

The Fable of the Radio. By Greg Williams

THE FABLE OF THE RADIO

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Note: This is a work of fiction. Any similarity between characters in this story and real individuals, living or dead, is purely contingent, whatever that means. [Insiders realize, of course, that Fred refers to B.F. Skinner and Bill to William T. Powers].

Once upon a time, a well-off little boy named Fred bought a radio with money his parents gave him (usually, but not always) when he took out the trash. Why Fred wanted a radio isn't important. What's important is that it didn't take him very long to figure out how to work the radio. When he turned the knob marked "ON-VOLUME" clockwise until there was a click, he sometimes could hear soft sounds from the radio. He discovered that the sounds got louder if he kept turning the "ON-VOLUME" knob clockwise, as far as it would go without a lot of force. If he then turned the knob counterclockwise, the sounds got softer. He also discovered that whether the radio made sounds at all (other than a hissing which also got louder when he moved the "ON-VOLUME" knob clockwise, and softer when he moved the knob counterclockwise) depended on the position of another knob, marked "TUNING."

Fred was happy with his radio -- at least he stayed near it much of the time, moved both knobs occasionally (according to a schedule which his parents decided was sometimes "essentially random" and sometimes correlated with the sounds produced by the radio before and/or after the knobs were moved), and evidenced facial expressions and limb movements correlated with the intensity and frequency patternings of the sounds coming from the radio. Soon Fred could get his radio to make sounds that wouldn't result in his parents leaving the room; this occurred more frequently as allowance-paying day approached.

By and by, Fred's friends got radios, too, and Fred discovered that he could work those radios in the "same" (Fred's word) way as he worked his own; in truth, there were some differences, which Fred said were "of no consequence," between working his radio and working his friends' radios -- for example, some of the latter had "ON" knobs, rather than "ON-VOLUME" knobs, and some made louder sounds when their "ON-VOLUME" knobs were turned counterclockwise, rather than clockwise. Still, it took Fred only a little while (with a bit of screaming from his friends' parents) to be able to work all of the radios equally well. Fred exclaimed to his parents, "I really know how to work radios well!" His parents agreed with him, not because of his claim, but because they saw him working the various radios in ways which, to them, could be classified, if not as "good," then at least as "correct."

Alas, one day about six weeks after he got his radio, Fred could not work it. He moved the knobs as he had before, but the radio made no sounds at all. Fred moved them again. No sounds. And again. Still no sounds. Gradually, Fred moved the knobs less and less frequently. (However, whenever he came home from working a friend's radio, he moved the knobs on his own radio quite frequently for awhile, even though the radio produced no sounds.) But eventually, none of his friends' radios could be worked, either, and Fred didn't move the knobs on his radio at all -- the radio just sat silently in his room. Exactly 83 days after the last time he moved the knobs (on a day not noticeably different to his parents than those before or after it), Fred threw the radio out with the trash, muttering obscenities. (His parents, hearing the cursing, washed Fred's mouth out with soap. Fred kept on cursing, and his parents kept on using soap "to deal with his inappropriate verbal behavior." Fred confided to his closest pals, but not to his parents, that he had discovered he "liked" the taste of soap.)

Now, it happened that Fred's radio was found at the local dump by Bill, a street-smart kid who appreciated gadgets -- the more complicated, the better. Bill had never seen the insides of a radio before, and he was delighted when he pried off the back and gazed upon the maze of wires and little objects interconnected inside. "Wow!" he exclaimed. "I wonder how it works?" Bill took the radio home, where he hid it from his father, who would probably try to prevent Bill from "breaking it by messing with its guts" enough to find out how it worked. Excitedly, Bill went to the public library and began looking for books on radios. He found a book with pictures of a radio being taken apart and put back together, in steps, but the radio in the book wasn't the same kind as the radio he had found, and he wanted to know how radios work in general, not just how the one he found or the one in the book could be repaired (which generally involved replacing "defective" parts with little understanding of how those parts worked). Then he came across a book titled BASIC ELECTRONICS: RADIO CIRCUITRY, VOLUME 1 and perked up; even though he didn't know what "electronics" meant, the words "basic" and "radio" so close together seemed encouraging. To make a long story short, Bill read that book (and also VOLUME 2 and VOLUME 3), spent hours looking at the construction of the radio he had found, and finally announced to his father that he had learned how radios work. (To which his father replied "so what?" but Bill didn't let that bother him.) Bill was so happy about knowing how radios work, he told his father about the radio he had found, currently hidden under a heap of broken concrete blocks. "Give it to me!" demanded his father. Bill got the radio and meekly gave it to his father. Of course, when his father tried to work it, he found that it was no use -- Bill hadn't changed anything inside the radio, and it still wouldn't make a sound. "Bah! What good is it?" Bill's father shouted, as he threw the radio down. As his father walked away, Bill calmly walked over to the radio and took off its back. He speculated about why the radio didn't work. "It probably needs a new battery," he thought, and then he saw that one wire to the RF-coil was loose, probably due to his father's anger.

Bill took \$3 from under his father's mattress, wrote out an I.O.U. (with interest) and stuffed it under the mattress, and headed for the local Radio Shack store with the radio in hand. On the way, as fate would have it, his path crossed that of Fred, who warily approached Bill, eyeing his non-designer jeans as if in disgust (or so Bill supposed). For a reason which Fred himself, to this day, says he "cannot explain -- apparently, random variability," Fred began yelling "That's my radio! That's my radio! That's my radio!" over and over. Bill dropped the radio and took off running. When Fred recovered his composure, he did not stoop to pick up the radio; rather, he kept on walking and never so much as looked back at the radio lying on the sidewalk. But he emitted, almost inaudibly, "I'll fix that peon!" and his course changed slightly from its direction prior to encountering Bill.

From a hidden vantage point up the block, Bill saw Fred walk away -strangely, without the radio. As soon Fred disappeared in the distance, Bill hurried back to the radio, grabbed it, and hurried to Radio Shack. On the way, he got to thinking about Fred's claim that the radio was Fred's. Well, maybe it was... maybe it had ended up at the dump by some crazy mistake or weird misunderstanding... and maybe getting it back in good working order would make Fred feel better... and maybe Fred, who looked pretty upscale, might thank Bill and introduce him to one of those fancy uptown girls. It would be worth a try, and \$3.

The Radio Shack clerk didn't seem to know an RF-coil from his rear end, but he did show Bill how to use the soldering gun which he kept hot for repairing speaker leads and such. Bill paid for a new (overpriced) battery and moved the radio's knobs gingerly. The resulting chorus of "Louie, Louie" resounded throughout the store! The clerk yelled, "Get outside with that noise!" Bill complied. And just then, Fred appeared! With two cops!! Before Bill had a chance to run, one of the policemen grabbed him around the waist and threw him to the ground. Bill, who had never been in such a situation before, knew exactly what to do: he tried not to move a muscle (which was only partly successful; his left eye started to twitch uncontrollably). The radio continued to produce loud sounds (something about a "very last chance sale" at Harry's Carpet Barn) while the other policeman searched Bill for crack and Fred, with a strange look (at least it seemed strange to Bill), grabbed the radio.

It all turned out better than Bill expected. No, he didn't get introduced by Fred to any uptown girls; he never even spoke to Fred. Fred was immediately and rather mysteriously influenced by the (sound of the? sight of the? sound and sight of the?) again-working radio, and the again-working radio was immediately and rather mysteriously influenced by Fred (or Fred's muscles?). The upshot was that Fred scampered away with the radio, rapturously twiddling its knobs in an incredibly sophisticated way (or so it seemed to Bill). With nobody around to press charges, the policemen had to release Bill with a warning against "fooling around with somebody else's property in ways they wouldn't approve of."

Bill thought that, as they parted company, Fred had seemed very happy. Bill was happy that he had helped Fred become so happy. And Bill was also happy because he knew how radios work, even if he didn't know as well as Fred how to work radios (although he suspected that he could figure out how to work radios as well as, and maybe even better than Fred, if he wanted). In fact, for the rest of his life, Bill remained very happy. (He even married an uptown girl, but that's another story).

For six weeks after the fateful meeting of Fred and Bill, Fred told his parents (with an annoyingly high frequency) that he was "very happy." They believed Fred, not because he said so, but because he took out the trash so regularly, even on the day after allowance-paying day, during every one of the six weeks. (And after those six weeks? Well, that's another story, too.)