, we start with The Blender Guru and his tutorial on understanding composition. In his very matter-of-fact presentation, he speaks volumes of principles of design, but better yet, he demonstrates with pictures. Life is always better with pictures. He makes us see that it's not rocket science, but knowing some rules can help in this create-on-demand world of designing stuff. We will watch this together and discuss, face to face.

To review, your assignment is:

1. Watch the Don Draper Kodak Carousel clip;

2. Read the blogpost on the Don Draper Method of Productivity;

3. Watch the first 5 minutes of Eric Spiekermann talk about creating original work;

4. Skim Karen Cheng's blogpost about becoming a designer;

5. Extra: The Unmistakable Creative interview of Cal Newton

Then, think deeply about this question:

**What do you feel is holding you back?**

Write down your answer. We'll discuss at our next meeting.

Next meeting: Discussion of **The Process**