

Consider Your Wake by Andy Smallman

There are lots of ways to consider how what we do impacts the people around us, both right away and in the future. Perhaps the most common is the idea of the “footprint” we leave behind.

Me, I prefer the image of a boat’s wake and used it for years in my conversations with the teenagers I taught.

Among the things I like about the wake image is that a wake is strongest when it’s new and close, and it comes in contact with lots of things as time passes. In this way it is significant both right away AND in the future, the form of significance just being different.

Understanding this, I think, helps people become more mindful of their actions, their words, and their thoughts.

Consider this further.

If you’re in the water near a moving boat, the closer you are to it the more its wake impacts you. The wake bounces and rocks you, and can even submerge you, overwhelm you.

The bigger the boat, the bigger the wake.

The faster the boat is moving, the bigger the wake.

The same holds true with our actions. The bigger our actions, the bigger the impact. The faster we act and react, the less thought we put into our actions and the greater the temptation to say something we’ll regret later.

Even as time passes or with people we aren’t as close to, our actions have significant impact. This is best illustrated by the Butterfly Effect, “namely that small differences in the initial condition of a dynamical system may produce large variations in the long term behavior of the system.” (Wikipedia).

What may first seem like a small thing, one we may not even recognize as having any importance, has a huge impact on the future.

For instance, if at a social gathering I am overheard making an obnoxious remark, someone hearing me may choose to avoid me, thus denying me what could have been a significant friend or someone who might have been a personal benefactor in some way.

How often has something like this happened, that we lose out on an opportunity because of some off-hand remark we've made or action we've taken?

Of course, there can be positive wakes, too.

You've met people who leave a positive wake, I'm sure. We are all drawn to people like this. They are naturally warm and put those around them at ease. They have a knack for helping you feel more like your true self. They not only accept you for who you are, they have a way of helping you become more fully who you are.

In reading the book "My Grandfather's Blessings" by Rachel Naomi Remen I learned of the legend of the Lamed-Vov as told to her by her grandfather.

The lamedvovnik are 36 righteous people in the world whose job it is to carry the weight of human suffering. No one knows who they are, including the lamedvovnik themselves. Not knowing makes it important to behave as if you might be one of the lamedvovnik AND to treat others as if they might be.

Why?

Because if there are less than 36 lamedvovnik, the world will collapse.

Taking the story to heart creates a new awareness for me. I have a significant responsibility, as we all do, to treat people with compassion, understanding and empathy.

What if I am one of the lamedvovnik?

What if the bus driver, the baker, or the old man crossing the street slowly when I'm in a hurry in my car is a member?

Thinking this way, it is important I do my part to behave righteously. When I greet everyone I meet with a heart filled with compassion, I leave behind a positive wake.

So I would encourage my students to consider what their actions, words, and thoughts leave behind, and how they may impact what is made available to them and others in the future.

We are continually inventing what is available to us as individuals, and collectively we are continually inventing what is available to us as a species.

I am someone who believes that our individual power to have doors be open for us, individually and collectively, rests in how we behave, how we act, talk and think, in the present moment.

(I work to promote ordinary acts of kindness. Learn more at kindliving.net. The illustrations were drawn by artist Fish Astronaut. This article contains an affiliate link.)