

# The Police Take Off Their Masks

Paul R. Potts

07 June 2020

## Sunday

It's been a busy week and there are a lot of things in progress. I'll just start with a few updates.

### The Air Conditioning Works!

On Friday morning a technician from Hutzel Plumbing and Heating arrived and took a look at the situation with the air conditioner. I shared my concerns that the long PVC pipe across the attic space above the garage ceiling had broken repeatedly and just seemed like a terrible way to drain the condensation — with such a long pipe run, it is hard to maintain enough drop to guarantee that water won't back up in the pipe and freeze again. After a while and an examination of the wiring and piping in the basement, he agreed and decided to run a new condensation drain pipe down through the floor into the utility room, where it drains into the sink there. He got this re-routed very quickly and then we were able to get the air conditioning on!

The restoration company left fans and dehumidifiers running in the mostly-emptied-out garage, after tearing out some sections of the ceiling and wall. They are supposed to return Monday, to check the moisture levels, and see if they can hand things off to a team to restore the insulation and drywall. Someone from that team is also supposed to arrive Monday morning to produce an estimate for our insurance agent.

It looks like we will finally be able to get one or both of our standalone freezers up and running in the garage. There are plugs along the back wall, but they were never wired correctly, and several of them seem to be switched with a light switch. I remember that the inspector found issues with those outlets; they also might have incorrect and dangerous wiring. So we are arranging to get an electrician out to fix up those outlets, and also to look at the outlet upstairs which was for some reason wired to generate a surprising and dangerous 240 volts. He won't be able to get out here until the Monday after tomorrow, though. But at that point, we should be able to hook up at least one freezer without having to run any unwanted extension cords in the garage.

## Slings, Arrows, Bites, and Stings

Mosquitoes are in, black flies are out. It's now sunburn-in-minutes season. We've had some very hot days already. Most of the kitchen garden plants are in the ground, and have established decent roots. But a few plants still in containers are suffering from the blazing sun. We are doing our best to get those things planted as quickly as we can.

The bee sting I got last weekend has mostly healed up, and today I was finally able to work the stinger out of the skin on the back of my thumb. I tried a while back but my attempts were failing and causing more bruising and other damage, so I left it to heal for a while. That was one nasty bee — I've never had a sting quite like this one.

On Wednesday we went to Costco, and while at Costco for groceries, bought another tent. So we now have a very nice tent set up in the yard near the kids' garden. It is all staked out, and they haven't damaged it yet, aside from some minor wear and tear. On Thursday night I took my laptop out to the tent after dinner and the older kids and I watched an episode of *Doctor Who*, while Grace watched the two babies. I had to struggle with iTunes and a corrupt video file for a while, so while I muttered curses at Apple, the kids made shadow puppets on the wall of the tent. They were having such a good time that I came close to declaring that the video was just not going to work out and we needed to do a shadow puppet show instead. But by the time I re-downloaded the video file, they were losing interest in their shadow sharks and birds, so we watched the series 12 (thirteenth Doctor) episode entitled "Can You Hear Me?"

### "Can You Hear Me?"

I have written before about how I am disappointed and frustrated by the series 12 episodes. This episode did nothing to improve my opinion of the series. Once again, the episode had severe pacing problems. This time there was a frenzied climax that came too early in the show, and it was followed by a lot of slow and tedious padding. Although there are some fun new cheesy horror-movie effects, the episode's premise was strange, introducing two new super-villains with newly inserted back-stories, instead of mining the huge back catalog of antagonists from the long, long history of the show.

There is a head-scratching animated sequence. It looks like the producer wanted to take a page from *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows: Part 1*. But this over-stuffed, poorly-paced episode just didn't really ever come together. In several scenes, companions follow up on a previous events that happened, in-world, years ago, but which we are just learning about for the first time in this episode. These scenes thus have absolutely no resonance for the viewer, and create no real sense of character depth or development. There are also some scenes that try to humanize the Doctor, but for the most part they fail badly. In fact, one scene fails so badly that the BBC had to respond to angry viewer mail.

I'm really at a loss, wondering how this mess was approved and released; I feel like I was watching the aftermath of a lot of notes from management (perhaps someone ordered more character development, **now**, at any cost), which led to a lot of script doctoring, re-cutting, and maybe insertion of scenes that were either not originally part of this set of screenplays, or were originally created for other episodes. However this came about, we're watching a sort of production train wreck in slow motion, since these episodes aired months ago.

## Mortgage Update

I spent a few hours trying to have a conversation with Wells Fargo about our options for catching up on the three months of mortgage payments that were put in "forbearance." I keep getting things in the mail from them telling me that that these payments will be due in full at the end of the forbearance period (that is, at the end of June), and so I need to contact Wells Fargo to arrange payment. They provide a phone number. The phone number sends me to an automated system, which plays several long messages that essentially re-read the same information that the letters contained, and direct me to their web site, and then hangs up the phone, without ever giving me an opportunity to talk to a person. The web site refers me to the phone numbers.

I did manage to, I think, get them to remove a "block" of some sort that they had placed on the account I had previously used to make mortgage payments. This stems from events that happened right after I was put on furlough from my job, on March 23rd. I immediately contacted Wells Fargo to ask for help due to my loss of income. I could not get anyone on the phone and sent a message via their online system. I wanted them to *not* take out the upcoming automatic payment which would have normally come out of my account on April 3rd or so. But although their web site told me I could get three months of forbearance, I was unable to get any reply or confirmation that they would suspend the upcoming automatic withdrawal, so I had my bank block transactions from Wells Fargo. Then, in mid-May, because I was receiving the enhanced unemployment payments and had received a stimulus payment, I decided that it wouldn't be a bad idea to make a partial payment on the mortgage account, so I initiated a withdrawal via their web site, forgetting about the block I had set up on my bank's end. So the transaction failed, and they *also* put some kind of a block on future transactions on my bank account.

I say that I *think* I got that block removed, because by using a different number, one connected to their banking division, I was able to talk to a person. That was a nice clear conversation, but he then insisted on redirecting me to someone in the mortgage division, despite my protests. I was sent to a call center, likely in India. The connection was *terrible* — the audio was quiet, and very muffled, with no clarity, as if we were communicating through a toilet paper tube stuffed with toilet paper. So in between rounds of "I'm sorry, I just can't hear you, the call is very bad" and long replies I could barely decode, I *think* that I verified that the checking account should work for mortgage payments starting in July.

But I was not able to discuss any options for what to do for the skipped April, May, and June payments; the call center worker just told me that I should be getting some paperwork later in June.

So you can probably understand my anxiety about the situation. I hate to be getting mixed messages — on the one hand, dire warnings about how failure to arrange payment could lead to foreclosure proceedings, strikes on my credit report, *et cetera*, while at the same time, being given no options to negotiate an arrangement before the deadline when those possible dire consequences can legally be inflicted on us. So I'm forced to try to have some sort of faith that our mortgage company, a huge corporation with a long record of criminal malfeasance, won't try to screw us over. I'm finding it hard to have that faith.

I had planned to ask for the 3 months' missed payments to be added on to the next 9 months' payments, thus increasing my monthly payments for the next 9 months. But we have some big expenses coming up, including insurance co-pays and the actual repair costs for the air conditioning system and wiring, which won't be covered by our homeowner's insurance. And Grace has pointed out that there is still a high risk of financial uncertainty hovering over at least the rest of 2020, and likely into at least the next year. I think she's correct. We should try to get the 3 months of payments tacked on to the end of the mortgage. Then in a few months when I hopefully will be back in some sort of regular routine with a paycheck, we should try to refinance the whole mortgage shebang, and try to get a lower interest rate while also shortening the mortgage payoff period as much as possible.

## The Microphone

This week I managed to build a microphone! Not from scratch, but from a kit. It's a studio condenser microphone, allegedly of very high quality. It arrived as a nice shell, metallic sparkle gray, the delicate microphone capsule, a transformer, two circuit boards, a bag of parts, and instructions. Assembling one of these isn't a beginner soldering project. It was "intermediate" — moderately difficult. Installing most of the parts is very easy, but there are some places where the assembler is expected to create connections not on the circuit boards but in mid-air; at one critical point, leads from four different electronic components and a wire from the capsule all have to come together in a clean solder joint formed above the board. That was a bit tricky, but fortunately I had some experience making this kind of mid-air solder joint in several of the hand-wired prototype boards I designed and built for Thorlabs projects.

I was a bit nervous that I'd have to spend a lot of time diagnosing what was wrong with the finished microphone, but I was pleasantly surprised to find that it worked immediately, and it sounds great. So now I have working condenser microphone. I'm selling my old Russian-made Oktava MK-319 for parts on eBay. I don't have the skills needed to get it working right, and the small businesses that used to work on Oktava microphones all seem to have gone out of business,

so it needs to find another home.

I also received an inexpensive reverb processor to use for live music, and another microphone made specifically to place in front of electric guitar amplifiers, so I'll be experimenting with that as time allows. At least for rock and roll guitar tones, it's generally considered better to capture an electric guitar sound played through an amplifier, rather than sending the signal into a direct box and mixer. But this isn't a hard-and-fast rule. It depends on the guitar, the player, the song, and just what kind of tone you are trying to capture. Sometimes it works well to capture both the sound from the amplifier and the direct signal and blend them. Sometimes "re-amping" is done, where the direct signal is captured live, but then later sent back through an amplifier to capture what the amplifier does to the signal. I don't have money for, or space for, a whole rack of different amplifiers, but I do have many other options to record a nice guitar sound.

## Garden Update

Joy arranged to have soil delivered, to top a large \_hügelkultur bed in the front yard. That bed is now mostly complete and ready for plants!

Grace and I made another trip to Coleman's Farm Market. Their spring plants were mostly gone, but we did pick up a few things: more flowers, more small plants to put in the crevices between concrete blocks, and more tarragon plants.

Something attacked the pepper plants in the kids' canoe garden. I noticed this yesterday morning: the leaves and stems of several of the peppers were chewed off. Grace and I hoped to put together some fencing around the contents of the canoe later yesterday, but the kids had a very bad chore day and created a number of fights and tantrums and crises, and so we didn't get to it, nor did we manage to cook the dinner that we had planned. And so this morning there was a lot more damage. A number of the pepper plants had been chewed off right down to the soil. Most of them are probably a complete loss. We're not sure what eats pepper plants. It might be the same thing that was eating sunflowers. The separate bed of pepper plants in the front yard hasn't shown any of this kind of damage yet, but maybe we had better get that bed fenced as soon as possible. I don't want to find out one morning that our entire bed of various peppers has been leveled.

I've started documenting the garden beds on Twitter. If you'd like to catch all the plant Pokémon, here is a thread that documents the plants growing in and around the 33 concrete blocks that make up the border of our main kitchen garden. And here is another thread in which I start to document what's inside the kitchen garden bed itself. There are several other gardens in the front yard but the kitchen garden is the largest and most complicated. I'll add notes as time allows. I had to stop this morning because my already-sunburned arms were being roasted again, and it is hot, so I did not want to put on long pants

and long sleeves, so I today after watering everything in the front yard I opted to come inside during peak burning hours.

Last night Grace picked a number of edible plants from the kitchen garden, enough to make a terrific salad. It contained some of the following:

- arugula
- sorrel
- celery (leaves)
- cilantro
- lovage
- chives
- dill
- nasturtium
- anise hyssop
- Italian oregano
- hot and spicy oregano
- kale
- bronze fennel

I'm not sure exactly what went into the salad and in what proportions. These plants aren't very big yet, so there wasn't enough of any one of them to make a salad. Sorrel is a fantastic tart herb, but it is delicate, and doesn't handle hot days and direct sun very well, so it was getting burned and shriveling up. Lovage has quite a pungent flavor, so I think only a little bit of that went into the salad. Anise hyssop is also delicious, but it also has a strong licorice flavor, so we only used a bit of that. And I think maybe she saved the chives and fennel for other dishes. Even without those leaves, the rest was a *mélange*, or perhaps maybe a *melee*, of herb flavors. She dressed it very lightly, with some olive oil and just a bit of balsamic vinegar. It was delightful to eat such a fresh and fragrant salad right from our garden. Not everyone would necessarily appreciate the riot of strong flavors, but Grace and I enjoyed it. With the salad, we served shredded rotisserie chicken from Costco in a butter sauce, and broccoli roasted in leftover bacon fat, and washed it all down with Sierra Nevada Wild Little Thing ale, which really hit the spot at the end of a hot and exhausting day.

After dinner, we showed the kids the movie *Groundhog Day* — a great film, which I have not watched in years. It has held up very well. The screenplay is a master class.

## Our Weight Problem

We've got a weight problem in the Potts household. I know that a lot of people in this lockdown situation have gained weight, especially if they turn to carbohydrate-heavy foods for comfort. A certain friend is making brownies or other sweets every day. But we seem to be having the opposite problem.

I've personally lost sixteen pounds since we started our own lockdown. I don't

think this is actually a bad thing at all — I’ve really just lost some of the weight I’ve gained since 2015, when I was living in Saginaw and walking in our beautiful downtown neighborhood nearly every day. So I’m actually quite pleased about my weight. I’ve also built up a little muscle shoveling dirt and wood chips.

But I’m not happy to see some of our kids losing weight, in particular several of the boys, but Elanor has lost a bit, too.

We normally don’t actually weigh the kids. They get weighed at the doctor’s office. The boys tend to be almost uniformly healthy and wiry. So we’ve never really worried about their weight. And no one’s been noticeably sick at all; they all run around and scream and yell and do their kid activities.

A few weeks ago I noticed that several of the boys seemed skinnier than I remembered them — their pants were baggier, and even with a belt at the smallest available hole, their pants were slipping down a lot. So I weighed everyone. And then, a couple of days ago, I weighed them all again, to see if there was a noticeable difference. Two of the boys had lost four pounds in three weeks. That might not seem like a lot, but it’s a shockingly large percentage of their body weight. And it’s on top of an unknown amount of weight loss since March 13th.

It isn’t a calorie supply problem, exactly — we have a ton of food in the house, perhaps literally. It’s more of a calorie delivery problem. Several of our kids, somewhere on the autism spectrum, are quite picky, and have long been in the habit of holding out *against* eating healthy food, *for* occasional binges on foods they favor. For example, the donuts served after Mass, and our occasional meals out, such as brunches at the Bomber restaurant, where they would stuff themselves with chili cheese fries, or pancakes, or other carb-heavy food. We’d also occasionally get a Chinese takeout feast, with dumplings and other goodies, or pizzas. Since going on lockdown, those carb-heavy foods have mostly been unavailable.

There’s another factor which pre-dated lockdown: Malachi’s egg allergy. For his safety, we had banned eggs from the house, almost never using them, since we wanted to make absolutely sure he wouldn’t get his hands on any egg. We found this especially critical during lockdown, because a major allergic reaction would result in having to use his Epi-pen, which would also result in needing to take him to a hospital emergency room, and we wanted to avoid, as much as possible, having to use any medical resources, especially the emergency room, during the pandemic, especially early on when ERs were flooded with people with COVID-19.

But we used to eat a lot of eggs. We all liked them and I often cooked eggs for everyone, on weekends.

Add that all up, and it probably adds up to a loss of a pound a week or more, for the picky-eater boys. They don’t actually have any fat to lose, so they are probably losing muscle. And our failure to get them out of the house for

regular exercise, over the last few weeks while we've been so busy with gardening, probably hasn't helped matters anyway.

So, we're trying to figure out how to get more calories into our kids, the boys especially. We're attempting to cautiously re-introduce eggs. We're trying to add more bean dishes, and bread. Sam has been following the lead of Grace and myself and making a bulletproof coffee for breakfast. This keeps us feeling pretty full until late in the day and has been a very effective weight-loss tool for Grace and for me, but he probably shouldn't be following this regimen at all.

Although restaurants are now re-opening in Michigan for sit-down service, I don't think we'll be going into restaurants any time soon. It just seems too risky. It seems as if the lockdown orders are just being lifted as a concession to the fact that there was never any other effective plan to save jobs and businesses. We're watching the numbers and will continue to watch the numbers. I don't expect them to look good, in most states.

There may be some anxiety and depression feeding, so to speak, into this problem as well. The kids have handled the lockdown very well, but it is certainly getting old for all of us.

Maybe we'll try getting takeout Chinese dumplings once in a while.

## **The Police Take Off Their Masks**

The news has been, frankly, pretty terrible. The police have taken off their masks, metaphorically, all over the country. The masks are the masks of sanity that sociopaths and violent abusers wear. They're emboldened by a blatantly racist bully in the White House. This headline from the Guardian pretty much says what needs to be said: "Protests about police brutality are met with wave of police brutality across US". From the article:

The nationwide anti-police brutality protests sparked by the killing of George Floyd in the US have been marked by widespread incidents of police violence, including punching, kicking, gassing, pepper-spraying and driving vehicles at often peaceful protesters in states across the country.

Read this story of what happens when an officer tries to do the right thing. It's enraging.

I don't have a solution, and I don't think this moment in history is going to be resolved quickly. I think there's a legitimate and important debate to be had about whether communities need police at all, at least police forces as they are currently constituted — heavily militarized, heavily funded, and increasingly turning to extreme violence as a first resort in every encounter, especially encounters with people of color. The Democratic party and its leadership of corporate-backed gerontocrats is entirely incapable of putting forth



any convincing leadership in this crisis. In fact, all the masks are coming off. In the middle of a virulent pandemic. God help us, and God let us help ourselves.

## **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!