

Saturday the Fourteenth

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Let's jump right in.

I've been writing this, the first issue of my newsletter, in part while walking on my treadmill. That sounds a little ridiculous, but my fight to find some kind of time to work on personal projects has led me here. I recall a cartoon, although I have not been able to find it online: it may have run in *Omni* magazine, probably in nineteen-hunnert-n-seventy-nine or thereabouts. Anyway, it showed two lab-coat-wearing scientists peering under a parked car. The caption read something like "scientists have narrowed the search for the magnetic monopole to a city block in Newark, New Jersey."

My search for free time has been narrowed down to the small snippets of time when Grace can run interference and I can descend into our basement to work out on the treadmill. I hook my little ThinkPad up to our movie-watching screen, stick a wireless keyboard/trackpad combo to the treadmill with sticky tack, and go.

I often don't get enough sleep these days, although I think that will gradually improve as our youngest children get a little bit older.

I am Gandalf, and Gandalf Means... Me!

For those who don't know me, or haven't heard any news in a long time – I'm Paul Richard Potts. What are the salient facts of my life? I'm married to Rebekah Grace Potts. In a bit over a month we'll celebrate our eighteenth anniversary. It's hard to believe its been that long. The days go slowly and the years go quickly, they say.

We have eight children. I haven't seen the oldest in a number of years. The youngest is nine months old today. The next-youngest is two years old and has Down syndrome. She had open-heart surgery in 2017 to repair defects that are common with Down syndrome, and that was fortunately very successful. Our second-oldest son has a diagnosis of mild autism. He is the only one we've had formally evaluated, but honestly the list of my children whom we suspect are "neurotypical" is a lot shorter than the list of those who probably aren't.

I'm an odd guy myself, I guess, although it's taken me years to understand just how odd I am; I've learned a lot from seeing aspects of myself reflect in my kids.

My formal diagnoses involve major depression and obsessive-compulsive personality disorder. I'm not too far from a person with Asperger's syndrome, although I'm pretty high-functioning most of the time. I hate to talk to people on the phone, although I have no trouble getting up in front of a group and giving a talk, or doing a radio show, or a live stream. I'm very introverted (that's my preferred spelling). I have a preferred non-standard spelling for words like "introverted." I need a lot of peace and quiet and down time to feel safe and healthy. I need to write or make music or podcasts to feel okay.

I've always been a person who tends to love abstract ideas first, things second, and people a distant third. I'm not sure why; it is probably a combination of my genes, my early losses in childhood, and my work and the culture of that work. Over the years I've gradually become better at relationships, although I would not say that I'm good at it. I'm a porcupine; I'm prickly. My own mother warned Grace that I was "moody," and she wasn't wrong. There are people who would admit to being my friends, but I rarely see them or have any contact with them at all. I'm not happy about this, but there it is. This has been especially exacerbated by having a lot of kids; most people don't actually enjoy being surrounded by noisy babies and mess, and honestly I can't blame them. And I think social media has paradoxically made all of us less-connected to real people than we should be.

The things that many people would consider disorders are, paradoxically, a big part of what allows me to be good at the kind of work I do. I've always been fascinated by computer programming and other systems of thought. Since I started learning to program computers when I was ten years old, and I'm now fifty-one, I've naturally become pretty good at it. That's not really intended to be a brag *per se*; it's a mixed blessing.

I enjoy my work a little too much, if that makes sense. I can write all the low-level code for a new hardware project from scratch, from very low-level drivers to high-level logic to user interface, and also the PC programs that send firmware updates to these boxes and remotely control them. This means that for the last big project I developed, I wrote a hundred thousand lines of code – in C, in C++, in C#, and in a JavaScript-like language called GEMScript. In a big company, a project like this would be worked on by at least a half-dozen developers, if not a dozen. I know because I've worked inside some of those companies, too.

I have a lot of trouble separating my work life from my personal life, and unfortunately I kind of like it that way. If my work wasn't interesting enough to keep me thinking about it outside of work, and to occasionally necessitate weeks of twelve-hour days, it wouldn't interest me.

This summer, we were short on hardware engineering time in my office, so in order to be able to continue to make progress, I started to solder together

hand-made prototype boards. Then when I reached the limit of what I could do with hand-made prototype boards, I learned how to design printed circuit boards and have them fabricated. That's been really cool and I love to learn new skills.

I've designed educational software; I've developed instructional multimedia including audio and video; I've been a web developer; I've been a database developer; I've written software for health research; I've developed software for the Apple Newton and Macintosh and PC; and I've written low-level driver code for audio cards and automotive devices. I've also been paid to write documentation, and for a time was the lead writer for a large documentation project. Overall, I like the most difficult stuff the best.

When I do things for fun, they tend to go kind of the same way. A few years ago I wrote songs for songwriting competitions. It involved writing, recording, mixing, and mastering complete songs in a week. Grace would find me up half the night, cursing and swearing at Apple Logic, re-recording a guitar part for the twenty-fifth take, and say "are you having fun? you don't look like you're having fun." And I'd say "what do you mean? This is great!"

Politically, I don't like to pin myself down too much, because I am continuing to study and learn. But I don't consider myself a so-called conservative, although I am conservative about many things; I can no longer consider myself a liberal, although years ago I thought that was a perfectly reasonable thing to be. I can't even call myself a progressive, because I feel like that identity has been tainted and compromised. I'm a radical, or nothing; I'm a dissident, or I'm not writing and saying anything interesting; I'm antifa, because the alternative is to identify with the *fa*.

I've recently grown my hair out long again just to take some very small personal stand against the culture of fascism that is everywhere growing these days; I've changed my name on Twitter to "long-haired hippie freak" because that persona is one aspect of the person I've always aspired to be. Grace and I joke that we're both going to have "unemployable" tattooed on our foreheads; but yet, I've managed to stay pretty well employed.

My politics is shaped around class resentment and empathy for the working class and underclass, because my life has brought me into frequent contact with members of those classes, and with members of the professional and managerial classes, and the example of my mother's life and the actual content of my religious and moral education turned me into a person who knows who to side with. I'm some kind of leftist; I'm some kind of anarchist; I'm not in favor of a strong state, but instead lean towards distributism and local control and intentional communities. My own moral code requires that I can never, ever grant any particular credence to partisanship of any kind. I'm also just not much of a joiner; I tend to live by Grouch Marx's line "I don't want to belong to any club that will accept people like me as a member."

I'm not planning to write constantly about myself *per se*, as opposed to my

history, my work, and the ideas and events swirling around me and my family – in case the above paragraphs are making you nervous. I don't even want to talk about *people* per se; I think that's not as interesting as talking about events and, more importantly, work, and most importantly, ideas.

Meanwhile, there's a lot of news to catch you up on.

That Old House

The biggest reason that I am able to take a deep breath and think about things, like this newsletter is this: after over two years of trying, Grace and I finally, *finally, finally* sold our old house in Saginaw. We worked with three different agents; we'd had buyers on the line with signed offers again and again, only to have each one back out, usually because their own financing or house sale fell through. For a time while we were in between agents, we tried to sell it to a buyer directly, working with an attorney; but that buyer also couldn't raise the money to make an offer.

It was in the nick of time; I was two weeks away from being unable to pay the August mortgage payment. After we moved out in early 2017, our home no longer had "homestead" status for the purposes of calculating property taxes. They allowed us a grace period, but the tax increase had finally caught up with us. Our monthly payment including escrow payments towards property taxes went up dramatically (about 40%). I managed to pay the July bill. I wasn't going to be able to pay the August bill. I had already turned off direct withdrawals, knowing that if we couldn't sell the house in August, we were going to go into default and our mortgage lender would start the long legal process we had spent the previous couple of years trying to avoid.

The empty house had occupied a good chunk of both our minds and paycheck. It was never properly winterized going into the late fall of 2017; we paid a gentleman to do it, and he cashed the check, but didn't do anything. So an upstairs pipe froze with water in it, and there was a flood. The family room ceiling came down. There was mold. There was an infestation of bats in the attic. Insurance covered a lot, but they didn't cover everything, and so we had to put many thousands of dollars into repairs. The contractors we were able to find in the Saginaw area were uniformly really shitty. They came back with ridiculously high estimates that made the insurance adjusters, and us, stare in shock. One contractor demanded almost \$50,000 to clean up the attic and put in new insulation. (We didn't hire that contractor). We went with another company, who gave us an estimate about one-eighth as high. Then the original contractor started calling, demanding that we pay them \$1,200 simply for producing the estimate. In return we demanded that they send us an itemized invoice. We never got it, so they never got any money.

A few of you saw the Saginaw house. In retrospect it was a project much too big for us to handle. It was especially too big for us to handle since I was unable

to maintain consistent employment while living in the Saginaw area. It cost a crazy amount to heat and cool.

The house and yard was a big beautiful space to raise a family. The house held 3,600 square feet of space, including a magnificent family room with a fireplace windows on three sides. We paid \$128,000 for the house in the spring of 2010. That seemed like a laughably small number, given that a similar home anywhere near Ann Arbor would have cost upwards of three-quarters of a million dollars.

We sold the house for \$79,000. We still owed \$89,000, so I had to take out a consumer loan to pay off the mortgage and pay the agents. Still, it's a lot better, from my perspective, to have a fixed monthly loan payment than a mortgage payment, arbitrary utility costs, and an entirely open-ended liability for the future of the house.

The house is one of the biggest reasons that despite earning a generous salary at my present job, we're in debt and barely above water. This kind of thing seems to be pretty much the standard state of most people who are fronting as "middle-class." They aren't, really, any more, and we aren't either. And we've cranked up the difficulty level on this video game, too, with seven kids at home; and since that didn't feel challenging enough, we've been taking in guests; for a while this year there were fifteen people living here, with only one working car, my 2003 Honda Element; but more on that another time.

Saginaw, America

You can hear Grace and I discuss our attempt to make a life in Saginaw in a podcast episode linked [here](#). That episode is very long – almost four hours – and is somewhat unlike most of our other episodes. If you'd prefer to listen to the show on YouTube, you can find it [here](#).

Saginaw is a small inland sea of economic despair, like many Rust Belt places, but we had established a sort of life there in a beautiful old downtown neighborhood. For a time I was walking two of the kids to preschool every weekday morning at our church a half-mile from our home. There was a diner down the street, and a record store, where a man named Bob got to know my tastes; sometimes I'd go in and he'd just hand me a box of used CDs, promotional giveaways or discs people had brought in, giving it me for free, saying he couldn't sell them. I really enjoyed finding bizarre little gems among the detritus.

We put in a dozen huge garden beds in our side lot and invited neighbors to claim portions of them, to grow a community garden. Grace put on her community organizer hat and put together a non-profit co-op so that we could sell things at the farmer's market. We had the best salads I've ever eaten, assembled straight from our own garden beds. It was glorious, for a time. Five years ago I recorded a conversation with Grace about our gardening project. You can find that conversation linked [here](#), or listen to it on YouTube [here](#). That conversation contains, from the show notes:

A walking tour of our low hugelkultur beds and this year's new raised beds; winter's survivors; our weeds; wild and cultivated strawberries, groundcherries; lettuces; dill; never be tilling; always be mulching; eating living food; leeks; tomatillos; willow; garlic scapes; purslane (pigweed); vitamin C and calcium sources from the northeast; how nature mulches itself; two kinds of clover; our deciduous tree nursery; collaborating with nature; let's see who shows up; smoothies without compromise; training your system to taste natural sweetness; water catchment; cosmos; plantain; annuals for nitrogen fixing; sunflowers; open-source zucchini; radishes; daikon; peas; cucumber; plants to climb and shade each other; nasturtium; considering a beehive; bee balm; mason v. honey; transplanted volunteer tomatoes; hazelnuts; almonds from California; doing things as our budget allows, with salvaged wood; sunflowers and potatoes don't like each other, but maybe the peas can mediate; a big kale party; the potatoes that didn't make it; onions; swiss chard; marigolds; thinning plants; carrots; a closed source zucchini; more lettuces; beets and beet greens; remembrance of growing seasons past; getting our neighbors involved; a typical city lot; a lot of food in a small area; feeding our kids the healthiest food we can find anywhere; Michigan's right-to-farm laws, and their evisceration; Michigan, agricultural powerhouse; Michigan and Ohio wines and beers; hellish monocultural farm-scapes; many kinds of blueberries; a cross between raspberry and blueberry; our flower-shaped flower bed; thyme, lavender, oregano, mint, feverfew, and pink lemonade blueberries; a quick sprint through the flower beds; parenting success days; my favorite person in the whole world; don't judge us by the height of our grass; kill your lawn; little apples; many thanks to Frank.

It couldn't last; my job arrangement had been somewhat tenuous to being with, working at home for a company that was having trouble maintaining funding; I had not received a raise or cost-of-living adjustment in seven years.

In addition, we learned first-hand just how racially biased our friendly white neighbors could be. I'm a fish-belly-white man married to a bi-racial (black and Jewish) woman, and our kids are curly-headed and of various blended shades. The expressions of bias took the form of harassment by the neighborhood watch, by the police, and by Child Protective Services. The transgressions that resulted in our neighbors deciding that the authorities had to be called included allowing our kids to play in our own yard, or walk in groups of two or three a couple of blocks to the neighborhood party store to buy candy and chips.

For some reason the white kids living in the neighborhood could do all these things and much more; they could vandalize trees and fences and walls; they could steal change from cars. But I'm sure that was just an oversight on the part of the Neighborhood Watch; a gap in the web of surveillance; a hole in the panopticon.

For the last year and a half, Grace had to resort to keeping our kids indoors, pretty much around the clock. We understand now why so many black families who try to make lives in liberal, Democratic neighborhoods, filled with friendly white folks who would bristle at being called racist and who would never admit to voting for Trump or use the n-word except among friends, wind up putting six-foot privacy fences around their back yards.

So, that was Saginaw.

By the way, please don't get me wrong; I'm in no way claiming that the famously "liberal" city of Ann Arbor is in any way less of a racist place, although the racism might tend to manifest itself differently, disguised as structural bias towards anyone who is not wealthy.

There are many reasons we wanted to find a home without neighbors close at hand. I'm really glad we did.

Back on the Treadmill

When I'm walking on the treadmill, am I milling? Or treading?

The treadmill was a gift to myself paid for out of 2018's end-of-year bonus. There were arguably many higher-priority things to spend that money on, but two years after leaving Saginaw, and three and a half years after starting my job in Ann Arbor, I felt that my lack of exercise was becoming a critical problem. I had developed a routine in Saginaw for a couple of years; I'd get up and out for a walk in our neighborhood before starting my work day. I didn't really go far; mostly, I walked laps of Adams Boulevard. I'd walk between two and seven miles. Sometimes I'd take my digital recorder and record a monologue of some sort. Some of these became episodes in my *Morning Valediction* podcast. In retrospect I feel that some of them were worth keeping, and I paid a friend of mine to transcribe some of them. Here's a the first one, edited down a bit; I have tried to maintain the feel of the informal, spoken monologue, while tightening it up a bit.

Morning Valediction #1 – Keep Watching the Skies (October 15th, 2013)

Good morning, it's Paul and it's the 15th, October 15th 2013, and I've just dropped the kids off at pre-school, so it is about 8:05 a.m. I'm gonna attempt to do a thing, at least for a few days – if my technology holds up and my resolve holds up – a recording each morning, on my way back home from walking the kids to school. I'm hoping this will motivate me to walk them to school instead of drive them. It's a little challenging. It's only a quarter mile or so from our home, so it's not far at all. Once I get out, I really enjoy the chance to walk – it stretches out my joints, all the aches and pains feel better. And I'm looking at the sunrise, although soon I

won't be, soon it'll still be dark – or at least just getting light. But it's challenging, because even if they've gotten twelve, ten, eleven, twelve, thirteen hours of sleep they're still complaining about being too tired to move. And Joshua actually sat down in the middle of the sidewalk and staged a little strike on the way this morning. That doesn't make it any fun at all.

Saginaw falls would be perfect falls if it wasn't quite so clammy. It's strange; every once in a while we get a day where it's a perfect fall day. We had one on Sunday. The kids were at the playground, sliding down the slide, and the air was so dry that their little sweatpants were building up static charges on the plastic slide. This was slightly comical in the case of Pippin, who didn't really know what static electricity is.

That's how dry it was, but it was a gorgeous day. It felt great to be out, until the sun went down, and then it started to get cold very quickly. But this morning it's a clear fall morning but it just feels damp, like you can see your breath a little – that's nice. The air on your skin is damp so it feels colder than it actually is. And somehow it's just perfectly set to make your nose run. And most spring and fall days in Saginaw seem like this, like they're too damp. So that's my only complaint about the weather here, not that's it cold. I like cold.

We had a very busy weekend. I did a lot of grocery shopping. On Saturday I went with Grace, but she's still moving really slowly after the C-section and needed to sit down to rest now and then. We realized that was just too slow to get the grocery shopping done. So on Sunday, I went out on a couple of grocery errands myself. Basically, we haven't done our usual full-bore stocking-up in... six weeks, something like that? We actually lost some WIC benefits because they expired. We didn't get to them: we were so busy, and so tired. Which is a shame.

We're still entitled to WIC [the nutrition program for Women, Infants, and Children] because I have income again, but it hasn't been enough income to cause us to lose the benefit. I've only received a couple of paychecks so far and they haven't been very big, because of missed hours. I don't have any paid time off, so I just get paid hourly. I have had one full paycheck of 80 hours for two weeks. The other two checks have been half of that. So, we'll gradually get back on our schedule here, and I should be earning more, and then at some point we'll lose our benefits.

We're still getting SNAP [Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program

– what used to be called “food stamps”] too. They’re in the loop about me having income. We’re still eligible for a while – I’m not sure for how much longer. So we were trying to use that on Sunday, making these grocery trips to restock the basement which has been depleted since spring. So I was buying lots of cans of black beans and lots of cans of tomatoes for my chili that I make, and boxes of shelf-stable almond milk that we drink, and that was the bulk of it, mostly.

We had a couple of birthday parties – a party for the kids’ uncle Jim on Sunday. That was why we were at the park, and that was really nice, and for that we just got a couple of angel food cakes. Kroger had a sale on raspberries so we cooked down raspberries and I threw in a little Malbec, a little red wine. And I rendered that down into a sauce. We had a bottle of Torani chocolate sauce to put on top of that. So that was a really nice dessert. We made the raspberry sauce so it wasn’t that sweet, it was tart, and then we had this pretty low-calorie angel food cake with that homemade raspberry sauce topped with just a little bit of sweet chocolate syrup, like the kind you put on coffee drinks.

I also had fun making a cake for Sam’s birthday, which was yesterday. I had bought another cake and it was like a plain devil’s food cake with a white frosting and a chocolate ganache on top, a bi-color thing. It didn’t occur to me until later that the cake was kind of ironically appropriate for my family. I didn’t realize when I bought it, since it didn’t say on the package, that when I cut into it, I found that the cake is chocolate and vanilla in a checkerboard pattern. Anyway, I took the stale rolled wafer cookies off the top, and scraped off some of the frosting, and sprinkled the top with candy stars. And then on the sides I used a brush and blue food coloring to paint a series of doodles of the TARDIS – the Doctor Who TARDIS – and Daleks brandishing their toilet plunger attachments, and Cybermen, the old-school First Doctor Cybermen.

I did it yesterday between getting back from dropping the kids, and going up to the office for my morning conference call for work, so it was a rush job, but it worked, and sometimes I do my best work when I’m rushed. I had bought some gel icing in a tube but somehow it disappeared between Sunday and Monday. I don’t know exactly where it went. One of the kids may have eaten it and hidden the evidence. So I had to use the food coloring, but it actually probably worked better because on the sides of the cake the gel icing might have just fallen off, not stuck, but the food coloring soaked into the icing.

We got Sam a poster – it’s a big poster of the TARDIS with the door open just a crack and a little bit of golden light leaking out. And it says underneath “Bigger On The Inside.” We think of Sam that way. He’s a small boy – he just turned seven, but he has deep thoughts. He has some issues, some disabilities, but he’s making rapid progress, and he makes us proud, because he’s always confronting them and trying to stretch himself. He has some difficulty speaking, and getting his thoughts across clearly, but he keeps trying. And he’s reading fairly well, and he volunteers to read in class even though he has difficulty speaking, but he practices reading to his classmates in school every day.

So he got his poster, he got the cake, and then his sister had made him something in a box – and we didn’t even know what it was. It was a craft project she did. He opened it up and pulled it out and we were all starting at it, because we had no idea what it was. It looked like a lipstick applicator made out of a toilet paper tube, with some duct tape and some construction paper. But Sam lit up and said “A SONIC SCREWDRIVER!” He knew right away what it was; it was very sweet.

So I tried to take him on a little adventure last night. One of my friends from college is a faculty member at Central Michigan University. He told me they were having an open house at the CMU astronomical observatory. And I thought “Oh! That sounds like that would be a great adventure for Sam; he could have a Doctor Who-themed birthday party, and then I could take him out to the observatory, and then just as it is getting dark he’ll get to look through a telescope, which he’s never done.

So, we did that. I didn’t tell him where we were going. I just stuck him in the back of the truck, and after his dinner and his little party, drove him out to Central Michigan University. I’ve never been there, and I was following Google Maps. That worked OK; I found the campus all right. Some of the streets on campus aren’t marked very well, and my night vision isn’t very good. The biggest problem was that I could not figure out where I could park. So I was trying to confirm this with my friend on the phone, but I wasn’t able to reach him. When I got there, *everything* was marked “No Parking.” But finally I got him on the cell phone and I had to ask him to come out, hop in the truck with us and guide me to a parking lot. And then we walked back to the observatory.

Sam had some difficulty looking through the eyepiece of the telescope. I don’t think he’s ever used a microscope or a telescope before. If you haven’t practiced that, it might not be immediately obvious what

you should do with your eyes. I couldn't get him to close one eye and look through the other. That's how you do it when you're starting out. If you use a microscope or a telescope for a while, you get used to it, and you don't need to squeeze one eye shut; your brain just gets used to feeding you the information coming through one eye and ignores what is coming in through the other eye. But he was having a lot of trouble seeing. It was hard for him to get his bearings. It was a large telescope, and that means it focuses in on a very narrow arc of the sky. So you might say "Oh, cool! Let's look at the moon." Well, when you point this big telescope at the moon, the moon is huge, and so what you will see through the eyepiece is only a very tiny section of the moon. You can look at the edge, or you can look at a crater or something, but the moon itself is much too large to see all at once. To get a nice image of the moon, the whole moon, you'd be better off with a pair of binoculars or something like that.

They aimed this big telescope at the Andromeda galaxy, which they say is 200 million light years away. It's a naked eye object – it is possible to make it out without a telescope. When they point the telescope at it, you're only seeing the very center of it, and it's still really dim; the center is a dim little fuzz-ball. You have to be a little bit patient, and let your eyes adjust to the dark, to even really see it. So that wasn't exciting for him. I'm not sure he could see it at all. The distance of 200 million light years wasn't registering on his brain (I don't think it registers on anyone's brain, really, but it made him agitated, and he kept saying things like "that's enough space to burn down the entire universe!")

And then they pointed the telescope at Uranus."Your-ehnuus," not "your anus." At first they miscalculated slightly and so we were actually looking at a dim star instead of a planet, and we couldn't figure out why it looked so dim. There was just a very, very faint star in the middle of the eyepiece. But they figured out they hadn't set the something-something to adjust for something-something. They got it readjusted, and there it was! We could see it clearly and it was a faint bluish-colored planet. I've never seen Uranus. So that was kind of cool. It's not a naked-eye object. There it was.

I should describe the setting a little more. We were up in a dome on the roof of this science building, and was lit with red lights because that helps you keep your night vision. People were clustered around the telescope. The dome rotates – if you've ever been in one, it's really cool. And there's a computer they using to guide the telescope. It's running software that shows a star map on the screen. The software figures out where to point the telescope and then the whole thing moves; the dome turns so the slot in the dome is lined up with

the telescope. Once they accidentally drove the dome the wrong direction and became frustrated with it.

Sam was more interested in the software running on the computer that showed the star map than he was in looking through the telescope. It's hard – most serious astronomy now doesn't even use visible light, and certainly doesn't use the naked eye. There are still people tracking comets and asteroids and making observations – useful observations – with visible light, but most of the really hardcore research is done radio waves and big arrays of dishes, or enormous optical telescopes with recording light into digital cameras using long exposure times.

What I'm saying is that looking through an optical telescope, with the naked eye, doesn't really live up to *Doctor Who*. Sam wanted to see aliens. He was frustrated and disappointed. He kept himself pretty well under control. Then we went out to look at constellations on to this observation deck, which is just an area of the roof that has panels you can walk on. The faculty astronomer had a laser pointer, and he was pointing out constellations that were visible in the sky.

Central Michigan University is in the town of Mt. Pleasant, right downtown, so there's a lot of light pollution. Also, the moon was up in the sky, and that throws out a huge amount of light. We couldn't actually see very many stars, so that was frustrating to him. But he became very upset, and gradually got himself worked up more and more, about the laser pointer. It was just an ordinary laser pointer, maybe five milliwatts. You could see this beam shining up into the sky, and it was just to help direct your eye, to point out where the stars were. It worked really well for me, but Sam became fixated on something I had told him previously, the idea that you can't normally see a laser beam unless it is either shining right into your eyes, or shining through fog or smoke or something else that diffuses the light to your eyes.

I was trying to explain to him that there was enough dust and moisture in the air above the University to allow us to see the beam. But by the time we left the observatory and were on our way back to the car, he was crying and repeating his mantra that we weren't supposed to be able to see the laser beam. He couldn't understand how he could see the laser. So I took him home, and that was the end of our outing.

It's hard. Parenting is hard. It's hard trying to decide what will be a good experience for a child. Sometimes you get it wrong. You've done your best, and you had a great opportunity, but it didn't work

out; he wasn't in the right frame of mind, a receptive frame of mind, or it wasn't as exciting as he thought.

I was just thinking back to when I was a kid growing up in the town called North East, and the town called Harborcreek, Pennsylvania. In Harborcreek we were on a four-acre lot, on a street without many homes or streetlights. We could go out on a clear night and see the Milky Way very clearly: a big band, a river of stars across the sky. It was amazing. And I used to take a book of constellations, put a red filter over a flashlight, and with the book, go through the sky and locate dozens of constellations. I would stare up into the sky, and feel like I was falling into it? The sense that there was an infinity up there was very vivid to me, as a child. I had a microscope, too, and I used to make slides and study them, and I was really into books about subatomic particles, and so I had a very strong sense that there was an infinity down there, too, of things that were smaller than us; a sense that we were poised, pretty much in the middle of the scale, between a big infinity and a small infinity. That was reinforced by seeing instructional shows like *Cosmos*.

It seems like Sam wasn't able to get a sense of that, last night, but we'll see. He may have taken more away from it than is evident, now. It might take him a while to process the experience, and then maybe he'll come up with some insights later. Sometimes that's how it works. Or maybe not. But we try.

I wanted to mention one more thing. When you head west from Saginaw on Route 46, towards Central Michigan University, after you get past a little town called St. Louis, you pass the most amazing sight that I've seen in a long time. I didn't really know it was there, because I don't think I've ever been on that stretch of road before. It's a wind farm that covers acres and acres. I'd have to look up how many there are, but maybe hundreds of windmills for electrical power generation. All huge, towering things, turning very slowly. [It's the Gratiot County wind farm, with 133 wind turbines on over 30,000 acres.]

We were going through there just at sunset, when the lights on the turbines were starting to come on, and it was amazing. It was beautiful. I'd like to go back and look at them again. I don't know how the people who live there feel about having these things everywhere, but I think I would love to live there. I know not every part of this state is suited for for wind farms, given the wind patterns, but it seems to me that every place in Michigan that can have them, should have them – all the deprived communities, all the empty communities, all the dead parts of Detroit, should have wind turbines

everywhere, if they can support them.

It would be visible, tangible, evidence that we are in the future; evidence that this world isn't the same world that we grew up in. It would be inspiring, in a way that trying to look at a tiny, faint galaxy through a telescope wasn't.

Maybe the things that inspired *me* won't be the things that inspire my kids. But we should have these everywhere, because they would be a symbol of a step toward energy independence, and trying to figure out how to develop tools for generating power that didn't spew huge amount of carbon, and make the planet damaged.

Anyway, I've got to go. I've got a conference call. But I'm going to try and see if I can keep up with this for a few days, if I have something to say. That was this morning's "Morning Valediction."

And – Getting Off the Treadmill

Most of the "Morning Valediction" talks were were rambling. When I was unemployed and my unemployment was running out, or the states involved were fighting tooth and nail, I kept up the walks; they were, I think, the only thing keeping me from popping a blood vessel. But it means that the monologues from those months are despairing; we came very close to being unable to pay our mortgage.

The solution was for me to take a job in the Ann Arbor area again. For a year and a half, I did the 90-something mile commute from Saginaw weekly, and spent half my nights at a friend's house, eating dinner with them when that fit into their schedule. This arrangement – living like a monk, driving down on Monday mornings, sleeping Monday, Tuesday, and Wednesday nights in Ann Arbor, then driving back to Saginaw after work on Thursdays and working from home on Fridays, allowed me to sublimate my loneliness and focus like a laser beam (ha-ha, I now write code for laser and optical instruments) on work.

I completed an enormous amount of working code, personally writing shipping more code in a continuous period of time than I've ever done before, and the Thorlabs MX product line, and with it the newly formed Ultrafast Optoelectronics group in Ann Arbor, was a success. But the emotional cost to me and to my family was high; I am still trying to rebuild some of the damaged, or never-properly-formed, relationships with my children. Having not been fathered very well myself, this doesn't come naturally to me, but I'm trying.

I'm also trying to bring my emotional and mental and physical health back up to a sustainable level, in part so I can be present for my kids.

Thunderstorms are starting to roll in, and I'm hoping the power stays on.

Three Cool Things

Jonathan Strange & Mr Norell (2015 TV Series)

I've been re-watching the 2015 BBC television series *Jonathan Strange & Mr Norell*, based on Susanna Clarke's 2004 novel. I bought the novel when it came out, and started reading it, but I wound up setting it aside for a few years, because initially I had difficulty getting into the story. It's a big book, written in a faux-archaic style, and full of digressions and footnotes. It moves pretty slowly at first. But eventually I started over and read the whole thing, and found it very rewarding, and then a few years later I read it again. I will probably read it a third time at some point, because it's that good, one of the best fantasy novels of the last hundred years, although its world-building can't *quite* match Tolkien's achievement. But it's much funnier, with a dry wit on display throughout:

When he awoke it was dawn. Or something like dawn. The light was watery, dim and incomparably sad. Vast, grey, gloomy hills rose up all around them and in between the hills there was a wide expanse of black bog.

Stephen had never seen a landscape so calculated to reduce the onlooker to utter despair in an instant. "This is one of your kingdoms, I suppose, sir?" he said. "My kingdoms?" exclaimed the gentleman in surprize. "Oh, no! This is Scotland!"

The story is a complex alternate history of events in and around London in the years 1806 to 1816. In this alternate world magic existed, but it has disappeared along with the Raven King. But two magicians arise. The first is Mr Norell (I'm using Clarke's anachronistic form of "Mr," written without a period), a bookish, judgmental type type obsessed with scholarship and respectability, who wants to hoard all the known books of magic. The second is a ne'er-do-well gentleman named Strange, an extraverted (my preferred spelling) and intuition-driven magician who wants to open up magic to everyone. Their conflicting personalities create most of the real drama in the long unfolding story, but there are also plenty of things happening around them, driven by a large cast of characters. Interestingly, the characters are drawn from a wide variety of social classes, ranging from the King of England to cabinet ministers to various grifters and con artists to servants to beggars and street performers, and they always throw off interesting sparks when they collide with each other.

The series, in my view, is just about as good as an adaptation can be. The performances are excellent, and the sets and locations are terrific. A movie, and even a seven-hour series, will always struggle to convey the philosophical depth and breadth that a great novel can have. But the series very good, and I am enjoying it more the second time than I did the first time. I don't think you have to read the novel to follow it. I wound up watching it via the iTunes store, because I had an iTunes gift card, but in general I really prefer to buy physical media; it is also available on DVD and Blu-ray disc, and there are cheap copies on eBay.

Know Your Enemy (The Podcast)

I listen to quite a few podcasts, as I have a long-standing interest in radio and radio drama, and have been producing podcasts myself since 2006. The podcasts I like are rarely the well-known ones with a large audience and slick production values and advertisers. In fact, those things tend to turn me off. Instead I like lesser-known storytellers and scholars and enjoy long, sometimes very long, in-depth conversations. One of the best recent examples is a new podcast called “Know Your Enemy.” It’s billed as a leftist guide to the right, but it doesn’t provide easy, shallow analysis or caricature. I’ve struggled to understand the books and ideas that conservatives claim to justify their modern ideology and praxis. I’ve read books by Corey Robin and others, but have not found their explanations very convincing. I find Bell and Sitman’s discussions much more enlightening, in that they strive to take a “radical” perspective. The word “radical” means “root,” and they try to get to the root of the matter, unpacking and explaining the unspoken assumptions and often-inexplicable world view of conservatives. You can find a page about the podcast on *Dissent* magazine’s web site [here](#).

You might want to start from the first episode, but you might also enjoy listening to the most recent episode, “Gunpower,” first; it’s compelling.

***The Artificial Man and Other Stories* by Clare Winger Harris (Belt Publishing)**

Clare Winger Harris is a lesser-known science fiction writer who published a number of well-regarded stories in pulp magazines such as *Amazing Stories* in the years 1926-1930. She was one of the first American women to publish stories in these magazines, as the field was nearly completely dominated by men. Aside from a self-published anthology published in 1947, her work has remained largely obscure. After her brief career, she didn’t leave much of a paper trail.

It’s a little difficult to read stories from so long ago with a fresh point of view; if you’ve read much in the way of Radium Age (1904-1933) or early [Golden Age](<http://www.hilobrow.com/golden-age-sci-fi/>) (1934-1963) science fiction, her work will seem quite familiar: her stories are about Martian invaders, cyborgs, mysterious inventions, and strange happenings in which humans transcend the everyday world using scientific discoveries. I’m reminded favorably of H. G. Wells, although Wells comes from a “scientific romance” period before the Radium age, and also of Edgar Rice Burroughs. Her style is somewhat basic, but her language can be quite effective, especially when describing things that are out of the ordinary:

The stranger approached a table upon which I seemed be, and raised his arms. A muffled cry escaped my lips! The feathers that I had supposed constituted his headdress were attached permanently along the upper portion of his arms to a point a little below the elbow. *They grew there.* This strange being had feathers instead of hair.

Her stories are quite imaginative; many of them feel like they could have become episodes of *The Twilight Zone*, if that show had been made towards the end of the era of silent film. Her work is no longer covered under copyright, which means that I can distribute adaptations, which might make a fun project. You can read the full text of one of her stories here.

I found this book on the shelf at Nicola's Books in Ann Arbor; it's a brick-and-mortar bookstore that remains independent. I didn't know anything about Harris. I probably never would have found her work if I hadn't stumbled across this new collection. I love browsing at independent bookstores, although I am able to do it less and less often; I almost always find something intriguing.

One Uncool Thing

The Lego Movie 2: The Second Part (2019 Film)

I really enjoyed *The Lego Movie* (the 2014 film). When I first saw it, I was convinced for a while that I was watching stop-motion animation rather than computer-generated imagery. It wasn't until I saw a ship built of plastic bricks tossed on waves of animated plastic bricks that I realized that it would have been practically impossible to make those scenes by hand. Part of what fooled me is that the characters in the film are rendered from actual scanned Lego characters, and they have scuffs and dings and cracks that come from being played with.

The Lego Movie is an entertaining movie for children and grown-ups, but then it goes sideways, and becomes a sort of art film, and we see the Lego world from an outside perspective, and the story suddenly acquires a second layer of meaning. That's a pretty remarkable thing for a children's movie to do.

The original was followed by several more movies in a similar style. *The Lego Batman Movie* (2017) is not only very funny, but it's also one of the best Batman films. *The Lego Ninjago Movie* is... well, not so good. And unfortunately *The Lego Movie 2: The Second Part* is not so good, either.

It's got its funny moments – lots of them. But that's all they are: just moments. Where the first one established a connection between events in the movie and events in the outside world, this one has that connection from the outset, but it's incoherent; as the characters travel into the outside world, things appear that have no reason to exist except as references to other movies – other, better, movies. Bricksburg has become a post-apocalyptic wasteland, as in *Mad Max*. When Emmet leaves the brick world, he sees visions like astronaut Dave Bowman in *2001: A Space Odyssey*. There are references to *The Fellowship of the Ring*, *Guardians of the Galaxy*, *Aliens*, *Jurassic Park*, *Die Hard*, and even *Planet of the Apes*. In fact, it's jam-packed with sight gags, references, and in jokes. The problem, of course, is that all this gives us a series of brief laughs but doesn't knit together into good storytelling. And the plot gets more and more complex as the movie goes along, even bringing in a time travel subplot that feels like it must have been added by script doctors late in production.

Did I mention that this was a musical, but the effect of all the songs is just to drag out and pad a film that already feels endless? There's a song called "This Song's Gonna Get Stuck Inside Your Head," but it doesn't really live up to its billing.

There's an aspect of the movie I found genuinely troubling, too; something I might call "blackvoice." Tiffany Haddish plays "Queen Watevra Wa'Nabi" ("whatever I want to be" turned into a fake African-sounding name). Her character gets a very black-sounding voice, which is all well and good, but the other characters' reaction to her is not so good. Batman, a long-confirmed bachelor, decides he is willing to accept her proposal of marriage; she tricks him using "reverse psychology," explaining that she isn't interested in him, which immediately makes him interested in her. But really, this is so unconvincing that it seems like he must just have "jungle fever." Her character is played up for its exoticism. She is also the villain, and her character is completely deceitful and shape-shifting. I don't much like the way that the one character with a notably black voice has these characteristics. And we learn that the character is actually the avatar of a white girl, her Lego toy, and presumably she is giving the character voice, which makes all these choices seem even stranger and less right. What were the writers thinking? What was Haddish thinking?

I can't recommend this film. Watch the first one, and watch *The Lego Batman Movie*.

What Now?

This newsletter is an experiment. I have been writing compulsively since childhood; in high school and college, I wrote for fanzines. I've published stories and articles, and I've been a blogger, and a podcaster, and a prolific Facebooker (is that a thing?)

In 2018, I decided to try to write as much as I could, and publish weekly blog posts, just to see what would happen. I wrote over 450,000 words about nothing in particular, targeted at no one in particular. It was not very satisfying, except to demonstrate how much I could write.

Facebook

I've withdrawn from Facebook almost completely. My reasons boil down to a sense that Facebook isn't really a community center any more, or even a mall food court, but a police station. If you do your organizing and socializing there, you're doing something similar to the guy who arranges to sell something on Craigslist and then meets the buyer at the police station to complete the transaction. Hell, it's actually worse than that: not only is law enforcement watching, but any companies or political parties prepared to throw money at Facebook is watching, too. I'm not exaggerating and this isn't hyperbole; if anything, the privacy and security situation online these days is far worse than I've portrayed it.

I'd like to be on Facebook more, as this is just about the only way that I'm in touch with a lot of folks, but it's not working out. It's not me, Facebook, it's you.

I have not deleted my Facebook account, but I now only use it on Firefox, using the Facebook Container Extension to try to keep it from following me on every web site that I visit. I suspended my account for a few months while I think over just what to do with it.

I've decided to do what Hermione did towards the end of the Harry Potter novels. In one of the saddest scenes in the whole series, she pointed her wand at her parents and their family pictures, and said "obliviate." She erased herself from that world and from their memories, to keep them safe from Lord Voldemort.

In the movie, there isn't any suggestion that she might be able to go back and restore their memories and the traces of herself in the world, although there is in the books.

Facebook has made it very, very difficult to remove your history from Facebook. That's a deliberate choice on their part; they want to be able to continue to mine and sell everything you've ever posted. Facebook's value to you, and to the people it's actually designed to serve, the advertisers and corporations who pay to access you, is in the "network effect." Breaking the nodes in that network reduces its value. And so there is no feature to, say, delete all your old posts from a given year, or even a given month. I've been on Facebook since 2008. I've put tens of thousands of posts up. The only way to manually delete them is to scroll through the activity log and use the pop-up menu on each post to delete it, then confirm the deletion.

You can download an archive of your posts, and I've done that, but it is very, very incomplete. A large number of my posts over the years have included links to web sites. Those links aren't present in the downloaded archive. So you can see what you said, but in many cases, not what you were talking about.

There's also no API for this. So you can't write a program to do it directly. But there are some plug-ins that will help. I'm using a plug-in for the Chrome browser called "Social Book Post Manager." It works by actually "puppeteering" Chrome, making it scroll through your activity log, and reads what is on the page, looking for matching posts, and gets Chrome to pop up the menus and select the commands and confirm in the dialog boxes that pop up.

It locks up a lot. Facebook stops responding, and the screen goes black, but the plug-in soldiers on and doesn't notice, then tells you it has finished when it hasn't. The plug-in is supposed to be able to delete a year of posts at a time, but I haven't been able to get that to work. I've had to do it one month at a time. And many times, it doesn't work. Sometimes it works only when I set it to run at a high speed, instead of a low speed. A number of times I've seen all the posts apparently gone, but then the next day a month's worth or year's worth of posts was back. I'm pretty sure Facebook has some anti-scripting measures in

place that are detecting the fact that I'm using an automated process to delete posts, and making it harder.

And it isn't just posts you have to delete; I also need to hide everything else from my timeline, and you have to do this by category. It's maddening. It's taken me many hours so far, and I don't *have* many hours, so I delete a few months at a time, and try not to look at what I'm deleting, so that I'm not tempted to put my wand of obliviation back in my pocket and walk away.

But anyway, this is what I feel I have to do, in order to be on Facebook at all. I'll be back on when this process is done, but only occasionally; perhaps weekly. And I'm going to use it more as a place to promote my work and stay in superficial contact with people I know in real life, and less of a place to actually have discussions and arguments.

See also this post from the Electronic Frontier Foundation.

Twitter

I'm still on Twitter, as "paulpotts," currently going by the name "long-haired hippie freak," although that platform isn't as much fun as it was in the early days, and I've been stuck at 950 followers for years, whether I tweet a little or a lot. I see a lot of people with clearly left-leaning timelines being "softly" censored – losing followers, although their followers didn't unfollow them, and having most of their tweets left off of their followers' timelines. I tweet pretty often, and retweet more often, but most of the time, my followers don't see my tweets. In the early days of Twitter, if you followed a person, you saw every one of that person's tweets, but that hasn't been true for years. So Twitter is also not such a great place to experience the "social" in "social media." I get less and less enjoyment out of it.

My experiences with all these format and platforms have led me nearly full circle, back to the idea of an e-mail newsletter. I might labor in complete obscurity, but at least I'm in charge of what goes in here.

I'd like to hear from you about whether you like this idea, or hate it, or are indifferent to it. What would you like to read about in these newsletters? What bores you to tears?

I'll leave it there for this week. Take care of yourselves, and I'll talk to you soon!

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