

High five!

Why, in the entire history of human life, did awesomeness become the great virtue of our age (and suckiness its vice)?

[Nick Riggle](#) 09 February, 2016

During halftime at a Celtics basketball game in 2009, the Bon Jovi song *Living on a Prayer* came blasting through the loudspeakers. As people relaxed in their seats, chatting, eating and drinking, the stadium's 'Fan Cam' zeroed in on the audience, projecting their images onto the jumbo screen for everyone to see. Most of them did what fans normally do – they nudged their friends, smiled, waved, covered their faces, pointed to the giant images of themselves lording over the arena. But then the camera settled on Jeremy Fry, a skinny young man sitting next to his mother.

HD video of Jeremy Fry - Celtics Fan Dancing to Bon Jovi Living on a ...



Fry could have just smiled at the camera, nudged his mother and laughed, waved to friends who might be watching at home. Or he could have done nothing at all. But instead he saw this as a special kind of opportunity. He bounced out of his seat and immediately assumed the role of Bon Jovi in a music video – lip-syncing, dancing and air-guitaring to the song. He roamed through an encouraging crowd. His antics said, in effect: ‘Let’s all pretend we’re in a Bon Jovi music video!’ Soon the audience was joining in, cheering him on, enacting various music-video roles.

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It is hard to describe the experience of watching Fry. It is enthralling, spirit-lifting, inspiring. He’s just *awesome*. That word is used to describe him in YouTube comments dozens upon dozens of times: ‘This guy is awesome’; ‘This guy is nothing but awesome’; ‘There are no words to describe how awesome this guy is, salute from Finland.’ Some comments even suggest that Fry exhibits ‘pure’ or ‘unadulterated’ awesomeness. We look upon Fry with the kind of enthusiastic joy that might make us bounce out of our seat and emulate him. At least one commenter saw the makings of a society-structuring ideal: ‘This man should lead us.’

Fry had nearly his entire section of the stadium smiling, singing and dancing along, but there was one very notable exception. A few fans were predictably indifferent to Fry’s animated proposal – they were there for the game, after all. One fan, however, roundly disapproved. Rather than ignore Fry, a man in a pale blue T-shirt pushed him away. He even mimicked kicking him.

As many YouTube commenters observe, this man totally sucks.

Even if you don't use the word 'sucks' yourself, you probably hear it a lot. Suckiness, for better or worse, is on our minds, and it's not a word reserved for the youthful. In 2015, for example, Robert H Lustig, professor of clinical paediatrics at the University of California, San Francisco, displayed full mastery of the term and even emphasised its special ability to [articulate](#) his thought: 'Now, I will tell you that America doesn't trust its politicians. And we have a good reason for that: they suck. If you don't quote me, I will be upset. The reason they suck is because, number one, they're interested in power, not doing the right thing, and, number two, they take money.'

Political leaders are often called out as 'sucky' – a fact that the US comedian George Carlin noted in his book *Napalm and Silly Putty* as early as 2001:

Everybody says [politicians] suck. Well, where do people think these politicians come from? They don't fall out of the sky. They don't pass through a membrane from another reality. They come from American parents and American families, American homes, American schools, American churches, American businesses and American universities, and they are elected by American citizens. This is the best we can do folks. This is what we have to offer. It's what our system produces: garbage in, garbage out. If you have selfish, ignorant citizens, you're going to get selfish, ignorant leaders. Term limits ain't going to do any good; you're just going to end up with a brand new bunch of selfish, ignorant Americans. So, maybe, maybe, maybe, it's not the politicians who suck. Maybe something else sucks around here... like, the public. Yeah, the public sucks. There's a nice campaign slogan for somebody: 'The Public Sucks. Fuck Hope.'

Too much suckiness makes hope seem empty or absurd. Appeals to hope are more successful with politicians who openly acknowledge how much suckiness there really is; they appeal to our need to overcome it, to rise above

and become ‘awesome’.

Just such hope was arguably part of then-Senator Barack Obama’s promise in 2008. Here he is in a [joking](#) (but not really joking) mood:

If I had to name my greatest strength, I guess it would be my humility. Greatest weakness, it’s possible that I’m a little too awesome.

Obama seemed to appreciate the fact that the promise of ‘awesomeness’ sang to the contemporary US spirit. It made his appeal to hope in 2008 irresistible. Could someone that awesome really be president? Saxophone-slinging Bill Clinton was cool; people wanted to have a beer with their bro George W. But fist-bumping Obama was just awesome. I was emphatically among the 65.9 million voters who thought: ‘This man should lead us.’

At the end of the day, what we want is to not suck. More than that: we want to be awesome

The word ‘awesome’ is of course the contemporary antonym of ‘sucks’. Some take this to be a condemnation of both terms, on the grounds that their usage is so broad that they’re nearly empty, meaning little more than ‘good’ or ‘bad’. As one journalist recently [noted](#): ‘The real problem with “suck” is that it has become the antonym of “awesome”, which has similarly replaced all adjectives of approval.’ And a cursory look at how these terms are used seems to confirm the point. Just consider the range of things that can be ‘awesome’ or ‘sucky’: a game, a social media app, a friend’s behaviour, the restaurant down the street, the concert last night, you. *Everything is awesome*, as we know from a recent Lego movie. And apparently nearly anything can suck, including, by Carlin’s lights, the whole of US society and culture.

But reflecting on our use of these terms also suggests that they capture something special. The threat of being a sucky person seems distinctive, and

the promise of being awesome seems to resonate, at least with the US (and apparently Finnish) imagination, in a way that goodness, virtue, politeness, dutifulness and other traditional forms of moral excellence do not. It's not that we want to be immoral, unprincipled or vicious – quite the opposite: we want to love our neighbour; we are generally proud of whatever virtue we possess. The problem is that the thought of being virtuous or dutiful out of a love of virtue or duty doesn't readily stoke the 21st-century ethical imagination. But the thought of being awesome out of a love of awesomeness does. At the end of the day, what we want is to not suck. More than that: we want to be awesome.

But what exactly do we want? What is awesomeness? We can begin to answer these questions by considering why we think that Fry is so awesome, and why we so firmly judge that the big blue kicker sucks. Consider what Fry did: he broke with the conventions of chilling during NBA half-time in a way that brought a group of people together. His bold intervention in half-time norms created a small community. He was, in short, a creative or improvisational community-builder.

Fry's grand gesture is awesome, but I think we experience the potential for awesomeness and suckiness every day. Consider how you might normally order a coffee at your local cafe:

Employee: 'Hi, what can I get for you today?'

You: 'I would like a large coffee, please.'

Employee: 'All right, that'll be two dollars, please.'

You: 'Here you go.'

Employee: 'Here you go. Have a nice day!'

You: 'Thanks. You too.'

There's nothing remarkable about this interaction, which simply follows the conventions of consumer exchange. The 'employee' plays his role as employee, and you play yours as 'coffee-shop customer'. The scene is not very different, aside perhaps from the happy influence of caffeine, from any other civil exchange. In each case, we act in our generic role as 'cashier', 'customer', 'helpful citizen' or 'person in public' – we each do what the social norms say we should do in these roles.

But sometimes we break out – because we're forced to (in an emergency, for example) or because we're inattentive or impolite. Yet other times we break out of these roles by expressing ourselves. When we enact a social role, we tend to act in a generic manner. Your actions as a coffee-shop customer are more or less the same as mine, provided we're both competent and know our manners. But as a result, our actions tend to conceal who we are as individuals, and so they often don't reflect the kind of person we are or aspire to be.

When we break out of our norm-governed roles by expressing ourselves, we often create what I call a *social opening*. A social opening occurs when an opportunity arises to step outside of these roles, in particular, when there is an opportunity to recognise the individual each other is, or aspires to be, beyond whatever personality traits and skills are required to enact the social role. Your individuality is constituted by things such as your aspirations, beliefs, values, sense of humour, talents, whether you're shy or intense, your taste in food, music, clothes. Social openings give us an opportunity to step outside of our norms, habits and routines by giving us an opportunity to express our individuality. They are therefore also a kind of self-opening, because they provide opportunities for self-cultivation and expression.

Now consider a slight variation on the conversation with the coffee-shop employee:

Employee: 'Hi what can I get for you today?'

You: 'I would like a large coffee, please.'

Employee: 'All right, that'll be two dollars, please.'

You: 'Small price to become human again. Here you go.'

Employee: 'Welcome back.'

Here you have created a little social opening by breaking the norms, going off-script and making a little joke. In doing so, you give the employee an opportunity to recognise your sense of humour and react with a witty response of his own. In offering the joke, you open the door to a mutual appreciation of an aspect of each other's individuality. Social openings are a success when this kind of mutual appreciation occurs.

So how would you react if you were to present someone with a social opening and they refused to accept it? Imagine that the employee from above recognises that you created a social opening, but for no apparent reason deflects or dismisses it:

Employee: 'Hi what can I get for you today?'

You: 'I would like a large coffee, please.'

Employee: 'All right, that'll be two dollars, please.'

You: 'Small price to become human again. Here you go.'

Employee: 'Um. Here's your coffee.'

That sucks! He could have accepted your social opening, but he refused. By saying ‘Um,’ he both recognises that you’re acting out of the defined role of ‘coffee customer’ and closes the social opening thereby offered. To be fair, coffee-shop staff would have to be social virtuosos to engage with everyone who wants to chat or make a silly joke. But what matters here is our inclination to think that the barista sucks, even if we should resist the inclination in this case.

This suggests that sucking as a person is a matter of being able to take up social openings and refusing. People who suck in this sense refuse to play along even though they could. The employee who took up the social opening doesn’t suck. In fact, we can say that he’s *down* or *game*. Being down is a matter of taking up social openings, and being game is a matter of enthusiastically taking them up. These are ways of *responding* to social openings when they are created. Awesomeness, in turn, concerns the art of *creating* social openings – such people are skilled at the awesome art of inspiring community on the small and large scale.

The word ‘awesome’ in this context clearly has a non-standard meaning. It’s not used in its traditional sense to mean awe-inspiring or, to summarise most dictionary definitions, inspiring a feeling of reverence or respect, often combined with wonder, fear or apprehension. Dictionaries commonly claim that the informal meaning of ‘awesome’ is just *excellent* or *extremely good*. And although people certainly do use the word this way, the definition fails to capture the important difference between being excellent and being *awesome*.

Many things can be excellent without being awesome. Consider a really good band – one that is pitch-perfect, culturally astute, innovative and enjoyable. During a live show, they might simply display their excellence in a way that is to be enjoyed and appreciated, but without fostering mutual appreciative

regard. Compare, for example, the live performances of the US rock band Grizzly Bear (excellent) and the late US folk singer and activist Pete Seeger (awesome). Grizzly Bear stick to a fairly minimal act in which they execute their intricate songs to near-perfection. Seeger, in stark contrast, sometimes barely even sings his songs, encouraging the entire audience to join in on the performance. The result is often a room full of strangers singing together, with Seeger leading, awesomely.

Awesomeness is a distinctive phenomenon, wherein someone expresses themselves in the spirit of fostering mutual, appreciative regard – from creating a social opening at the local café, to enlivening the community or workplace, throwing a great party, or getting a whole section of a stadium to play around.

The person widely credited with inventing the high-five is Glenn Burke (1952-1995) – an African-American baseball player and gay trailblazer. On 2 October 1977 at Dodger Stadium, Dusty Baker had just hit his 30th home run of the season. Burke was up to bat next, and when Baker approached home plate, Burke was waiting to greet him. ‘His hand was up in the air, and he was arching way back,’ Baker recalls. ‘So I reached up and hit his hand. It seemed like the thing to do.’ Burke immediately went up to bat and proceeded to hit his first Major League home run. When he made his way around the bases and rounded home plate, Baker was standing there with his hand up high.

Burke was an exemplar of awesomeness. According to the sports agent Abdul-Jalil al-Hakim: ‘He was a joyous, gregarious person. He could high-five you without necessarily going through the motion with his hand.’ By all accounts, Burke was essential to the distinctive life and spirit of the mid-1970s Dodgers baseball club. When he was abruptly traded to the abysmal Oakland Athletics in 1978, the spirit of the team changed dramatically. The writer Jon Mooallem reports that: ‘LA sportswriters described the trade as

sucking the life out of the Dodgers' clubhouse. A couple of players were seen crying at their lockers.'

The high-five is a brilliant symbol of the ethics of awesomeness

Many people think that the high-five signals the recognition of success or excellence, but as the story of Burke and Baker suggests, that rests on a slight confusion. Consider the fact that NBA players [routinely high-five](#) the guy who misses his free throws. What the high-five expresses, at least in its original form, is not the mutual appreciation of achievement but the feeling we get upon the achievement of mutual appreciation.

Glenn Burke thought he was the very first person to experience that emotion: 'You think about the feeling you get when you give someone the high-five. I had that feeling before everybody else.' Associated with the high-five, in Burke's account, is an entirely new feeling of awesomeness. Whether or not a new feeling emerged and found expression in the high-five, and regardless of whether Burke felt it for the first time, we know what he's talking about: it's an affect-laden recognition of each other, of success in creating or cultivating interpersonal connection – in short, of awesomeness.

The high-five is a brilliant symbol of what I call the ethics of awesomeness. It concerns the actions, habits, character traits, values and principles – in short, the ways of life – that make us awesome and not sucky. The creative community-builder stands at the pinnacle of the ethics of awesomeness, forming its highest ideal. The ethics of awesomeness concerns ways of being such a person and ways of responding, or failing to respond, to them. The ideally awesome person is, in short, a virtuoso of communal imagination, imagining culture and community where it doesn't exist, and bringing it to life.

Why, in the entire history of human life, should awesomeness be such a

prominent concern now? If the question doesn't grip you, consider the astonishing fact suggested by the story of Glenn Burke above: it took our species, *Homo sapiens*, until *the 1970s* to invent the high-five. I find that almost unbelievable. Thousands of years, nearly the entire history of human interaction, of human strife and struggle – a history of hardship and celebration, love and friendship, family and community, serious challenge and soaring triumph – and no high-fives. Vigorous handshakes? Of course. Parades? Glorious ones. Pats on the back? Time and again. Hugs and kisses? So many. But no high-fives.

The answer requires a deeper study than we can achieve here. But it suggests that the love of awesomeness really is something new, that for better or worse the kind of creative community-building enshrined in the ideal of awesomeness is gaining the favour of our ethical imagination.

It's easier to say why we hate suckiness. Sucky people live as if awesomeness doesn't matter, isn't worthy of appreciation, or as if it's something they just can't be bothered to attend to. When you suck, you not only fail to inject your own life-giving energy into the thing, you actually vacuum life out of it because of everyone's more-or-less subtle awareness that the thing needs your presence and contribution to live and breathe. The US writer John Steinbeck documents this in his memoir *Travels with Charley* (1962) – a book basically about his cross-country journey in search of social openings. After one particularly sucky interaction, Steinbeck notes:

Strange how one person can saturate a room with vitality, with excitement. Then there are others... who can drain off energy and joy, can suck pleasure dry and get no sustenance from it. Such people spread a grayness in the air about them.

The deepest suckiness comes from a kind of bad faith, from a false sense of

culture and community as a static or grey thing, simply there whenever you need it, your bottomless source of connection. The sucky person doesn't understand that social bonds need light and water and nutrients. They aren't something you can just pay for and find waiting on Netflix. This kind of existential disposition to suck is the kind that can do more than cast a pall over a party or add a sour note to an otherwise beautiful connection. It can actually make *others* feel that the spirit of awesomeness is not worth tapping into, that being game is not essential, or that you can just let others bring everyone together. It can make one cynical and unenthusiastic. It's the black hole of the suckiverse.

I hope that together we can move further away from this black hole, but it's too soon to know what will happen. The ethics of awesomeness is organised around a new ideal – a kind of valuing orientation or sensibility – one that a person can adopt and live, breathe and see by. From our current vantage point, we don't really know what kind of person would emerge whose life was governed by the ethics of awesomeness. What would they care to think and write about? What would they love to do? What kind of society would they build? It's too soon to answer these questions. To find out, we will have to rethink how we engage imagination and community in our lives.

I know I'm game. Are you?