

2018 Week 23: The Week Ending Saturday, June 9th

Paul R. Potts

Sunday

Saturday evening we received the replacement fuses for the two smaller fans from Vornado. No charges, no argument, they just mailed me a couple of fuses in a little zip-lock bag inside a padded mailer. I went out to Meijer with Joshua to pick up a few grocery items: anchovies, tortillas, tomatoes, lettuce, avocado oil. Somehow a small hand-basket of food wound up costing \$75.00. I'm pretty sure it wasn't the jelly beans that accounted for most of that. I guess a dozen cans of anchovies add up a bit, but still. I would look at the receipt, but lost it somewhere.

Apparently Pippin, who hated anchovies, now loves them enough to open up two cans and leave one of them hidden under his bed.

Our guest-mom made dinner: tacos with leftover pork roast, and freshly fried tortilla chips. It turns out that avocado oil isn't great for deep-frying. I read on the front of the bottle that it was great for frying had a smoke point of 500 degrees and that sounded promising, but it also says on the fine print in the back that it isn't recommended for deep-frying. Our guest-mom is accustomed to using Crisco oil (soybean oil) and I was trying to get something else to use. We don't want to use peanut oil because of Veronica's peanut allergy. I was considering grapeseed oil and probably should have stuck to that plan.

Also: deep frying on Saturday means that on Sunday morning, the kitchen floor was slippery enough that I had to give it some extra wiping-down because I was afraid I was going to have a slip-and-fall accident.

I made a pretty basic breakfast: just the Birch Benders paleo pancake mix, with blueberries, topped with butter, maple syrup, and raspberries.

Sunday was both busy and not busy. Grace and I wound up feeling pretty burned out and exhausted, as if the cooler weather was allowing us to rest and our bodies said "no no, trust me, you really need some down time." So we had a little down time. I even got a brief nap in the afternoon. I took Veronica down into the basement and showed her how to make playlists from my iTunes library and burn them onto CD-Rs. So she's making herself "mixtapes" now. I

replaced the fuses in the two Vornado fans that had stopped working. Both of them seem to work fine now. I am leaving them running for 24 hours on high to see if they burn out again. I set up four mousetraps in the basement. We recently cleaned up evidence of mice, and it's a little unclear whether there are more mice running around down there currently. But maybe we'll find out. It would be nice to find out how they are getting in, and stop them, but that may be very difficult, from what I've been reading about how mice get in through tiny holes and gaps.

For dinner I roasted the ribs following the instructions: 500 degrees uncovered for 20 minutes, then 350 covered in foil for an hour and 40 minutes. I don't know if I wrapped the foil too tightly around the pan, or if the instructions changed since the last batch, but that just wasn't quite enough cooking time. They were edible, but really not as tasty and softened up as they should have been. So after dinner we roasted the rest for another half-hour or so at 350 and the result was much tastier. If we get these again I might try either adding 25 degrees or just taking off the foil and adding an extra 30 minutes uncovered.

Producing the Pottscast

Grace and I finally got down into the basement to record a podcast — quite late on Sunday (after 10 p.m.). We spoke for about two hours, and then I had to edit it and do the production and upload. That went smoothly, but it just takes time: the bouncing, the conversions to MP3 and movie, and the uploading. I have tried to figure out how to streamline this as much as possible. While the raw audio file is transferring across the network, I write the blog post in Markdown and pick out clips for music. Then I assemble the Logic project and while it is bouncing the finished 16-bit 44.1kHz **.wav** file, I put together the first part of the BBEdit worksheet. But then there's a bit of a bottleneck: I can't create the movie until the conversion to MP3 is done.

So I kick off the MP3 conversion, wait, then start the MP3 file uploading to the web site and kick off the conversion to the movie file. While the movie file is uploading I can finish most of the BBEdit worksheet but because BBEdit's worksheet interface is not multi-threaded, I can't execute more commands while the movie conversion is going on. So there's some waiting.

When the movie conversion is finished I can start uploading the movie to YouTube while the MP3 file is still uploading to my web hosting site, but it isn't clear if this is really a win; it may slow the upload down so much that there isn't much advantage to running them in parallel. I publish the blog post as soon as the upload of the MP3 file is finished, or at least close to finished. Then I have a blog post URL that I can put in the description of the YouTube movie version of the podcast. Then I can run the code in the workbook to generate the entries for the RSS feed files.

It's fortunate that I now have a sort of template in the BBEdit worksheet which helps remind me where I am in the process and what I still have to do. Because

by a quarter to two in the morning, I need it. I should look into what other optimizations I might be able to make to the process, maybe re-ordering some of the steps a bit. Maybe I could use a workbook command to kick off the upload. But honestly, there's an advantage to having to at least manually trigger a command in the workbook for each step: I can double-check the results and intervene if there is an error. I often make minor errors. For example, because I started the editing just midnight, I typed June 4th for the date, because that's what my computer said. But we date the podcast posts with the date we recorded, so I had to fix the MP3 and movie filenames manually to make that consistent with what we have been doing.

My reflux was not great. I think I've done some permanent damage. I have also had it pretty clearly demonstrated that from day-to-day, and pretty much hour-to-hour, the stomach acid situation is a measure of my stress level. So I am planning to put off further follow-up with my doctor until either we close on the house sale in June, or it falls through for some reason. If we close, I expect it to improve, maybe dramatically, and then it will (I hope) be a matter of whether something can be done to heal the long-term damage. If it falls through, I am probably going to need something stronger than Prilosec to keep from burning holes in myself.

Monday

I heard from Grace that we finally got someone out to look at the air conditioner, and it is now fixed; it was a blown capacitor. It was much less expensive than I feared: \$173.00. I hope it stays fixed. And it's a bad time to be spending money on anything, as we are trying to pay for a number of repairs on the old house; fortunately, insurance will cover most of it, but it's a matter of deductibles, timing, and scheduling contractors as soon as possible. So we're doing our best to try to manage all that. As I described to Grace in the podcast last night, we're basically spending just a bit more than I take home each month, and have been for over a year. So we're losing money each month, but making it up in volume!

But we remain hopeful that in just another couple of weeks we will close, and be done with this. Well, except for the lingering aftermath of paying off about \$25,000 in new debt that we had to take on, for the privilege of losing \$60,000 on the house. But that will actually leave us in a much better position each month, and if nothing else goes wrong, we can start to get ourselves above water.

I am hoping that today the two additional fans I ordered from Vornado will arrive, and also the books for the podcast. I'm going to see if I can get a copy of Melinda Cooper's *Family Values: Between Neoliberalism and New Social Conservatism*. And we still hold out hope that if we do this diligently, and get more folks involved, somehow it will pay off, in some way: not necessarily financially, but somehow.

Reading? Not much accomplished, but I did read a few pages of *Divine Invasions*

and also another book I picked up on Memorial Day, *Butcher Bird* by Richard Kadrey. I'll probably have more to say about both of these books soon, although I am attempting to keep my reading focused on non-fiction for the podcast.

Tuesday

Repairing the Old House

When I got home last night, Grace was very stressed-out. She's been dealing with insurance and contractors. The mold remediation folks found that the mold was more extensive than they thought, and so they wanted to extend the original estimate. We were told that insurance would cover the increased expense, and they could go ahead. We told the contractors to proceed. But then yesterday on the phone Grace spoke with someone who said she wasn't sure they *would* cover the extra expense. So Grace is trying to get that straightened up and I am burning holes in my own esophagus with worry that we will be on the hook for thousands of dollars of additional repairs that we don't have the money to pay for.

In addition, the company that came up with that huge estimate for the attic work has been harassing Grace, telling her that we are going to have to pay them \$1,700 even though we told them we would not approve the proposed work. Grace told them to send us an itemized invoice. I don't believe we should have to pay them for producing an estimate, especially not one that was so high that the insurance adjuster found it to be far out of line with the customary costs for this kind of work. I want to see what they put on the invoice before I pass judgement, but I don't think it is customary to pay a company to come up with an estimate.

So we're looking at possibly having to pay our deductibles (two thousand), plus possibly for the extended work on the mold remediation, plus \$1,700 that I'm not sure we can get the insurance company to cover on the bat damage claim. Then, apparently the amount the insurance company is paying us to cover the other, approved work has been reduced, "depreciated" in some way Grace understands but I don't, which means we will have to pay even more, although she thinks we can apply to get that back from the insurance company after the work is completed. And because of the delay in the mold remediation work, the contractor we had lined up to do the plaster and paint work — basically, to close up the ceiling and get the room looking normal again — is not available. So Grace is desperately trying to line up a new contractor, and see if they will do the work as already estimated and approved, or if we need to get a new estimate. And we're trying to get this all finished in the next ten days.

We've also had some real behavior problems with our kids, which often seems to happen right when mom and dad are stressed out; they seem to sense weakness, as if they were waiting for a moment when we can't pay much attention to them to do their worst and deliberately provoke confrontations.

I'm not sure there are enough antacids in the world at the moment. I just bought a couple more bags of Tums Ultra Strength Smooth Peppermint Chewy Delights.

Dinner was over-cooked chicken paprikash with sweet potatoes added because Grace accidentally put way too much salt in and had to cut it, made with some crappy leftover chicken. The result was kind of like a sweet potato curry with chicken in it. It was actually pretty tasty, washed down with a glass of South African Rosé from Costco (I forget the winery and year; I'll have to look it up). Everything last night was aggravating, from Benjamin taking the rubber feet off one of the fans (again) to the kids refusing all day to get a load of dishes on, so that at 10:00 p.m. the dishwasher was still washing the day's first load and we couldn't get the dinner dishes loaded up and running until it was even later. So we got to bed late and cranky, but at least it wasn't too hot.

I read the kids a story: the first few chapters of *The 13 Clocks* by James Thurber, an odd and funny fantasy that both is and isn't a children's book.

I received a package from Powell's books containing two paperback copies of *The Benedict Option* by Rod Dreher and the unabridged audiobook on CD. I'll start listening to the audiobook today. On my lunch break I might go order a copy of *Family Values* from Nicola's Books.

On my way out this morning, I discovered that Veronica had left her bike outside in the back yard, in last night's rain.

Someone Left a Bike Out in the Rain

I can't even begin to count the number of times I've begged the kids not to leave bikes in the rain. I went out of my way, when I was finding her a bike, to buy a used made-in-USA steel-framed Raleigh. Presumably the frame will not rust out, but everything else will likely be prone to rusting.

I'm tempted to lock it in the garage and tell her that her irresponsibility has cost her access to her bike until next spring. Maybe then I will have extra cash to take it to a bike shop and get some maintenance done. The gears probably need a good cleaning and lube and it may need a new chain and some brake parts. I'm not sure what other things we can do, to try to get the kids to understand the idea that there are natural consequences for their actions.

Is losing her bike for a while a natural consequence? I guess maybe it isn't, since it is probably still useable. Maybe the natural consequence would be that she has to pay for the repairs herself when it rusts out. But it might be rideable, just in a deteriorating state, for a long time, and it seems like that separates out the consequences so far from the action that there won't be any clear connection in her head. And also, the kids aren't *getting* allowance at present, so there's no money for them to save up, because they've lost that privilege as punishment for all their other failures to do their assigned chores.

Parenting is hard!

Wednesday

Our Money Tightrope Walk

Grace gave me an updated last night on the progress of scheduling contractors. We went ahead and paid the attic contractor on a credit card: \$6,900 in a lump sum. We've got someone lined up to do the plastering in the family room, and the painting. We've received payment from Liberty Mutual covering most of the \$6,900, as well as a couple of smaller checks covering part of the expenses related to the water leak damage. So right now, I'm just waiting for the pre-authorization on the card to finalize into a charge and show up on the card balance, and then I will pay off most of, it so we still have some credit available for other contingencies.

With these huge expenses and payments, trying to schedule everything and pay for everything, we are doing a bit of a high-wire dance. We are hoping and working for several things: first, that we can get all the work finished within the next nine days, so that we can get through the closing. And we hope that when everything is done, we can quickly get our accumulated credit card debt paid down and quickly increase our emergency fund. I've got projected budgets in spreadsheets, but they are all contingent on getting through the closing. If that falls through, then we're off the charts and I don't know what is going to happen.

The projected budgets say that while we're paying off the loan of the funds we need to close, and these other debts including the borrowing we had to do to finish the repair work, of the parts of the expenses not covered by insurance, we won't have much in the way of money to spend on things like real beds for the kids, work on the house, or anything to keep our cars running (or replace them). So the austerity is going to be our reality for a while longer. That means continuing to live without furniture. Our books might remain in boxes for a year or more longer. I'm not going to lie — that's frustrating.

When all is said and done, the decision to move to Saginaw pretty much ruined our chances of getting ourselves into a place of financial security for a decade. It's hard to accept that reality and embrace it and still believe we made the right choice, and not just see the whole debacle as mostly a mistake.

Grace told me that for some trivial reason one of our kids became angry at our house-guest's boyfriend, and scratched his car out of rage. So we have to make that right somehow. Our oldest son did something similar over ten years ago. It makes me wonder — is this kind of behavior *genetic*?

The 13 Clocks by James Thurber

Last night I read the middle third or so of *The 13 Clocks*. It's a very strange story — not really a story as much as it is an excuse for Thurber to write some funny scenes and engage in some of his trademark wordplay. This seems to get

more crazy and funny as the story goes on. So while early on we have little jokes like this:

He clapped his gloves together and two varlets appeared without a word or sound. “Take him to his dungeon,” said the Duke. “Feed him water without bread, and bread without water.”

But a few chapters later we are getting verbal pyrotechnics like this:

“The task is hard,” said Zorn, “and can’t be done.”

“I can do a score of things that can’t be done,” the Golux said. “I can find a thing I cannot see and see a thing I cannot find. The first is time, the second is a spot before my eyes. I can feel a thing I cannot touch and touch a thing I cannot feel. The first is sad and sorry, the second is your heart. What would you do without me? Say ‘nothing.’”

“Nothing,” said the Prince.

“Good. Then you’re helpless and I’ll help you.”

Some passages are alliterative. This “stunt” passage made my kids laugh out loud, and demand that I read it again:

The brambles and the thorns grew thick and thicker in a ticking thicket of bickering crickets. Farther along and stronger, bonged the gongs of a throng of frogs, green and vivid on their lily pads. From the sky came the crying of flies, and the pilgrims leaped over a bleating sheep creeping knee-deep in a sleepy stream, in which swift and slippery snakes slid and slithered silkily, whispering sinful secrets.

And some passages are filled with internal rhymes, as if they should be written in stanzas instead of sentences:

“Look,” the Golux said, “and listen! The Princess Saralinda will never wed this youth until the day he lays a thousand jewels upon a certain table.”

“I would weep for Saralinda,” Haggia sighed, “if I were able.”

Then there are actual verses, laugh-out-loud verses:

“There was an old coddle so molly,
He talked in a glot that was poly,
His gaws were so gew
That his laps became dew
And he ate only pops that were lolly.”

I’m not sure this story will wind up making a lot of sense, but it is awfully fun to read. If it encourages them to explore this kind of silliness in their own writing, it will have been entirely worth the effort.

Thursday

Yesterday afternoon Grace took the kids up to Saginaw so that she could meet with a painter. She got a chance to poke around the old house and look briefly at the work in progress. She was happy with what she saw and so I'm pleased that the work is getting done.

The Benedict Option by Rod Dreher

Yesterday while at work I finished listening to *The Benedict Option* in audiobook form. I'm going to have quite a bit to say about this book in the future and we will be discussing it on the podcast. Right now I'm still piecing my disorganized thoughts together, so extensive comments will have to wait. But so far, I will say that I am largely impressed with Dreher's writing, especially using my lit-crit tools. The book contains many big and wonderful ideas, and I find myself in deep agreement with many of his arguments, and find myself approving of the work and words of the other people that Dreher presents in his book. But I also have a number of issues to raise with the author. I'll leave it there for now.

On my lunch break yesterday I went to Nicola's Books and ordered a copy of Melinda Cooper's book *Family Values: Between Neoliberalism and the New Social Conservatism*. That might come in as early as Friday, and I'm eager to take a look at it.

Friday

Last night I got home a little earlier than I've been getting in for most of the week: about 7:20 p.m. Grace and I caught up on news about the insurance work, talked about some other bill we have to pay, did some cleanup and made dinner, which was chana masala. We ate late again, about 10 p.m., which is really not ideal. But the chana masala came out very good. I'll have some for lunch.

Another employee with Liberty Mutual has apparently "ghosted" on us, and suddenly e-mail to this person is bouncing without warning, while he and Grace were in the middle of a conversation. This is the *third time* this has happened since we started working on these claims a couple of months ago. Combined with these hugely inflated bids, and harassment from contractors, this is not helping our stress level one bit. And Grace can't get a call back from anyone at their "fraud hotline."

We had to get up early because Grace had an 8:00 dentist appointment with Pippin. But after finishing dinner late, we did not just want to lie down and immediately go to sleep. That is a sure trigger for reflux. So I kept everyone up until after midnight and finished reading *The Thirteen Clocks*. It's a very odd but funny and satisfying little tale. And it was nice to actually finish one of these books, since I am in the middle of so many books but have finished so few recently.

I still woke up with my esophagus burning a couple of times during the night. So, I got perhaps five and a half hours of broken sleep before the alarm went off at six. Not ideal.

Grace was kind enough to let me sleep a while longer (as I was able, which was not very well) while she got ready to go. She made a pot of coffee. So for breakfast I had a lukewarm black coffee and a couple of handfuls of granola.

I will head to Costco after work with a reduced list, because Grace and our houseguest did some of the shopping yesterday. That is nice: we will hit our checking account a little less hard. I'm trying to juggle how to pay for the remaining contracted work. There are delays while we wait for checks to arrive and get them deposited and cleared, and then delays while I make payments to credit cards. These expenditures all together are much higher than our credit limit. So if a contractor wants to be paid in full up front but we haven't received a check to cover it yet, I have to put that on the credit card, then pay it down when the money arrives to try to prevent us from spending a lot on interest charges. Some things can be paid right out of checking, but I have to watch that closely too, because we have a number of smaller bills popping up like mushrooms. It's quite a pain and I'm dancing as fast as I can. This is tricky because if I screw it up, we risk having a charge fail to go through, or a "cascade failure" of bounces.

There's endless frustrating detail to recount, about the actual repair work, but I'll spare you. We will have a conference call with our realtor this afternoon.

Saturday

I'm usually able to write the Saturday part of each week's blog post on Saturday, but I'm writing this on Sunday June 10th, because yesterday turned very busy. We got a quick breakfast on the table, toasted English muffins with leftover egg salad, cleaned it up, and then managed to get everyone into the car (with several lost pairs of shoes, several kids wearing weather-inappropriate shoes and weather-inappropriate jackets, etc.) and drove to Wiard's Orchard for a picnic event put on by Congenital Heart Center at Mott Children's Hospital.

The Congenital Heart Center Picnic

It has been nearly a year since Elanor had open-heart surgery. The weather was very nice even though it rained for a time. We found it quite pleasant to walk around in light rain. They served picnic food, there was face-painting, and the kids had a great time. We only lost one of them, and only briefly. So, a fun time all around, although I thought there would be more of a program — maybe a little talk, or a puppet show on heart health for the kids, or something like that, but there wasn't. It was overcast, but there was still a lot of UV coming through the clouds, so I got just a bit reddened by the sun, which is not great for the appearance of my skin (we fish-belly white Potts men don't age all that well), but good for my mood and vitamin D levels. We got t-shirts.

We came home and argued with the kids for a while about cleaning up the kitchen, and gave Sam a soaking bath and deep-cleaning hair-washing, since he was long overdue. Grace got a very brief nap. We then had to head out again, to a piano recital. Joshua has only been taking lessons for four weeks, but our piano teacher offers all her students a chance to perform in the recital, and he jumped at it. So he played “Twinkle, Twinkle, Little Star” and “Frère Jacques.” Some of the kids were quite good, although as they are almost all very young students the majority had difficulty sticking to a beat.

Before the show actually started the teacher invited her students to come up and warm up and so that’s how our four-year-old wound up on stage, twice, seated at a Steinway grand in front of an audience, improvising brief pieces on the piano. And then because we let him do that, he couldn’t understand why we didn’t want him to go up with Joshua during the concert proper.

We were planning to come home and make dinner, because the little reception after the concert was, we thought, just a snack, with people bringing veggie trays and cupcakes. But they wound up ordering a couple of dozen pizzas, too, and so the kids all ate pizza. So we didn’t have a proper dinner.

Despite not having eaten breakfast or lunch at home there was a moderately big mess in the kitchen to clean up. We essentially spent the rest of the evening arguing with the kids about doing chores. Sam was the only diligent one, so I invited him downstairs to watch *Babylon 5*, season 1, while I did some paperwork: tidied things up, sorted old papers, wrote some checks, updated the money spreadsheets, etc. It was interesting to watch these again, or at least to give them a little bit of attention, as they played in the background while I worked on other things.

***Babylon 5* Season 1**

For the most part, *Babylon 5* holds up very, very well, especially in comparison to other science fiction TV shows. And I still like the fact that J. Michael Straczynski had a whole, well-defined arc of a story to tell. It really makes the series better, even episodes that sometimes become a bit cheesy and melodramatic, such as “Infection.” This is regarded as one of the worst episodes of the series, and it’s not very good, but if you compare this show’s worst to the worst that series like *Star Trek: The Next Generation*, *Star Trek: Voyager*, *Stargate SG-1*, or *Andromeda* had to offer, there’s no comparison; the “floor” of *Babylon 5* was just a lot higher. But even in these early four episodes (disc 1 of the first season DVD set), there’s a lot of nice character development going on.

People also criticize *Babylon 5* for its occasionally primitive-looking computer graphics, but I’m not one of them. Yes, they tend to look a little crude compared to what CGI artists can do today, but it is a product of its time, and in general I’m not looking at the effects in order to laugh at them, because I’m actually engaged in the story. On other words, I’m on the side of the storyteller, not his adversary.

I should track down a copy of the movie, *Babylon 5: The Gathering*. I think we watched it a long time ago, in the form of a DVD from Netflix, back when Netflix was just a service that rented DVDs by mail. But we should probably have it to re-watch since it serves as the pilot for the series.

I had one unadulterated victory: I figured out how to recover the lost programming code for the basement door lock (it was actually on a sticker *inside* the lock). So I've now changed all the codes. This is a big relief because now, until they break the code or shoulder-surf it again, the kids can't go rummaging in the basement. The idea that they could go down there at any time, and rummage in the things we put down there to keep them safe from the kids, has been a source of great stress for me, and it's alleviated a bit. There is still the question of what happened to the original booklet with the codes in it. And what happened to the backup set of keys? (They exist in part so that if the lock battery goes dead, you can still unlock it, and they are missing). I think it is possible that I put both the booklet and keys in a Very Safe Place™ *upstairs*, because I didn't want them to be somewhere *behind* the lock if the battery dies. And the Very SafePlace™ is a little too safe. It's pretty easy to get into the lock from the back; you can just remove a couple of screws. But there aren't any exposed screws on the front of the lock, so if we were locked out of the basement, we'd need to break in, in some way.

Anyway, the codes are changed, and stored in some additional safe places, and I'm relieved.

When I came back upstairs four episodes later the kitchen was still a mess. We tried again to get Veronica to do at least some of the cleanup, but she procrastinated so long that I gave up on reading the kids a story and we went to bed angry. She did finally do some cleanup, so it was a bit readier for breakfast Sunday morning, but it was after midnight, and we had been asking her to do this cleanup for something like ten hours at that point. That's a whole lot of saying "yes" and then procrastinating.

I was hoping and waiting to read *The Wonderful O*, also by James Thurber, but we gave up. And so the week ended, not with a bang but with recriminations and arguments.

I'll go ahead and start the next week's blog and post this one.

Books, Music, Movies, and TV Shows Discussed This Week

This list does not include books, chapters of books, or other works that I only mentioned briefly in the text above.

- *The 13 Clocks* by James Thurber (Penguin Classics Deluxe Edition trade paperback)
- *The Benedict Option* by Rod Dreher (unabridged audiobook)
- *Babylon 5* (Season 1)

Pittsfield Township, Michigan
The Week Ending Saturday, June 9th, 2018

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