

# 2018 Week 24: The Week Ending Saturday, June 16th

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## Sunday

I found a cheap copy of the *Babylon 5* pilot movie on eBay and ordered it, and I'm bidding on an old Logitech Harmony 300 remote, because we need another one (our houseguest had need of ours, after losing the remote for her new TV). Fortunately these old things are much cheaper than they were when they were new. I've kept an eye out for universal remotes at a few stores like Target, but the ones they have are very old, and not programmable; basically, the codes they come with, in a book, are all the codes they know how to generate. So I was hesitant to get them, because I think they are from a land before Blu-ray players and smart TVs. I'm not sure why Target doesn't carry anything recent, but there it is.

Grace and I are canceling the podcast today and we are skipping Mass, because we really, really have to spend some time trying to sort out and organize all the insurance-related paperwork. The stress of managing all this is, in addition to trying to manage the family, is making Grace physically ill during the week. And I've had reflux for months, largely improved now, but I don't think it will truly go away until we're done with the Saginaw house.

The kids have been awful, just awful, today: fistfights, screaming matches, arguments, threats. I think they can tell when Grace and I are about at our breaking point. They choose that moment to be on their worst behavior. I would like to believe it isn't a deliberate effort to harm us further, but it sure feels like it sometimes.

## Monday

### Insurance Paperwork

Grace and I canceled all our plans yesterday and we're glad we did. Grace spent much of the afternoon running errands, while I started organizing documents, looking at bank and credit card statements and the Liberty Mutual web site, taking screen shots and saving web pages as PDF files. When she got back, I had the beginnings of a framework for organizing all the documents we've gotten

in electronic form from Liberty Mutual and various contractors. I also scanned some check stubs.

I've now got two folders containing information on each of the two settled claims. There's an overview, taken from the web site. The overview pages contains links to attached documents that show updates about the claim, including payments made. For some reason the web site lists each document twice. And the documentation is incomplete: for some reason, we got one payment that doesn't show up on the overview for either claim. Because we've worked with a number of different adjusters, and had three adjusters "ghost" us, the documents we've received are quite inconsistent.

I've also got a spreadsheet going, showing all the payments for house repairs that we've paid for, and all the reimbursements we've gotten from Liberty Mutual. The claims are listed as settled, which I think means that they think the paperwork is done and they've paid out everything they are going to pay out. But the work isn't completed. We think that most, if not all of it, will be completed this week.

We've bundled up documents for the claims and sorted them roughly into "relevant" and "not relevant," where "not relevant" includes things like estimates we didn't accept. And we now have a binder with most of this stuff printed out and in sheet protectors, along with our original check stubs.

All of this is an attempt to reduce, at least a little bit, the sense of confusion and chaos which is stressing us out so much as we try to shepherd all this work to its conclusion. Call it our attempt at local entropy reversal. There's still some more organizing to do, including collecting up paper and electronic receipts and getting them all into one place, but at least there's some documentation now for everything we've spent and everything we've received.

When the dust settles and we have paid the last contractor, we will have spent a few thousand dollars out of pocket. I don't have an exact figure yet. Some of that we've managed to pay right from our checking account. Some will be sitting on a credit card. There's a way we can apply for some additional reimbursement after the work is complete, because of the way our payments were reduced due to depreciation. I don't claim to fully understand the how and why of that, but every little bit will help us pay it off.

My reflux continues with a new twist. Now it seems like everything I eat tastes like it is burning my mouth. Even *yogurt* tastes like it has had chili oil added. The conclusion of all this stress can't come fast enough. Meanwhile I feel like maybe I should be fasting. It's not very practical at the moment, but maybe I can at least partially fast.

We didn't have a story last night. We had a rushed dinner — it was going to be lasagna, but instead we made a sort of "deconstructed" lasagna, basically a baked pasta with cheese on top. Veronica did step up and help us out a lot with kitchen cleanup, though, which was great.

## Tuesday

I wound up staying at work quite late last night, and so there is no real reading or watching to report. When I got home, about 9:00, dinner was ready, but the kids would not get the table set, so we didn't eat until after 10:00. So our tentative plans to watch a show or have a story went out the window.

### Someone Left a Glass Stuck in the Drain

After dinner, when I started to clean up, I noticed that the kitchen sink was not draining very well so I put my hand down the drain to find out if something was stuck in the garbage disposal. Something was: one of our French drinking glasses (Durablex, or Picardie, I'm not sure which). It was perfectly stuck: just the right size and shape to drop right in, but not come out again.

Grace and I both struggled for a while to get it out. Finally, replicating a similar scene from our old house a few years ago, I had to use the end of a broom to smash it. These glasses are extremely strong *very* hard to break that way. When it did break, it didn't just break into a few pieces, but shattered like safety glass into small fragments. I wore a glove to pick out the larger ones, but the smaller ones are much harder to pick up. I started with the vacuum cleaner, which pulled out a number of pieces. The remaining ones had to come out mostly by feel. So my right hand is covered with small cuts. The grinder mechanism of the disposal has gaps in it, and when hard things get into the gaps, such as chips of glass, the disposal can't turn. Then someone has to figure out how to pry the little chips out of the gaps in the bottom of the disposal.

This has happened at least three or four times since we moved into the new house: we've lost a baby food jar, some plastic toys, and at least one or two other drinking glasses down the disposal, not to mention some silverware, which was damaged but not destroyed. The kids don't notice something is in there until turning it on. I've had to fish broken glass or plastic out of that thing over and over. I'm really sick of it.

To find the last few pieces that were preventing the disposal from turning, I had the kids go to the high cabinet in our kitchen, where we keep flashlights for taking out the trash after dark, and for emergencies. But they had apparently been playing with the flashlights, because the ones that weren't missing had dead batteries. I have bought at least a dozen flashlights over the last few years, to have them on hand, stashed in several places around the house, specifically for power outages or other emergencies. And so you can imagine that I was seething a bit, at this point.

Fortunately one of the backup places where we also keep flashlights still had a working flashlight. Despite my best efforts I was unable to get the last few bits of glass out. So I had the kids work on it, starting with Veronica, who failed, and Sam, who failed, and ending with Joshua, who has smaller hands that allowed him to see the glass while his hand was in the opening. He succeeded. We got

the disposal working again and avoided having to replace it. I *really* don't want to have to spend any money on dumb home repairs at the moment.

The rule is that dirty plates and bowls can go in the sink, but glasses and silverware has to be piled on the counter. Because I am just. So. Sick. Of. This.

After washing my hand down with rubbing alcohol, I decided that I was done with washing dishes for the evening and the rest of them would have to finish cleaning up without me. Mostly, they did. I went to bed around midnight, but most everyone else was still up and around, and Grace didn't come to bed until about 1:15, so I didn't really sleep, which meant that it was hard to get up early, and so again I was pretty late into the office. I'm pretty tired of that, too.

### **Threading the Money Needle**

There was no big news on the Saginaw house repairs. The mold remediation company, Elliot Environmental, was supposed to finish up the family room today. Grace didn't get a call, and tried calling them a few times, but didn't get a call back, so we don't know where it stands. Grace is thinking about going up there for a day or two, staying overnight with friends, to try to supervise the rest of the work, if we can get it scheduled. I deposited the second-to-last reimbursement check, and it has cleared, but it was a pretty small one.

I am nervously waiting for the last check to arrive, because we will soon need to pay the balance we owe to Elliot Environmental. I would like to pay it directly out of our checking account rather than putting it on the credit card. I want to keep as much credit free as possible, for last-minute contingencies, and of course to avoid paying interest. But some things will have to go onto the card, because the reimbursements are considerably less than the actual amounts we have to pay. We still hope to get additional reimbursement after the work is complete, that depreciation I mentioned earlier, which was applied to our reimbursements. So maybe I can use that to help pay off whatever charges I wind up having to put on the card. However it happens, I think we can thread this needle, but it is a little nerve-racking. I fear that the sale could still fall through, and if we can't line up another buyer very soon, we'll be in an untenable position with our finances.

### **Wednesday**

#### **Ghost Adjusters!**

Yet another insurance adjuster has "ghosted" us. This is the *fourth*. So again, Grace was trying to get in touch with our adjuster, and not getting any responses, until she heard back from a supervisor and learned that the claim is being re-assigned to another adjuster, yet again.

What the hell is going on at Liberty Mutual? Seriously, what the hell is going on?

Grace was trying to get in touch with our adjuster because the contractor we had engaged to clean the ducts showed up, but then realized the ducts are wrapped in asbestos-containing insulation, and said “we can’t work with this,” and canceled the job.

So, we are trying to figure out what to do. It may be that we just can’t get that duct-cleaning done, given our limited time frame and lack of funds. We’ve made our best effort to get as much repair work done as we could schedule and supervise, and as insurance would cover, and then some.

### **The Lost Check**

Last night I left work a bit earlier, getting home just after 7:00. When I arrived, the mailbox was hanging open. I was expecting some important mail, including a check for over \$4,000. The kids had gotten the mail. We’ve asked them, again and again, not to. And after they took the mail from our mailbox, somehow it didn’t make it into the house. There was a flurry of buck-passing, but then I determined that one son in particular had been carrying the mail up the long driveway to the house, and somehow arrived without it.

We walked along the driveway one way, and then the other. Finally, he spotted a bundle of mail, still wrapped in a rubber band, lying in the woods to the side of the driveway. Included in the bundle was the check.

It’s hard to even figure out how to punish the kids anymore. We could spank or otherwise beat them, but that just doesn’t seem effective, and the consensus seems to be that it damages kids and inspires them to be violent themselves. We could remove privileges, but they have practically none at all now; they have mostly all been taken away. We could use time-outs or isolation. I don’t know where we’d put them. We could use grounding, but they are practically grounded all week now. So Grace and I are pretty much at a loss.

I went out to Meijer to deposit the check in their ATM, and return bottles, and get some coconut milk yogurt and bananas for Grace, as her stomach has been bothering her, most likely from all the stress. I brought home a movie that was on sale: *The Last Starfighter*, from 1984. I watched this movie in the theater when it opened. Before it opened, actually, since I saw a “sneak preview.” So after a meal of leftovers and cleanup, we went down into the basement to watch the movie.

### ***The Last Starfighter* (1984 Film)**

The good news is that the movie has held up pretty well and didn’t seem much different to me than when I watched it back in 1984. The bad news is that the movie didn’t seem much different to me than when I watched it in 1984. There are things I like about it: the practical sets, the stage-play look. Two of the supporting actors are notable. Robert Preston plays Centauri, a con-man/recruiter. His character is not all that well-crafted, but the actor is very

charismatic despite this. Dan O’Herlihy plays Grig, a lizard-faced alien, and he’s a lot of fun to watch. Lance Guest is Alex and his robotic double, and he’s not a bad actor but he’s obviously too old for the role, and doesn’t bring a lot of color or depth to the screen. Guest is supposed to be playing a teenager who is perhaps 17 or 18 years old, but the actor was about 23.

The cast is rounded out with a whole bunch of not-very-memorable aliens, and trailer-park denizens, including a number that made me say “oh, yeah, that woman... from all those shows in the seventies!” And one, Barbara Bosson, who I remember from *Hill Street Blues*. In the credits there was one more small surprise: one of the child actors, who appears only briefly in some early scenes, was Wil Wheaton. He originally had some dialogue, but those scenes were cut. So in the released film, he’s just a kid appearing in the background of a couple of scenes — an extra, really — although he is credited.

Overall, the movie is slow-paced, and interrupted with occasional oddball scenes that don’t quite fit the tone. When the robot replacement for Alex is revealed, he’s a gruesome, pulsating thing, like a skinned gnome. I remember being horrified by this reveal in the theater. There are some scenes that are laughably unconvincing. When the teenagers are riding in the dark in the back of a pickup truck, they are clearly just sitting in a prop truck with a blurry rear-projection of scenery passing behind them. Then there’s the CGI. It’s really quite primitive. I’m generally pretty forgiving of this kind of thing, as all CGI is a product of the technology available when it was made, but some of this is distractingly bad. In particular, the sequence where Alex and Grig hide their spaceship in a cave inside an asteroid looks ridiculous.

It seems that the movie was probably more influential than fondly remembered. The video-game plot element was reused by Ernest Cline in *Armada*. There’s a similar video-game recruitment element used in the setup for *Stargate: Universe*. The whole wish-fulfillment, Mary Sue aspect of the plot was stale even when it came out. And even in 1984 when I was fifteen, I didn’t like the way that all the killing in the movie seemed to have no moral weight at all for the characters.

*The Last Starfighter* has a 76% rating on Rotten Tomatoes, which seems to me a bit higher than it deserves. The audience rates it at 69%, and I’d rate it even lower. Still, it holds a special place in my memories because I saw it when I was young, and its use of CGI, even CGI that often looks pretty unconvincing, was ground-breaking. Having grown up in a trailer park — although one that looked a lot less interesting than the one in the movie — I must have identified a bit with the main character. Or, at least, with the idea of him, since I don’t think I could relate to the 23-year-old Lance Guest in the role. The best I can say about the movie in 2018 was that it kept the kids mostly entertained for a while. Even at only 101 minutes, the movie feels quite slow, and many scenes drag. But to me, there was a certain satisfaction in realizing that my opinion of the movie, formed 35 years ago at the age of 15, hasn’t really changed; as I mentioned, it was about as good, and about as bad, as I remember.

## Thursday

Last night Grace took Elanor and left for a day or two in Saginaw. She'll be staying overnight with a local friend. She was quite angry yesterday because she found out that the company doing the attic work — who we thought had finished up the work last Friday — had not finished, and in fact was planning to leave the work unfinished for another eleven days, not planning to go back in to finish the job until June 24th.

### Never Pay Contractors Up Front

You know how they say you shouldn't pay a contractor up front? Here's a very clear example why you shouldn't pay a contractor up front. We were in a bind because they refused to start work until we paid them in full, and we had already had so many delays. So we happily paid in order to get the work going. And now we've paid, and so don't have much in the way of leverage to get the contractor to finish the job.

Liberty Mutual will not cover any asbestos remediation, and the duct-cleaning company won't touch them. So we can't get that duct-cleaning done. My plan now is to just forward that reimbursement for duct-cleaning to the buyer, because we are unable to finish that part of the work. We can't afford to pay for asbestos remediation, and we're also running out of time.

Our house guest is supervising the kids today. Veronica already called me this morning to tell me that Joshua was taking full advantage of the fact that his mother wasn't at home, and behaving badly, defying Veronica and provoking her. But I don't doubt that Veronica is also taking advantage of the situation to provoke *him* as much as possible. There's not much I can do about any of this from work except pray that eventually my kids will learn to work towards common goals. They don't seem to understand that they have an opportunity to spend a beautiful summer day playing outside, reading, drawing, whatever they want, with only a few small chores to take care of.

They have no idea how much I would love to have such a truly care-free day, and what I would give for one.

For our bedtime story, I read the kids the first half of James Thurber's *The Wonderful O*. If things go well, we'll read the rest of it tonight. This is another wordplay-heavy book, and a lot of fun to read.

### The Buyer Backs Out

It's about 8:00 p.m. and I just got off the phone with Grace and then with our realtor. I've been nervous and distracted all day and I know it makes no rational sense, but this often happens to me when we're about to get bad news. I'm not claiming I have some sort of precognition. It is probably a matter of simply being very sensitive to clues that something is about to happen. In this case they probably weren't even that subtle.

The buyer lined up for our home is backing out, because she was unable to sell *her* home. That was written into the purchase agreement as a contingency. So, we have no recourse; the sale is off.

On the positive side, we will have finished several important repairs and improvements on the house which ought to improve its marketability. Or, at least reduce the number of big red flags (such as obvious water damage and a collapsing ceiling in the front room). That's going to be all replaced.

We have a couple of leads and we are really hoping they will lead us somewhere, to something. We'll probably have the house back on the market around the first of July.

I'm not taking this news too well, as the person that has to figure out how to keep paying for two mortgages.

Grace will be home tomorrow.

## Friday

### A Samosa Wrap

Another week comes to an end. Grace is still up in Saginaw. The kids ate dinner without me. Actually, they literally ate my dinner, too. Our houseguest cooked food for everyone and asked the kids to leave me at least a couple of tacos. The kids promptly ate them. So I stopped at a place called "Hut-K Chaats" in the little plaza at Packard and Platt. I was feeling like I wanted hummus with lamb, but I couldn't think of a Mediterranean place that was still open about 8:45. Hut-K Chaats was open. It's an Indian restaurant, at least sort of. Their web site says they are a "Health-conscious cafe serving locally sourced Indian street food, wraps & ice cream in casual digs."

I have no idea whether street food in India typically includes things like a "samosa wrap." India's a big place so it probably depends on the street. But that's what I got, along with a mango lassi. The lassi was allegedly full of probiotics so I figured it couldn't hurt. The wrap was a little odd, combining what seemed like a store-bought flatbread with the potato-based samosa, and some lettuce and red pepper sauce. It tasted good, though, and didn't keep me up all night with heartburn, so I will count that as a win.

The kids were watching videos on Grace's computer when I walked in, and I had the impression that they had been doing that for hours and hours. They didn't seem to want to give up the videos long enough to hear a bedtime story. So I eventually threw them out and went to sleep. Benjamin did not want to give up his videos. And at 3:30 a.m. I woke up to realize they were still watching videos on the Kano, with its tiny, extremely tinny-sounding USB speaker. Veronica did do some cleanup of the table and kitchen at my request, although an inspection this morning revealed that it was not very thorough. I was too brain-dead last night to spend the remainder of my evening arguing with them. Grace will be

home tonight and we can argue about it then. I will stop at Costco after work and get our usual salmon for dinner.

I e-signed the document to release the buyer from her contract and Grace will do the same. It's hard to be happy about this because I was so hoping that in only another week or two, we'd be free of a big financial burden.

### ***What Happened to Bernie Sanders* by Jared H. Beck, Esq.**

I realized that I have forgotten to mention a book. Last week when I picked up *Family Values*, I also picked up a copy of *What Happened to Bernie Sanders* by Jared H. Beck, Esq. This is a book that documents in detail how the DNC tilted the playing field in the 2016 election. The facts of that aren't really in doubt. But what still bothers me is just how many of my Democrat-voting friends seem so comfortable with it, mostly because the other side does it too, or is worse, or something; I'm not sure I can even speak for them. I've started this book, but not gotten far enough into it to really evaluate it yet. Really, the thing I love about it so far is the way the cover graphics and text mirror's Hillary Clinton's book. If I ran a bookstore, I would always shelve them and display them next to each other. (I'm probably never going to get to run a bookstore).

I've listened to most of *The Benedict Option* unabridged audiobook a second time. I still need to skim the text in order to flag some bits I want to quote, and write up more notes, before I feel ready to write a complete review. But I'm getting there.

To cheer myself up, I (perhaps imprudently) ordered a boxed set of Orwell's non-fiction, including a book I read one long ago and loved, *Down and Out in Paris and London*. I'll have more comments on that when it arrives.

### ***"Videotape"* (Song by Radiohead) from the Album *In Rainbows***

And now for comments on something completely different. I've been listening to some Radiohead, and thinking about one Radiohead song in particular: "Videotape," from the album *In Rainbows*. The song has what seems at first to be a relatively simple structure, built around a chord progression on keyboard, played in slow quarter-notes. But if you listen to live versions, and follow some videos on YouTube, and even listen to the album version, which has some oddball percussion that builds towards the end of the track, you might begin to realize that the song in its straightforward form is not so straightforward. It seems that the way the audience hears it, and the way the musicians hear it, might be quite different. It all hinges around where the downbeats are.

There are a number of videos on YouTube. The original seems to be this one, by Warren Lane: "The Hidden Syncopation of Radiohead's 'Videotape' by WARRENMUSIC." Vox picked up the idea and made a shorter, perhaps more accessible, video citing Lane. There are others. I'm not going to list them all. It goes on and on. Lane has a 30-minute followup video, and others have weighed

in. For my part, I'll just say that I believe Lane's hypothesis: I think that the way Thom Yorke and Radiohead hear the song revolves around an *offset* rhythm, where the actual beats-per-minute is about 150, and the downbeat comes 1/8th note *after* the beats where the piano chords land.

I'm not sure if I would call that "syncopated," or a "rhythmic offset," but I think it's there, and it's kind of fascinating. This video might make it clearer; that producer shows a number of pieces that have complex or even contradictory rhythms. And the best reference for how the band hears and thinks about the song is probably the live at Bonnaroo recording, where the accompanying parts are clearly shifted off the piano beats, especially towards the end of the song when the real "one" finally shows up clearly in the drum part. There's also a soundboard recording allegedly from the same show and in that recording you can more clearly hear that even Yorke's vocals are offset from the beats of the piano chords. As the parts come in and out, it becomes clear that the song's real rhythm is a more complex beast than is first apparent.

Any piece of music can be scored in more than one way. The very famous introduction to Beethoven's Fifth Symphony is actually scored to open with a rest. This is done so that, mostly, the rest of the bar divisions fall where one would expect. One could score "Videotape" in different ways, and a lot of rock musicians don't really *write down* their compositions in traditional music notations. So there's not really an "original" score, as far as I know; it's a question of how Yorke *thinks* about the song. And so the question that arises is *why* he would chose to think of the song with that rhythmic offset.

To that question, I can't offer a definitive answer, but I can throw out a few hypotheses. First, nerdy musicians love to challenge themselves. The members of Rush were not classically trained, but many of their most famous songs use passages in 12/8, or 7/8, or alternating phrases between 5/4 and 4/4. Dream Theater uses crazy, crazy time signature changes. King Crimson liked to create songs where different parts have different time signatures that go in and out of synchronization with each other; trying to play those parts along with the other musicians would drive one crazy without having that time signature to cling to, like a life-line, in a gale of opposing rhythms. But this is not without *artistic* purpose: listen to King Crimson's "Discipline." The parts cycling in and out of synchronization tantalize and fascinate the ear. By comparison, "Videotape" seems simple. So *why* think of it with this "rhythmic offset?"

I think it is partly the mental challenge, and possibly also a desire to keep the song *sounding* slightly "uneasy." This comes through especially in live performances, where the band's "downbeat" is 1/8th note offset from Yorke's chord changes. And that "uneasy" feel comes through, slightly, even when Yorke plays it straight up, for piano and voice, with no accompanying instruments at all. Why? Because it's a little bit harder, even for very experienced musicians, to stick to a rhythm that is slightly offset like this. That difficulty comes through in the performances, re-creating that slight rhythmic "uneasiness." There may be more reasons to it. When they do the song live and add percussion and other

instruments, if the band is thinking about the rhythm in that more complex, syncopated way, it makes it much easier to play along in a way that emphasizes the “rhythmic offset” and sounds much more interesting and complex than a simple four-on-the-floor rhythm. But if you really want the answer to why this is song was made so complex to begin with, I think you’d have to ask Thom Yorke.

If you are starting to feel that all this is just a little bit up it’s own butt — and to be fair, I feel that way a bit myself — you might also love to hear Radiohead the way the brilliant Reggie Watts hears them. Which... is also not wrong. I think it’s entirely fine to enjoy a thing and also enjoy a funny satire of the thing. In fact, it’s a way to enjoy it twice as hard. Watts doesn’t hate Radiohead. He loves them, un-ironically. If he didn’t love them, he wouldn’t bother making that spot-on parody.

I came across an ad on YouTube, showing that Radiohead is playing in Detroit on July 22nd. I’ve never seen them live. In fact, it’s been years and years since I’ve been to a show by a well-known pop or rock act of any kind. I might be forgetting one, but I think the last big show I saw was Thomas Dolby in 2006.

I thought Veronica might like to go see Radiohead, and maybe Sam too, although Sam might be a little too sensitive to loud noise. I tried to buy tickets. Ticketmaster shows none available at any price. There are some reseller sites that claim to have tickets available, but I would have to think really hard about spending \$200 or more *per ticket* for a decent seat. With our finances uncertain, I’d just be dumping more debt onto a credit card. Even if my finances were a lot healthier than they are, it is hard to feel that such a price is justifiable. In this broken world, I’m honestly not sure my kids will ever get to see a rock show the way I saw a rock show, without feeling like the price somehow made the whole situation incredibly tense and pressured. I mean, what if they were bored, or hated it?

I’ll have to think about it some more, and most likely it will just get tossed on the heap of passed-over opportunities, which keeps growing, along with the heap of my regrets that I just seem almost entirely unable to give my children the experiences I’d like to give them.

If only *Reggie Watts* had a show scheduled somewhere nearby, I think we’d have something. I’ll keep an eye on his upcoming dates, but right now it seems like he’s globe-trotting, with only one show listed in the United States: Los Angeles, at the end of July. But at least his ticket prices are much more modest. I’ll keep an eye out for other shows nearby. I don’t think the kids would be interested in nostalgia acts. Is Modest Mouse a nostalgia act now?

In fact, Radiohead is probably a nostalgia act now.

Want to feel old?

Wait for it...

## Saturday

Yesterday's Costco trip was pretty modest. Grace was not back yet, and we had not made a meal plan for the week or done an inventory, so I bought only salmon, a berry pie, couple of bags of salad, some more guacamole cups, a couple of bottles of sangria, a box of croissants, and some chips and popcorn for a movie night. Friday was my 3rd anniversary at Thorlabs. When I got home I found that I had gotten two items from eBay in the mail: the DVD of the *Babylon 5* movie *In the Beginning*, and another Logitech Harmony 300 universal remote control, because ours is sort of on permanent loan to our house guest, who lost the remote for her TV.

### ***Babylon 5: In the Beginning* (1998 TV Movie)**

*Babylon 5: In the Beginning* is good in its way. It has a framework story, set well after the events of the TV series, in which Londo is the Emperor of the Centauri Republic, but Centauri Prime is heavily damaged. It was aired after the 4th season of the TV show, making it a sort of prequel. But some fans recommend watching it prior to the TV show, as an introduction. Be warned that if you watch it this way, it contains some spoilers. Since Grace and I have watched the whole show and seen the movies before, we didn't care about spoilers. I think actually if you are watching it for the first time, it would probably be better to watch it after season 4, episode 9, "Atonement," as recommended in this guide. But if you are re-watching the series, I think it is fine to watch it first, since it fits the chronology.

The movie is a bit of a mixed bag. It was nice to remember just what a rich and complex story the team achieved here. The production team really did a lot with low-budget scenes. For example, a lot of the drama in the conversations is very much enhanced by the lighting in particular scenes, especially by what it hides. And the dramatic dialogue, especially among the Minbari, is terrific. The screenplay makes great use of foreshadowing and certain key phrases that return with different meaning in different contexts. Although I've seen it before, I was once again impressed with both the screenwriting and the acting, and so don't regret refreshing my memory by watching it again.

Overall, the movie is a little slow and talky. The younger kids were a bit bored because so much hinges on subtle things that are set up in critical conversations. There's quite a bit of info-dumping going on to set up scenes, although it doesn't feel as unnatural as it might in less skilled hands. Many of the space battle scenes are brief montages, sometimes accompanied by voiceovers describing the larger context. This makes it hard for them to feel truly dramatic. The CGI back then was relatively primitive. It's clear that they had to carefully ration their CGI scenes. By modern standards it looks a little primitive. The ships are a bit too obviously just shaded geometric shapes. The imagery is at its worst when the movie tries to show you outdoor scenes, of building and grass and trees, or snow, and they look painfully low-resolution. But the main performances are

so good that they help me maintain my suspension of disbelief. So I just kind of wince at some of the CGI scenes as they go by, but I don't let them really ruin my enjoyment of the movie.

I think tonight we'll watch a few more episodes from season 1.

I got up pretty early this morning and had a bath. My sister-in-law showed up about 8:15, which was a bit of a surprise. But we had coffee out on the back deck before the mosquitoes were really active, which was very nice. I made way too many scrambled eggs with leftover salmon, and toasted bagels and butter. I really don't feel like huge meals in the summer. I should have made three or four eggs because apparently everyone else was not all that hungry either.

We hadn't gotten enough sleep and so Grace and I actually went back to bed for a while. I couldn't really sleep, but I chilled out. Grace slept a bit. When we got up and out, it was almost 3:00. Grace had heard about a bakery in Milan that was selling sourdough on Saturdays, so we drove to Milan. They were sold out. That's what we get for taking a chill-out day.

We drove around the area for a while and looked at Milan, then drove back to the old downtown of Ypsilanti and had a snack at the Chick-Inn, a drive-in restaurant that has been operating at that location since 1953. While I think I've had their food, in the form of take-out that Grace brought me, I can't recall if I've ever actually eaten there before. It's a real drive-in, with the little speakers at your car window. We wanted to get out of the car, though, so we ate at some outdoor tables. We had hot dogs, grilled cheese sandwiches, chili dogs, fries, soda, and a chocolate malt for me. Their chili dogs were very tasty, totally drive-in food. I can't remember the last time I had a chocolate malt. It's been years. It was a deeply nostalgic flavor. Also, it really seems like the Flonase is keeping my allergies under control. Under normal circumstances I can't have a milkshake without a nasty allergy attack, my head packed solid, sneezing, maybe turning into a sinus infection that lasts for weeks. Flonase really seems miraculous to me, and I'm not even taking it every day, just every other day.

***Family Values: Between Neoliberalism and the New Social Conservatism* by Melinda Cooper**

After the late lunch we went to a park downtown. Grace and I just sat at a bench in the shade and I read her part of chapter 2 of *Family Values* by Melinda Cooper. We made some progress in chapter 2, although it is slow going. This text is *quite* dense. We can get through it and understand it reasonably well, but it is hard, and often times it takes us a bit of conversation to unpack certain sentences that the author breezes by pretty quickly.

Grace and I don't actually have degrees in Political Science or Economics. I've picked up more about these subjects than I think the average person knows, just through my general education including a history course about the Vietnam War, but there are definite gaps in my knowledge. Chapter 1 is a pretty impenetrable

overview of the author's thesis. In chapter 2 it starts to slow down and turn into more of a narrative, and that helps, but it would be great if she would provide definitions of some of her terminology. The reader could benefit an occasional page, or even a footnote, on what the author means by terms like "family wage," and "Fordism," a page or two on the poor laws she refers to, and glosses on terms like "monetarism" and "public choice theory." Different authors often mean slightly different things when they say "neoliberal," or "neoconservative," so it might be nice to hear what the *author* means when she uses those terms. It might be nice to have a sentence or two on what it means to be "Hegelian," at least in the context the author quotes. We think we know, more-or-less, what these terms mean, but a refresher would help.

It also seems like she needlessly restricts her audience by dropping in a lot of unusual words, and foreign phrases. I can handle words like "anathema," "aegis," and "rubric." Words like "constitutive" slow me down a bit when I have to read them out loud, because it's a word one rarely comes across, but the *meaning* is clear enough. I know what "en masse" means, although I think it is more common for phrases from Latin or French to be italicized when they appear in English texts. I'm of course familiar with lots of Latin phrases that English texts often borrow, such as "de facto" and "ad hoc," but I slowed down at "a longue durée historical analysis," although I could puzzle out the meaning of the phrase, and stopped dead at "tout court," a phrase Cooper drops in several times. It means "only," or "simply," or "without anything else added," but I had to look that up. I think Cooper unnecessarily limits her audience, here, by assuming her reader knows the meaning of these phrases.

I consider myself pretty well-read, but occasionally a word will stop me dead:

The liberal and left coalition for welfare reform may have quibbled with the causes of African American disadvantage *adduced* [emphasis mine] by Moynihan, yet they were in fundamental agreement on the point that this disadvantage undermined the family and that any long-term solution to racism would therefore require an effort to restore the African American family and the place of men within it.

Of course I know the word "deduce," and I know the word "traduce," but I'm not sure I've ever come across "adduce." It means "to bring forth something as evidence in a discussion or argument." It is honestly rare for me to come across words I'm not familiar with. I don't think the author chose the word deliberately to obfuscate; she just has assumptions about her audience that I don't live up to. The Grammarist web site also mentions "educer," says that "in general this word is rare and its synonym deduce is more common," although I don't think they are actually synonyms. I think "adduce" might be less common in American English and more common in British English. The author seems to be Australian — maybe that helps account for some of her word choices, that seem quite unusual to this American?

She also uses other odd constructs, such as "...they are unable to explain how the

problematic of family dysfunction became so central to popular understandings of inflation...,” where “the problematic” serves as a noun. This just seems unnecessary. I think a good editor could have helped here, and that would have gone a long way towards making the text easier to read.

Anyway, as I said, it’s slow-going. But in chapter 2 we have more of a narrative, and what I can understand of it is pretty fascinating. She mentions the Mothers’ Pensions program, something I didn’t know about; we just completed a section on AFDC, Aid to Families with Dependent Children, later known as ADC. I’m familiar with the way this program was attacked and pretty much dismantled during the Clinton years, but it’s helpful to read a brief history of attacks on the program, and consider programs and policies that might do a far better job actually helping the people that need it.

So we’re pressing on, even though I wish the book was written in a more accessible style. I’m reminded of Chomsky: a great speaker, but in his books he often wanders into sarcastic phrasings, and if you don’t actually know the topic well already, and his take on it, it’s not always obvious that he’s being sarcastic. Similarly, in Cooper’s books, she often seems to set up per premises, over the course of a paragraph, but assumes that the reader already shares her conclusion about the topic of the paragraph, and so doesn’t clearly state it. It really just makes this all just unnecessarily hard to read. But it does seem like as the book moves on, it is turning into more of a narrative, and that helps.

## **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 Last Starfighter* (1984 movie)
- *What Happened to Bernie Sanders* by Jared H. Beck, Esq.
- “*Videotape*” (Song by Radiohead), from the Album *In Rainbows*
- *Babylon 5: In the Beginning* (1998 TV movie)
- *Family Values: Between Neoliberalism and the New Social Conservatism* by Melinda Cooper

*Pittsfield Township, Michigan*

*The Week Ending Saturday, June 16th, 2018*

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