

Columns

3/29/2017

Screw It

Ellen C. Wells



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Part of my philosophy in life is to be quite knowledgeable in one thing and to know a little about a lot of other topics. If nothing else, it helps you mix and mingle anywhere from a cocktail party to the local church supper.

With this philosophy in mind I enrolled in an economics class in college. Macro or micro, gosh, I can't recall which it was. I don't remember much about the class (there goes the cocktail party conversation) except two things: 1) Author Stephen King's daughter was in my class and 2) I learned a little something about the Phillips-head screwdriver.

Here's the scenario: The professor, in an effort to build our inquiry skills and interests in the world of economics, assigned us to read all of the front pages of the Wall Street Journal for the next week, and choose one article to summarize, analyze and otherwise apply to our lives. A couple or three days go by and wouldn't you know—there wasn't one thing that sparked my interest. Another day or two go by and still nothing. I was running out of time and headlines. This was the late '80s, so it's not that there wasn't some economic development or scandal or something to write about. It's just that there wasn't one topic that made me read the article to the very end and not want to just plagiarize the whole thing.

And then I saw it. The article that got me to read to the end, and an article topic that randomly pops into my mind to this day: the invention and rise of the Phillips-head screwdriver.

In short: The Phillips screw and its accomplice driver don't exist solely to double the number of screwdrivers you must own or to strip all your screws. Its innovation comes from the fact that it self-centers, and when it can't be screwed in any more tightly, it simply slips off. This feature made it revolutionary for automation. Its invention and subsequent peddling to Makers Of Machines was happening in the mid-1930s, and with World War II approaching, anything that could make manufacturing more efficient was sure to gain a foothold.

I read the article with great interest, summarized it and somehow applied its lessons to the current times. What my grade was, I have no idea, but I do recall my professor was unimpressed with how impressed I was

with such a thing as a screwdriver.

What's my point? I have several. First, I often use this anecdote for myself when I am feeling confined by rules or instructions. Screw the assignment, quite literally. What I did for my summary is something of which I feel quite proud. I found a new topic of interest (I've been intrigued with efficiencies ever since) and I thought "outside the box" to make it happen. In the end, I was fulfilling this portion of my education. I took charge. I'm good with that.

Second, inspiration strikes anytime, anywhere. And we never know what will be next. Take George W. Bush, for example. After his presidency he read a book (yes, he can read, he jokes) by Winston Churchill titled *Painting As a Pastime*. "If he could do it, I could do it," Bush confessed recently to Jimmy Kimmel. And you know, he's not half bad. As human beings, that wick of inspiration keeps burning until the end. Tomorrow you could run across an article, a conversation, a song, anything, and it could change you or the way you work or the way you do business.

My third point? Cocktail party conversations about screwdrivers don't last long. You'd have better luck with that at a church supper. Choose your topics wisely. **GP**