

Wheaton's Law

2015-03-29 Reflection by Pastor Kris Cervantes
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My goodness, it's lovely to be back with you folks. I've missed you. I hear that you missed my Powerpoint skills. Yep, that's what I hear. Hopefully you also missed my charm and wit, but actually, I'm fine with being missed for my exciting nerd skills. In fact, that's a perfect lead-in to what I want to talk about today.

My topic today is Wheaton's Law, a simple axiom perhaps not coined by, but certainly made famous by, lovable geek Wil Wheaton. If you are a fan of the Big Bang Theory, you may have seen him there; if not, he's this guy: (slide 1). But when I was growing up, I knew him as (slide 2) Ensign Wesley Crusher, of the Starship Enterprise (the Next Generation, of course).

I wasn't what most folks would have called a cool kid. Physically, I was stick-thin, had thick, board-straight black hair, thick glasses, buck teeth – yeah, I was the whole enchilada. (slide 3) That's me on the left, on one of my good fashion days. Mentally, I was heavily into dragons, horses, spaceships, faeries – spelled with an A-E, thank you – post-apocalyptic dramaramas, and so on. (slide 4) By the way, this is *one* of the exciting things that happens when you go to Google Image Search and type in “dragons faeries spaceship.”

I vividly remember sitting down with my Dad to watch the first episode of Star Trek the Next Generation in September of 1987. I even remember that we had to watch on the crappy TV in my parents' room, because the good TV was being used to watch something everyone else in the house wanted to see.

But this isn't a story about what I learned from Star Trek, because Judy already did that reflection, and I hear it was awesome.

So, going back to Ensign Wesley Crusher (slide 5), I wasn't even cool enough to know that the world of science fiction absolutely *hated* this poor kid. In 1987, he was 15 years old, and among the first things internet-users did was set up altnet groups called “die.wesley.die” where they could hang out and talk about how much they hated this child. My pendulum swung in the other direction, and somewhere moldering in the attic is a folder which contains a signed 8x10 photo of Wil Wheaton, as well as my membership form for the Official Wil Wheaton Fan Club. I wrote a letter to Wil Wheaton to get that photo, and I mailed off an application to join that fan club. I was THAT NERDY.

Fast-forward 20 or so years, and by this time I'd acquired a thin veneer of coolness – or I told myself I had, anyway – and I knew people weren't supposed to have a crush on Ensign Crusher, and I was all grown up anyway, and my crushes had moved on. (To actors who played hobbits. In Middle Earth. But still.) Wil Wheaton had pretty much vanished from my consciousness, but sometime around the early naughts – that's how cool I am, I can refer to the early 2000's as the naughts – he started showing up on the pop culture radar again.

The start of his rediscovered fame was probably a speech he did at PAX World 2007, a video gamers convention, in which he talked about how awesome it is to be a nerd. The takeaway, as Wheaton himself confirmed on his blog later that month, was a message which was later canonized as the Rule of the Internet, aka, Wheaton's Law. It's short, just four words: “Don't be a...”

Let me just take a little side trip real quickly here. (slide 6)

I'm going to tell you, for the rest of this reflection, that Wheaton's Law is “Don't be a jerk.” But in fact it is “Don't be a Richard Nixon.” So if you want to go Google it later, or embroider it on a handkerchief, use the

actual four words, “Don’t be a Richard Nixon.” But because this is church, I’m going to pretend that the four words are “Don’t be a jerk.”

Wil’s other axiom, the thing he says most in his blog posts, on Tumblr, on Reddit, is “Always be awesome.” “Don’t be a jerk” and “always be awesome.” You can see why I like this dude, right?

Being a nerd is only a problem in a first-world sense of the word “problem.” I’m aware that being bullied because you’re [air quotes] “too smart” is, like, a speck on the eyeball of a fly in the larger macrocosm of problems. (Also please note the air quotes around “too smart;” I’m no Einstein, I’m just sharp enough to get myself into trouble.) But being bullied because of your brains, your lack of coolness, your endless, silly, awesome passion about minutiae – well, bullied is bullied. It sucks.

Unfortunately, experiencing bad behavior doesn’t always lead to good behavior. The bullied, in some cases, become the bullies. I think we humans are particularly prone to this mistake in adolescence; it’s hard to grow out of those patterns once they’re set, and see to the other side of the behavior that we’re propagating. There’s even a sense that “If I got bullied, then other people have to be bullied in order to make it into my in-group” – fraternity hazing comes to mind. These attitudes and behaviors, overt and covert, conscious and subconscious, lead us to act like jerks.

The good news is, the idea behind “Don’t be a jerk” is not a new one – almost every religious movement has had a Golden Rule, and atheists and agnostics think just as much as the religious about how to be good human beings. The bad news is, we’ve been talking about this stuff for a long time, and we’re still not there.

I think what it comes down to is that in some ways, we’re fighting biology. (In other ways we aren’t – I’ll get back to that.) Humans are just big, articulate mammals, when it comes right down to it. It wasn’t all that long ago that the average lifespan of the human being was 30 to 35 years or so – our best estimate of Paleolithic human life expectancy is about that. It wasn’t until the 20th century that life expectancies around the world topped 65 years. What that says to me is that we had about 200 centuries where we had to do a LOT of living – including competing for food and mates – in just a few years. And then we’ve had about 100 years where there’s been a large proportion of our species’ population which would live longer. Plus, of course, there are now so damn many of us, we’re in little danger of immediate extinction if we don’t procreate and pass along our genetic code.

Do you see what I’m getting at? I’m just spitballing, here, but it seems to me that shorter, more precarious lifespans equal a more desperate struggle to stay alive. And when the basic needs of life – food, water, space, procreation – aren’t met, we are animals who will fight to get those things.

So even for those of us who are lucky enough to be born into a country where our basic needs are likely to be met, there are all these millennia of evolutionary biology which says “Stuff should be mine, not yours” and “probably things that are different are bad because they may kill me.”

I know none of these thoughts are exactly original. But it’s helpful to be reminded of these ideas sometimes. I was raised by people who thoroughly indoctrinated me into a culture that says “Don’t be a jerk,” so my first instinct isn’t to be a jerk – I can generally hesitate in the face of unpredictable or unpleasant behavior and make a choice about how to act. But... not always.

Driving is probably my Achilles heel, when it comes to jerk-ish behavior. I have the world’s worst potty-mouth when it comes to being in the car, and for those of you who know how bad my language is on a regular, casual basis, you know I’m really saying something. (Prior knowledge of how much I swear:

another reason it's weird getting a job with people who've known me for at least six years, and in some cases 40 years.)

When I talk to other drivers – and I do – I am capable of being the biggest Richard Nixon you've ever seen. Luckily they can't hear me – as my kids like to remind me – but it's still bad behavior. Satisfying in the immediate moment, it leaves me feeling crummy just a few seconds later (often while noticing that the person I'm creatively cursing up and down is an 85-year-old woman).

Not being a jerk would definitely improve my attitude, outlook, and day in those cases.

Generally speaking though, when we act like jerks, it's not in isolation, where the only person affected is ourselves. Oh no, we're really good at being jerks *in groups*. We're maybe best at being jerks communally. However, this is not one of those cases where doing things together is a good idea.

I'm going to give you some scenarios, each one of which could be addressed with an application of Wheaton's Law. After each one, I will prompt you for advice to our imaginary protagonists. (Hint: the phrase I hope you'll say is "Don't be a jerk.")

Scenario: George is online, scrolling through Facebook, when one of his acquaintances posts a meme so egregiously stupid, George opens up a comment box and prepares to rip the poster in, out, and sideways.

George, take this advice: "DON'T BE A JERK."

Scenario: Janet is in line at HEB and oh my GOD, the guy in front of her – 97 if he's a day – is taking FOREVER to get out a checkbook – a CHECKBOOK, FOR GOD'S SAKE – and write a check, and oh no, she can also see that he's fumbling in his wallet for some coupons. Before she can stop herself, Janet is shifting from foot to foot, sighing loudly, and rolling her eyes.

Janet, could you please just think, and "DON'T BE A JERK."

Kevin is a legislator, and the people who elected him really liked it when he talked about cutting taxes and the sanctity of marriage – his definition of marriage. A reporter has just come to him for comment on a news story about how a woman was denied hospital access to her lifelong partner, and the reporter would like a comment from Kevin about the situation.

Kevin, I'm begging you to be open-hearted, and seriously: "DON'T BE A JERK."

Andreas is a pilot, going through a really terrible time with his mental health. On a short flight from Spain to Germany, Andreas considers locking the pilot out of the cockpit and ending his life, then and there.

Andreas, we know it's too late. But I can't help wishing someone had had the chance to tell you, "DON'T BE A JERK."

The thing about being jerk is, it can have really small repercussions – I might feel a rush of easily prevented irritability while driving behind someone who's out for a Sunday stroll – or it can have *really big* repercussions. And I know Andreas Lubitz's mental health was not in a state simple enough to be swayed by "Don't be a jerk." But just as we can't squeeze the toothpaste back into the tube, acts of violence to ourselves and others – little ones, big ones, medium ones – can't be taken back. We can atone, we can apologize, we can determine to change *in the future*, but we can't take it back.

It would be much more effective to stop ourselves from acting like jerks in the first place. It would be a much better way to show love to the world and one another. It's a start – a small and simple start, which should make it easy to do, right?

Let's not be jerks, together.