

If we do not stop to help each other, what do we become?



Jeff Atwood

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Yesterday, I received this email as a response to [You Can't Vibe Code Love](#). It's such a remarkable and powerful statement that I asked permission to share it here, in its entirety, with personal information redacted:

Hey Jeff,

Hope you and your family are doing well.

Just jogging your memory; I reached out to you (and John Carmack) about how difficult interviewing had become despite me being a stellar engineer at my work. You offered some words of wisdom, wrote me a postcard, which I still have, and stickers (which my kids loved).

I took a leadership coordination role in Tokyo, and it freed me from the interview process I hated, and I'm still programming. Through the public school here my family found our way into a community, which brings me to why I'm writing.

I've been thinking about Stack Overflow drying up and honestly; I feel profoundly sad.

2013 I was active duty in the Air Force. Simultaneously I was also going to college full time remotely. I was deployed in Zamboanga Philippines. The Zamboanga Siege happens. Over 100 people killed, 120,000 civilians displaced. It was warfare in a populated city where nobody should have every been caught up in that to begin with. For 3 weeks this went on.

I was still doing college. I still had homework, tests, projects. All of that needed to be done.

With everything happening around me, missing my projects and homework became a huge risk. Everyday was a fight to do my job and help these people, and do my school. I would cry a lot looking at my textbooks not sleeping. The smoke from the burning city would come in the cracks of the buildings I worked and lived in.

I had a Microsoft Surface because it was perfect for someone who was flying around with equipment on vehicles that vibrated all the time. I swapped the plate out from my vest and slid in my Surface so that I could still do my homework if we had to leave. That's how important this was to me.

Sometimes I would get stuck, and I needed someone to just nudge me in the right direction.

I actually come from a family with a few software engineers. I have friends who were software engineers. I reached out for help. The standard response from everyone fell between ignoring me or telling me I need to "do it myself".

You know who did help me? **Random strangers on Stack Overflow**. People who had nothing to gain from helping me other than just trying to help someone in need.

That meant so much to me. I felt a connection to people through a community.

And it meant the world.

An LLM would have done exactly what I wanted back then. But would it have given me what I needed?

At the time, **I needed to know somebody cared enough to help me.**

You, your colleagues, and random strangers in the Stack Overflow Community, really helped me. It was more than answering my questions. You gave me your time. That made me feel like I mattered. The fact my questions could help other people in my predicament made me feel like I was part of something.

An LLM can't do that.

So when I watch communities hollow out, replaced by something that gives answers but doesn't give me a single thought... I get depressed. Because we're losing something that was always there but I didn't notice. It's like losing gravity.

Thanks for everything.

If you ever find yourself in [city] I'd love to say thank you personally.

Hope all is well,

D

Perhaps the LLMs are a reminder that we should make an extra effort to cultivate relationships with each other and form communities online – communities that belong to us, not some billionaire. Communities where we regularly stop to help each other, because that's how we learn too. And if we do not stop to help each other... what do we become?



Written by Jeff Atwood

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vilx_

5h

Hello! Is anyone here anymore? Oh, what irony would it be, if this place had nobody to read this either.

I understand what you're saying, and this got me thinking about the next question - "why?" Why are the online communities drying up? Why are we becoming more isolated? Is it really just the nefarious machinations of large corporations? Or is there something else?

Because to me it seems like... well, corporations DO affect the way the world is going, but they also are kind of... reactionary? Like, they don't create new wants, needs and desires in people, they just take the ones that are already there and (ab)use them as much as they can. They give people what they want - and people just aren't very good at wanting things which are good for them.

I'm thinking of other places where human contact has been slowly going away in my life. For example, in a supermarket I **prefer** to use a self-checkout. In McDonalds, I **prefer** to use the ordering kiosk. Because it feels more... relaxed. If I'm talking to another human, I feel the need to be quick and efficient and not waste their time. The machine doesn't care though. Unless there's a queue to use them, I can just take my time and move at my own pace.

And it's similar when deciding to ask a question online. A chatbot is much faster and convenient, and you're not imposing yourself on other people.

Another example - COVID gave a lot of people (especially us, software developers) the opportunity to work from home, and most people have become... quite attached to this arrangement. There is real resistance in going back to the office. And often it also works in the favor of companies, who can now downsize their offices. Not needing to commute is a really convenient time-saver, and also good for the environment. Plus it doesn't really feel very isolating, unless you're very extroverted.

And on topic of helping others, especially strangers - for a long time now I've marveled at how awkward it feels to give money to a beggar. It just feels... wrong, somehow. With my rational mind I can think this through - that 1 or 2 euros is not going to be a noticeable loss in my budget. I spend more on a whim when buying lunch or games on Steam. And it could make all the difference in the world for the person receiving. Or they could spend it on booze and drugs. But it would not be MY problem, it would not be MY choice. There's no moral gray area here, as far as I can tell - giving is the right thing to do, period. And yet... why does it feel so wrong? Unusual.

Similarly for helping people online with what is obviously their homework. Is this someone who is genuinely struggling, and maybe doesn't even know how to ask a good question; or is this someone lazy who wants others to do their work for them? If I tell them the answer, have I helped them to grow, or have I enabled them to avoid growing? Again - this *shouldn't* be MY problem. But it feels like it is...

And so... I really don't know. It's easy to blame things on "the bad corporations", like it's

easy to blame obesity on “super-palatable junkfood” - but at the heart of it, it’s our own bad choices. Corporations are just feeding into that and profiting off of it.

But what’s the fix? I don’t know...

2 replies



HJVT

4h



vilx_:

It’s easy to blame things on “the bad corporations”, like it’s easy to blame obesity on “super-palatable junkfood” - but at the heart of it, it’s our own bad choices.

That’s true, in the same way that getting addicted to heroin or gambling is a choice. Deciding to try a thing once feels like a low stakes choice, but our brains are so easy to reward-hack, especially when the daily life is full of drudgery and economic precarity.

And with junk food specifically, there’s a whole industry hooking kids on it. Like, it is absolutely mental to let a fastfood chain run a school cafeteria, but that is a thing in the US.

1 reply



dark.pony

▶ vilx_ 4h

Don’t worry, you are not alone. At least one more soul is still here, reading. Both of you raised brilliant points, so thought-provoking.

Never written here before, but inspired by Jeff’s message, made a small effort to sign up and reply.



joshuaslocum

3h

Jeff,

Just wanted to say that Stack Overflow really helped me out when it first came out. I started reading your blog around 2008. I left the programming world in 2017 and started my own small business and no longer work in software, but I still really enjoy reading your blog.



vilx_

▶ HJVT 1h

Yes, this... is an open question for me still. Where is that border between “you should have known better, this is your fault” and “you could not resist this and it’s not your fault”? When it comes to our own desires, what counts as being under our control (and thus our responsibility), and what doesn’t?

There’s madness on both ends of the scale - either you’re responsible for everything, including drug abuse; or for nothing, including the most grievous of crimes. You could argue that you’re just a product of your specific circumstances -

argue, that you're just a product of your specific circumstances genetics/upbringing/experiences/etc - and thus have no real choice over your actions. Anyone in the exact same shoes as yours would have acted the same way. And you can also argue, that everything you do while being conscious is still a choice and thus you are fully responsible for it.

There is even a paradoxical (yet necessary) example from real life. We all know that a person under the influence of alcohol or drugs often is "less in control" of themselves. They do things that they normally wouldn't if they were sober. However in a court being under influence makes you MORE guilty/responsible, not less. I understand *why* that is so, and I agree that the end result is correct, but... ehh... I can't make it all make logical sense.

So, like... I don't know. Do you have a nice, clear criteria how to determine what is under a person's control (and responsibility) and what isn't?

[1 reply](#)



HJVT

[▶ vilx_](#) 10m

I don't think it's about deciding what is a personal choice and what is not. Ultimately 1) nobody is a perfectly rational spherical being in a vacuum, 2) we should focus on what we can control.

Which is why to me, the point of having society is to make it easier for it's members to make good choices. This is why I believe in Portugal-style drug decriminalization, and why I believe that eliminating food and housing insecurity world-wide is a topmost priority after combating the climate change.

Would there still be some violence if everyone had the same access to basic necessities, education, opportunities? Sure, personal conflicts happen. Would people make bad choices like operating dangerous machinery while under some form of temporary impairment, or going to a crowded space while sick? Sure. But it would be a lot easier to argue that those are **personal choices** than in the world where not going to work while sick means a risk of losing your income and going hungry, where organized crime may be the best employer around.

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