

When a Seed Yields a Melon or a Forest

The story, *The Other*, by Jorge Luis Borges, is about the uncanny encounter between a man named Jorge Luis Borges and his much younger self. The elder self, with the advantage of hindsight, is able to tell the other all that has transpired, from family history to books and career that still lie ahead of the younger self. Yet the story also tracks the deliberate flouting of causality and connection between the two.

Beneath our conversation about people and random reading and our different tastes, I realized that we were unable to understand each other. We were too similar and too unlike. We were unable to take each other in, which makes conversation difficult. Each of us was a caricature copy of the other. The situation was too abnormal to last much longer. Either to offer advice or to argue was pointless, since, unavoidably, it was his fate to become the person I am.

It is too unnerving to come face to face with the person who one was/will be in 50 years. So instead of planting a melon and reaping genetically the same melon, in Borges' story, differences are written into what ought to be a mono-trajectory, the "fate to become the person I am." In today's scientific context, some scientists are engaged in cloning, defined by the Cambridge Dictionary as "a type of genetic engineering that uses cells from one organism to create a second living organism that is genetically identical to the first." Does Dolly the sheep have the exact life as the sheep from which she was cloned? Would environment, for example, make any difference? What would be the result of mass cloning if individual identities no longer exist or count? Is Dolly subject to mutation or mutiny? While some individuals, especially those with "high net worth," seek immortality by similar acts of genetic engineering (I think ultimately it is **control** they are after, for death is the final giving over of control over who one is, and what one has), It seems safe to say that life is more messy and unpredictable. To use a familiar example, there are 26 letters in the Latin alphabet. The course from A to Z, however, is open to many permutations. Or to use biology as a more cutting-edge example, four letters A, C, G and T represent molecular compounds that form the building block of DNA which is found in every cell of every living being. Here is a summary from the Cleveland Clinic of what is, and how the DNA works. It is like a vast library of instruction manuals. These instructions tell your body how to create organs and tissues, how to function and what you look like.

Written entirely in four letters, DNA uses its own language to write the multitude of instructions. The body then reads these letters through:

Transcription: RNA — single-stranded nucleic acids that can carry messages — copies the instructions and carries them out of the nucleus.

Translation: Tiny decoding machines called ribosomes read the RNA messages and build proteins by linking together amino acids.

Post-translational modification, folding and transport: After translation, your cells make further changes to the proteins. Then, they're ready to help your body work.

“Those four letters are enough to write the story of every living thing — and make each one unique.”

(<https://my.clevelandclinic.org/health/body/dna>)

There is an afterword to this fundamental act of writing and reading:

“All known life on Earth uses the same genetic alphabet, consisting of four letters. Now, researchers at the University of California San Diego have demonstrated that one of biology's most essential enzymes [the E. coli bacteria] can accurately read and transcribe an expanded, eight-letter genetic alphabet. The findings provide important evidence that cells can process synthetic genetic information using their natural molecular machinery, advancing a long-standing goal in synthetic biology to expand the language of DNA. It could also allow scientists to custom-engineer biological systems that perform functions or produce compounds not found in nature.”

(<https://phys.org/news/2026-08-letter-dna-alphabet-accurately-natural.html>)

Human beings have done a pretty amazing job of deciphering, and writing subsequently upon the primary text. We have also caused unspeakable damage when we fail to understand that text, or one another in our own interpretations of the text(s).

“We were unable to understand each other. We were too similar and too unlike. We were unable to take each other in, which makes conversation difficult,” says the elder Borges in *The Other*.

Plant a melon and reap a melon? Human beings now have the skills to tinker with the genetic code to grow a “better,” bigger and more resilient melon. We have also come close to configuring as yet unknown seeds and reap the whirlwind. Among the materials for this subject, I appreciate Shi Cheng Yen (釋證嚴)’s understanding of sowing and reaping:

The student asks: “I cannot see what the 'cause' looks like.”

The teacher replies : "A cause is like a longan seed. If I told you it was a longan tree, you certainly wouldn't believe me, because no matter how you look at it, it appears to be nothing more than a seed; this represents the presence of a 'cause' but the absence of the necessary conditions.

"If you bury it in the soil and nourish it with sunlight and water, it will sprout, grow strong, and eventually blossom and bear fruit.

"A heart inclined toward giving is that seed. When the conditions are right, one must sow it promptly; in time, it will naturally sprout and flourish. However, this process takes time; you cannot expect to sow today and harvest in just a few days. If you were to dig it up to check on it, you might sever the roots of the very thing that was just beginning to sprout."

(Shi Cheng Yen [1937–]: *Jingsi Aphorisms*, Vol. 2 (Part II), Section 2: Religion – On "Cause and Effect")

Instead of a melon for a melon (which is not far from “an eye for an eye,” the principle of just deserts), Shi Cheng Yen’s embodied understanding of *karma* sees with practical eyes, and the eyes of love. Putting a seed in the soil without nourishing it (without the necessary conditions) yields nothing. Similarly it takes hope and love to see in an unremarkable seed its full potentials: the longan tree that will yield abundant fruits.

In an age that puts a premium on cash crops, massive industrial farming, high-tech agriculture, and what may be the next thing: “decentralised, farm-integrated model for cell-cultured protein production,”¹ I wish more farmers, and more educators would cultivate with the kind of vision and patience that Shi advises. It is a lesson she has practised for 60 years, with the seed of Tzu Chi.

I am thankful to Fr Louis for leading the class reflection from 種瓜得瓜 to 恩上加恩. Perhaps of all the blessings we have received, the most generous is this: Having made us in God’s image, God is wise enough and trusting enough to have also given us free will to probe, to understand, to write, and to amend.

¹ “Netherlands Inaugurates World’s First Cultivated Meat Farm”

(<https://www.greenqueen.com.hk/cultivated-meat-farm-dairy-lab-grown-netherlands/>)

Postscript:

A one-of-a-kind documentary film series, “Up,” that follows 14 children from wildly different backgrounds in Britain since 1964, will air its final installment this September. Set out to be an investigation about class, the series have turned out to be about lives, in some ways pre-scripted, but in many ways **alive** and off the script. See “70 Up review – a deeply moving conclusion for the 63-year-long TV experiment” (<https://www.theguardian.com/tv-and-radio/2026/sep/15/70-up-review-itv1-itvx>)