

The audio sounded just awful; whatever filtering and compression Facebook Live applies, it does terrible things to chorused electric guitar. It may also have had something to do with the laptop mic using “beam-forming.” I really don’t know. If that is the case, an external microphone might sound a bit better, but it still probably going to be crushed pretty badly by the compression. I should compare it to Google Hangouts next time; I think Google Hangouts may yield better sound quality.

“A Long Expected Party,” Continued

We had our story very late since the kids had all been sleeping on and off all day while trying to recuperate from their virus. So I think it was past midnight when I read some more of chapter 1 of *The Fellowship of the Ring*. I got through the middle third or so of the chapter, covering Bilbo’s party and the aftermath, from:

The next day more carts rolled up the Hill, and still more carts. There might have been some grumbling about ‘dealing locally’, but that very week orders began to pour out of Bag End for every kind of provision, commodity, or luxury that could be obtained in Hobbiton or Bywater or anywhere in the neighborhood.

to:

Gandalf remained for a while staring after him into the darkness. ‘Good-bye, my dear Bilbo — until our next meeting!’ he said softly and went back indoors.

I had a few comments on this part of the chapter. The Peter Jackson movie follows this chapter quite closely, with some strategic trimming to keep the story moving along at a good clip. There are a few changes: in the movie, Merry and Pippin steal Gandalf’s thunder, so to speak, by setting off the giant dragon firework, meant to be the finale of the display, prematurely, *inside* the tent. This change seems to exist to set up the mischievous natures of Merry and Pippin earlier in the story, and I don’t think it does any harm; it also sets up the funny scene where they apparently have to wash all the dishes as punishment.

The movie elides a couple of interesting bits of the chapter that are about Bilbo’s class in Hobbiton. There’s a mention of “Bagshot Row,” 3 houses near Bag End that Bilbo presumably owns; they are “adjoining the field” where the party is held, and occupied by “three hobbit-families.” The text later mentions that Bilbo left gifts for them:

The poorer hobbits, and especially those of Bagshot Row, did very well. Old Gaffer Gamgee got two sacks of potatoes, a new spade, a woollen waistcoat, and a bottle of ointment for creaking joints.

Are these families renters, so that Bilbo earns money as a landlord? Are they tenant farmers that farm some of his land? It’s not entirely clear, although

we know about the Gamgee family, where father Old Gaffer Gamgee and son Samwise are the former and current gardeners at Bag End.

There's also a matter not shown in the movie: apparently Bilbo's birthday party was segregated. There was a larger party that was pretty much open to everyone:

Practically everybody living near was invited. A very few were overlooked by accident, but as they turned up all the same, that did not matter.

But inside the "great pavilion" was the party of select hobbits who got to see Bilbo give his farewell remarks:

There was a splendid supper for everyone; for everyone, that is, except those invited to the special family dinner-party. This was held in the great pavilion with the tree. The invitations were limited to twelve dozen (a number also called by the hobbits one Gross, though the word was not considered proper to use of people); and the guests were selected from all the families to which Bilbo and Frodo were related, with the addition of a few special unrelated friends (such as Gandalf).

The segregated nature of this dinner party is not, I think, captured in the movie. I was a little bit startled, but reminded that in Tolkien's time, it would have been stranger to have an egalitarian, "everyone is treated like family" gathering than to segregate the hobbits.

This chapter also has some of my favorite writing by Tolkien; he describes the fireworks using alliteration worthy of the unknown Beowulf poet. The result is quite literally pyrotechnical:

There were fountains of butterflies that flew glittering into the trees; there were pillars of coloured fires that rose and turned into eagles, or sailing ships, or a phalanx of flying swans; there was a red thunder-storm and a shower of yellow rain; there was a forest of silver spears that sprang suddenly into the air with a yell like an embattled army, and came down again into the Water with a hiss like a hundred hot snakes.

I love fireworks, and we were privileged in Saginaw to get up close and personal to a huge display every July 4th. But in Tolkien's fantasy the fireworks go from an impressive show of noise and light to something magical.

Then there is a clear callback to the days of *The Hobbit*:

He took off his party clothes, folded up and wrapped in tissue-paper his embroidered silk waistcoat, and put it away. Then he put on quickly some old untidy garments, and fastened round his waist a worn leather belt. On it he hung a short sword in a battered black-leather scabbard. From a locked drawer, smelling of moth-balls, he took out an old cloak and hood. They had been locked up as if they

were very precious, but they were so patched and weatherstained that their original colour could hardly be guessed: it might have been dark green. They were rather too large for him.

This is none other than the traveling cloak Bilbo wore as he set out more than sixty years earlier, although the fact that it is still in one piece strains credulity a bit, despite the mothballs Tolkien lampshades it with. Bilbo originally borrowed it from Dwalin:

That's how they all came to start, jogging off from the inn one fine morning just before May, on laden ponies; and Bilbo was wearing a dark green hood (a little weather-stained) and a dark-green cloak borrowed from Dwalin. They were too large for him, and he looked rather comic.

Sixty years later, they were still too big.

The Question of Dwalin's Very Long Life

We later learn from Glóin that Dwalin is still alive; Frodo learns this in Rivendell. It's a touching detail. According to Appendix A of *The Lord of the Rings*, Dwalin died in the year 3112 of the Third Age, but the Third Age ended in 3021 with the destruction of the One Ring. If you assume that Tolkien meant 3112 to mean year 91 of the Fourth Age, Dwalin died late in the 122-year reign of Aragorn, years after the deaths of Merry and Pippin, at the age of 340, which would make him by far the longest-lived dwarf on record. There is nothing else in Tolkien's writing that commemorates or explains Dwalin's unusually long life, and so I wonder if Tolkien accidentally made an off-by-100 error when writing Appendix A. 240 years would have been a more typical lifespan for a dwarf of Dwalin's cohort, as Balin, his older brother, was killed in Moria at the age of 231, and Glóin, who didn't die in battle, lived to be 253.

Monday

My Consultation at Beaumont Hospital

Monday was a big day. I made an onion pesto omelet and toasted bagels and coffee, and Grace drove me to my appointment at Beaumont Medical Center in Sterling Heights. (The Beaumont facility seems to be right on the border between Troy and Sterling Heights, with some hospital buildings on the Troy side, and the medical center building on the Sterling Heights side — strange!)

We made it a bit early, early enough that we weren't panicked, and got checked in. It's over an hour from our home. I had a pulmonary function test, a strange procedure where I was made to breathe through a tube into a machine at different speeds: breathing normally, panting fast, inhaling deeply, exhaling as deeply as possible, etc. while the woman running the test acted as a drill instructor, "encouraging" me to get the best reading I could. This test is not actually painful

but it is uncomfortable and a little disturbing. During the “pant hard and fast” part, the machine will suddenly close a valve which prevents the user from getting any air in or out at all; apparently it is testing how hard you can try to force it.

That’s a little disturbing, to have your air supply suddenly cut off, even if you are expecting it. I’m obviously being facetious, and don’t actually mean to make light of torture, but I came to think of this procedure as being “airboarded,” sort of a very mild version of being waterboarded. I only had to do this for a few minutes, but one can imagine what it could be like with the addition of a little duct tape and a more sadistic operator.

Anyway. I then gave a very thorough history to the nurse coordinator, and then we waited around for a while (but not too long, only about 30 minutes) to see the doctor. He was, I think, a bit puzzled that I was coming to see him, as he usually works with patients who are much sicker, many of whom have the full-blown alpha-1 antitrypsin deficiency disease, with the genotypes “ZZ” or “SZ,” or some rarer genotype. As he put it, I had gone right from a “generalist” way up to not just a pulmonologist, but a pulmonologist who specializes in this kind of illness. But lacking any good information or advice other than that one piece of data, my “MZ” test result, I found his name on the Alpha-1 Foundation web site. That was the only thing I had to go on, to choose a specific pulmonologist, other than just picking a local one at random.

I didn’t have a lot to show him on Monday by way of symptoms. (Had he seen me back in November or December, I would have shown up with a horrible cough, and probably wouldn’t have even been able to make it through the pulmonary function test at all due to the coughing.) Grace was in the room to back me up — to help me describe my months of illness accurately, and to not forget to mention anything or ask any questions.

In the end, we were both pretty satisfied that he took my concerns seriously. He ordered some blood tests to look for immune response markers, to determine if my immune system is fighting off some active infection now. He is going to requisition my chest x-ray from December and see if it shows anything relevant. He didn’t prescribe anything, but advised me to try over-the-counter Prilosec, Flonase, and daily saline, as well as sticking with the Claritin and albuterol as needed.

He thinks that a lot of the inflammation, coughing, and pain I’ve been having might actually be related to chronic reflux and post-nasal drip rather than an active infection in my lungs or other issues caused or exacerbated by low alpha-1 antitrypsin levels. He said a few things I found surprising: one, that heartburn can cause coughing even when you never actually feel the usual burning sensation, or gas pressure. And two, that coughing up (or blowing out) brightly colored mucus was not a good indication of active (or even past) infection. That one is still puzzling me, because I’ve always thought that yellow or green mucus was literally tinted that way because it contained a lot of bacteria.

But apparently this *isn't* actually the case. WebMD actually says:

You might have heard that yellow or green mucus is a clear sign that you have an infection, but despite that common misperception, the yellow or green hue isn't due to bacteria.

Apparently the tint is because of a greenish-colored enzyme, and you can have a terrible bacterial infection with clear mucus.

I also was complaining that it seems in the last few months like the mucus in my throat is very thick, and hard to cough up, and that it seems to catch and hold crumbs from whatever I've been eating, which makes it more irritating, leaving this tickle in my throat as if I've got food stuck there.

So I'm not sure I fully understand exactly *what* creates the color, but this article suggests:

...[acute inflammation] releases various inflammatory mediators which attract the immune system to the area, including a class of cell called a neutrophil. These neutrophils have something called a respiratory burst. What that means is they produce enzymes which produce free radicals of oxygen and these free radicals of oxygen destroy the bacteria. But in the process, they can also kill the white blood cell. These myeloperoxidase enzymes — that make this respiratory burst — contain iron as a cofactor, and it's the compounds of this iron, which are present in various oxidation states, that give the mucus its bright green colour.

I think this suggests that the green or yellow mucus might be more a marker of inflammation, rather than proof of infection. I think this means that the root cause might be infection, or it might not be. I think it might mean that there could be a secondary, opportunistic infection, but it's relatively harmless and not the root cause.

So what's the root cause? Well, we're testing the theory that the root cause might be some combination of environmental irritants, allergies, and stress-related acid reflux. I think it might be that my relatively low alpha-1 antitrypsin level is making me more susceptible to the inflammation response. But maybe my "MZ" genotype is really not a contributing factor at all and the genetics I should worry about are the ones that make me prone to the irritation, allergies, and reflux. I will see him again in a few months.

So that's the plan.

So far I feel at least tentatively confident that he's looking at the right things. And I feel a bit encouraged. Maybe I *haven't* actually damaged my lungs with these months of coughing. (If I'm lucky, I haven't done much in the way of permanent damage to my esophagus with the reflux, either.) And that's where the pulmonary function test might be of use: I have a baseline, and if I come

back for another test in a year, we can notice if things have gotten better or worse (taking into account that some decline happens naturally with age).

I called my brother after the appointment, and he told me something interesting — he said that he had a bad, long-lasting cough a while back, and that to his surprise his doctor recommended Prilosec, and that made it go away. So maybe that’s the more relevant genetic information.

The thing is, I’ve had bad reflux before — I was even hospitalized overnight once, at age 36, thinking I might be having some kind of heart attack. But they did a stress test with a dye injection, and my heart function looked absolutely fine. It was just reflux, just severe enough to cause surprisingly intense pain in my chest.

But back then I don’t think it ever made me cough, at all. So it’s all quite confusing. But I just want to get better. And I’ve clearly got to get back into some kind of exercise regimen, if I can figure out how.

***Star Trek: The Next Generation* Season 5, Episode 5: “Disaster” and Episode 6: “The Game”**

We didn’t do all that much for the rest of the day; Grace and I didn’t get back home until late afternoon. Grace then had to pretty much spend the rest of the evening attending to our sick baby Elanor. I did more dishes. We watched a couple of old episodes of *Star Trek: The Next Generation*. In particular, “Disaster” and “The Game.” I recall seeing both of these before.

In “Disaster,” the Enterprise crashes into an invisible cosmic bugaboo (a piece of quantum yarn left over from the Great Unraveling, or something like that). The ship is badly damaged and there are a lot of casualties; but the script doesn’t really care much, because it isn’t anyone we know personally. The bridge is cut off from the rest of the ship, so Counselor Troi is in charge of the bridge for a while. There are some nice moments in this show: Troi has to stand up for herself against Ensign Ro Laren. Keiko gives birth to a surprisingly old baby. Worf as midwife is still pretty funny, as he tells her “you may now give birth.” He admits that the real thing differs quite a bit from the computer simulation he studied at the Academy.

In “The Game,” Oculus Rift has come to the Enterprise. Everyone gets hooked on it. Wesley Crusher is back to visit, and proves that the only thing that can interest a heterosexual teenage boy more than video games is a heterosexual teenage girl. The crew members’ O faces will haunt me until the end of my days. The mind-controlled crew, including Picard, disable Data and hunt down Wesley, by programming the sensors to detect the plume of Axe body spray. Wesley and his girlfriend are captured and eyeball-raped by a smiling Picard and Riker, and stain their nice polyester tunics, but fortunately Data saves the day, and there are apparently no hard feelings about all the assault and forcible stimulation of everyone’s pleasure center. (And why should there be? It was the

happy-go-lucky eighties! Times were different! Or something.)

Tuesday

Offers on the Old House

We have an offer on the house! Actually, three offers. One of them is close enough to what we owe that I may be able to simply borrow a chunk of money to put into the pot at closing, and make the numbers work out without resorting to a short sale, deed-in-lieu, or any of those things that are likely to put a huge dent in my credit.

I think this offer is contingent on a satisfactory inspection, and we're waiting on that, but I am reopening the issue with my bank now that we have an offer on paper. We had an offer last fall but it was so low that I would have had to borrow a much larger amount. This offer is higher so I'd have to borrow considerably less to make it work.

If this goes through, it will mean we lost over \$50,000 on the house. If you factor in the renovations we did on moving in: a complete new hardwood floor in the family room, and refinishing floors in other rooms — it will be more like \$60,000. And I'll still be paying for the house for another two to three years. But the monthly loan payments will at least be considerably less than what I was spending on mortgage, taxes, insurance, water, and energy, which is good — we'll be a little more secure each month, financially.

And maybe as important or even more important, our future liability will be reduced to *just this loan*. Freeing up a little bit of money each month *and* making it so we're no longer responsible for everything about the old house would go a long way towards reducing our stress level.

“A Long Expected Party,” Continued

I got home relatively late last night, ate some chicken pot pie, cleaned up some dishes, and read the kids the last part of chapter 1 of *The Fellowship of the Ring*. The last part of the chapter is mostly an account of the gifts Bilbo left for friends and relatives, as part of Bilbo's post-departure “life-changing magic of tidying up.” Otho Sackville-Baggins feels aggrieved, and demands to see Bilbo's will. Frodo obligingly lets him read it, and he is enraged to find that it looks to be entirely in order:

Otho would have been Bilbo's heir, but for the adoption of Frodo. He read the will carefully and snorted. It was, unfortunately, very clear and correct (according to the legal customs of hobbits, which demand among other things seven signatures of witnesses in red ink).

‘Foiled again!’ he said to his wife. ‘And after waiting sixty years. Spoons? Fiddlesticks!’ He snapped his fingers under Frodo's nose and stumped off. But Lobelia was not so easily got rid of. A little

later Frodo came out of the study to see how things were going on, and found her still about the place, investigating nooks and corners, and tapping the floors. He escorted her firmly off the premises, after he had relieved her of several small (but rather valuable) articles that had somehow fallen inside her umbrella.

We don't really ever see Otho get his comeuppance, as he dies in the years between Bilbo's 111 birthday and Frodo's departure from the Shire. Hundreds of pages later in the chapter entitled "The Scouring of the Shire," we will learn of Wormtongue's murder of Otho's son Lotho, thus bringing the unpleasant Sackville-Baggins family to a sad and violent end.

There's not much left of the chapter, except for Gandalf's warnings that Frodo keep the ring "secret" and "safe," words echoed in Peter Jackson's movie adaptation. Gandalf then says goodbye. We are told that:

The evening was closing in, and his cloaked figure quickly vanished into the twilight. Frodo did not see him again for a long time.

Frodo's Timeline in Film and Print

In the movie, this "long time" seems to be only a few weeks or months; in the book, it is many years.

- Bilbo leaves the Shire with Thorin and company on the equivalent of our April 28th (according to this source, Third Age year 2941, about five months before his birthday, September 23rd).
- Bilbo then leaves Hobbiton for good on his birthday in Third Age year 3001, about 60 years and five months later.
- Gandalf then leaves the next day (I think).
- Frodo does not see Gandalf again until 3008 (about seven years later)
- Frodo does not actually leave the shire until the day after the birthday he shares with Bilbo, 3018 — seventeen years and a day after Bilbo's secretive departure.

Gandalf's Long Game

That's a long time for Gandalf to harbor suspicion, but it makes a little more sense when we consider that Gandalf is not human, but an angelic figure. He existed for a long time before coming to Middle Earth, in ages that Tolkien did not precisely document in terms of human years; call it thousands or tens of thousands of years. He's been knocking around Middle Earth for about 2,000 years. So perhaps time doesn't have the same sense of urgency for him, until, suddenly, it does: in the films, Jackson has Gandalf say "three hundred lives of men I have walked this earth and now I have no time." There's not much to support that "300 lives of men" number in the books, but it's certainly the case that Gandalf has been observing and arranging events for a long, long time, events which then come to fruition very quickly.

Peter Jackson clearly felt that it would be difficult to get a sense of urgency going in the movie, if the audience immediately had to think about a seventeen-year gap between Bilbo's departure and Frodo's departure. The book's timeline would tend to deflate the sense of the menace of the ring that the movie sets up in the prologue. We would have needed a way to indicate the passage of time: maybe a montage of Frodo pattering around the shire, and growing older. We'd have to age Frodo, at least somewhat, although like Bilbo, he does not show a lot of outward signs of aging, because of his possession of the ring.

I think Jackson made the right choice for the movie. I am a hardcore Tolkien fan, but I don't believe that the movies had to adapt the text literally in all respects, and as I've mentioned before, I think the opening scenes of *The Fellowship of the Ring*, the movie, do a very good job of presenting the important elements of the first few chapters of the book. In some later chapters — well, I have some quibbles. But we'll get there, like Gandalf, in our own time.

Wednesday

Harvest Moon Café for breakfast: breakfast BLT sandwich, hash browns cooked extra-crispy, and coffee.

Aaand I forgot to take the leftover chicken pot pie with me this morning for my lunch.

Trump, Again

Over breakfast, I read a few more chapters in *The Dangerous Case of Donald Trump*. As I've mentioned before, there isn't a lot here that is new or of interest to me; Gail Sheehy's essay in particular is disappointing, as it consists largely of alarmist hand-waving about Nixon and neo-McCarthyism. But there are a couple of concepts mentioned that I think are worth bringing up, in between examples of Godwin's Law and bits on sociopathy:

- Trump is described as a *malignant narcissist*, which is a narcissist who also engages in aggression, especially *sadism*.
- The concept of "splitting" is mentioned, which I think is a significant aspect of Trump's thinking; he clearly divides the world into loyal and disloyal people, and updates his lists frequently as events unfold. Per Wikipedia:

People matching the diagnostic criteria for narcissistic personality disorder also use splitting as a central defence mechanism. Most often narcissists do this as an attempt to stabilize their sense of self positivity in order to preserve their self-esteem, by perceiving themselves as purely upright or admirable and others who do not conform to their will or values as purely wicked or contemptible.

- Hypomania is mentioned, which I think is also a useful tool for understanding Trump's lack of sleep and his constant energetic attacks on others; it is associated with attention deficit disorder. I don't have a lot of confidence

in ADD as a diagnosis for children, but there's no denying that Trump's attention span is lacking.

So this stuff can be interesting, but it's just not enough to make this volume really hold together as a book; for one thing, there's too much redundancy between the contributed essays.

The chapters I read today don't mention the concept of "flying monkeys" but I think it is also relevant:

They are people who act on behalf of a narcissist to a third party, usually for an abusive purpose.

I think this pretty much sums up Trump's staff of enablers, including the justifiably reviled Sean Spicer and Sarah Huckabee Sanders (and, recently, Ronna McDaniel, who tweeted that "Democrats hate our President more than they love our country," which combines the worst aspects of nationalism, partisanship, and a claim to understand the hidden motives of one's political opponents, all in one sentence).

Thursday

Well, Thursday was a bust. I woke up with a fever and a sore throat, so I called in sick. Again. We have a whole house full of kids who feel so bad that they will just sit in the bed coughing and crying their eyes out. I wasn't able to get extra unbroken sleep, but I did nap a bit and Grace brought me tea and soup. By the end of the day I was feeling a little bit better. I sat in the bathtub with Elanor for a while so she would be able to inhale some steamy air, and that helped drain her nose a little bit. She fell asleep sprawled on my chest. I don't think she's dangerously ill, but her little honking cough and sobbing because of her packed sinuses is just heart-rending.

Grace went out to get us Chinese food from King Shing for dinner. It didn't taste as good as I hoped. I think some of that is because my own head is pretty packed and I can't smell things well. But also, it just seems like some of their fried rice and noodle dishes just aren't very good. So we will tend to stick with their ribs and orange chicken and sesame balls and other items that have been consistently tasty.

Our guests are getting sick as well, which is not at all surprising, but I'm worried for the little baby boy staying with us.

***The Fellowship of the Ring* by J. R. R. Tolkien, Book 1, Chapter 2: "The Shadow of the Past"**

Thursday night I read the kids the first part of chapter 2 of *The Fellowship of the Ring*, called "The Shadow of the Past." I've already discussed the long timeline. There are a few interesting details that I noticed. In the scene where Gandalf puts the ring in the fire, he briefly holds it. There's no dramatic reaction to

him briefly touching the ring, or even getting his hand near it, as is suggested in the movie. But we do hear some more detail about what would happen to Bilbo (or Frodo) if they kept the ring for too long. Gandalf describes how they would “fade” — become invisible even when they weren’t wearing the ring. It’s suggested that this is what became of the Ringwraiths.

In the book the menace of the ring escalates quite slowly. There’s no reason that Gandalf can’t touch it. It would be a significant risk if Frodo *gave* it to him, and he accepted it.

At this stage Frodo could presumably put the ring on and it isn’t clear that he would experience anything special (except for becoming invisible).

In the book, the ring seems to become gradually more hazardous as Frodo moves East, and as he is hunted. In the movie, there’s a pretty sudden escalation. Bilbo wears the ring on his birthday with no dramatic effects. And an unspecified (but not terribly long) time later, weeks or months at most, when Frodo puts on the ring at the Prancing Pony in Bree, he’s suddenly very dramatically present in the shadow realm, experiencing “shadow-vision,” and in grave danger of being seen by the Ringwraiths and perhaps Sauron.

The escalation is fast, and not fully explained — what has changed? Is this just due to the presence of the Ringwraiths? A day or two earlier, Frodo puts on the ring, with Ringwraiths breathing down his neck, and the creepy-crawlies crawl out of their holes, and he looks a bit queasy, but he doesn’t experience “shadow-vision” (or if he does, we aren’t shown). So there’s some pretty wild inconsistency here. I wish it ramped up in a more explainable way, but I don’t wish that enough to wish that the movie stuck with the much longer timeline between Bilbo’s departure and Frodo’s departure. We’ll talk it over as we continue.

There’s also a mention of ent-like beings somewhere in the Shire:

‘But what about these Tree-men, these giants, as you might call them? They do say that one bigger than a tree was seen up away beyond the North Moors not long back.’

‘Who’s they?’

‘My cousin Hal for one. He works for Mr. Boffin at Overhill and goes up to the Northfarthing for the hunting. He saw one.’

‘Says he did, perhaps. Your Hal’s always saying he’s seen things; and maybe he sees things that ain’t there.’

‘But this one was as big as an elm tree, and walking — walking seven yards to a stride, if it was an inch.’

There’s some debate over just what kind of creature Hal saw. In my opinion the two strongest possibilities are that it could have been an Ent — perhaps a different “branch” of Ents that lives this far West? Or perhaps it was a Huorn — a wild tree, maybe “off the reservation, escaped from Fangorn Forest, or possibly from the Old Forest. Treebeard suggests that some trees can become “Entish”

and some Ents can become “tree-ish.” Maybe this creature is one of those in-between beings, rather than a true Huorn or Ent?

I’ve seen it suggested that this might have been one of the lost Entwives. This seems unlikely, because to me Treebeard’s sad story of the Entwives suggests to me that the male and female Ents actually *diverged* — almost undergoing a kind of speciation, becoming different, to the point where they may have even been unrecognizable to one another; it could be an allegory about the development of agriculture as it diverged from herding, or the development of culture and permanent settlements as it diverged from nomadic living.

In any case, I don’t think Tolkien ever clearly stated his intention here. It’s one of several suggestive mysteries in his works that can’t be completely resolved.

Friday

After some debate with myself and another soak in the tub, I decided to go into work. I ought to be past the contagious stage (but then again, I thought that I had gotten off easy with only a brief illness, last weekend. So I really don’t know what is going on).

Grace made me a bulletproof coffee, some Dave’s Killer Bread toast, and a couple of fried eggs. Dave’s Killer Bread advertises itself as made by ex-cons so I have taken to calling it “murder bread.” We do like it, though; we tried it compared to several other whole wheat breads that Costco stocks and so far it is the best-tasting one.

I took my Prilosec, Claritin, and a chaser of albuterol. The heartburn is disappearing, and that’s very nice. The cough and phlegm is not and seems like it may be on an upwards part of the “cycle” again. That may be due to this virus, though, so it probably isn’t fair to judge. This is the first time I used the inhaler in about a week. It does seem to help a bit, but not dramatically. A little later today I will try the saline and the Flonase again, although it’s been hard to get my head clear enough to get a full dose in there. I’m trying to be compliant with the regimen my new doctor advised!

This week’s paycheck was a little bigger than last week. I have gotten a raise, and it was even retroactive to the start of March. So we have a small windfall. I paid off my black credit card which had a balance of a couple hundred dollars. That’s the remainder of the debt for my ThinkPad. So that’s paid off now. Grace is getting a small budget for clothes, largely because Veronica doesn’t get hand-me-downs.

House Sale Complications

There are some complications with the offer on the house. It is contingent on the buyer selling a currently owned home. So we are hoping for the best there. And it will get another inspection. We are hoping the buyer understands the condition the house pretty well from walking through it, understands already

that it needs some improvements, has already taken those expenses into account in writing the offer, and won't ask us to make too many more accommodations in the price, which would mean borrowing more, or making repairs that we can't afford to make.

We will get the water turned back on so the plumbing can get an inspection. We are also going to have some work done on the attic and heating ducts. It looks like insurance will cover some damage from bats. This should include some repairs to attic insulation and cleaning ducts. So we're making arrangements with a contractor who will get paid by our insurance company. So this might help with some of the issues.

This is all kind of going on at once while the household full of kids is still mostly sick, so it's all quite a challenge. And Grace's car is having some issues, so I need to figure out how to pay for that as well.

Audio Production Notes

Grace has arranged a guest for the Pottscast. I just hope that we can record. I am considering recording a live song, if my voice isn't too scratchy. Last night I spent some time messing with the recording setup. In order to accommodate more microphones, I switched from using the Roland FA-66 as my main recording interface, to using the Tascam US-2000. The FA-66 will be for remote callers. I messed around with this for some time. I could not figure out why I could hear inputs using the direct monitoring feature of the US-2000, but no audio would make it into Logic, or out of Logic. As far as I could tell, I had everything configured correctly. I tried quitting Logic and running it again. Nothing.

Then in desperation I rebooted the computer, and launched Logic again. Everything just started working exactly as expected.

That's strange, and makes me nervous, because in my experience, Logic and CoreAudio will almost always let you reconfigure them on the fly and work fine. MacOS X should be able to restart the CoreAudio subsystem when you change parameters without having to reboot the entire OS. So if something is crashing or locking up undetectably, with no error messages that percolate up to the user, that's bad.

I don't have any way to diagnose the problem further without digging into logs, and I suspect that might not be very helpful. I just hope the US-2000 works as reliably under Logic as the FA-66 did, which is to say, almost perfectly. But we'll see. I still need to verify that I can get the remote audio working correctly for the Google Hangout. Last time I tried it, I could not get anything working until I restarted Safari, although it had been working a few days earlier.

I'd like to replace this whole setup with a newer Mac Mini with an SSD, and current versions of MacOS X and Logic, and two new audio interfaces, to be determined. But I have no real assurance that a more recent software/hardware combination would actually be any more reliable than this old combination. I

still miss Snow Leopard, which I still claim is the most reliable version of Mac OS X that I ever used for audio.

I'd still like to find a way to have my second audio interface consist entirely of a 2-in, 2-out box that uses optical S/PDIF (on TOSLINK). That would mean the main interface would have this interface. It's uncommon. I'd consider another digital standard. For example, the Tascam UH-7000 has digital in and out (AES/EBU on XLR female and male). The manual tells me it does 48kHz. Although, even scrutinizing the manual, it's still not 100% clear to me whether I can configure it so that the digital inputs feed the computer as the device's channel 1 and 2 input to the computer, and the device's output from the computer feed the digital outputs. But that box also has preamps and analog inputs and outputs that I just don't need for this purpose.

If I do upgrade everything, there's also a good chance I might be able to get a software solution working, to supply the extra audio device necessary for Skype or Google Hangouts. That would be great. It really seems like something that the operating system should support itself, but unfortunately I don't think I can expect any more innovation from Apple in the audio subsystem for MacOS X (pretty much ever).

The Zoom U-44 seems like it might be useful for this setup... maybe? It really depends on how the inputs and outputs can be mapped to the channels going to and from the computer. And the SPL Crimson 3 is very pretty, but as it has only two microphone preamps, it can't replace the old US-2000 for this setup.

It doesn't seem like TASCAM has a really good replacement for the US-2000. There's the US-16x08, but it doesn't have fine-grained control of which microphone inputs get phantom power. Ideally, I'd be able to turn it on and off on each input; the US-2000 lets you do it by pairs, which is good enough for my purposes; the US-16x08 only lets you turn it on and off for banks of four. That seems like a small step backwards, although for this purpose I could live with it. I don't really need the low-latency monitor mix built into the US-2000; I don't really use it except for testing. And I certainly don't need MIDI. And to be honest I don't need the extra line inputs, 11-16, or the extra line outputs, 2-8. And this device doesn't have front-panel metering.

My ideal rack-mount interface for this purpose would be a plain old USB 2.0 device. Lightning might be nice for a future computer connection but I don't need it at present and don't have anything to plug it into. It would have:

- 6 XLR microphone inputs, with good preamps, on the front panel, with an input level knob and phantom power switch right there for each one. These should have plenty of gain. This would allow me to use my two PR-40s, add a third one for a guest, with an extra input for a condenser mic for an acoustic guitar, and a couple of spares.
- Those two spares, inputs 5-6, could be Neutrik Combo jacks with a switch to make them instrument inputs. Although don't bother, unless they sound

as good as plugging my guitar into my Radial JDV and then into a good preamp and ADC. (So, in fact, maybe don't even bother.)

- Then, I need 6 more TRS line inputs. (I'd usually use two, but if I added an iPad or live DJ mixer or something, that's two more, and I can imagine needing two spares for something in the future.) In general I don't need these to be configurable to support consumer-level outputs, since I'd do that conversion externally using transformers or direct boxes that will give me better sound.
- As for outputs, they can all be TRS, and I think 6 would do it.
- Then, digital: I'd be in hog heaven if it had S/PDIF out on TOSLINK and RCA coaxial, like the Celesonic US-20x20. I only need 2 outputs and 2 inputs.

That's really about it. I don't need or want a second headphone jack. I don't need or want a MIDI interface. I don't need or want built-in DSP, or a mixer, or anything like it.

Then it would be *great* if I could buy another box like this one, another USB 2.0 device, powered by a regular AC power cable, except with *only* the 2 input channels and 2 output channels of digital I/O. It wouldn't have to be rack-mountable since I'd imagine this could be quite small.

These both probably need word clock in/out and through, again like the Celesonic US-20x20, but so far I've been able to get reasonable results without having to mess with word clock.

Why isn't someone making devices to these specs?

Do I need to go into business?

I notice that TASCAM has some new Dante devices like the ML-16D and I'd love to try these, but they are probably extreme overkill for what I actually want to do in my home studio. They may not be overkill for what I'd *eventually* like to do, though...

At this point Paul got a faraway look in his eyes, as he stared into space and began to imagine a live performance space with a short-throw projector and a motorized theater screen for movie nights, a separate podcasting studio, a separate mixing and mastering room, and mixers everywhere all capable of sending audio to and from one another, and he could be no longer reached for comment, so we'll leave it there for now.

Back to the Box?

The new Sound Devices MixPre-10M looks promising.

Saturday

The Pottscast Setup

I spent a chunk of Saturday working on the podcast setup, practicing guitar, and attempting to get reasonably good sound into the TASCAM interface. I'm using my Radial JDV on electric guitar, and having a lot of trouble. The output from the JDV when I play is extremely dynamic. It will very easily clip the input on the TASCAM even when the preamp level is turned quite low (like the nine o'clock position). I can engage the 15 dB pad on the JDV, but that just seems to push the problem downstream. When I pad the signal or turn the TASCAM preamp level way down, I wind up with a very low level in my control room headphones, and I want it a lot higher. I might be able to compress it on a bus inside Logic but this is starting to get complicated for what should be a simple control room mix.

It just seems like the inputs on the TASCAM are easy to clip compared to my old and much-missed Apogee Ensemble. I don't have the Ensemble anymore to do an A/B comparison, but I think it was more robust in this situation. It seems like I might need a hardware compressor on the output of the JDV before I can even feed it into the TASCAM. I don't have a good hardware compressor handy so I'm not sure what I can do.

Overall I'm just not sure the TASCAM mic inputs sound as good as the Roland FA-66 inputs, and that's disappointing. I've been using the FA-66 since rebooting the Pottscast last summer and between the PR-40s, the Cloud Lifter, and the FA-66, and the Renaissance Vox plug-in I use in post-processing, this chain has been giving us a certain characteristic voiceover sound that I like. I am not sure I can get something that sounds comparably good with the TASCAM.

Also, I've been having a lot of problems getting remote audio working for the podcast Google hangout. The hardware connections seem to work fine. I can play a track from the computer out of the output of the FA-66, into an input of the US-2000. The Google hangout will *hear* audio that goes into the "mix minus" and out from an output of the US-2000 into the input of the FA-66. So the hangout can "hear" the audio from our microphones. But for some reason the hangout doesn't seem like it will *send* audio back into the control room mix. That input of the US-2000 just remains silent while the hangout is up and running. I have no idea why. I got it to work last time, when we did our interview with Julie, but I don't know exactly *how*. I think I just restarted Safari enough times and it started working. That's nerve-racking. This is our podcast infrastructure and it's just way too fragile. And I am not confident that just updating all the hardware and software would help this problem.

Boromir and Isildur

We have made a bit more progress in *Fellowship of the Ring*. Frodo has heard Gandalf tell him the story of Gollum. It's interesting — Gandalf is working with

a very few actual facts here, but he weaves them into a story in which he puts feelings and motivations in Gollum, and makes him a sympathetic (although very disturbed) character.

Gandalf has also told Frodo a bit more of the history of the ring. There's a passage in which he describes how the ring betrayed Isildur, by slipping off his finger, rendering him visible in a critical moment:

‘...Isildur was marching north along the east banks of the River, and near the Gladden Fields he was waylaid by the Orcs of the Mountains, and almost all his folk were slain. He leaped into the waters, but the Ring slipped from his finger as he swam, and then the Orcs saw him and killed him with arrows.’

This is an example of a time when the ring showed *agency*. I was reminded this time of Boromir's death, at the end of *Fellowship*. The ring betrays Boromir, in a sense; his heart is tainted by a lust to take the ring from Frodo and wield it. In the logic of the story, because Boromir's heart has become impure, the perimeter of his virtue breached, his body is vulnerable, and so he too dies pierced by Orc arrows.

There's another passage where Gandalf says something interesting about how he believes there may be another power, another *agency* at work to create the slightly unbelievable chain of coincidences that led to Bilbo's discovery of the ring. In part I think this is a bit of "lampshading," but it also hints at the larger context, the way this story of the Third Age of Middle-earth fits into the larger Legendarium, which goes all the way back to the creation of the world, and describes the beings behind it.

‘Behind that there was something else at work, beyond any design of the Ring-maker. I can put it no plainer than by saying that Bilbo was meant to find the Ring, and not by its maker. In which case you also were meant to have it. And that may be an encouraging thought.’

Gandalf does not tell Frodo that "God" meant for Bilbo to find the ring. There's no evidence that the hobbits used a term like that. But he is suggesting that Eru Ilúvatar set up this outcome, in the Music of the Ainur, and may have intervened directly to make it happen. I don't have Tolkien's published letters on hand, but apparently Tolkien confirmed this in his letter 192. According to Wikipedia:

Tolkien indicates in Letter 192 that "the One" does intervene actively in the world, pointing to Gandalf's remark to Frodo that "Bilbo was meant to find the Ring, and not by its maker", and to the eventual destruction of the Ring even though Frodo himself failed to complete the task.

It sounds like I really should get hold of Tolkien's letters, and study them. Maybe I'll track down one of the books that collect them. I have not read a

lot of biographical material about Tolkien, other than Tom Shippey's *J. R. R. Tolkien: Author of the Century* (which is a nice introduction and a quick read — I recommend it as a good *first* book on Tolkien).

Private Government

I ordered a copy of Elizabeth Anderson's book *Private Government How Employers Rule Our Lives (and Why We Don't Talk about It)* via Nicola's Books (my favorite locally owned bookstore), <http://www.nicolasbooks.com/>. Nicola's often doesn't have certain political books in stock — they have a huge children's books and a big literature section, but their sections on politics and current events are not that large — but they get special orders in quite quickly. I stopped in to order the book last Tuesday and it was in the store on Thursday. So Grace and I have it in our hot little hands and we will be talking about it on an upcoming Pottscast.

There are other books piling up on me. On the shelf I've still got *Unspeaking* by Chris Hedges, which is a quick read, and I keep meaning to finish it. I keep picking at *The Dangerous Case of Donald Trump* (see last week's post), although it isn't terribly good or terribly interesting; I'm sort of "data mining" it for interesting ideas (and not finding a lot, but a few).

Earthshock (1982 Doctor Who Serial Fan Edit)

I forgot to mention this back when we watched it. I think it might have been Monday or Tuesday night. We watched the fan edit of *Earthshock*, the Fifth Doctor (Peter Davidson) serial from 1982. This is one of the better stories from the 1980s *Doctor Who* (and there isn't a lot of competition; most of the eighties serials are pretty awful, to be honest). This one has some good stuff going on, and the fan edit cleans up this serial nicely. It features an explanation for the extinction of the dinosaurs, and shows what became of the young companion Adric. Adric isn't considered one of the more likeable companion characters, but I think he's a pretty great character in this show. He's described as:

With a brilliant mathematical mind and wearing a star-shaped badge for mathematical excellence, Adric is well aware of his own intelligence. This, coupled with his relative immaturity, leads to a personality that is abrasive and occasionally crosses over into arrogance. As a result, Adric is one of the least popular, or even "most hated", of the Doctor's companions among fans of the programme.

Maybe that's why I like him; I kind of identify with him! I should track down some of the other serials that feature Adric and see if any of them are watchable. Maybe we could even watch them in order. (There are many ways to try to approach the mountain of old *Doctor Who* serials; we've gone through Cyberman stories, Dalek stories, best-reviewed stories; why not follow the arc of a companion?)

***Mistaken Identity: Race and Class in the Age of Trump* by Asad Haider**

This book is coming out soon and I am going to pre-order a copy. So I don't actually have anything to say about it yet.

It seems like it *may* be the critique of identity politics — or, rather, the cynical manipulation of identity politics — that I've been hoping for. Other recent books on the subject have seemed lacking to me, especially Mark Lilla's *The Once and Future Liberal: After Identity Politics*.

The Liberal Dogpile on Bernie

Recently on Twitter, there's been a shitstorm of bot, and human bot, posts dog-piling on Sanders again for his invited remarks on Martin Luther King Day. (From what I can tell via Facebook and Twitter, I was never exposed to Russian election-influencing bot posts, but I sure as hell was and still am exposed to Democratic bot and troll-army posts.) A lot of the shitstorm this time has been from black women going on about Sanders' racism. In some cases they are specifically attacking him on the grounds of his comments about class. I'm trying to understand their arguments, and not having a lot of success, in part because they are incoherent — but there does seem to be some kind of critique going on there, and I'm hoping this book might help me understand it.

I get that they would prefer that an older white Jewish man *not* speak for them, and I think that's fine, although I detect a constant whiff of ageism and anti-Semitism in their strange attacks; for example, I keep hearing the claim that Sanders doesn't have enough experience as an administrator to be president, or enough understanding of foreign policy. In my view his 32 years of experience in elected offices would make him one of the most politically experienced presidents we've ever had. His extensive committee work suggests plenty of administrative experience.

He has not been Secretary of State, but he did give an interesting address on foreign policy. While someone might listen to that address and legitimately claim they disagree with his thoughts on foreign policy, what I see instead is a claim that he is completely naïve on foreign policy, suggesting he has no thoughts on the subject, or only uninformed or childish thoughts. No, they are thinking of Trump.

Personally I think Sanders probably *is* getting too old to be a great presidential candidate. So I've got that ageism, I suppose, although I see it as a realistic assessment of his capabilities in office as he approaches eighty. It is a bit early to be endorsing a candidate, but personally I'm favorably impressed with Nina Turner. In fact at this point she's the only figure that seems to show any of my ideals and a minimum of corruption by campaign money. But there are many wearying months to go before the next election, and my assessment today is that we're looking at another Democratic failure with a significant

third-party presence, and another cycle in which “centrist” Democrats become even less distinguishable from moderate Republicans and even more vitriolic towards anyone expressing the slightest traditional leftist critique of their radical neoliberalism.

Media Discussed This Week

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

- *Star Trek: The Next Generation* Season 5, Episode 5: “Disaster” and Episode 6: “The Game”
- *The Fellowship of the Ring* by J. R. R. Tolkien, Book 1, Chapter 1: “A Long Expected Party” and Chapter 2: “The Shadow of the Past”
- *The Fellowship of the Ring* (2001 film)
- *Earthshock* (1982 *Doctor Who* serial fan edit)

Pittsfield Township, Michigan

The Week Ending Saturday, April 7th, 2018

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