

Too Many Fish

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A Week and Then Some

I'm now two days out of sync with the usual newsletter schedule I've tried to stick to, in which I release a new issue every Sunday evening. As we've gone off the deep end into our gardening projects, we've become slightly unmoored from our regular sense of time. The days are getting longer and we've been getting up early and getting to bed late and in between those things, spending most of our days outdoors. With less supervision the kids have become even more feral, and we've had some extreme difficulty getting them to do daily chores such as washing dishes. Somehow Malachi broke the HDMI cable connecting the vintage PC, DVD player, and vintage PlayStation to the TV.

They've actually been asking me to read them stories in the evening before bed, so I'm in no hurry to get them a new cable. I've been reading them stories from the first volume of the Subterranean Press collections of Robert Silverberg's stories, called *To Be Continued* (here's a review of this volume). These stories seem so naïve and funny. We read a story called "The Iron Chancellor," about a robot servant that goes bonkers and puts a whole family into a strictly-enforced lockdown while at the same time putting them on a diet, and it seemed particularly on point given that I've lost twelve pounds since our own lockdown began on March 13th, and I've started weighing the kids weekly, not to fat-shame anyone but strictly to help us tell if any of them seem to be losing weight.

Just to be clear, we have plenty of food in the house — we have shelves in the basement stacked with plenty of non-perishables including canned beans and tomatoes, a pantry upstairs stuffed with oats, rice, pasta, canned tuna, potatoes, and flour, a freezer full of ham hocks and frozen chicken and bacon and butter and vegetables, and a refrigerator filled with vegetables and lunch meat and cheese and leftovers. We've even got a secret stash of chocolate and hard candies in the basement. And so far we are still getting a generous amount of food assistance via our SNAP benefits. But we *haven't* been eating some of the regular foods that certain of our picky eaters prefer, and we've been asking the kids to exercise more of *their* cooking skills during the days while Grace and I are semi-fasting until dinner, which is the pattern we naturally fall into during

the summer.

Between the Potts kids who would literally rather skip meals than have to cook oatmeal or make pasta or assemble sandwiches for themselves, and the Potts kids whose intense food preferences, possibly autism-related, lead them to refuse perfectly good food because the sweets and carbs they love aren't being served, and the Potts kids who may be eating less because of their anxieties and isolation during the pandemic, I fear that a couple of the kids may be losing weight. We should know in a few days. If they are, we'll have to figure out a strategy to help get those kids better-fed without resorting to just giving them all the Pop-Tarts they can eat, because we know what refined sugar does to their behavior.

It's now the afternoon of Tuesday, May 26th. I'm just going to add a "Tuesday" section below as quickly as I can, and send this out. I'll try to get back onto the Sunday schedule, even if it means the next issue is very short.

Sunday

Yesterday it was only about 72 degrees, which sounds ideal, but the humidity was creeping up, and it was starting to feel unpleasantly sticky. Today it was in the eighties by 10 a.m. and is very humid, so after watering plants I went down into the basement to hide out from the heat for a while. I will get back out in the early evening and try to do a few things.

This week has been full of gardening tasks. I've barely done anything else. We've had several beautiful days for it and I've been having a great time, staying outside on these lengthening spring days until dark.

Gardening

My black fly bites are mostly healed and fading like bruises. I've been more careful about wearing long pants and sometimes long-sleeved shirts. Occasionally something will get through my defenses. One pair of jeans has a hole in the knee and I had a black fly get in and bite me on the knee. One bit me on the knuckle while I was shoveling dirt. But the wave of black flies seems to have peaked and I am seeing fewer of them now, which is a great relief. Some highlights from the week in the garden:

- I've been pulling out poison ivy vines, wearing gloves. They were growing extensively in and around the wood chip pile. After I pulled out ever visible vine, yanking out as much of the buried vines as I could, new sprouts were back in 48 hours.
- The sunflowers that Joy started from seeds are now in a separate bed by one of our compost bins, with cans around them to protect them, and they are already growing up above the top edges of the cans.

- The native bees must be finding the pepper plants, because several of the cayenne pepper plants are already starting to grow tiny peppers.
- The pineapple mint is starting to shoot straight up. Apparently some of these mint plants switch between two kinds of growth: first, straight up. Then, sideways.
- Our “bee barns” are up and running. We somewhat foolishly left them outside on the deck, still in their boxes, and mason bees had already started to fill in the little bee holes, so yesterday I had to gingerly unpack them and move them to their summer locations while the bees were flying around, confused. Fortunately, mason bees are not aggressive, so I did not get stung. But this morning a number of confused bees were flying around the shelves on the back deck where they had been. I think they will find them eventually.
- I started doing a little mulching with cocoa shells.

Last night I made a pan of polenta drizzled with olive oil and perfumed with some sage, thyme, and oregano leaves from the kitchen garden, although we can't harvest very much from most of the herbs yet, because they are only really just starting to grow. But it was delicious!

I am looking forward to having herbs all spring and summer and into fall. The mints in particular ought to grow like crazy, so I am investigating recipes for mint teas, and of course we will have to have mint juleps. If you've got any good recipes that use mint, please send them to me! Especially if they make good use of orange, lemon, lime, apple, pineapple, strawberry, or chocolate varieties of mint.

I am hoping the sage varieties also do well, because I want to make fried sage leaves, as well as sage tea. I searched Alibris, looking for cheap copies of cookbooks that feature herbs, and ordered a few for inspiration.

Things shipped via USPS seem to be taking longer and longer. One book I ordered, *Beard on Bread*, has not arrived after five weeks, and some guitar capos I ordered from Sweetwater have not arrived after three weeks. So, these may take a while. But most of the herbs probably won't be ready to harvest in significant quantity for a while anyway.

I looked more closely at our lavender plants. The four varieties are “Ellagance [sic] Purple,” French, “Hidcotte Blue,” and “Lavance.” We're considering various wild options, like ordering plug trays and planing whole beds of lavender, or putting a lot of creeping thyme plants along walkways or driveways. But we really need to focus on the projects already underway for this year, and save some more ambitious projects for next year.

The kids are working on sanding down the old canoe. They will then paint it, and then we'll fill it with wood chips and soil as the children's garden. We have plants ready to go into it, so they had better get moving on that project! The

plan is to make it a “pizza garden.” We’ve got a couple tomato plants, a couple of sweet pepper plants, and some herbs suited for pizza such as basil and oregano.

Tuesday

It’s been very hot. We went out to Lowe’s today and got some fresh air filters to put in the return vent of the air conditioning system and we have have that cranked up. It was over 90 degrees today and it looks like we either tied or broke the record for this day. I’ve been trying to keep the new plants happy. Some of them, such as the mint varieties, will be fine, and are already growing vigorously. But some of them have only just been planted and don’t have well-established roots yet, so I’ve been giving them extra water. I’m happy to report that the tiny leeks are almost all standing upright, and are on track to become tall and fat and delicious.

I’m in a rush to get this newsletter done and out today so I’m just going to run through a few highlights:

No Fish, Five Fish, Twenty-One Fish, Way Too Many Fish

My sister-in-law Shelley has been going bass fishing, which she does every spring, to fill up her freezer with delicious fish. Yesterday she was out at 4 a.m. fishing and then came by a few hours later with fish in coolers to drop some off and give us a lesson in scaling and gutting bass, while we attempted to maintain a safe distance. Grace and I have both done some fishing before, but it’s been *years*, so we really needed a refresher on how to break down fish. Grace had asked me on Sunday night to dig a trench for fish guts, which I did. It wasn’t too easy — the soil in our yard is extremely heavy with clay, and it must have been full from somewhere, because it is also full of broken fragments of red bricks, which can stop a shovel cold. And since it rained on Sunday night, the clay soil meant that the trench was full of standing water on Monday. Standing water is not something you want to leave in your yard in Michigan, in May! But I digress.

I think she brought five or six largemouth bass (at least, that’s what I think they were), a foot or more long. She would have caught more, but was apparently roused by the police because she was fishing on the edge of a state park, but in an area that was actually private.

Joshua was a trooper and helped scale, decapitate, and gut the fish, which is not effortless, because bass are slimy and hard to grip, with sharp scales, and sharp fins. I wound up leaving the job to Joshua, Grace, and Shelley, and went back to mulching the kitchen garden.

They put the guts and heads in the trench.

Then it was time to go, as we always do on Memorial Day, to Grace’s brother Ben’s grave in Detroit. Did I mention it was extremely hot? We also discovered that apparently the air conditioner in Grace’s truck is no longer in working

order. So we had to drive with the windows down, which meant that I got more sunburned, but we made it there and back, and ran several additional errands, including a trip to Trader Joe's for chocolate. (For some reason, Costco stocks almost no decent chocolate, except for seasonal gift boxes).

We also discovered, in the drive back, that there was a mouse running around inside the truck. Apparently when you hardly ever use a truck for several months, and it is filled with crumbs and other food debris from children eating in the back seat, mice will move in.

Before we went inside for the evening I filled the trench with fresh soil from our dirt pile, since the clay soil I had dug out wouldn't soak up water.

I harvested some thyme and other herbs and we baked the bass with olive oil, lemon, and herbs. It was delicious, although bass is somewhat bony and difficult to fillet, so serving it to the little kids was messy. But it was all eaten.

This morning Shelley began sending Grace text messages at a bit after 6 a.m. and then called at 7 a.m. and then was shortly knocking at the front door with more fish. Grace had known she was planning to come back this morning and had left a cooler for her to drop off fish, but had not told me. And we expected a few more fish. We didn't expect 21. We don't have anywhere near that much room in our freezer. We didn't have any ice on hand. And we also had a number of important errands to run.

So, our first stop was at a nearby gas station for ice. They didn't have the three 22-pound bags of ice we paid for, so we had to instead take home nine 7-pound bags (that lost us a few pounds, but I was in no mood to argue about it). We dumped the ice over the fish, covered the buckets with a tarp, and left for our errands.

The babies had kept us up until well past 1:00 a.m., and it was far too hot to sleep well, so we were pretty severely sleep-deprived when Shelley started calling. We needed to go to the post office to pick up a registered letter from Wells Fargo that they had refused to deliver to our home. We needed to go to FedEx to send a signed form back to Wells Fargo — given that a lot of our mail has been badly delayed, I wanted to use FedEx for that letter, because Wells Fargo had told me that if I failed to sign the agreement for three months' mortgage forbearance, they might take other, unspecified, action, and I didn't want to give them any possible reason to do that. We also needed to go get some air filters for the air intake to the central air conditioner. And we needed to go to the Post Office to send some packages. The trips to Lowe's and the Post Office were horrible: both were way too crowded, and way too hot. The traffic flow in the Post Office was confusing, and we wound up wasting a lot of time filling out the wrong mailing slips, and then filling out the right mailing slips. I wrote on Twitter:

If you are out running errands and about to lose your shit because it is hot as Satan's infected hemorrhoid and top of the craziness of managing mask, wipes, maybe gloves, maybe sanitizer, and trying to

stay safe from all the other people about to lose their shit... I feel ya

We called Joshua from the Post Office to ask him to put more ice on the fish.

As we left the post office, Grace and I closed our eyes and sprayed each other down with alcohol because we had been in the building so long, and it didn't seem like it had good ventilation.

When we got home everything was still quite cold, which seemed promising — while I wasn't that excited about the prospect of dealing with 21 bass, I was much *less* excited about dealing with the prospect of 21 bass that had started to lose their delicious freshness. And it was over ninety degrees outside. We rinsed off all the fish and put them into coolers, layered with the rest of the ice. The kids had not washed any of the dishes from the previous night. They also hadn't made themselves breakfast or done any of the other very basic tasks that help keep our household running.

It was an important day for those deep, cleaning breaths.

I got the air filter installed and turned on the air conditioner. After a while it seemed like we were even getting cool air out of the vents. So maybe, just maybe, we'll be able to sleep better tonight.

In good news, a couple of our friends are going to pick up some of the fish. Grace found two people who each were willing to take seven of the fish, and clean them. So we only have to clean and find freezer space for seven of them.

I left them to it and came down into my basement office to re-hydrate and work on this newsletter.

A few minutes ago, Joy came in to tell me that water was dripping from the ceiling in the garage — apparently, condensation from the air conditioning system. We have a ton of stuff stored in the garage, so she's been moving things out of the way.

A few years back, shortly after we moved in, we had this problem, and so had a handyman tear open the garage roof. He found a cracked plastic pipe and replace it, and replaced a whole lot of moldy fiberglass insulation that had been ruined, and which I had wound up tearing out of the rotted ceiling, thus exposing myself to a whole lot of mold and fiberglass, and triggering a long series of events that involved treatment for asthma and eventually led to getting my diagnosis as a carrier of alpha-1 antitrypsin deficiency, but that's a story I've told at length elsewhere, and right now I have to go out and see if there is anything I can do to fix it, up to and including turning the air conditioning back off.

Ah, summer. It's the time when everything happens at once. Some of it is great, and some of it is horrible, but all of it is smelly and sticky!

Remind me next time to write about the attempts several of my kids have been making to improve their relationships with me. It's remarkable, and also frustrating, to be a father.

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