

The types of people we are

Our personal passions feel unique, distinguished. Most of the time they aren't.

by [Benjamin J. Dueholm](#) in the [March 2026](#) issue

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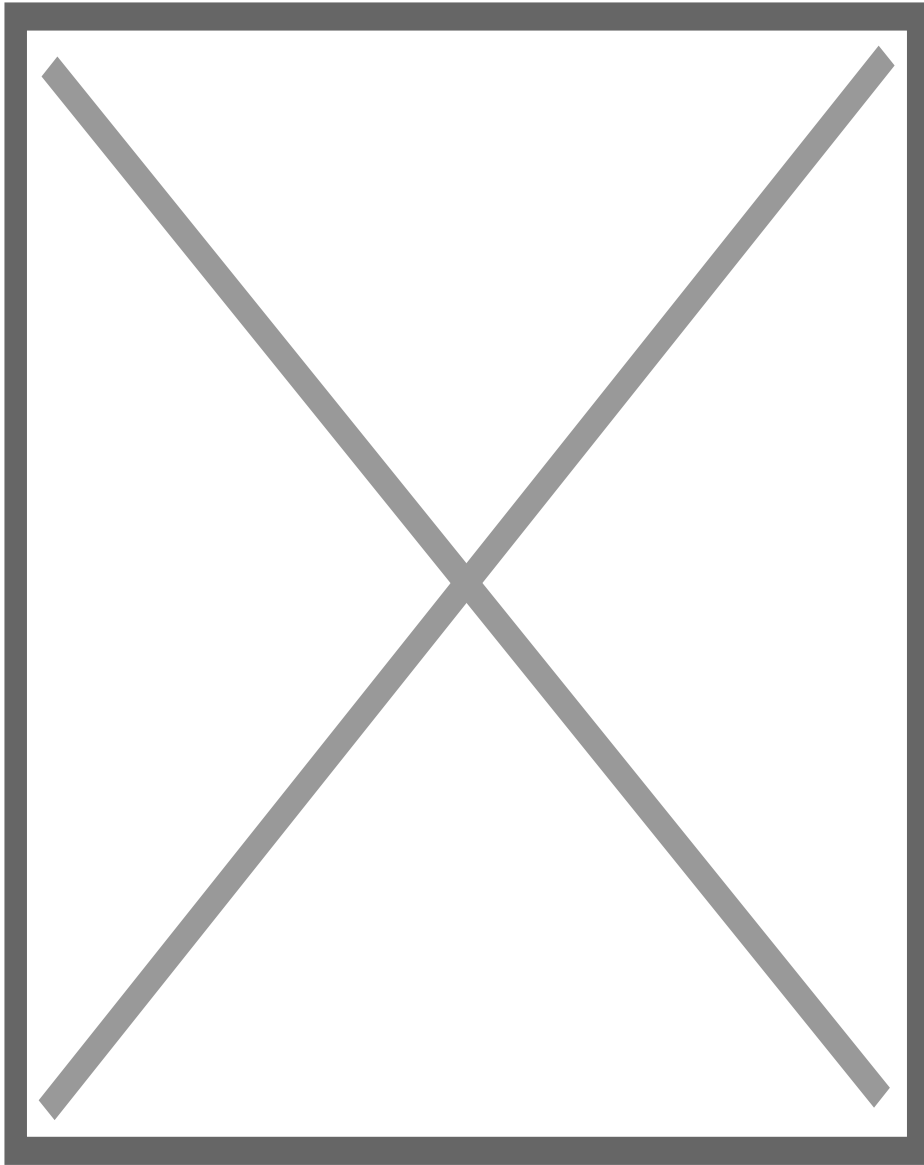


Illustration by Grace J. Kim

I have recently become a victim of theft.

Not of anything so vulgar or replaceable as money or as bureaucratically infuriating and costly as my “identity,” but something more intimate and personal. I was going to write something, perhaps a book, on a topic of peculiar fascination, wrapped in a narrative conceit involving a personal quest. I nurtured and cultivated this idea for

years, only to discover that someone had taken it. Down to small details! And not just the same project and quest, but at the same time of life I'd started it. This larcenous author even nicked my idea of having a debilitating fever in Munich, where I'd experienced a derailing bout of COVID in 2023. It was as though someone had seen into my drafts folder, my text messages, even my private conversations, and turned them into a book before I could.

To make matters worse, this idea was stolen from me ten whole years before I had it. Outrageous. It was such a flagrant theft that all it took to detect it was a belated subject-word search of my local suburban library's catalog.

In hindsight, I admit, it feels inevitable that someone else should have gotten there first. But enthusiasm and passion resist the obvious. Passion feels unique, distinguished, personal. To discover that one's passion project has already been done is to feel that a piece of one's individuality has been lost. I am not one but merely one of a type.

It's a common enough feeling. We "discover" an obscure band only to run into people who've known about it for years. We read a book that appears to us as forgotten but turns out to be hotly debated even now. We come to an artist, a movie, a style of cooking in unconscious reaction to our circumstances only to find out we were part of a broader trend (and not usually a very early part of it). Somehow, I don't feel like less of an individual when a friend shares something with me that I don't yet know I'll love, or when I impart my own enthusiasm to someone else. But when I have the illusion of finding something, it stings to learn that I'm just part of a crowd. Or even a niche.

In online discourse, there's a pigeonhole for everyone—Karens, debate bros, daily Chipotle eaters—to say nothing of the broader demographic categories to which we are all liable to be reduced. A few details, a few personal tics, a few volumes on a bookshelf are all you need to pin a person to the board of a type. It's a cheap, easy dopamine hit. On the other hand, it feels spiteful and unjust to be the one summed up in such derisive shorthand. I may eat Chipotle every day, but my enjoyment of their burritos is unique and pure! And there is so much more to me than that, anyway.

Both impulses—to fix a type and to resist being typed—contain something true. Our types capture a real thing about us, even if we remain irreducibly individual. My enthusiasm for the paintings of Pieter Bruegel the Elder and my craving—toxic, you might argue, without objection from me—to see them in person may characterize me as a "Bruegel bro." On the other hand, it is still mine, still embedded in experiences of surprise and recognition that no one could have on my behalf.

This is, I suppose, a theological realization, too. Do I wish to plead some originality before the Son of man when he comes to judge the nations of the earth? A special arrangement by which my path of sin and redemption may be distinguished from a mere type, from the hackneyed sheep and goats around me? It would seem that I do. And in a rude material sense this is valid. No arrangement of matter and energy exactly like each of us has existed before or will again. When I die, a vast archive of experience from the mundane to the ecstatic will vanish from the world, leaving only a few witnesses here and there to the deeply unoriginal types of guy I have been.

But for better or worse, Jesus of Nazareth does not seem to have found originality very impressive. His parables are filled with stock characters. The people he heals are usually anonymous and always preserved with the barest of detail. Even sin, that dullest and most redundant of human activities, simply sorts us into types that have existed time out of mind. That my aesthetic response to the gospels was at first so refined and literary can't possibly be impressive to him. To me, every day may be new. But to humanity as a whole—let alone to God—there is nothing new under the sun.

I checked out the book that I had meant to write. I even read it. I was dismayed to find that I rather enjoyed it. I came to appreciate the funhouse mirror it held up to the work of my own imagination. Thankfully, there were

some insights the author failed to glean from the project and some places where his preparation could have served him better. But he also pointed me to a lot of sources and ideas that had not otherwise occurred to me. And I was grateful, however grudgingly, for the sense of fellowship in my obsession. After all, it was not so different from Ash Wednesday or coming to the altar for communion. I confess before the whole company of heaven that I have been a cliché. I don't know if I will make anything out of my own version of this project. But at least, if I do, I won't do it alone.