



Ned the Automator

Wiley Davis

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Dear Grandmother Barton,

My name is Ned, Ned Barton. I am your grandson, son of roger, who you obviously have communicated with before. I met you once, when I was five at a family gathering we had at a park near a river. That is as much detail as I remember—I apologize for my five-year-old's memory—though I do recall talking with you.

I'm not exactly sure how to tell you this in a way that will make sense, but, well, this is the first time I have written you, ever. Don't worry, I'm not on drugs. I know you get a letter from me on all you birthdays and at Christmas. I know that sometimes you have even gotten calls from me on your answering machine, but none of those were actually me. This letter is me, though. Ned, your grandson.

I may not be on drugs but I am in jail. I haven't been officially convicted of anything yet, but I thought that, perhaps, my arrest would make the papers, even all the way out east where you are, and I wanted you to know what it's all about.

I'm sure you know that I worked for a company called Streamline Communications. It's in the profile so I assume you've heard a little bit about my job from the family, perhaps from myself, even. But I'm sure it has all been vague allusions to some complicated occupation. Let me tell you about my job.

I was an Automator. Streamline Communications, you see, is in the business of automating communication between people and organizations. The company started out as a greeting card service. You logged online, gave our system a few key points, marked birthdays, anniversaries, any important event and important people down in our calendar, and the system would make sure that they got a greeting card, personalized to a small degree, on the proper occasion. That was back in 1998, before I was with the company, of course, and most of our clients at that time were corporate clients. We sent out cards and thank-you notes for CEOs, salesmen, those kinds of people. The service really took off. Soon, so many people were using the system that most people just assumed that whenever they got a card or a thank-you note in the mail, that it had been generated by a computer. Here's the part that always fascinated me: even after it became well known this was going on, clients kept signing up and renewing their contracts. It became just another defacto standard in the business world, like having a telephone. Everyone knew it was insincere, but to not do it would be worse.

Around that time a few other companies entered the market. Now the game became who could outdo the other in terms of complexity and personalization. Personalization, in fact, became all the rage. I can't even begin to describe to you how sophisticated it has all become, except to say, again, that none of the letters you have ever received from me were written by a human being.

And even before Streamline Communications launched their service, the CRM industry—that's Customer Relations Management—was already in full-swing. Hotels were early adopters. You'd check into a Hilton, any Hilton in the world, and if you'd asked for three pillow mints the last time you were there, then sure enough, you'd have three mints on your next visit without even having to ask. The Hilton's database was particularly impressive for its day. It would give the desk clerk key points about the circumstances of your last trip so that as you checked in, the clerk could follow up about whatever it was you were doing the last time you stayed at a Hilton. "Did you ever manage to get tickets to that play Mr. Dalton?" for example. The odd thing was, this was a global database, so even if you had been searching for theater tickets in New York, the San Francisco desk clerk would remember it as if he had been there in New York himself. This didn't upset people or throw them off because, well, people don't have great memories. Most people just liked the fact that someone remembered them, that makes people feel important, even if they themselves couldn't remember the specific conversation. Streamline Communications did the same thing, CRM, but we did it with correspondence: cards, letters, email, phone calls (though only via answering machine, we're still not sophisticated enough for real-time conversation.)

Naturally, it wasn't long before our corporate customers were adding their own family to their lists of recipients. Correspondence takes time, which many of our customers just don't have. And like I said, with other companies now in the mix, the product was becoming very sophisticated. But things got really weird when SC came out with an advanced product they called Full-Duplex Relationship Manager, FDRM. One of the downsides to our automated service was the increased volume of reply communications. That's where FDRM came in. When you signed up, you got an email address, a physical mailing address, and a voice-mail number. Any time a person responded to one of your automated messages, their response would automatically be routed through our system. Our algorithms would pick out the key points, store temporally important events like mergers, promotions, marriages, even deaths, and

create a unique history in the database for every communication stream. With this information, our system could then reply with an individually-tailored message that was not only timely, but relevant. Our own corporate research estimated that these closed-loop, totally computer-generated message cycles account for more than 72% of corporate communication. It's scary how widespread this practice is. We even have, and I'm ashamed to admit having used it myself all this time, a system designed specifically for old people. It's marketed as a sort of humanitarian service, a make-the-old-folk-feel-remembered type of thing.

Let me give you a few details about my job, then. I'm an Automator as I said. All that really means is that I make sure one of our nodes is running properly. We have 224 nodes, each of which has five Automators that work in shifts. It pays very well but the work is kind of grim. At first it was a perverse kind of thrill because what an Automator does is deal with the anomalies, the topics that have been deemed too sensitive or complicated for our algorithms. The code is quite sophisticated, but some things it doesn't do too well with yet, so it flags it for Automator attention. That means that most of my day was spent trafficking in death notes (they don't tell you that when you're hired.) Death was a sensitive topic, too sensitive to trust entirely to the code, so we would add a few lines here, edit an inappropriate phrase there. Most of my day was spent writing sentences like, "No one will miss him more than I will, he was a friend and one fo the best fisherman I've ever cast a line with." Spelling errors were part of the trick, though the code would sprinkle those in from time to time as well, to make it seem more authentic.

In my node alone we handled 423,000 communication streams. Those are FDRM streams too, so that's approximately 846,000 people, though some streams consist of more than two users, we handled a lot of group accounts. Each node is about the same size, so that means that Streamline Communications effectively created entire conversation loops for roughly 189,504,000 people globally. And that's just our company. None of the companies release user data, so it's hard to say just how much human interaction is managed in this way. It's mind-boggling. I worked there for twelve years before I really even thought about what that means. It saves time but for what? It means that grandma will be remembered, but by who? When was the last time you were grateful that your thermostat remembered to keep your house at 72 degrees Fahrenheit while you were away? Probably never. I hope never. Last week I realized that that's all Streamline Communications is, a big talking thermostat, a toxic sludge that had gummed up one of the traits that makes

humans such fascinating creatures, the way we interact. So I set fire to my node. I came to work with five gallons of ethanol and I lit the place on fire. The sprinklers put it out almost immediately. Security arrested me, the communication loops remain closed, I'm in jail.

But I've written you. Maybe this can be the beginning of something great for me? For us. I feel that even though I'm locked up, that a whole new world has just opened up to me. So Grandma Barton, or can I call you Mary, tell me all the things I've missed.

With love and apology,

Ned Barton

P.S. Don't reply to my former address as that was my automated inbox. Instead, please send your reply to:

Ned Barton

c/o Petaluma County Federal Prison

P.O. Box 3451

Warsaw, KY 89564

My Dearest Ned,

It is so sad to hear of you in jail. I have never been, but when life gives you lemons, you must make lemonade. You have always been a grandson to me. I am comforted that you have a fire in your new place. Sorry for such a short note in response to your long letter. I always wish there was more time.

Love,

Mary Barton

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