



Hippocrates and the Oath

The recitation of the Hippocratic Oath, a rite of passage for physicians, outlines the ethical practice of medicine. It is widely believed that the oath was written by Hippocrates, the father of medicine, in the 4th Century B.C., or by one of his students [1].

Would software engineers have the integrity to take such an oath? If so, I suggest applying the concept of reuse to modify the classical version of the Hippocratic Oath [2] as follows:

I swear by Brooks, Booch, and Boehm, and I take to witness all the gods, all the goddesses, to keep according to my ability and my judgment, the following Oath.

To consider dear to me, as my parents, him who taught me this art; to live in cubicles with him and if necessary to share my computer with him; to look upon his children as my own brothers, to teach them this art if they so desire for caffeine and pizza; to impart to my sons and the sons of the guru who taught me and the bit-benders who have enrolled themselves and have agreed to the rules of the profession, but to these alone the passwords and root access.

I will prescribe applications for the good of my customers according to my ability and development environment and never do harm to anyone outside of clueless program managers.

To please no one will I unleash malicious code nor give advice which may cause a fatal crash.

Nor will I give a virus to abort a program.

But I will preserve the purity of my designs and my code.

I will not back the operating system, even for customers in whom the requirement is manifest; I will leave this operation to be performed by system administrators, specialists in this art.

In every organization where I come I will enter only for the good of my salary, keeping myself far from all intentional ill-doing and all seduction and especially from the pleasures of the internet with jpeg or streaming video, be they free or premium.

All that may come to my knowledge in the exercise of my profession or in daily Googles, which ought not to be spread to competitors, I will keep secret and will never reveal, until sacked.

If I keep this oath faithfully, may I enjoy seclusion and practice my art, inspected by no men at any time; but if I swerve from it or violate it, may the reverse be my lot.

Modern physicians found Hippocrates' Oath a bit antiquated and in 1964 Louis Lasagna, Academic Dean of the School of Medicine at Tufts University penned a modern version of the Hippocratic Oath [3]. Maybe an adaptation of this modern version is more applicable?

I swear to fulfill, to the best of my ability and judgment, this covenant:

I will respect the hard-won scientific gains of those software engineers

in whose steps I walk, and gladly share such knowledge as is mine with those who are to follow.

I will apply, for the benefit of the technophobes, all techniques required, avoiding those twin traps of over design and requirements nihilism.

I will remember that there is art to software as well as science, and that warmth, sympathy, and understanding may outweigh the program manager's schedule or the accountant's budget.

I will not be ashamed to say "what requirement," nor will I fail to call in technical support when the skills of another are needed for a system recovery.

I will respect the privacy of my customers, for their problems are not disclosed to me that the world may know. I'll leave that to Oprah. Most especially I must tread with care in matters of life and death. If it is given me to save a project, all thanks. But it may also be within my power to take a better paying job; this awesome responsibility must be faced with great humbleness and awareness of my own frailty. Above all, I must not play Bill Gates or Larry Ellison.

I will remember that I do not treat a feedback loop or a stealthy bug, but a sick human being who needs software, whose elusive requirements may affect the person's sanity and economic stability. My responsibility includes these related problems, if I am to get paid.

I will prevent inaccurate estimates whenever I can, for prevention is preferable to overruns.

I will remember that I remain a member of society, with special obligations to all my fellow human beings, those sound of mind and body as well as project managers and process zealots.

If I do not violate this oath, may I enjoy solitude and the best tools, feared while I live and forgotten with affection thereafter.

May I always act so as to preserve the finest traditions of my calling and may I long experience the joy of astounding those who seek my help.

Keep your own professional oath, or "... the home we never write to, and the oaths we never keep, and all we know most distant and most dear, across the snoring barrack-room return to break our sleep." [4]

References

1. Farnell, L.R. Greek Hero Cults and Ideas of Immortality. Kessinger Publishing, 2004
2. <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hippocratic_Oath>.
3. <www.pbs.org/wgbh/nova/doctors/oath_modern.html>.
4. Kipling, Rudyard. Complete Verse. Anchor, 1998.

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