

# The Big Chill

Paul R. Potts

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## Thursday

### The Big Chill

Yesterday it was 95 degrees out and very humid — actually dangerous to work outside for very long. But then the remains of tropical storm Cristobal blew across Michigan. We had some heavy thunderstorms, and there was some damage elsewhere in the state. But from what I'm reading today, there were no tornadoes. Pittsfield Township seems to have come through without too much damage. Our power stayed on. Grace and I were out running errands and actually in a Kroger grocery store when the lights went out, but then came back on. I'm glad we didn't lose power, because although we have a generator we can hook up to keep the refrigerator running, the kids broke it a while back, snapping off some parts in the throttle mechanism, and so it needs some work. It was a gift from a friend, who got it used via Craigslist, and looked like it had already been modified or repaired by a tinkerer, so I'm not quite sure how to go about getting it repaired. It would be better to have a whole-house generator wired into our main panel, so that we can flip a switch and have the generator drive only critical items like lights and refrigerators, but that costs a lot. We also don't *really* want a big diesel engine right outside our home. Ideally we'd have a better backup energy solution, but I'm not quite sure what that might be.

I'm typing this on my little laptop while sitting on the back deck outside our bedroom. Grace and I just drank our bulletproof coffee and we're basking in the coolness. It's just past eleven o'clock in the morning and the temperature is a glorious 65 degrees or so. It's so very, very nice to be outside today. I very rarely actually spend time out here, which is a shame. This year, like many years in Michigan, the morning temperatures went directly from "too damned cold" to "too damned hot" and we've had precious few days when it was actually comfortable to be out on the deck. So I'm taking as much advantage of it as I can.

It will be in the fifties tonight and in the forties tomorrow night, which will be strangely cold, rather than strangely hot, for mid-June. The common element is "strange."

I spend time thinking about things we might be able to do, in both the short term and long terms, to get our home and yard and infrastructure ready for a world in which the weather will become more chaotic and extreme every single year for the rest of our lives and the lives of our children. Will there be a way to easily create a lighter-covered roof, making it white or light-colored to reflect heat? That would probably help a bit. In the woods here, our home is not actually very well-situated for rooftop solar energy, but we have been considering an installation in our yard. We need to upgrade our gutters, and get rain gardens in place that can soak up the excess water from severe storms. We ought to be able to make use of the stone retaining walls as places to create small greenhouses, which would allow us to continue to grow some food plants across three seasons, or even four seasons. There's an awful lot to think about.

## **Mortgage News**

I have good news about our mortgage. I finally managed to get a person on the phone at Wells Fargo. We are starting the paperwork process to tack the payments that were put in forbearance (does one say "forborn payments?" I've never heard that usage) onto the end of the loan. The paperwork process won't be complete until the fall. This means I won't have to pay them back in a huge lump sum, or increase or monthly payments for a short period. But, of course, it extends the loan. We took out a thirty-year mortgage three years ago. I was 49 years old, and knew that was a bit risky. I don't think it is safe to assume I'll still be working as a software engineer at the age of 79, so something has to give. I've been paying down a little extra principal with almost every mortgage payments, but only a little bit. I need to be able to pay down this mortgage much faster than I've been paying it down. If I can stay employed for at least a few more years at this current job, I think I'll be able to crank up the extra principal payments. We also ought to be able to refinance, after the current loan modification has been completed.

## **Infrastructure**

The repairs to the air conditioning system have worked out quite well so far. The condensation drains downstairs in the utility room sink, where Joy has been collecting it in buckets and using it to water some of the plants she's growing in the enclosed area at the base of the deck.

The electrician who was scheduled to come out on the fifteenth of June had a schedule change, so came out earlier, and fixed a couple of electrical issues. He rewired the three outlets in the back wall of the garage so that they are properly grounded, and not controlled by the light switch. One of them is now protected with a GFCI, which is useful if anyone wants to run an extension cord outside to use an electrical device outside. However, we had to disconnect an overhead light to make this work. The house wiring is strange and amateurish in many places. I think this same circuit also runs around to the front of the house where

it is connected to an outdoor electrical outlet on the front wall, which doesn't make any sense, but not connected to the outdoor electrical outlet on the back wall.

We want to use these outlets to power some freezers in our garage, but he cautioned us that he had not figured out everything that was on this circuit, so it might be a lot to ask from a single breaker. So we'll see. We'll try one freezer to start with. Ideally we'd be able to buy meats from local farmers in large quantities, which is almost a requirement for a household of ten, but we'll have to start small. I want to look into getting some kind of freezer alarm that can give us some warning if the freezer goes out, due to a blown breaker, or for other reasons.

Looking at the back wall of the garage, along with being able to look inside the side wall, since part of the drywall was removed, has confirmed my worst fears about the garage. At least one wall of the garage is in terrible shape, with severely rotted wood. I don't think this is all due to the air conditioner, although there has likely been a leakage problem since it was first put in, in (I think) 2016. This damage probably goes back further. I think the previous owner saw the condition of the walls, but in renovating the house to flip it, opted to just cover up the damage with fresh drywall and siding, since a house inspector wouldn't normally tear open drywall to look for damage. On the back wall, he didn't even do that, and the drywall is crumbling. So, the renovation that is currently underway will replace the insulation and drywall in the garage ceiling, and close up the damaged wall, but it really needs a deeper renovation — the back and side walls need to be rebuilt. In the short term, the gutters need some major work, along with the yard, to accommodate rainwater, to avoid further water damage to those walls. The closer we look at the renovation work that the seller did, which was superficially very pretty, the more disgusted and enraged we become. But I need to let that go, because it's our home now, and there's nothing we can do but try to improve things over time as best we can.

So, where are we, in the garage ceiling repair process? Most of the things from the garage are still in a couple of storage pods, sitting in our driveway. The remediation crew is done — they've dried out the ceiling and torn out the damaged insulation and drywall, at least, the parts of it that were damaged by the *current* air-conditioner condensation pipe leakage problem. The source of the leaks is now thoroughly fixed, and so I'm pretty sure, or at least I hope to hell, that there will be no further leakage. The next step is for our insurance adjuster to approve an estimate for the actual insulation and drywall repair. Then the repair will get scheduled — it shouldn't actually take long for a crew to make those repairs. Then we'll need to get a crew back out to re-load things into the garage, and then the pod rental company will have to come get the pods. Our insurance adjuster is very busy, because of the huge number of claims in the Midland area, due to the flooding, and breaching of a couple of dams. I'll check in with her again today and see if there is a hold-up.

## Gardens

Despite various interruptions and distractions this week, and mainly due to Joy's continued efforts, our various garden beds are continuing to come along. I'm very happy with the kitchen garden, and I've been documenting its contents on Twitter. If you like pictures of plants, here are the links:

1. Here's a thread documenting the plants growing in, between, and in front of the concrete blocks that make up the border of the kitchen garden bed.
2. Here's a thread documenting the first quadrant of the kitchen garden bed (approximately, since the layout is not symmetrical).
3. Here's the second quadrant.
4. Here's the third quadrant.
5. Here's the rest of the kitchen garden including the fourth quadrant and the fire ring in the "middle" (it is actually quite off-center).

I'll put additional threads like this on Twitter for our other garden beds. Since I'm going back to work on Monday the 15th, my posting of this sort of thing will likely slow down considerably.

We've had a few setbacks in the gardens. Despite putting cans and cut-up plastic bottles around the stems of the sunflowers, something ate a lot of the sunflower plants. I think I mentioned that earlier. Joy put some fencing around that particular garden bed and the surviving sunflowers have continued to grow like crazy. Meanwhile, something ate most of the new corn plants in the corn bed down to the soil. We got a few more and re-planted, and put a fence around the corn bed, but something ate a few of *those* corn plants, too. So we suspect a bird of some kind. In the children's garden (the canoe), something ate the sweet peppers almost completely, but did much lighter damage to the hot peppers. Are the leaves of hot pepper plants too hot for animals? I don't know, but there doesn't seem to be any damage to speak of in the separate fire ring bed containing a variety of pepper plants, hot and sweet. We replaced the destroyed sweet pepper plants in the children's garden with eggplant. Eggplant plants have weird fuzzy leaves with sharp, thin, almost transparent little spines on them. So we're hoping maybe animals won't want to bother with them. Meanwhile, we have to figure out some more fencing options for various other garden beds.

We're learning as we go. I put in a bunch of mint varieties, in a quick-and-dirty garden bed thrown together by piling up wood chips and soil. Several of the mint varieties are doing very well. But some are not. The chocolate mint, strawberry mint, lemon mint, and lime mint are creeping varieties that apparently like partial shade, while the spearmint and peppermint and lemon mint and apple mint all seem to thrive in direct sun. The variegated pineapple mint is somewhere in between; I'm not sure it will be happy anywhere in our yard. I should relocate the creeping mints. I'm thinking about trying to put a few of them behind the children's garden, where we hope to eventually put some raspberry plants. That area gets partial shade.

Joy found some plastic stakes with snap-in holders for boards, used to form garden beds, and had some boards cut to size, so I assembled a third bed for greens, along the back of the house. The plastic stakes were almost impossible to drive into the soil in our yard, which is an extremely dense mix of clay, pieces of brick, gravel, and even chunks of concrete (back when the house was built here in the late 1960s, the yard must have been filled in with this stuff, probably left over from a construction site). Even Grace's heavy steel tulip planter can barely penetrate the soil. What I had to do was use the tulip planter to dig up a bit at a time, then pour water in to soften up the clay, then continue to deepen the hole bit by bit, removing brick pieces, rocks, and chunks of concrete as possible, until I had quite a deep pit. Then I had to put the stakes in, and pack the clay back in around the stake.

This didn't actually work well to keep the stakes in place, so Joy also picked up some rebar stakes, and at my request Grace picked up a four-pound sledgehammer. So I got to spend some quality time driving stakes into the ground with a sledgehammer. Four pounds may not sound like a lot, but for someone with a mostly-sedentary job, it's a lot. I loved the opportunity to feel like a steel-driving man, although my wrist is regretting it today. I mused on Facebook that I would love my software engineering work more, if it involved occasionally using a sledgehammer. (On the other hand, perhaps it's best that my workplace is free of sledgehammers. How many times would I have been tempted to use one on a recalcitrant computer?)

## A Fight at the Opera — a Food Fight!

Last night we watched the Metropolitan Opera's live stream of *Hänsel und Gretel*, an opera by Engelbert Humperdinck. (Yes, I had to look it up — the English pop singer, born in 1956, took his stage name from the German composer, born in 1854). We chose this opera because it was targeted, more-or-less, at a young audience, and because the description made it sound entertaining. It's still very difficult to actually *watch* an opera with the kids. Surly teen insisted on voicing surly teen's displeasure and horror at this atrocity, loudly and repeatedly. Screamy toddler screamed her way through dinner and into the opera. Wandering baby wandered and got into things. But we managed to get through it without too many interruptions. The fact that it is quite a short opera, only about two hours, helped a lot.

*Hänsel und Gretel* was performed in English translation, with a contemporary (but surreal!) staging. It's funny, but it really takes the "grim" in brothers Grimm very seriously, and adds some bizarre and disturbing psychosexual imagery. The children rummage through the forest looking for berries, by rifling through the pockets of the trees, who appear as people, with branches for heads. In a wonderful dream sequence, a troupe of chefs with enormous heads slowly place covered platters onto a long table, directed by a maître d' in a tuxedo, with a giant fish's head. Simultaneously, the chefs lift the covers of the platters, revealing delicious-looking desserts. It's a gorgeous and surreal moment.

Later, when the children meet the witch, they stand on stage in front of a giant painting of a mouth, which as Grace pointed out was painted so as to almost resemble a womb and cervix. A giant cake appeared at the opening of the mouth, with a gigantic pink tongue. Later, the witch's cottage looks like some kind of German industrial building, with concrete block, utility lights, oversized kitchen equipment, and a poster (in German) demonstrating how to apply the Heimlich maneuver in case of choking. Scattered around this enormous kitchen are dolls that appear to be the corpses of roasted children. We're told that the witch's oven has magically turned them into gingerbread. At one point, Gretel smears chocolate icing on Hänsel's face, creating a Hitler-style mustache. This, I feel, was taking the imagery just a bit too far. What was the actual point of invoking Auschwitz in *Hänsel und Gretel*? And while the children are eventually restored from gingerbread back to living, breathing children by magic, the witch... is not. If you've ever seen Peter Greenaway's 1989 film *The Cook, the Thief, His Wife, and Her Lover*, you'll have some idea how the final scene plays out. Honestly, I was glad that the younger kids had wandered away by that point.

My feelings about the staging and sets are mixed. But the singing was gorgeous, and I found myself enjoying the music a great deal. The score was deeper, more evocative, and more complex than I had expected. And I don't think I will ever forget the tree people, the chefs, and the incredible fish costume, though.

## Saturday

### ***Tron* (1982 Film) and *Tron: Legacy* (2010 Film)**

We continue to have a lot of difficulty getting through our days and finding time to watch a TV show or movie for entertainment occasionally, but this week I showed the kids the original *Tron*, and last night we watched the first half of *Tron: Legacy*.

*Tron* remains an interesting film in several ways. It was ground-breaking in its use of computer graphics — graphics which look laughably terrible now, but I still find them endearing and interesting. But the plot and character development is relatively simplistic, and it's hard to stay interested over the course of the movie, parts of which feel quite slow.

*Tron: Legacy* looks a lot prettier in many ways, but the dumb sexism, present occasionally in the original, is even more blatant, and the plot is extremely predictable, filled with callbacks to the first film, as well as very obvious references to other films, including the *Star Wars* films and *2001: A Space Odyssey*. But as this review describes, *Tron: Legacy* is interesting for its consistent *aesthetic*, with a soundtrack by Daft Punk and imagery, now dated, that is impressively consistent:

...the virtual world is quite possibly the most beautiful set I have ever seen in a movie. There are batons and disks and light-cycles (neon

motorbikes!) and very cool flying thingies. I was trying hard not to blink, lest I miss any of the transitions of handheld batons to the light-cycles. These deserved a separate ovation on their own.

Sometimes, “dumb, but pretty” can be enough.

## Back to Work

My time at home is running short. On Monday morning I will go back to the office. My feelings about this are very mixed. There’s no doubt that despite the terrible ongoing tragedy of this pandemic — and I don’t think we’ve really even hit the halfway point, as far as the count of people who will eventually die from this virus — the opportunity to stay at home, and work on personal projects, and spend more time with my family, has been a great thing for me. I am physically quite a bit healthier than I was in March. I’ve lost unwanted weight, and I’m stronger, because some of the garden work, such as shoveling, and building raised beds, is quite a workout. I’m a bit sunburned, which is not ideal, but it isn’t too bad. The many, many bug bites either have healed, or will heal.

Again, I’m grateful that I have been able to stay at home without going bankrupt or facing the loss of our home or been unable to feed my family. Many, many people are not so fortunate. But of course that’s the root of my anxieties about the future. With no plan for *everyone*, we have guaranteed the continuation of savage inequalities, and that reality is going to bite us all very, very hard.

My mental state is a bit more difficult to assess. I have cut back my consumption of news and opinion — especially opinion, pretty dramatically, especially after the first month of our lockdown, when I realized that following the media closely wasn’t doing anything good for me. I’ve managed to have only a small and occasional presence on Facebook. I’m more active on Twitter, but recently, outside of sharing articles and posting an occasional snarky reply, most of my posts have been about gardening, which I consider to be a form of community-building and anti-fascism that I am very happy to once again participate in. But there’s no denying that the kids are stressed out and frustrated and sad, and I am, too.

I actually enjoy the work that I do — it’s one of the reasons I’ve been able to stay mostly-employed as a software engineer for thirty years. I *like* programming and debugging and low-level debugging that would drive most people absolutely crazy. I’ve always been suited for this kind of obsessively detail-oriented work. So, when I am able to work away on a project and get something shipped out that people use, I’m quite happy about it. I especially love it when I get to work with a customer who has a bug or feature request and I can go ahead and fix the bug or get the feature working and send the customer an update. That’s something that I can do as a bigger-sized fish in a smaller-sized pond, at the Ann Arbor Ultrafast Optoelectronics division of Thorlabs. Writing code for an automaker, or a medical device manufacturer, or something like that, would

not be such a hands-on experience and I'd be a guppy in an ocean, despite my experience. So, in many ways I'm looking forward to getting back to work on the projects that I had to abruptly stop working on in March.

I'll be returning to a workplace where my employer has implemented the basic guidelines for limiting the likelihood of COVID-19 transmission. What that looks like in practice, I'm a bit unclear on. I'm told that they are no longer having meetings with people sitting around tables, and if they have in-person meetings, people maintain physical distance, and wear masks. That's good, but I'm just not certain how safe it is possible to be in an office environment. I'm told the engineers aren't sharing pizza and soda around a table, but they are sharing takeout meals where everyone gets their own meal in a container and they sit farther apart, but still in the same room, and eat. And of course people on the same floor still need to share a restroom, and do share (to some extent) a small kitchen and refrigerator.

I think I will be encouraged to work at home when possible, but that "when possible" is kind of a slippery set of words. I don't think there will be a sense of urgency about it, and I think there probably should be. So I will be pushing to be in the office only when I actually need to be in the office, and I think I have *some* clout and discretion, but only *some*.

It's an ironic comfort to see that my employer is now implementing some of the recommendations I was anxiously suggesting to management back in February.

I'm probably going to transition from being a showers-before-work guy to a showers-after-work guy. I'll get up, brush my teeth, drink my coffee, and go in to the office with my face mask and "virus clothes" — a long-sleeved outer shirt (yes, even in July) and "virus shoes," a designated pair that will stay in the car, and I'll take these things off when I come in the door, and jump in the shower.

Besides my safety and the safety of people around me, I'm also concerned that I simply won't be able to concentrate well on my work, in an environment that feels unsafe.

When I had to start working from home March 16th, I had not had very much notice that I was going to be working from home, and so my office/studio room was a horrible mess. It's still a bit messy, but I've made quite a bit of progress organizing it. I can now sit down at one desk and turn on a light and do soldering work, or plunk down a laptop and do coding work, without having to move aside too many things. I can even see the floor in here. Well, parts of it, at least.

Here in our bubble, we've been discussing "opening up" — what we feel safe to do, and when, and how. And the truth is that not much has changed, and in some ways we feel that things have gotten more dangerous.

The *country* doesn't feel ready to end safety measures, which early on were politicized. And that politicization has only gotten worse.

I'm anticipating a high likelihood of confrontation — not that I will confront

people, but that people will confront *me*, and try to compromise my safety, in a way that I can't back away from.

I ordered some pepper spray dispensers to carry with me when I have to go into a public place. I never, ever want to have to use one, but I also want one in my pocket. So that's where my head's at.

## Readings

Per the Detroit News,

...researchers found that states that were more successful at keeping people at home were also more successful at reducing the spread of COVID-19. And mobility decreased more in Michigan under Gov. Gretchen Whitmer's stay-home orders than in any other Great Lakes states — or most states in the United States, according to the study.

I do think that's true, although I *also* think that Whitmer could have done a better job, early on, and implementing lock-down orders even a week earlier might have drastically reduced Michigan's death count. And let's not celebrate just yet:

The federal Centers for Disease Control and Prevention reported 1,994,283 confirmed cases of COVID-19 in the U.S. through Thursday, with 112,967 deaths.

The British study estimated that about 4.1% of Americans had been infected through May 20 and predicted many more people will die as the economy opens up.

“We predict that deaths over the next two-month period could exceed current cumulative deaths by greater than two-fold, if the relationship between mobility and transmission remains unchanged,” the authors wrote.

“Our results suggest that factors modulating transmission such as rapid testing, contact tracing and behavioral precautions are crucial to offset the rise of transmission associated with loosening of social distancing.”

MLive posted an article that ranks the risk of various activities:

...now that some public places are reopening, individuals must decide for themselves which ones to continue to avoid and which ones pose little risk of spreading the virus.

As the article says, outdoor activities are generally safer. So we would consider some sorts of outdoor socializing, although we don't think it is safe to eat shared

food at a table with other people, even outdoors. In the article, they rank activities from most risky to least, with bars and large concerts in the “most risky” category, through churches and buffets, only slightly less risky, if at all, and then through schools, restaurants, casinos, playgrounds, hair salons, dinner parties, airplanes, backyard barbecues, malls, beaches, bowling, and down to offices — offices are ranked four out of ten:

Unlike shops and restaurants, offices are lower risk because employers can better enforce the rules of distancing and masking.

The experts say it’s still safer to work from home, though, since being around people for eight or 10 hours increases risk.

Even lower than that are eating outdoors at a restaurant, getting groceries (ranked three out of ten, but highly dependent on whether mask wearing is happening), down to golfing and getting takeout food from a restaurant (especially with touchless payment and curbside pickup, ranked one out of ten).

Regarding mask-wearing in retail stores, MLive posted another article about the dilemma faced by store owners:

Some people are furious that stores require them to wear a mask.

Others are furious that most stores aren’t strictly enforcing their mask policy.

I’m in the second camp, and actually think retailers should take a tough stand, even to the point of throwing out customers, but I also have a lot of sympathy for cashiers and other store workers — it isn’t fair to ask them to be bouncers, and I am not feeling very good about the idea of stores hiring security guards, such as off-duty police officers, because that doesn’t tend to go well.

Also per MLive,

Roughly two-thirds of Michigan shoppers are wearing masks inside retail stores, based on a MLive count at 37 stores across the state.

That’s not good enough. Grace and I have recently seen mask-wearing at stores such as Target dropping dramatically, and groups of people barreling around, being their usual, talkative, boisterous selves, and freely ignoring physical distancing guidelines.

Meanwhile, it’s pretty obvious what is happening — our brains are *tired* of the extra anxiety and distraction and — let’s call it what it is — additional physical and emotional *labor* that this situation calls for. So we have “quarantine fatigue,” as CNN puts it:

If you’ve found you’re no longer disinfecting your hands as often or becoming more lenient toward unnecessary trips outside, you’re not alone. This unintentional phenomenon is “caution fatigue” — and you have your brain to blame.

You were likely vigilant at the pandemic’s outset, consistently keeping up with ways to ensure you didn’t get infected with the coronavirus or infect others. The threat was new and urgent to your brain. And driven by the human instinct for self-preservation, fresh fear motivated you to eagerly adhere to recommended safety precautions.

This is also mediated by the lack of clear social consensus. States are “opening up,” whether they are ready or not — and they aren’t. And while we might be mentally done with the virus, the virus isn’t done with us:

...the number of Covid-19 hospitalizations since Memorial Day has gone up in at least a dozen states: Alaska, Arkansas, Arizona, California, Kentucky, Mississippi, Montana, North Carolina, Oregon, South Carolina, Texas and Utah.

We’re headed for surges in states that have “reopened,” and a “second wave,” likely hitting at the end of summer.

Meanwhile, we are contending with other kinds of fatigue, including news fatigue. There is a deep desire, not surprising, to return to some sort of normalcy, or status quo, to life before both the pandemic and the murder of George Floyd and the start of the recent wave of protests and the police riots. John Oliver’s episode posted June 7th is instructive and impressive.

There’s no going back. Trying to go back leads only to stagnation and death. We need to grab our shovels and build the world, again.

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