22:04 More Letters from Screwtape

by the Demon Wormwood, and certainly not by Manul Laphroaig

My good neighbors,

Some of you surely remember those letters from a certain Uncle Screwtape to his nephew Wormwood that C.S. Lewis published eighty some years ago. Though some discount those letters as apologetics, a believer's fictional account of demons discussing the best way to corrupt a well meaning (but poorly behaving) soul into perdition, I've often wondered with which modern sins Screwtape might be corrupting his patients these days.

Imagine my surprise when a mistake of the post sent the following to my door, which I reproduce faithfully and without redaction or comment.

–PML

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My dearest nephew Malört,

I'm overjoyed to have heard that your patient still spends long, wasted days on social media, seeing that others have adventures but never participating in them first hand. The cat videos worry me a little, but so long as he can't give the cat noms or scritches I guess it can't feed his soul.

Do be careful, though. The same Internet that feeds your patient and endless supply of computer-generated voices reading forum posts over a video game is entirely capable of giving him more dangerous things. It can teach him to repair a car, and it has all the novels that we worked so hard to have censored back in my uncle Screwtape's day.

Censorship back then the real deal. We had so much fun having our patients light a pyre and tossing books into it, that we eventually forgot the whole point was to keep the books from being read. These days, the Opposition has perverted our fine tradition into something called Banned Book Week, where they give away free copies of the books we worked so hard to squash! One of them even portrays your great grandfather Behemoth as a pudgy cat, thrown out of street cars *after* paying his fare and getting into a shoot-out with the NKVD. How insulting.

Keep me apprised of your patient's progress, and be sure to watch for any signs of his finding anything useful out there.

In service of our Lord Below,
–Wormwood

Malört, we have to talk.

I read in your last letter that your patient has declared himself to be a "computer programmer," and that his television set has been off for a week while he repeatedly stumbled through the same chapter of a 21 Days book.

You needn't worry that two more weeks will destroy your careful work in maintaining his illiteracy, but two more months might see you transferred to Search Engine Optimization or some other department with no souls to corrupt. Pay attention!

A number of strategies might work here, but I heard of an excellent new one from your cousin, Legion. The idea is not to dissuade your charge from learning to program, but to slowly twist the idea of programming until he learns nothing useful.

Begin with the choice of language. Ages ago, we'd start endless debates about whether BASIC was harmful and whether Pascal was for idiots. That kept good engineers from learning to read spaghetti code or use a language with safe strings, but now language arguments are going out of fashion. No one cares to debate them endlessly, just as the humans have largely forgiven one another for using different text editors.

No, the trick these days is Artificial Intelligence. They might call it Large Language Models, and they recently called it Machine Learning, but the beauty is that the user *feels* like he's programming a computer while never actually writing any code.

So direct him back to the thirty-second videos, and whisper in his ear that "prompt engineering" is the bees knees. Get him to scroll endlessly, and know that if he does try some stuff on the prompt, he will never see the endless gigabytes of linear algebra beneath it all. It will feel like it makes sense, at least for thirty seconds, and then there will be another video.

Your uncle,
–Wormwood

Nephew Malört,

You are awfully worried that your patient has joined a hackerspace, and not without reason. After that gambit of yours to make him unemployed for a few months, he now has time on his hands to join a club, and there's danger that club might teach him something.

To prevent this, you just need to make the space a hassle for him instead of an inspiration. Take soldering for an example: if he keeps at it, he will quite soon become good at it. And if he gets good at it, he'll be able to assemble surface mount kits that the others cannot, which might give him the confidence to design his own. This can't be allowed to continue!

So whisper a little in his ear. Make him turn the iron too hot, or let it crust up overnight when no one is watching, to get those barnacle covered tips that make an expert struggle.

If he uses enough flux, tell him it's too much, and if he really uses too much that's not a problem, so tell him it's an embarrassment to his grandfather's grandfather that so much flux is wasted on an LED throwie.

When he makes a reparable mistake, like using the wrong resistor value, be sure to fill him with shame. And if no magic smoke escapes, double up on the shame, as if he's the very first to have an LED that's a little bright or a little dim on account of its series resistor.

When you come visit the eighth circle, we might discuss other ideas. My grandfather once got some monks to fight for a century over whether they were "of" the Enemy or "with" the Enemy, and I bet we could trigger a similar fight between 60/40 and lead-free solder.

–Wormwood

Nephew Malört,

In your last letter, you made smug references to your patient "blinking LEDs with an Arduino," and I worry that you don't understand how serious this might be. Arduinos might use 8-bit microcontrollers, but they are programmed in an easy dialect of C!

And worse, Arduino is a dialect of C for which a thousand convenient examples are shared without intimidation. If your patient first blinks LEDs, he might later blink them in sequence, or display the temperature on them. Pretty soon he might extend the examples with original code, and I worry that you might make side remarks about this too, ignoring the danger.

For the danger in these blinky lights is that they are projects. In the same way that one might fail to learn Spanish from a book for years, but quickly learn the basics when there's no other way to buy food, a project has the power to make a boring language exciting. Your same patient—the one who a few short months ago wasted a month without getting to the second chapter of his 21 Days book—might soon finding himself *giving a shit* about C.

Once he gives a shit, how long do you expect it might take him to learn a language with just 32 keywords?

–Wormwood

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Uncle Wormwood,

I write to you just before sending my resignation to Our Father Below. The Patient has indeed picked back up his 21 Days book, and this afternoon I overheard him explaining pointer arithmetic to a friend.

I'm ashamed to say, the explanation was right.

Your disgraced nephew,
–Malört