

Remembering Matthew Seligman

Paul R. Potts

19 Apr 2020

Wednesday

It's snowing — not just a few flurries, but quite a bit, and it's been snowing on and off all day. It's not the kind of snow kids can play in — it's just wet and windy. So everyone is inside. I downloaded some free Dungeons and Dragons modules and rules, made available by Dungeon Masters Guild. So the kids are playing with that stuff. They even had coloring pages, so the younger ones are coloring. Joy made some dip out of cauliflower — we had a lot of cauliflower, because we stocked up on it early on, and it lasts a long time in a box in our cold garage.

Feedback

Grace reminded me that it was MERS, not SARS, in the Obama administration. Those disease outbreaks tend to merge together in my head a bit, since I remember both of them.

Grace also tells me that her symptoms of anxiety went away after adding more potassium into her diet. So it's possible that this was a side effect of her blood pressure medication, combined with a change in her diet — specifically because we've all been thrown far off our regular dietary routines.

Just Trying to Raise Some Dough

My friend David got in touch to share his appreciation of James Beard's book *James Beard's Theory and Practice of Good Cooking*. (I have also ordered a used copy of Beard's *Beard on Bread*). David suggested that I might try putting the dough, in the loaf pan, in a sink of hot tap water.

I thought that the biggest problem with my bread-baking was that I needed more warmth, but I received some new information yesterday. Grace told me that the flour I used on Easter Sunday, which I took out of a jar in our pantry, was Bob's Red Mill Gluten Free 1-to-1 Baking Flour, not a wheat flour at all, and not a gluten-free flour designed for baking bread. The web page says "While our

Gluten Free 1-to-1 Baking Flour is not meant for yeast dough, you can use our Gluten Free All Purpose Baking Flour blend in your favorite recipes instead!”

So that alone could easily explain why I just didn’t get a good rise out of that flour. Without gluten, or specialty ingredients designed to replace gluten, that flour might work OK to make biscuits or a quick bread, but it won’t really trap the CO2 bubbles produced by the yeast over the longer rise time.

Still, it was all we had on hand, so yesterday I tried another batch, using a simpler recipe from the Staebler book, and I tried a couple of tricks — I put the initial wad of dough into our Instant Pot, on the “yogurt” setting. It was bubbling, and it rose, but it wouldn’t double in size, and it just didn’t have the “springy” texture that gluten gives. The dough ball tended to split and crack apart. After beating on it a bit more and forming loaves, I put them into our oven set on “warm” (140 degrees). Again, they rose some more, but not very much. After a couple of hours I gave up and baked them, and again, they tasted good, and we ate it all. But the interior just wasn’t very bread-like. It was chewy, almost like mochi, and extremely difficult to slice!

So, I’m pretty sure my technique was fine — I was just using the wrong flour. I know flour is a bit hard to find in some places these days. We’ll see if we can get some actual bread flour and I’ll try again. I’m really hoping that eventually the *kids* will do this, so if they want bread, we can just tell them to go bake some.

Unemployment

There’s been no change or new information at all regarding my Michigan unemployment payments. The weeks I certified for are still unpaid and still have the annotation “Open Non-Monetary issue.” I can see the message I sent a few days ago. There hasn’t been a reply. Sometimes the option to chat with an agent appears, and sometimes the option to send a message is there. Maybe it has to do with the time of day? In any case, the site doesn’t match the online help. I have tried a few more times to connect with an agent in the online chat, but it always just seems to make me wait indefinitely.

I haven’t heard anything further from the staff members working for my Senator or Representative.

Next week, I expect to be able to certify for two more weeks. But I expect that payment for those two weeks will also be held, until someone gets around to fixing my account, so that payments can go out. I’m still assuming that I’ll be paid for those weeks eventually.

Stimulus

We’ve received our one-time Federal stimulus payment. This makes me a little less nervous about having to wait for unemployment benefit payments. We’re actually not in money trouble at the moment. I am concerned about June and

July. And I'm also very concerned that my employer-paid health care will expire, and I'll be unable to make COBRA payments, which will likely be more than our mortgage payments. But the only thing I can really do to help out future us, right now, is to continue to spend as little as possible now.

Thursday

Unemployment

I never got any further information from my Senator, Representative, or the Unemployment Insurance Agency, but as of this morning, it looks like my certifications are now marked for payment on Friday the 17th. This is a relief! It means I was able to put together tentative budget spreadsheets for various scenarios for May and June. June will be a pivotal month; if we get to the start of June and it doesn't look like I'll be re-hired soon, we'll have to make some hard decisions about health insurance and work.

Friday

I made biscuits.

These used some of Grace's sourdough starter, and the other kind of Bob's Red Mill flour we had on hand, Gluten Free All Purpose Baking Flour, which is the one they recommend more for yeast breads.

This recipe was from the Staebler book I mentioned earlier. It calls for sourdough starter *and* baking powder (and baking soda), so I thought I might get more rise out of it. It did rise a bit, but even with the baking powder, not as much as I hoped. The biscuits were not gummy or rock hard. Instead they were more on the soft and crumbly side. This flour has a noticeable bean flavor and (in my opinion) a slightly gritty texture. The kids told me that they loved them, but I did not particularly love them. So, I still want to make some breads with wheat flour for comparison, even if we continue to use gluten-free flours at least part of the time.

Later in the afternoon, I put new strings on my acoustic guitar and tried to get it sounding good again. It needed some adjustments — truss rod, string height adjustment, and bridge. It wasn't intonating correctly. It's been in the case far too long. These things need to be played often to stay in shape! And when the adjustments all work right, it sort of magically comes together: you make a big adjustment, it gets closer, then you adjust something else, it goes way out of whack, and you re-tune everything, and then make a smaller adjustment, and it goes a bit out of whack, and you re-tune everything again, and so on, until you are making tiny adjustments, then letting it sit for a few hours to stabilize, and then if the magic happens, when you pick it up the next day it is perfectly in tune, not buzzing, and with excellent intonation.

My acoustic guitar is a Babicz Identity Jumbo. They aren't made anymore. They have some unique features. If you type "Babicz Identity Jumbo" into Google, you might be able to find a picture of one. Most acoustic guitars have bridges that are glued to the top. This one actually has a bridge that is bolted to the top, and you can loosen the bolts and slide it (very carefully) slightly out of position. I couldn't get the guitar to intonate properly on the high strings, using Martin "silk and steel" strings, until I adjusted it slightly "cock-eyed." But with most acoustic guitars, you don't have options like this, if it starts to sound a bit off, as it ages; you'd have to have a luthier work it over, which would likely involve a neck reset, or a bridge removal and re-gluing, or maybe changing to a compensated bridge or nut.

It wasn't just the guitar; my fingers are also a bit rusty. I started working on "Blackbird," the old Beatles song. Years ago I learned the basic guitar part, but back then I couldn't finger-pick very well. I've since learned to finger-pick better, and also to play while accompanying myself singing, and to maintain a better rhythm. But I've got to go way back, learn the parts again, and work on this song bit-by-bit, with a metronome.

By the time he got around to recording the White Album, Paul McCartney could easily afford to have guitar technicians and luthiers work on his guitars, which is why his guitar's intonation sounds so nice in the recording of "Blackbird." But even after working my guitar over to the best of my ability, it doesn't sound quite so perfect, even when I bend the strings to bring the notes in the octave position closer to the desired pitches. I have always been frustrated by the vagaries of guitar tuning — even with my very first garage sale acoustic guitar, which had a warped neck. I wish sometimes that I couldn't hear the difference between a perfectly intonated guitar and one that isn't, but I can, and it's often grating to my ear. So this guitar could probably *still* use some attention from a real professional luthier. That's not gonna happen anytime soon.

There are a lot of transcriptions and tabs of "Blackbird" out there, and a lot of YouTube videos. Many of them are incorrect. Something I've learned about Beatles songs is that if you come across a transcription and it is hard to play, it is probably wrong. Paul McCartney is a wonderful musician but he was not a virtuoso guitar player and, more importantly, not *interested* in virtuoso guitar playing. He found beauty in simple parts. Most of "Blackbird" is played on three strings at a time, and one of them is always plucked open. The hardest part of playing the song is maintaining the rhythm of the simple finger-picked pattern while changing fingerings and singing. It's really quite a simple part, but it takes some learning, because it doesn't involve the full chords that most guitarists are used to.

Saturday

It was a rough night last night. Grace and I get tired of the same basic meals that the kids tend to love — potatoes, pasta, etc. Last night we made a pot of polenta and a topping of pan-fried vegetables and sausage with roasted red peppers. We thought it was tasty and the older kids liked it, but the younger kids were outraged. Daniel Peregrine held a silent protest and refused to eat anything. Benjamin Merry held an extremely loud protest and continued to berate us for hours, long after being sent away from the table. Elanor Susan (3) voiced her displeasure by bellowing and screaming. Malachi Richard (16 months) was perfectly content to cram both the vegetables and the polenta into his mouth. So we call this kind of meal a mixed success.

Today Joy, Grace, and I walked around the garden to talk about goals and plans, and also explored the back woods a bit. We tend to forget that our property is quite large and there is a lot of space back there. With no leaves on the trees yet, it is easier to get around back there than it is mid-summer. There's a nice clearing with some downed logs that look like they were cut at one point. It would be a perfect place to set up a tent for a camp-out right in the back yard. So I think we will try to do that soon. Honestly we're disappointed that the kids haven't jumped at the chance to do it themselves.

Sam and Joshua did some raking today since we are now planning to compost all the fallen leaves we can, to amend our very clay-heavy soil. We have some raised beds behind the house. They had been partially filled with leaves, and today I filled them up with bags of soil. It was great to get out. I spend far too much time inside and get out far too rarely.

Sam helped with that a bit and I showed him how I avoided lifting extremely heavy bags more than I had to — by splitting them open with a shovel right where they lay in the stack, then removing most of the soil by the shovelful, until the bag was light enough to pick up and shake easily.

Joshua's glasses showed up in the mail today, from Zenni Optical. It's a milestone for young Joshua! These are his first glasses. I helped him pick out the frames using the "virtual try-on" feature. He chose green frames for both his regular vision glasses and sunglasses. They look great. I was concerned they might not fit well, but they seem to fit fine. If they need some minor adjustment, it ought to be possible to soften the plastic up in hot water and bend them a bit.

Based on his experience, I'm going to see how much it would cost to order myself some new glasses from the same company. The frames are indeed very inexpensive, but things go up pretty quickly if, like me, you need a more complicated prescription — I wear bifocals. My grandfather used to wear trifocals, and I've always wondered if I might wind up with trifocals one day, but I think they are rarely made now, and it's more common just to switch glasses.

Joy just got back from running some errands — she picked up some eggs from a local farm and stopped at a few other places, too. She checked Busch's in



Figure 1: a boy wearing glasses with green plastic frames

Saline for some good bread flour — I had asked her to see if they had some King Arthur flour — and she was going to see if they had some wheat gluten — but they didn't have much to choose from. She brought back some wheat flour to try, though, so maybe I will bake something tomorrow.

Sunday

Furies of Calderon by Jim Butcher

I almost forgot — I finally finished reading a book! I've been reading it since January and been unable to make much progress, as I haven't been able to get quiet time either in the morning or before bed. But I finally had a couple of late evenings when I could stay up after the kids were quiet, and managed to finish it.

This is the first novel in a high fantasy series by Jim Butcher. I like Butcher's work in the Dresden Files series quite a bit, especially in the later ones, which become less formulaic and more complex. The Dresden Files series is low fantasy, taking place mostly in our contemporary world with a few magical elements that break through, and so it makes sense that the characters speak mostly in contemporary dialect and the language is modern.

I am a fan of some high fantasy, particularly Tolkien, Donaldson, Le Guin, Dunsany, and E. R. Eddison. But most fantasy I pick up is a disappointment. I tend to really dislike most modern high fantasy, because almost everything I read in the genre is extremely derivative. Almost no one has been able to

match Tolkien's world-building, and they don't even really try. And almost no one has been able to match their world-building with *language* that is as effective as the beautiful language of the great high fantasies. It doesn't have to be archaic-sounding to be elevating, beautiful, and inspiring; Donaldson and Le Guin both demonstrated that. But most modern fantasy I've tried to read recently has language that is dull as dishwater and flat as a pancake. The trend in the writing itself seems to be relentlessly downward in recent years, with few exceptions. The phrase "you can write that, but you sure as hell can't read it" applies — the sentences sound unconvincing and embarrassingly bad, and often unconsciously campy.

So, modern high fantasy is a genre I'm always hesitant to pick up. But since I like Butcher's work, I wanted to try this series.

Furies starts pretty well and introduces an appealingly down-and-out young protagonist, Tavi. I'm not going to give much away, because I think if you are interested in this series, it would be worth going into it without a lot of spoilers, but Tavi has reached the age where young people usually acquire "furies" — magical companions that allow them to control the elements — but has none. We start to learn of the world Tavi lives in, and the systems of magic that apply there, and there is some genuine creative effort there. But Butcher never seems to dive deep enough into the world he's creating. And then we spend most of the book following other characters.

On top of the relatively shallow world-building, Butcher tends to fill in the rest in broad brush strokes, with those brush strokes mostly borrowed from George R. R. Martin's *A Song of Ice and Fire* series. And that, mostly, is not a good thing. Much of the novel is essentially a reply of the Battle of Helm's Deep from Tolkien's *The Two Towers*, but told in a much less lyrical and more more gore-soaked way. And there's also more than a little of Martin's sadism, and even a touch of John Norman's *Gor* novels. And again, that's not a good thing.

There are some other influences. I think some of the mechanics of the magical "furies" may be borrowed, or at least absorbed, from the fantastic *Avatar: the Last Airbender* cartoon series (note: not to be confused with James Cameron's *Avatar* film). That's really not a bad source of inspiration at all. There's also a touch of Lovecraft, which I enjoyed; a little goes a long way!

This novel is strongest in its character-building. The characters of Tavi, Amara, Bernard, and Isana are all quite well-drawn and show some surprising depths. The villains, however, don't impress me very much. The tone is all over the place; too much Martin-esque darkness, with a little humor leaking in occasionally. It could have used much less Martin and much more humor. The book is too long, especially for the first volume in a series, and several subplots could be excised completely. And the language often simply just doesn't live up to the story. It's *competent*, but after reading fantasy that is written much more beautifully, I find that I'm not really happy to settle for *competent*.

I might consider trying the second volume, *Academ's Fury*, if I come across it.

But more likely, I'll hold out for more books in the Dresden Files series, or works by other writers.

Biscuits — Again

With the generic wheat flour Joy brought back from Busch's, I tried the sourdough biscuits again. I'd like to report that they worked beautifully this time, but... they didn't. I was very distracted with babies running in and out of the kitchen and getting into things, and did not get the correct amount of flour into the dough. We tried to remedy this by adding a bit more liquid, but it was too late, and they barely rose at all. Again, they were edible, but not really what I hoped. But hope springs eternal! I'm planning to try a very straightforward bread recipe again with the wheat flour and see what happens.

Remembering Matthew Seligman

The English bass guitarist Matthew Seligman died of COVID-19 on April 17th in London. Seligman recorded with a number of my favorite bands: with Robyn Hitchcock (in the Soft Boys); with Robyn Hitchcock as a solo artist; with Thompson Twins; and with Thomas Dolby (extensively). He also worked on albums by The Waterboys, David Bowie, Morrissey, Tori Amos, Sinéad O'Connor, and many others.

I heard about Seligman's death from tweets by Robyn Hitchcock. I'm also on Thomas Dolby's e-mail mailing list, and so received an invitation to "attend" a Zoom conference call tribute to Seligman today (by watching the stream on YouTube). There were some technical glitches getting it going, but eventually we could hear properly. There were about two dozen people on the video conference, many of them with familiar names, including Tom Bailey of Thompson Twins. All were joining the call from their very ordinary-looking living rooms or kitchen tables. There were a couple of hundred people watching, like me, on YouTube. It was a strange but moving experience.

The call started about 3:00 and the technical glitches were worked out by 3:15 or so. Unfortunately I had to leave about 3:45, since I had planned to join a couple of neighbors for a brief walk in the neighborhood at 4:00, masked up and maintaining our distance from each other.

When I came back downstairs about 5:00, I assumed the videoconference would be finished, and so I worked on some other projects. But it's now about 6:00 and I just checked in on YouTube. The call is still going. There are 244 people still watching. People are sharing video clips. I don't know who everyone is, but they all seem to be people who knew and worked with and loved Seligman on one way or another. A lot of nerdy musicians, with tears in their eyes; it is late in London and Thomas Dolby is gently trying to wind things up, but no one wants to leave the conference.

For my part, I never met the man, but his music found a home in my brain

quite early on. I always found myself gravitating to fretless bass, and when I was able to buy one, and start to write and record my own music, I sought out a particular fretless bass tone, using a chorus effect to make the “wobbly” fretless sound thicker. I didn’t even realize it consciously at first, but I was trying to make my bass sound like Matthew Seligman’s bass in songs from Thomas Dolby’s album *The Flat Earth*.

You can hear the track “Screen Kiss” here, featuring some of Seligman’s amazing fretless work, here.

He didn’t just play fretless, though; he could also anchor a more straightforward, fun neo-psychedelic rock rhythm section on a song like “Insanely Jealous” by The Soft Boys (led by Robyn Hitchcock), available here.

Seligman was 64 years old.

About This Newsletter

This newsletter by Paul R. Potts is available for your use under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0 International License. If you’d like to help feed my coffee habit, you can leave me a tip via PayPal. Thanks!