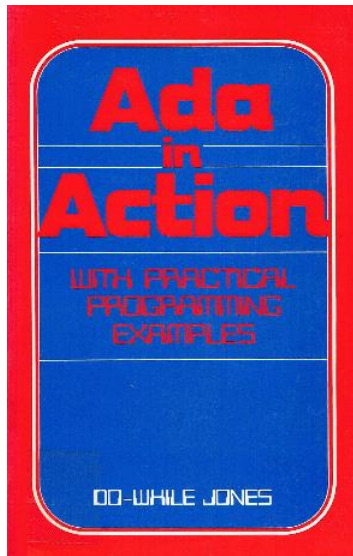


A Has-Been's Reflection on Fame

Now that I am an old man, I realize I wish someone had told me these things when I was young. I hope you can learn from my experience.



Today (15 May 2019) is the 30th anniversary of the book-signing party for “Ada in Action,” my book on software programming using the Ada programming language. That day, in 1989, was near the beginning of my 13 years as a software celebrity (1984-1997). In September of 1987, Ed Yourdon (of Yourdon and Constantine fame) invited me to write a book for Yourdon Press. Instead, I took the offer from John Wiley & Sons. In retrospect, that was probably a mistake because Yourdon Press certainly would have pursued a more aggressive marketing campaign to a targeted audience, and sales probably would have been better. Wiley just dumps a bunch of books on the market without really promoting any of them. That makes sense from Wiley’s perspective. Why spend a lot of money marketing software programming books when cookbooks are flying off the shelf? A small publisher like Yourdon would have been more motivated to sell every book in their catalogue.

There are two lessons I hope you will learn from this. First, producing a good book is only half the job. Marketing the book is the other half. Furthermore, selling a good book is harder than writing a good book. Many authors fail because they expect their excellent book to sell itself. It won’t. This is true of other products—not just books. Everything needs to be advertised. Second, I discovered a bigger publisher isn’t always better. You might be better off as one of a few clients of a small agency than one of a million clients of a large agency.

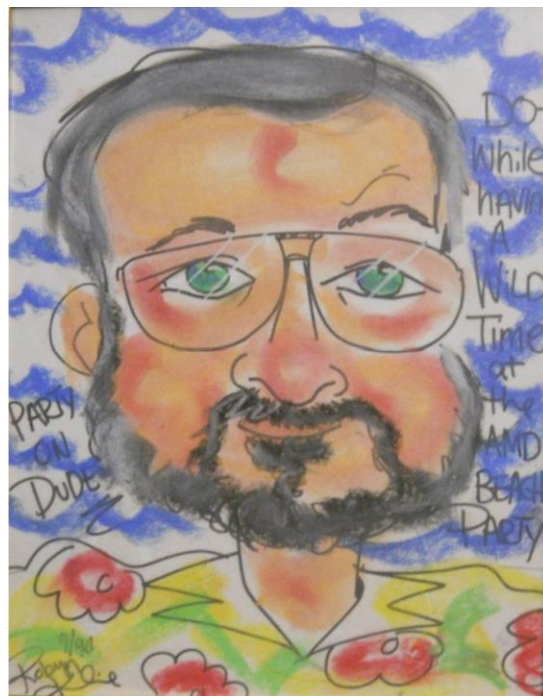
That’s why (instead of staying with Wiley) I took the offer from Miller Freeman Publishing to write “Signal Processing in Ada.” I cashed the first advance check and was about to start writing the book when United Newspapers bought Miller Freeman. United Newspapers decided they just wanted to own the Miller Freeman magazines, and didn’t want to publish books, so they paid me the final advance check immediately to buy out my contract. That’s why I used to joke, “‘Signal Processing in Ada’ is the book United Newspapers paid me not to write!” (As if they

were trying to cover up something sinister 😊.) Since I didn't really have time to write the book anyway, I didn't look for another publisher.

Timing is important. I was fortunate that my career began just before microprocessors were invented. I became one of the first people to program a microprocessor simply because people who came before me didn't have a microprocessor to program. People who came after me were too late to be first. Soon after that, the Ada programming language was invented, and I became one of the first to write about Ada. I was lucky to be in the right place at the right time twice. In the early days of computer programming, many software "experts" (who didn't have much real experience) were giving bad advice—which I contradicted. That made me slightly controversial. Since I wasn't just repeating conventional wisdom, and had actual success to give me some credibility, the controversy helped make me famous, which advanced my career.

Having a secret identity was an advantage when traveling on business using my real name. I could ask engineers what they thought about Do-While Jones and get an honest answer. (My cover was finally blown when Christine Anderson figured out who I really was, so she could ask me to be an Ada 9X Distinguished Reviewer. Even so, I managed to keep my true identity a secret for several years. Now, nobody cares about Do-While Jones anymore, so there is no need for secrecy.)

Being famous can be addictive. Meeting famous people in the speakers' lounge, and hearing those people say how much they admired me, was even better than strangers coming up and asking me to sign their book. It is hard to describe how flattering that can be. I really enjoyed the food, music, entertainers, and favors at the corporate-sponsored parties I was invited to during the years I was famous. Those were great times. I can understand how trying to recapture that feeling can become compulsive.



For me, fame is like going to Paris. I loved every minute I spent in Paris, and I would not pass up the opportunity to go back if it ever arises—but I've never made the effort to go back, and probably never will. Going to Paris and being famous were both fun at the time, and I will always be grateful for the experiences; but I don't NEED to try to recapture those feelings. Fame was never the motivation for writing the Ada articles. I just wanted to help software engineers write better computer programs. I didn't care that nobody really knew who Do-While Jones really was. The Do-While Jones brand was important; but my real identity never was.

I never identify myself on my radio program because "The Word With Us" (that is, the program content) is what counts—not who produces the program. "The Word With Us" brand is important because people who hear and are blessed by one program need to know where to find more episodes. (Which, by the way, are at <http://krsf.net/archives.html> .)

I maintain the <http://scienceagainstevolution.info/index.shtml> website so that people can see both sides of the creation/evolution controversy and make an informed decision. Readers can find out who produces the website if they take the trouble; but I don't make my real name prominent because the website isn't about me. The website has established its own name recognition, and attracts an average of more than 100 people per day.

I make the "Death Valley Dave" YouTube videos because I want to entertain people and hope that, after watching the videos, people will think, "I'm glad I watched that." I don't make music videos because I want people to think, "He sure is talented."

Regardless of whether it is teaching people how to be better computer programmers, or telling them about God, or entertaining them with music, what matters is making the lives of other people better. I try to do that through education and entertainment.

But it all comes back to selling. You can't educate or entertain if nobody listens. Fame helps to attract an audience. Fame is really just a sales technique that gets your product noticed. You need a trusted brand to establish the credibility which attracts an audience. Fame can give you brand recognition and credibility before you even say a word. While other good writers were submitting unsolicited manuscripts, and getting rejection letters, publishers were asking me to write books and articles for them because they knew software engineers would read articles written by Do-While Jones. Fame gave me opportunities I would not have otherwise had.

Here's the reason for writing this essay: Young people of every generation strive for fame. We all like to be liked. It is good to be famous—but there has to be a reason for being famous. You can get a certain amount of fame by posting pictures of yourself on Facebook and saying, "Look at me! Look at me!" But that fame won't last because there is no substance to it, and there is no value in it.

If you want to be famous (and there is nothing wrong with that) you have to do something worth being famous for. You have to say something worth saying, or have some other reason to be famous. You have to provide some lasting value, or your fame won't last.

God has a work for you to do. If you do it to the best of your ability, you will get a reputation for doing a good job. Then, your reputation will open doors for you, and you will be given

opportunities to do even greater things, which will make you even more famous, and give you opportunities to do even greater things.

Once you become famous, you have a responsibility to continue to be worthy of that fame. Always remember, it is the product that is important, and the benefit that product provides that is important—not you. The good feeling that comes from being the one who produces that product is not important. Yes, the adulation that comes with fame is a powerful motivating factor, which rewards past success and encourages future success. That’s good—but the danger is that fame can become addictive. Once you have been famous, you will know how good it feels, and you will want more. That can encourage you to do ANYTHING that will keep your fame alive. That can ruin your life. Don’t yield to the temptation to do anything that makes you famous.

With fame comes criticism. Your jealous competitors will say all sorts of bad things about you. Don’t let this discourage you. When people lie about you, and make personal attacks, remember that they are doing this because you are more successful than they are. If you weren’t accomplishing anything, they would not bother to try to stop you. If bad people are trying to stop you, you must be doing something good.

But if the criticism comes from good people, and has some factual basis, you need to listen to the criticism. Sometimes it is hard to distinguish helpful, constructive criticism from hateful attacks intended to discourage you. Here’s how to tell the difference: Ask yourself, “Does this criticism sound like something Jesus or Satan would say?”

Fame can be a powerful servant you can use to accomplish great things—but do not let fame become your master and make you a slave to it. Don’t allow the need for people to say good things about you cause you to do anything you should not do.