

With Trembling Hands

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Thursday

I'm back in work mode, and once again working long hours, not getting enough sleep, and trying to stay as safe as I can. I wasn't really able to watch the Metropolitan Opera's stream of *Satyagraha* with Grace. Elanor decided to throw some kind of screaming fit shortly after we started the stream. I just have to sigh and take a deep breath and try to have patience, and faith that at some point, the kids will have all grown into people who are able to either let their parents watch an opera or film without disrupting it, or even watch it with them.

It's too bad, because while I've listened to the Sony recording of this opera several times and enjoy it, I was curious about the staging. What I saw — the first fifteen minutes or so — looked impressive. This opera is quite abstract, with little physical action taking place in linear time. Glass's three operas: *Einstein on the Beach*, *Satyagraha*, and *Akhmaten*, seem to get progressively closer to operas with traditional staging, although they don't quite get there. *Einstein* is really a series of hypnotic, evocative songs. *Akhmaten* doesn't really have dialogue and action as much as it has static set pieces, although some things do happen that can be represented by actions on stage, such as entrances, processions, exits, and murders. *Satyagraha* seems to be somewhere in between, as it tells more of a story about ideas moving through time than people interacting.

Still, I'd like to have a DVD or Blu-ray of this opera as it was staged at the Met. There doesn't seem to be one, except for a very scarce and expensive 2001 DVD release.

I just checked the schedule, and it looks like I missed the chance to see another opera I wanted to see, *Doctor Atomic* by John Adams.

The Metropolitan Opera has its own streaming service, for \$15 a month. I'm tempted to subscribe to watch some of the available streams, but I fear that given the reality of our lives now, I'd never really get to use the service. And it doesn't have everything they've been streaming recently — *Satyagraha* isn't available (but *Doctor Atomic* is). It's the same situation as with the Criterion channel — so much to watch, so little ability to watch any of it uninterrupted,

and things I want to watch would likely come and go before I could manage to watch them.

There are lots of shows I'd like to see, and many of them are *only* available on streaming services now, and there may never be a DVD or Blu-ray available. For example, I'd really like to watch *Tales from the Loop*, and I'd like to watch *Star Trek: Picard*. But *Tales from the Loop* is streaming from Amazon, and no way in hell will I support Amazon. And *Star Trek: Picard* is streaming from CBS All Access. They've already pissed me off by announcing that *Picard* was available to watch for people who signed up for a free trial, and claiming they wouldn't bill me until the trial period ended — but then they immediately billed me. So I canceled the service before ever getting to watch a single episode.

I also really don't want to support this model of multiple streaming services. Not only are people paying as much or more for multiple streaming services than they were for cable, but they now have multiple companies attached to their computers or smart televisions and bank accounts, each one collecting as much personal information as possible. And streaming services are far from carbon neutral — the infrastructure to provide all this data on demand is costly, and the image and sound quality is often far from what I'd prefer, especially since bandwidth is far from evenly distributed. And so I continue to decorate the walls of my own silo with DVD and Blu-ray discs that I've bought, often used, often from eBay.

I guess it's not much different than curating our home library with books that I've painstakingly tracked down, rather than just buying what the booksellers have on display.

Which reminds me. I haven't been inside a bookstore of any kind since, I think, February. I've been considering going into Barnes and Noble in July, if they hold their annual Criterion Collection sale. Barnes and Noble stores are large and open and have good ventilation. But I might just order films from their web site instead. They have free shipping.

The idea of going into smaller, more intimate, cozy bookstores does not seem safe to me now, much as I'd like to support independently owned stores such as Nicola's Books. They are doing curbside pickup and will ship, but their web site is not set up for browsing books in stock, and that's often how I've found books that I didn't know about, but wound up enjoying a great deal. But if I wind up wanting a known in-print book, I will see if Nicola's can get a copy for me.

Last night Grace and I met at Costco for our regular grocery trip. We've been going every three weeks. (I'd like to be able to use the word "triweekly," but like "biweekly" and bimonthly, it has an ambiguous meaning, so I never use these words).

Costco is still doing a good job keeping customers and staff members safe. The plexiglass barriers are still in place and they are still sanitizing shopping carts. They require mask-wearing. But the customers have lost their focus. People now

barreled right into our personal space, over and over. Several times, while Grace was looking at items on the shelves, folks would crowd right in next to her to grab something, despite her loud calls of “excuse me!” At one point, a young man was so oblivious to this, and squeezing in so close to her, that I loudly asked her if she wanted me to pepper spray him for her. She said “no thanks, I’ve got my own pepper spray.” He seemed to entirely ignore all this and we let it pass, but I’m not happy about this “new normal.” And this is in a store that enforces mask-wearing, sort of; folks are getting awfully sloppy about whether their masks really cover their nose and mouth.

A Nation of Psychopaths

So, it looks like we’re going to continue to do this pandemic thing the hard way, while the rest of the world looks on in horror:

Europe, where most countries have largely contained the virus (after initial screw-ups), is looking at America with slackjawed horror. The European Union is likely to close its borders to American travelers when it restores some international travel on July 1. Canada will most likely keep its U.S. border mostly closed when the current agreement expires on July 21.

Around the world, it is beginning to sink in how profoundly rotten the United States is. Unless America manages to turn things around, it will slide from the center of the international order to a peripheral, mistrusted basketcase, and it will deserve it.

My employment situation is holding steady for now, but it’s obvious that things in the wider economy are not really going to go well as we proceed into summer and fall. And so I’m proceeding on the assumption that we’re going to need to continue to maintain stockpiles of food, and may even need to expand those stockpiles. Pork products seem to be returning to the stores to a limited extent, but chicken products now seem to be in short supply, and a number of staple items at Costco, such as bags of rice and flour, are still limited to one per customer. And it is still hard to find decent flour.

When the garage repairs are complete, we are planning to hook up at least one freezer. I was looking into “garage ready” freezers, which are designed to tolerate a wide fluctuation in external temperatures. (Regular refrigerators and freezers can get confused operating in an unheated garage; when the ambient temperature is cold but above freezing, they may not come on, and this can result in thawing and refreezing your food, producing freezer burn). General Electric makes a whole line of freezers designed to work well in unheated garages. They seem to be completely sold out and unavailable, as people like us prepare for an extended siege.

The New York Times has an animated feature that shows what we are learning about how COVID-19 spread in the United States undetected during the first

few weeks after it arrived here, and it's horrifying. We now know there was a lot of undetected spreading of the virus in February:

Seattle was just the beginning. In New York City, where officials had found only a single case by March 1, roughly 10,000 infections had spread undetected.

And:

New Yorkers and visitors continued to travel out of the city. More than 5,000 contagious travelers left in the first two weeks of March, estimates suggest.

A few months later, having had no Federal or state leadership to speak of, and having been marinated in conspiracy theories, people are *losing their fucking minds*.

In Florida citizens testified before a committee considering whether to require face masks in public. It proceeded much like I'd expect from a series of paranoid schizophrenics petitioning a committee for release from involuntary commitment in a psychiatric ward.

A total of 52 people had submitted requests to testify for their allotted two minutes each. Only a few spoke in favor of masks, signaling their intent by wearing one when they stepped up to the mic.

The commissioners needed all of a minute to vote unanimously in favor of making masks mandatory in public places. All the talk in opposition of God and the devil's law and inalienable rights and the Constitution and the Holocaust was outweighed by two simple sentences from Alonso that were as clear as sanity itself:

"I wear one to protect you. You wear one to protect me."

That's encouraging, but I don't expect the anti-maskers to go quietly. They've been marinating in their own epistemic bubbles, and many will die insisting that they were right all along, and they are dying because it was God's will.

People are losing their fucking minds.

Recently we had a guy ride his Segway scooter up our long unpaved driveway through the woods and knock, uninvited and unmasked, at our front door. He was selling pest control services. He thought it was OK to solicit like this.

It's not OK.

Honestly, who knows what he was thinking? But it's perhaps not surprising, given the mixed messaging from officials and media at all levels, as well as the simple reality that in the absence of any sort of public financial support, most people have to work to eat and remain housed, no matter what the risk. And many of us have come to believe that this is some sort of a law of nature rather

than the result of collective choices we've made. Again, from the New York Times:

More than 22,000 deaths in the New York City area could have been avoided if the country had started social distancing just one week earlier, Columbia University researchers estimate.

About 36,000 deaths nationwide could have been avoided by early May had social distancing begun earlier, the estimates say.

It's almost impossible to estimate how many will die by the end of the year. But I believe it's important for us to remember that most of those of us who will die or be debilitated by Sars-CoV-2 could have been saved by simple actions taken early on, but we collectively chose not to take those actions.

I'm reminded of a scene from the first episode of the radio Drama *Moon Over Morocco*. Jack Flanders has a conversation with the Comtese Zazeenia about the people of Morocco. It's a bit dated, and a lot racist, but she tells him that because they attribute all fortune and misfortune to the will of Allah, unexpected deaths are not investigated, and:

It is murder. Always, murder.

And the person murdered might be me, or you, or someone you love.

Sunday

I had (and still have) a lot to write about, but the rest of the week just sort of got away from me. So I'm just going to try to finish things up quickly.

I will be working from home tomorrow, and possibly several days this week. Today I spent some time rearranging my office in the basement. I've now got the room split down the middle: along one wall I have two tables, one a hardware workstation and one a software workstation. The hardware workstation has a bench power supply, voltmeters, soldering irons, etc. It's where I assembled the microphone kit, and also where I built some hardware prototypes for Thorlabs last year. My personal computer and all my podcast and music recording and production things are on the opposite wall.

I have to tell the state of Michigan that I've been working for the last few weeks and so I am not claiming unemployment, and they should end my claim. I received my first paycheck on Friday.

I also have to contact Wells Fargo again. I spent several hours waiting on hold on Friday but was never able to talk to a person. A few days ago I received a letter telling me that when Wells Fargo started processing my automatic withdrawals for mortgage payments again, starting July first, the extra amount I had requested they withdraw and apply to the mortgage as a principal-only payment — the way I've done it since my very first mortgage payment — would

not be applied to the mortgage principal, but held until my account is again “current,” which means “until all the paperwork for handling the missed payments is completed,” which I’m told will probably be later in the fall. I’m not at all happy about that — they would be earning interest on that money and my mortgage will be accumulating extra interest that I would have otherwise avoided. So I’m going to insist that they delete the additional withdrawal, and if they can’t, that they cancel the automatic withdrawals.

But to do this, I’ll have to talk to a person.

It’s frustrating, because I thought this was all set up and ready to go, until I got this surprising letter.

The kids broke several things this week. They (meaning Malachi) finally managed to destroy the video monitor they use to watch movies, work on the computer, and play video games. It has been dropped and damaged several times before, but this was the end. It just produces a grim flicker of lines and patches of color.

Elanor had damaged Grace’s laptop last week to the point where it wouldn’t boot. Grace took it to the computer shop on Jackson Road and the gentleman there got it working again, although there was only so much he could do, and it remained in somewhat fragile condition. Grace brought it home on Thursday. We had maintained strick rules — the kids weren’t allowed in the bedroom where we kept the laptop. The bedroom had to remain locked. But while Grace and I were out working in the garden on Thursday night, one of the older kids unlocked the room and left it open, and Elanor went in and did what Elanor does — and she broke it again.

So Grace didn’t have a working laptop, to use for e-mail or Zoom calls for the kids, and I wasn’t prepared to hand over mine and have mine broken. And the kids had no screen to use for Khan Academy work or just to distract the babies with Baby Shark videos. So on Saturday morning, having done what research I could on their web site, Grace and I masked up and went to Best Buy.

We came home with two new low-end Hewlett-Packard laptops and two modestly-sized (by modern standards) monitors, one for upstairs and one for my office. Then I started working on a solution to keep the laptops safe. Well, safer. I had already routed out one of the tall, narrow bookcases in our bedroom with holes through the back to accommodate a whole lot of cables: power cables, Ethernet cables, phone cables, coaxial, etc. I had mounted everything on the top of the bookcase and on the top two shelves, where the babies can’t easily get to it, with cables routed behind the bookshelf where they can’t see them or grab them.

So I extended that idea. On top of the bookcase sat our Wi-fi router. On the top shelf sat our cable modem, a Vonage internet phone box, and a cordless phone master base station. On the next lower shelf sat a power strip with all the little power bricks for these devices. Everything was routed through holes cut through the flimsy cardboard-like backing of the bookcase. These were hidden behind a row of books

So I extended this idea. I took the existing power strip and added a second one, and mounted them both vertically, to the inside walls of the bookcase. I put the three laptop power bricks in there, too, and cable-tied everything up neatly. The second power strip has two 5-volt USB charging ports, so I now have two short USB cables Grace and I can use for charging our phones. On the top shelf, with a metal bookend that Grace wrapped in fabric for me, I created a little spot where three laptops can stand vertically on the top shelf, and their charging cables, bundled up and guided through a series of metal hooks screwed onto the bookcase, hang there at the ready. So we can now stick all three of the laptops up there in a relatively safe spot when we aren't using them, and charge them if necessary.

The two Hewlett-Packard laptops came with a low-end consumer version of Windows 10. It's intrusive, privacy-demolishing garbage. The first thing I did to both of them was wipe the internal solid-state drives and install Ubuntu MATE using a USB flash drive. I chose this particular model of laptop not because it was particularly fast — it isn't, really, but any modern PC laptop is fast enough for e-mail and web-surfing — but because it was cheap, had a long battery life, and had been praised online for excellent Linux support.

The problem is that commodity PCs like this are constantly changing. Parts come and go. Units with the same model number and features may have very different parts. Folks with identically-marked models probably did indeed have great success with Ubuntu MATE. In fact, it worked great when I tested it by booting from the USB flash drive, after installing it onto the hard drive, audio doesn't work at all. No audio devices are recognized at all.

I know it *can* work, because it worked when booting from the flash drive. But something wasn't set up quite right. So I have some troubleshooting to do, and I probably need to beg for help on the message boards. This is unfortunately very, very typical of my experience with Linux. It's not really all that different from the very early distributions — I first used Linux distributions starting about 1995 or so. I used to earn a bit of consulting income on the side getting Linux working for people on their various PCs and laptops.

Everything else seems to work fine — the camera works, video works, Internet access via Wi-fi works. Zoom works. It's just audio that doesn't work.

So, Grace will have to use my laptop for the time being when the kids have Zoom calls. I can live with that. But I spent four or five hours on Saturday working on the audio problem, trying several different distributions of Linux, with no success at all, and that's maddening. And clearly I still have to put some time into it, and probably ask for help on message boards, when there are many things I'd rather do. And the folks on said message boards are often pretty obnoxious about sharing the expertise they wield, so it isn't something I look forward to.

With Trembling Hands

Grace and I are half-watching the Metropolitan Opera's live-stream of *Die Zauberflöte* (The Magic Flute). It's a gorgeous production, with incredibly elaborate and colorful costumes and sets, although I am not paying enough attention to it. But I need to send this out and we need to get on to bed. So I'm going to close with a quick story about my attempt to get one small part of my work life back to "normal," and support a small business.

There's a café on Jackson Road near my office. I used to stop there at least a couple of mornings a week for a coffee. If I had time, I'd get an egg salad sandwich on wheat toast with lettuce and tomato and eat it there. That was my solution to being unable to cook and eat eggs at home, due to Malachi's egg allergy. But I haven't been there since the first week of March.

On Friday morning I was in a rush and didn't manage to make a pot of coffee at home, and decided I wanted to see if they were open and if it seemed safe to get a takeout coffee drink there. They were open. It was just me and the young woman behind the counter. We were both wearing masks. She made me a 3-shot breve (three shots of espresso, with steamed half-and-half) to go. We kept our distance from each other. They had actually placed several tables in front of the counter to keep the customers a bit further from the staff. The drink was hot. I sanitized the outside of the takeout cup, as well as my debit card and my hands, and it seemed about as safe as this sort of transaction can be.

I couldn't see much of her face, but as she was putting together my coffee drink, I couldn't help but notice that her hands were trembling.

I have no idea what her life is like. For all I know this could have been her first day on the job. Maybe the place just reopened. I didn't recognize her; she isn't one of the people who I usually see working there, some of whom I know by name and used to chat with frequently. But whoever she is and whatever her circumstances, I'm assuming she needs this job to earn a living, to pay for her food and housing. It's probably safe to assume she doesn't want to get sick or die for that paycheck, though, or make her friends or family members sick or dead.

And of course the business needs income to stay open. But it struck me that after months of lockdown, she wasn't happy to be there, and I wasn't happy to be there. It wasn't clear that the risks to our health and the health of our friends and families were actually worth this simple transaction. So I won't be going back, at least not until the reported infections and deaths in these counties become negligible. And that may take a long, long time.

Things are going to get worse now. I suspect they will in fact get *much* worse. I think we're headed back into a lockdown, or near-lockdown. Things may go very severely off the rails as the election gets closer. I don't think the protests are going to stop. I think martial law, or a military coup, are both quite within the realm of possibilities.

Many folks seem to be in denial. They may just be fed up, or burned out on the lockdown. Some are actually insisting that wearing masks isn't necessary, sanitizing our hands and surfaces we touch isn't necessary, and maintaining physical distance isn't necessary — and keep in mind, it is safest to do all of the above; that guy in Costco presumably thought that since he had a mask on, it was OK to get close to other shoppers, if he was thinking at all. With all this going on, these folks are making it much *more*, rather than less, dangerous for me to go out into stores or restaurants.

I'm watching the data, such as it is. It's hard to find out exactly what is happening locally. Grace dug into our county's web site and determined that most of the people who died from COVID-19 in our county actually live not in Ann Arbor but in two other ZIP codes — our ZIP code, south of Ypsilanti, and Ypsilanti itself. That's a bit shocking. But it confirms that we've been right to feel nervous when we consider going into a store. Our nervousness about it is justifiable and has helped keep us safe.

Our hands *should* be trembling. Let's do what we can to learn from that, and do as much as we can to stay as safe as we can, even if we are forced into taking risks we might not choose. And let's not lose our fucking minds.

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