

The Longest Day

Paul R. Potts

21 June 2020

Tuesday

Back in the Saddle

So, yesterday morning I went back to work, after sleeping on Sunday night in the tent with Merry and Pippin. It got surprisingly cold, so despite the fact that everyone had blankets, in the middle of the night I woke up to find both boys piled next to me for warmth, which was funny and sweet. I wrapped all of us up in my blanket and we managed to get back to sleep for another hour or two, although when I sleep outside like this, the light and sound wakes me up *very* early. I was up about five and not able to get back to sleep. There's also the minor issue that as a man with a 52-year-old prostate, I can't sleep through the night without getting up to pee anyway. So at about 6:30, I extricated myself from the blanket and went inside, and managed to sleep another hour or so in my own bed. Grace made me a bulletproof tea. That's heresy, I know, but I've been reducing my caffeine a little because if I'm already nervous about things, my usual dose is too high.

I was nervous about the prospect of going into an office again. However, it is about as low-key as an office can get. There's a lot of physical distance between me and the other people here. I've been bringing in a cooler with lunch food and eating at my desk.

We've moved meetings, even between people who are in the building, online. Today I had a meeting with several of my colleagues using Microsoft Teams. That made it easy to mark up a document together. Teams is a big, bloated application and getting it up and running on my over-burdened laptop took over an hour, with issue after issue, but eventually I got it going.

Last week I had a request for help from one of our other engineers, so I had gotten out my work laptop and tried to get it going, for the first time in almost three months. It wouldn't boot. The Windows rescue disc wouldn't fix it. But the hard drive seemed to be OK — if I booted it up with a Linux-based boot disc, I could still see all my files, and they seemed to be intact. So I eventually wound up trying to use an open-source boot rescue tool, and that got it booting

long enough to get the file for my co-worker. Then I shut it down, because until yesterday, I wasn't getting paid to work on it. I did want to verify that I could get it booting, though, because otherwise I was going to have to ask my manager to get me some urgent IT help, so they could have a working computer for me when I started.

"Working" is relative. I was unable to open a project that I had built a few years ago with Visual Studio, because of broken compatibility between versions. So I tried to install a later version. That was a disaster and it's now 9:25 p.m. and I'm still at work, and I've been trying to get Visual Studio up and running since about 1 p.m. It's an unbelievably bloated piece of software; the installer takes nearly an hour to run, if everything goes right, and it didn't. Installing it for basic development in C++ installs 321 packages. A number of them seemed to conflict with old packages, which couldn't be removed, leading to an entire afternoon and evening spent searching message boards for other people having similar problems and groping for solutions.

Using several different ad hoc procedures and shady-looking executables, I think I've just about gotten it completely installed. It would have been far faster to just start with a fresh installation of Windows on a freshly-erased hard drive, which is why people often do just that. But I have so many specialized applications, specially configured, on this one. If possible I will start setting up a new machine and get things working on it one at a time, and gradually retire this one.

Struggling with Windows configuration issues always reminds me of how much I like simplicity in computer systems and how much I don't like operating systems and programs and applications and languages that are designed instead to create whole ecosystems of for-profit consulting. I posted on Twitter:

Burn down the OS, the applications, the APIs, the build tools, the languages, the BIOS, the ISA, and the whole legacy and let's start over with something simpler.

I don't agree with Chuck Moore about everything, but I still find his principled designs to be absolutely inspiring. At this point, just about anything would be "something simpler."

About Last Night

I got home last night to find that the house was trashed, Grace was demoralized and struggling to get some correspondence done, and the kids were clustered around the computer. We had some mail and packages to deal with. I was excited to receive a set of movies from an eBay seller — a boxed set called *Zatoichi: The Blind Swordsman*, from The Criterion Collection.

***Zatoichi: The Blind Swordsman* (Criterion Collection Boxed Set)**

This set contains twenty-five of the Samurai films starring Shintaro Katsu as the protagonist Ichi, produced between 1962 and 1973, with beautiful artwork and a small book. Scroll down, on that web page, to see a trailer for the whole set. The set is out of print so I was happy to get my hands on a copy. It will have a special place in my collection alongside the collection of Godzilla films.

These films are set in the Japan of the 1840s. They are very much genre pieces, with quite similar stories, although the various directors who worked on them often found ways to make them interesting and fresh. I managed to watch parts, but only parts, of the first one last night. They are all in Japanese with subtitles, not dubbed, which makes it difficult for the younger kids to watch them. The first two are in black and white. I expected the first film, called *The Tale of Zatoichi*, to be more action-oriented. I was surprised to find that the fight scenes were short and dramatic, and the film really is more of a character-centered drama. I was favorably impressed by the acting and the dialogue. The cinematography is also very strong, and makes the film look a lot like classic *noir* crime dramas. The transfer is about as clean and clear as one could hope for, given the age of the film. The opening minutes appear quite damaged, just like the opening minutes of the original *Godzilla* are damaged, but the rest of the film is nicely restored.

These 25 films aren't the totality of Shintaro Katsu's work as Ichi. There was a TV series, too, and a handful of later movies, including at least one starring a different actor. I'm not sure if the TV series is any good. Some of these 25 probably aren't all that good. There were hundreds of Samurai films produced in Japan, as well as a ton of martial arts films. I don't know a lot about them. I suspect that the American series *Kung Fu* represented an attempt to create an Americanized version of two of the best sub-genres: stories featuring the legendary Shaolin temple, and stories about a wandering [*rōnin*] warrior who rights wrongs and can't stay in one place.

I am not going to attempt to watch all 25 of these films, at least not anytime soon, and certainly not back-to-back, but I want to pick a few of the more interesting films. If you'd like to read a bit about the films and the character, this essay by Geoffrey O'Brien does a nice job of introducing the series, and there's also a video essay by Tony Rayns that describes the historical period a bit.

I'd give a lot for a chance to watch one of these all the way through with Grace and the older kids, without interruptions. But that just probably isn't going to be available to me anytime soon.

While I did enjoy watching parts of the first film, I had to put it up on the shelf. The rest of the evening didn't go very well. I was able to water the plants. We ate late, and I really just wanted to go to bed. Grace made a nice dinner, but

Benjamin threw a tantrum about eating a tablespoon of chicken with lemon sauce. The babies kept us up far too late, especially given that I had gotten a poor night's sleep on Sunday night. It was a pretty awful evening, honestly.

It's after 10 p.m. now and it looks like I've patched up my Windows system enough that the installer was able to finish successfully, so I'm going to go home!

Friday

The work week has gone fast, as they tend to. I'm still getting adjusted to the changes in the office and getting back on top of the projects I was working on. On Thursday afternoon, there was a severe electrical brown-out, and so there wasn't much I could do. After wondering for a while if the power was going to stabilize, I just shut down computers and power strips, sent a text message to my boss, and went home. We're in a strange limbo in the office, eating at our desks, staying physically distant, and with many of us at home. I will probably arrange some days at home starting next week.

We've received a payment from our insurance company, which will cover most of the garage repair, although the accounting is a bit complicated; we have a thousand-dollar deductible, the actual air conditioning system repair will not be covered by our policy, and they withhold some of the money until the work is completed. Right now we are trying to schedule the work with the restoration company. The rental for the pods was only paid through the end of the month, so we are hoping that this can be all finished by the end of the month. We'd like to have usable space in our driveway and garage again.

Wednesday night, we had a terrific meal. Grace made garlic scape pesto from the garlic scapes that arrived as part of our CSA share, from our friends the Martins. Because several of the kids don't tolerate cheese well, she used nutritional yeast (which we call "nooch") instead. I had picked a whole pile of sage leaves from the plants in the kitchen garden, so she fried them in lard from an heirloom pig raised by the Martins. Then we fried a bag of Shishito peppers. The pesto was good, but I did not want to eat a lot of pasta, so for me the highlight of the meal was just popping fried Shishito peppers in my mouth, dusted with salt, one at a time, along with the crumbly, crispy fried sage leaves, and washing the peppers down with an IPA. It was a delightful meal for the approaching end of spring and start of summer.

I haven't been able to do a lot in the garden this week, but I have done a little. I have been able to water and weed and help take care of the plants briefly before work and after work (amid swarms of bloodthirsty mosquitoes — they were even biting me on my forehead). Grace and I managed to have a chat with Joy last night and she showed us the garden projects that she is working on. There's so much! It's not going to feed us all our calories this year, but between the tomatoes, cucumbers, greens, peppers, corn, greens, and a number of other plants that are on their way, and the huge variety of herbs, it's already

very satisfying. Several days this week I had in my lunch greens (sorrel, arugula, nasturtium leaves, and nasturtium flowers) to use in wrap sandwiches, along with radishes from our CSA share, and walking onions chopped into tuna salad, and it's been great.

As I walk around and inspect the plants and water them, I'm always snacking on the herbs — stevia, sage leaves, basil leaves, and mint leaves. Last night I ate something I've never tasted before — the flowers from borage plants. You can eat the leaves, although they are hard to eat unless you get them very early, because they are covered with spiky hairs, and so we haven't done much with them. But the flowers attract bees, and taste like cucumber, so they can be thrown right onto a salad. I love edible flowers. We will save some of the flowers to let them go to seed, though, because the plant might come back from seed next year, and we'd like to have it in our kitchen garden. Ideally, if you want borage flowers, you should sow seeds every few weeks, so that you will have plants flowering all summer, but I'm not sure if we are that ambitious yet — and it grows very large, so the kitchen garden bed may not be the right place for it next year.

Some plants will likely survive and some may return from seed, and some may not survive. For example, the variegated sage plants are more delicate than the regular gray and purple sage varieties, so they are less likely to make it through the winter. The plants that return can stay where they are, and we'll fill in the remaining spaces with new plants next spring. Joy and Grace have collectively a lot more gardening experience than I do, although I'm learning what I can as we go along; my approach to the herbs was, initially, "just plant a whole bunch of stuff and see what happens." I didn't know much at all about their growing habits. For example, I love the taste of chervil, but we only put one plant in the ground, and it is already getting too hot and sunny for it to thrive, so I want to try to use a bunch of it this weekend. Next year, maybe I can try either planting a number of chervil plants from seed or from starts, in a slightly shadier spot, creating a small bed of chervil so we have more to use in cooking, as long as the plants last. And next year, some of the perennial herbs, at least the ones that make it through the winter, should be better-established and more productive. I'm really looking forward to watching how the garden projects progress over this growing season and in future years.

IKEA

I'm not sure if I've written about the IKEA order or not, but back on May 6th I placed an order for several bookshelves to use in the basement. IKEA had shut down their stores and would not even do curbside pickup, but only delivery. And these deliveries were going to take a long time — after I placed the order, I was sent an e-mail with the estimated delivery date of over a month out, on June 12th. Somehow I initially read that as May 12th, which seemed reasonable. It was a little while before I realized that they were actually telling me it would take over five weeks to get my order.

When I realized that, started looking into what it would take to have some custom bookshelves built, and while I didn't have a complete plan yet, I decided to cancel the order. But there seemed to be no way to get in touch with anyone at IKEA. Calling would just send me to a recorded message; they did not provide an option to talk to a person at all. The only way to contact them was to send a message through the web site. The site declared that the delivery charge was not refundable even if the order was canceled.

I felt that it was a pretty unreasonable, and possibly illegal, policy to charge people a delivery fee for a canceled order that would not even be shipped for a month, so I decided to just ask my bank to take care of disputing this with IKEA. They refunded me the whole amount of my order and I left it to them to try to get in touch with the incommunicado IKEA.

On June 6th I was surprised to hear that IKEA had still not gotten the message, when I started receiving a series of e-mails about how my order had been picked and was still scheduled for delivery on June 12th. I went back to their web site and attempted to cancel the order again. I called. It still wasn't possible to speak to a person. I sent a direct message to IKEA customer service on Twitter. I got no response to any of this. Finally the day before it was supposed to be deliveries, I started getting automated messages from the delivery company letting me know about the impending delivery. They had a number I could call. So I sat on hold for over an hour with the delivery company but eventually did get to speak to a person, and told them I had been trying to cancel the order for over a month, and had already been reimbursed by my bank. They said something about how a lot of customers had told them similar stories, and that they would bounce the shipment back to IKEA. So they did not show up at our house.

Apparently this finally got the attention of someone at IKEA because on Wednesday, I received a "merchandise return" credit from IKEA. It was missing the delivery fee. But, strangely, it was not for the amount of the charge minus the delivery fee, but a slightly different number.

So, I've now been reimbursed twice for the bookcases, once by my bank and once by IKEA.

I called my bank today and told them about this reimbursement, and that they should take it from my account to cover most of what they reimbursed me a month ago when I disputed the charge.

I'm happy that I've been reimbursed, but dealing with this has cost a lot of my time, and it is time I did not want to give up in order to deal with their failures. IKEA is a company that has a highly optimized supply chain, like meat-packing plants. This makes them very "lean" and allows them to keep prices low, but also means there is no "give" when anything goes wrong. It seems to me that they could have closed their warehouse stores to the public, but moved to no-touch pickup at the warehouse stores. But they did not. They switched entirely to

deliveries, involving third-party delivery companies. I'm not sure why they did that. It's been a disaster, from what I can see on various social media sites.

If companies can learn any lessons at all from the pandemic, I hope that one of them is that being overly "lean" is the opposite of being robust in the face of unforeseen challenges.

But at least they have shared their support for Black Lives Matter.

Sunday

The Longest Day

Yesterday was the longest day of the year, and it felt like it. I wound up spending a large part of the day outside. I slathered up with SPF 50 sunblock and put on my wide-brimmed canvas hat. I manage to avoid sunburn, except on my scalp. Apparently the hat, which looks like it would completely block sun, including UV light, really doesn't. I need a different kind of hat for gardening.

I worked on various things in the garden projects with Grace. We planted a blueberry bush along with the existing raspberry and mint plants in the bed right along one wall of the house. I tried to dig a deep hole for it but encountered the same terrible soil that exists all around our house — beneath a very thin layer of soil that was added when landscaping was first put in, the soil isn't really soil at all but extremely dense clay, perhaps with a little sand, and also full of rocks and fragments of bricks and chunks of concrete. This is why we've been doing so much in raised beds. In the clay, there's almost no drainage at all. I used a hose to fill the hole, which would soften the clay a bit, then I'd dig out a bit more. I repeated this process a number of times and eventually got a hole that was deep enough for the blueberry bush root ball, but the soil conditions are really not ideal.

The previous owner just put down strips of landscaping fabric and dumped some soil and wood chips on top, and planted hosta and boxwoods on top. They didn't have deep roots, so we were able to tear them out fairly easily. One of our friends took the hosta plants — incredibly heavy to move, by the way — for a shady spot on her property.

We've added more soil and more wood chips to build up the bed a bit, and an edge of gravel against the wall of the house itself, but really it could use a lot more soil — it really needs to be built up several feet. Ideally we would dig down and take out more of the clay, too, but I don't even know how to do that. So, it will probably stay like this for the next year. Maybe next spring we could do a more ambitious project involving taking out the plants, improving the garden bed, and putting them back in.

Grace and I took off the protective netting on one of the beds on the south side of the house and tried to figure out what to do with it. We planted that bed with

pea shoots and radishes. They have grown like crazy, but the plants have not grown the way we hoped. We knew it was partly shaded, close to a wall of trees, and that was fine for delicate greens, but apparently it gets so little sun that the plants are all extremely “leggy” and the radishes are really only scrawny greens, with a red part of the stem that would normally swell up into the bulb-shaped radish itself. So we are scratching our heads a bit wondering what to do. Should we try leaving it longer? Should we just harvest everything in there now and eat them as shoots and sprouts, and try putting in some different plants that are even more shade-tolerant? We’re not sure. The bed next to it, planted with collards and salad greens, also isn’t producing anything worth harvesting. Joy recently filled a third bed there with already-well-established plants including pak choy, kale, and collards and they look fine, but it’s not yet clear if they will grow well in that spot.

We could plant fiddlehead ferns, but we already have them in a shaded bed in the front yard. And one of these three beds is quite tall, with deep soil, so would be ideal for plants that send down deep roots. But I’m not sure if anything will thrive there. At some point we could probably do a project to thin and prune some of the trees that are shading the south side of the house so heavily, but that is beyond what we can do this year.

I spent much of the day doing fussy “detail” work in the kitchen garden bed and the beds around it. I got the cucumbers tied to the pyramid of stakes Grace had put in the bed, moving them slightly and adding a couple of additional stakes to give them more places to grab and climb. I dead-headed flowers and loosened up the soil and mulch, gave some plants extra water right into their roots, and cut back many, many herb plants to encourage them to grow bushier. As a result we’ve got heaps of herbs — a whole heap of sprigs of different kinds of mint, basil, thyme, parsley, oreganos, chervil, tarragon, cilantro, and others. Last night for dinner we had Yukon Gold potatoes with butter, dill, chives, and sour cream, and roasted whole bass topped with a delicate sauce made by blending olive oil, butter, tarragon, and chervil. It was delicious! And this morning, for Father’s Day, Grace made me a spinach omelette topped with more of the tarragon and chervil sauce.

It was mostly a good day. The kids dithered and bickered and fought and wasted most of the day fighting over getting their kitchen cleanup chores done. And so there were things Grace and I had hoped to do, but didn’t get to do. I was planning to sleep in the tent with the boys again, but since we didn’t eat dinner until almost 10 p.m., there just wasn’t time. Instead I put on a movie the kids hadn’t seen, a movie arguably not really appropriate for kids due to language, but which Joshua and Sam laughed very hard at nonetheless — *This is Spinal Tap* (1984). It’s still funny, although world it shows now appears to be filled with antiques. I’ve seen it several times, of course, but not for quite a few years, and I found jokes in it that were new to me. The member of the Tap that I identify with most is actually Harry Shearer. His character, the bass player Derek Smalls, is a decent bass player who just wants to be part of the

band. He's not argumentative, and he mostly just watches, bemused, as the two competing band founders bicker and vie for attention both on and off the stage. He describes himself as "lukewarm water" in between their "fire" and "ice," and always wants to do what it takes to keep the show going, no matter how ridiculous things have gotten. I think a lot of musicians could learn a lot from Derek Smalls.

In addition, it was Shearer who eventually sued for royalties:

Shearer claimed that he and the other co-stars of the film received only \$179 for sales of merchandise and music over the prior three decades.

The creators eventually achieved a victory of a sort; they received a settlement, and they got back the rights to the music, and the rights to play the characters that they created without having to get permission from a copyright holder.

I'm going to wind it up there today — Grace and I have errands to run, and there's always more work to do in the gardens. If I can manage, I will try this evening to watch the Metropolitan Opera's live stream of Philip Glass's opera *Satyagraha*. Stay safe, and keep your masks on!

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!