

HENRY. M. HALFF

## WHAT HAPPENED TO THE CALLIGRAPHERS

*A Just-So Story*

**Abstract.** A parable is presented that contains lessons on how new technology affects the practitioners and craftsmen that it displaces.

This story, if it took place at all, took place in the city of Strasbourg in 1440 or thereabouts. At the time, an inventor by the name of Johann Gutenberg was seeking support for a new invention of his, an invention that he called a *printing press*. This particular invention could easily make any number of uniform copies of a single text.

At the time, making copies of text was the job of transcribers called calligraphers, scribes, or clerks, depending on their positions. Gutenberg decided to seek support in the calligraphic community by demonstrating his invention at a nearby monastery famous for its fine illuminated manuscripts.

Gutenberg succeeded in gaining an audience with the monks, and, on the appointed day, lugged his printing press, along with a text set in type, up to the monastery. There, in front of an interested but skeptical audience, he explained how the press worked, had his assistants run off a few copies, and passed the samples around. He also handed out key chains, memo pads, and refrigerator magnets imprinted with his name and contact information.

Looking out on the audience after the demonstration, he saw nothing but boredom and hostility in its eyes. With some trepidation, he asked, “Any questions?”

One monk, who seemed to speak for all of them, replied. “You say it’s easy to make copies using this contraption. Well, we’re all experts at making copies. How about letting us give it a try?”

“Well,” said Gutenberg, “I’m not entirely sure that your skills are all that applicable to my invention, and it does take some training.”

“Copying is copying,” replied the monks. “If your device really is easy, we should be able to make copies with it ourselves.”

So Gutenberg ran the monks through the process of setting type, inking it, and running the press. They were, with considerable difficulty, able to make a few miserable copies and a large mess.

After the demonstration, Gutenberg asked, with some trepidation, “So, monks, what do you think? Some cool invention, eh?”

The head monk replied, “Well, Mr. Gutenberg, to be kind, we don’t see much of a future for your invention. Just compare your copies with our beautiful illuminated

manuscripts, and you'll see that your product has a ways to go in the aesthetic department, to put it mildly. And as for ease of use, we'd rather make a thousand copies our way than try to use your contraption.

"We do, however, have some suggestions for you. Before you go off inventing stuff that won't ever be used, you should pay some attention to *our* needs. For example, we desperately need better inks. The flow of even our best inks is terribly uneven. And palm sweat is another terrible problem, perhaps *the* fundamental problem in the copying field. Our palms tend to sweat and ruin the paper underneath. If you could solve the palm-sweat problem, you would revolutionize the copying field."

Gutenberg, somewhat dismayed by this reaction, began packing his gear for its return trip. As he was closing the last crate, he noticed a small group of monks engaged in an animated discussion, apparently about something they saw in one of his printed samples. Just as he was about to leave, one member of this group said, "Not so fast, bub. We need to talk."

"About what?" Gutenberg asked.

The monk then said, "We're all members of a group known as the Letterform Design Society, and we find your work amazing. We're interested in the principles that govern the design of good letterforms. We want to know what makes them easily read and aesthetically pleasing. But we're stuck with a persistent problem. Every time we write a letter, it comes out differently. That's just the way human handwriting is. So, even if we knew the principles of good letterforms, we could never apply them.

"That is, until you came along. This invention of yours sets us free. We can take the time and care required to render a good letterform, and then cast it in lead type. Then your machine can churn out any number of perfectly consistent and identical copies.

"There are so many things that we'd like to try. First off, we could see how small we could make the letters. Your press can produce characters that are much smaller than those that we make with a pen. Just imagine the savings in paper. Pens are just too limiting!"

"My," said Gutenberg, "this is a heaven-sent coincidence if there ever was one. I've been looking for someone who can design letters for my type. Over in Mainz, I have a complete foundry set up to cast sets of type. We call them ...."

The monk interrupted, "Let me guess. If they're made in a foundry, you must call them 'fonts.'"

"Right you are!" exclaimed Gutenberg.

The monk turned to his compadres and said, "Boys, our days as calligraphers are over. We're heading to Mainz to design fonts. I guess we'll have to call ourselves, 'fontographers' from now on."