

Going to Seed

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09 Aug 2020

Wednesday

Busy week!

On Monday, some workers from Paul Davis Restoration came and finally helped us put everything in the pods back into the garage. They told us the pods were supposed to be picked up on Tuesday.

The Long Tuesday

I took yesterday off work because we had a whole lot of things to do, starting with a dentist appointment for Veronica in Chelsea. So, yesterday was a very long day, but Grace and I got a lot done.

I made it to Chelsea with Veronica by 8:30 a.m., via the intercession of the Juice of the Blessed Bean, and she had her dentist appointment. Her teeth seem to be in pretty good shape. Her wisdom teeth are coming in, producing some discomfort, but it looks like they may come in without problems, which would be great. Grace's came in fine, but I had to have all four removed surgically. Veronica got Grace's big jaw. Joshua got my small jaw. The others aren't so clear yet, and may be somewhere in between.

Ann Arbor Pediatric Dentistry operates an office in Chelsea, in the old Post Office building. They were doing their level best to implement good COVID-19 safety — Veronica had an online health screening the previous day, we both had a health screening when we got there, and they were all masked up, keeping people in their cars in the parking lot until they called them in. However, due to the large number of asymptomatic infections, I'd be lying if I said I felt great about going into doctor or dentist's offices. Temperature screenings seem reassuring but I doubt they are actually very effective at catching infections.

After Veronica and I got home, Grace and I got ready and started a series of errands. No one had shown up to pick up the pods, so we attempted to get in touch with the pod company, to see if they were going to come pick up the empty pods. We spent a quarter-hour on hold, only to find that it was completely useless to call the phone number on the side of the pods; they could not tell us

anything, as we did not have the order number, and were not the people who actually rented the pods. It seemed that they couldn't even look up our address to determine if a request had been received to remove them. So we'll have to try checking in yet again with Paul Davis Restoration.

According to the dates on some photos I took with my phone, the pods were dropped off on June 2nd. We've had the pods in our driveway for 64 days. Loading the pods, tearing open the ceiling, drying it out, repairing the air-conditioning system, repairing the garage ceiling, and unloading the pods only has taken, in my estimation, about ten days of actual work on-site, and some of those were days in which people just came briefly to take measurements, pictures, or inspect the work in progress. So an awful lot of waiting around has been involved, and we still have no idea when the pods will actually be taken away.

The restoration company also hasn't gotten around to presenting us with any kind of final bill, although the money to pay them has been in our account waiting for quite some time.

We dropped off our ballots for the Pittsfield Township primary elections.

We delivered several bags of somewhat worse-for-wear basil. It was a bit wilted but I think at least some of it was still usable to make pesto.

We went through a bank drive-through to deposit another check from our insurance company, using a pneumatic tube system.

It has been a *very* long time since I used one of those — in fact, I am not sure I ever used one myself, although I remember my mom using them all the time when I was a kid. Using the pneumatic tube to deposit our check brought back memories of the afternoon in the Fall of 1985, when I started my freshman year at the College of Wooster. My mother took me to Freedlander's Department Store in Wooster, Ohio to buy me a winter coat. She picked something to both keep me warm and provide a bit of protective coloration, since I was to be surrounded in large part by preppier kids from wealthier families, who were mostly wearing clothes from L.L. Bean and Lands' End (*sic*), with their famously misplaced apostrophe. She bought me a dark blue Pendleton wool coat and I wore the hell out of that thing — it was quite nice, although like almost all coats, the sleeves were just a little bit too short for my long monkey arms. Freedlander's, torn down in 2010 after 125 years, had a pneumatic tube system running between the sales desks and the office, and I had never seen one operating inside a store before.

We then went to CVS to refill my prescriptions with another 90-day supply.

Then, we went through a Culver's drive-through to pick up some shrimp and fries (rather than a burger or chicken sandwich, parts of which don't get hot enough to denature COVID-19 particles).

From there, we went to IKEA again to try to get a couple more bookshelves; I wanted to spend part of the evening building them, so that I could unpack a

few more boxes of books, to free up space which would allow me to move a few more items out of the storage room in the basement, which in turn would free up some shelving that we could move out into the garage — moving a few more pieces in the “organizing our stuff” game. IKEA felt much safer this time, on a weekday afternoon, and after Whitmer’s mask mandate went into effect.

We had no trouble with crowding at IKEA this time — although there were more people in the store, everyone was masked up, ventilation was very good, and people were spacing themselves out appropriately. In fact, at one point, we were speaking to a masked employee who got in a little close to us to show us one of the items we were looking for on her tablet device, and her co-worker gently reminded her to leave a little more space between us. So we felt like our local IKEA was not unsafe this time. But the trip was pointless. The store was out of the bookshelves I wanted; there are four in the basement now, and I had been hoping to set up two more of the same kind, and have been considering adding six or more of them in the future, so that we would eventually have a dozen or more of the same kind of shelves in the basement. The staff could not tell me when they might be back in stock.

We’ve been through this several times with IKEA. Twice we’ve had several shelving units of a specific kind, and later wanted to buy more, only to find out that they were discontinued items.

Should we have bought a dozen of them a few weeks ago? It’s kind of a moot point, as that would have been more than we could afford to buy at once, transport easily, and store (each bookcase comes in two large boxes, and the larger of the two is over eight feet long).

I also wanted to buy a standing desk to try out, but the one I wanted was out of stock, too. But unlike the shelving units, the staff claimed that they were scheduled to receive more of the desks. So we might be able to get one of those next week.

There are four desks in my home office, two against each of the long walls of the room. Two of them are made of doors sitting on plastic sawhorses. I first got these to set up my home office on the cheap when we moved into the house in Saginaw. The other two desks are plastic folding tables from Costco.

The desks are set up by the type of work I do at them:

- Desk 1 is a door and houses my old Mac Pro, amplifiers, audio interfaces, and studio monitors. The Mac Pro is my workhorse computer holding all my personal audio, video, and photo projects. There’s also space for a motorized mix controller and a USB DJ controller.
- Desk 2 is another door and houses my new mixer and recorder, headphone amplifier, direct boxes, tabletop microphone stands, and the two microphones Grace and I use to record podcasts. There’s another monitor and space where I can set up a laptop to do streaming. There’s also a little (just a little) space to set up additional microphones so that I can record

myself playing guitar or bass. I'd like to have my vintage Yamaha DX-7 synthesizer on a stand tucked partially under this desk and ready to use, but the desk isn't tall enough.

- Desk 3 is one of the plastic folding table and is my electronics assembly and repair workstation. It houses a couple of soldering irons, little shelving units full of components, a benchtop power supply, a silicone mat for soldering, wire, solder, a printed circuit board holder, and other tools. I use this for both work projects and personal projects as needed.
- Desk 4 is the other plastic folding table and is my work project desk. It houses my work laptop when I'm working from home, an extra monitor, a cordless phone, a calculator, an additional keyboard and mouse, and a lot of index cards covered with notes and to-do lists.

This is the arrangement that I've gradually settled into as I adjust to working primarily from home.

I've recently had a flare-up of pain and reduced mobility in my right shoulder, probably caused by a combination of over-enthusiastic gardening work (now mostly done on a "weekend warrior" basis), stacking and un-stacking heavy boxes full of books, and aggravating old repetitive-strain injuries by jumping back into full-time computer work at these desks with poor ergonomics. Hence, the desire to replace the chairs, and also the desire to try a standing desk. I've used a standing desk setup before — while doing software development work at Dow Chemical in Midland, I set up my office with two desks, one sitting, and one standing. I set myself a rule that I would write and debug code standing, and do other tasks such as reading and writing e-mail messages and documents while sitting. That worked very well for me: I wound up spending roughly half of my work day standing, and more importantly, mixed it up enough that it helped keep my back and joints in good shape.

I've been trying to take care of my shoulder, and it is improving. I've been using anti-inflammatory medication (Naproxen sodium, as low a dose as will help), and alternating between warm soaks and cold packs, trying to keep a better ergonomic arrangement while mousing and typing, and trying to avoid straining it with any heavy lifting, while it heals up. Grace has been very helpful, too, massaging it and digging into the pressure points, which is painful but loosens it up immediately. I'm trying to do a little light stretching as well. If there weren't a pandemic going on, I'd have arranged a referral to a physical therapist by now, but as long as I'm able to keep it improving without that kind of in-person treatment, I don't think the risk is worth it.

None of the desks are height-adjustable, at least not very adjustable. My chairs were straight-backed vintage wooden chair with leather pads for the seat and back, which I think we rescued from someone's trash back in Saginaw. Those chairs worked better with the door desks than it did with the folding tables. They were also falling apart — I kept trying to clue them back together, but they need more extensive restoration and repair that is beyond my limited carpentry

skills. And so I recently replaced them with a couple of of tubular steel shop stools from Costco. The shop stools are much better for my purposes — they are height-adjustable, and they have no arms, which allows me to play guitar while seated. They have feet instead of casters, which is better when working around cables, so I can't accidentally roll over an expensive cable and damage it. I've been using these every day for a few weeks now, and they seem reasonably sturdy so far, although the seats are a bit wobblier than I'd like. More importantly, the ergonomics are better now that I can adjust the seat height. I should probably pick up a spare or two if Costco still has them, but they may not — they often get in items that quickly sell out and are never re-stocked.

I'd like to try the standing desk for my Desk 4, the one where I'm doing most of my work-from-home work. If it works well, I would eventually like three more, to replace all four of the desks in my office. This is a longer-term project, though, to be completed as I have time and money, along with eventually putting up acoustic foam to improve the acoustics in here, for recording purposes. The acoustics are currently acceptable for use with dynamic microphones, which we use to record podcasts — they're certainly far better than they were in my wood-paneled attic room in Saginaw. But it could sound better, and when using more sensitive condenser microphones to record guitar, the untreated reflections are more noticeable.

We'll just have to see if the desks and/or shelving units come back into stock at some point, preferably soon. The staff members suggested we could call, and only my desire not to spread COVID-19 kept me from laughing in their faces. I have wasted so much time attempting to call, e-mail, or tweet to IKEA in the last few months. For months their phone system would not even give one the option to wait to speak to a person. And I have yet to receive any replies whatsoever to the numerous e-mails and direct Twitter messages I sent to customer service trying to confirm cancellation of my order back in June. (But who knows — maybe they will start answering phones again at some point).

So, the IKEA run was a bust, but we then went to Trader Joe's and then to Target. We re-stocked our supplies of chocolate, mints, Norwegian flatbread crackers, "light" olive oil for making pesto, and drain cleaner, because we always need drain cleaner, no matter how carefully I try to keep all our hair from clogging up the bathtub and sink drain — mostly, there are simply a lot of us using one bathroom.

By the time we left Target, the long day was catching up with us, so it was time to head home. Grace and I both stripped off all our clothes and put everything into the wash, scrubbed down our hands and faces with soap and water, took our zinc lozenges, and I also did Grace's new routine, using a dilute iodine solution to clean out my eyes and nostrils, and gargle with it. Then Grace gave me my extra vitamin C and D.

I have to admit that these last two trips were motivated at least partly by the desire to stay out of the house a little longer. In many of the weeks since early

March, I haven't left home at all, so it's not surprising. But the impulse does worry me a bit; are we taking too many risks, even going to stores that seem to be doing their best to take precautions and are thus about as safe as they could possibly be? I don't know.

Wednesday

I'm nervous today, because baby Malachi (20 months old now) will go with Grace this afternoon to the University of Michigan Medical Center for a "baked egg challenge."

Basically, Grace made a batch of muffins with eggs in them last night, and this afternoon, Malachi is supposed to eat one of them, while supervised by doctors, in a medical facility, in case he has a severe allergic reaction. This will take several hours. They give him a little bit, then wait, then give him a little bit more.

If he doesn't react, then we can eat eggs again!

The stakes are high.

We've been avoiding eggs, both by themselves and as ingredients. Grace has cooked eggs a few times for me, exercising extra caution, and I've made them a few times for the kids, but Grace hasn't been eating any eggs, since she is breastfeeding Malachi, and it is difficult to eat eggs — we have to be extremely careful Malachi doesn't get any, even a speck left on the table or dropped on the floor. So, mostly, it hasn't seemed worth the effort.

We really, really miss eggs, and prepared items containing eggs. So we really, really hope Malachi passes this little test.

Thursday

Malachi passed his baked egg challenge!

There's a protocol to follow now. He is supposed to eat part of a muffin with baked egg in it three times a week, then after a while we can try him on other foods with eggs in them. If that continues to go well, we can assume he's over his egg allergy.

Last night for dinner I fried up some chicken sausages, eggs, and tomato halves. It was sort of a minimalist version of a full English breakfast or "fry-up," but still delicious. In particular, the tomatoes were fantastic, blackened on the side that was sitting in the pan, which concentrated their flavor. We can't take credit for growing these particular tomatoes, though — they were Romas (although huge) grown by our friends the Martins, and they arrived as part of our CSA share.

Joy's travel trailer is here in a temporary spot, while she continues to work on getting a more permanent spot set up. It looks great! A very nicely restored vintage trailer.

The pod people came and picked up one of the two pods today. So we are gradually reclaiming our driveway. There's no word on when the second one will go.

Last night Grace worked on loosening up my shoulder and helping me gently stretch it. It's still somewhat sore, but improving. This afternoon I took a break from work to ice it.

One of the two huge tomato plants in our kitchen garden bed collapsed (again) in its cage, and there wasn't a wind or storm to blame. I think it's just gotten so heavy that it hopelessly bent its cage. These wire tomato cages just aren't any good and I want to come up with something much better next year.

On the plus side, we've got a lot delicious tomatoes of our own arriving soon.

Annual Science Fiction Anthologies

I've long loved anthologies of science fiction stories, dating back to books I read as a kid. I have particularly strong memories of *The 1975 World's Best SF*, edited by Donald A. Wollheim. Of course, it now seems a bit arrogant that Wollheim called these stories the "world's best," as I think they were all written by Americans in English, but it's too late to cancel him now. Wollheim published anthologies every year from 1965 to 1990 inclusive, for a total of 26 collections.

The actual publication history is a bit confusing. The imprints vary; some are Ace, and some are DAW (Donald A. Wollheim's own publishing imprint). The first seven were entitled *World's Best Science Fiction: 1965*, etc. through 1971. These seven were co-edited with Terry Carr and there are both hardcover and paperback editions. The first four of these were reprinted as paperback editions in 1970 entitled *World's Best Science Fiction: First Series* through *Fourth Series*.

Then Wollheim continued the series without Carr, under the name *The 1972 Annual World's Best SF*, etc. through 1990. There are various hardcover and book club hardcover and paperback editions of all these, with one odd exception: apparently, the 1979 volume was only released as a paperback. And then first nine of these were each re-published in paperback editions as *Wollheim's World's Best SF: Series One* through *Series Nine*. I recall these in particular, since I had several of these reprint editions; in particular, I recall the 1975 collection, re-published in 1980 as *Series Four*. It contains some of my favorite short science fiction stories of all time, including "A Full Member of the Club" by Bob Shaw, a little parable about consumerism and wealth and exclusivity which has held up very well.

Over the years, I've collected (or re-collected) a number of the books in this

series. There are a lot of copies out there. Original hardcover first editions are a bit scarce, but there are lots of book club edition hardcovers, since most of them were re-published by the Science Fiction Book Club in the seventies and eighties.

Naturally, there are a lot of copies on eBay, and they generally aren't very expensive. I just came across a complete set the later (1972-1990) series, all in hardcover, all first printing, and they should be on my shelf soon. A bit part of the joy of collecting these books is looking at the cover art! The 1975 collection features a small recreational vehicle, situated on a dark alien landscape. An enormous octopus-like creature, with giant gold eyes, has its purple tentacles draped across the landscape, and looms over a small space-suited figure. It's both ominous and hilarious!

Confusingly, Carr published his own series for a while, from 1972 to 1980, called *The Best Science Fiction of the Year 1* etc. I don't recall reading any of these, although I have other anthologies by Carr. It would be interesting to compare the volumes year-by-year and see where the selections overlap, if they do.

I don't have a lot of anthologies in my collection that represent the years after 1990. The grand master of annual science fiction anthologies was probably Gardner Dozois, who published *The Year's Best Science Fiction* series from 1984 through 2018 — for 35 years! — until his death.

This series is not to be confused with *The Year's Best SF* series, edited by David G. Hartwell and Kathryn Cramer. That series started in 1996 and ran through 2013.

I tend to be kind of an opportunistic book collector, preferring to stumble across books of interest rather than deliberately search for them. At least, I've *tended* to do it that way, because I loved to spend time scanning shelves in the most cluttered, overstuffed, dingy little hole-in-the-wall used book shops I could possibly find. Those kinds of places aren't really available as much to me now, for various reasons, including the fact that many of them don't exist any more. But anyway — because of my deliberately scattershot approach to acquiring books, I've never really tried to acquire volumes from either the Dozois or the Hartwell and Cramer series. A few years back, though, I found five of each of them on the shelves in a small bookstore in Frankenmuth, Michigan, for just a few dollars each, so I bought all ten. Because we were at the time, getting ready to move, I just put them in a box, and they've been in the box until this week.

Those books are now shelved, on some of the IKEA bookshelves I set up a few weeks ago. And as with all the books I've unboxed recently, I'm trying to do the Marie Kondo thing — decided which ones actually “spark joy” when I look at them and read them, and which ones I'm indifferent to.

Because the volumes don't feature the year on their covers, but are instead numbered (the 21st annual collection through the 25th annual collection, and 9 through 13, I didn't realize — until today! — that they are all from the same years, 2004 through 2007. So there's a chance to look at two anthologies from

the same year and see what the different editors thought was the best. Does this mean I will want to get rid of some of them? Not necessarily. I want to take some time to skim through them, side-by-side, and maybe read a few stories. The time to do that is pretty scarce, but I keep hoping to seize a little bit. One of the ways I've tried to enjoy these anthologies is just to open them up and pick stories and read them to the kids. Sometimes I preview them, and sometimes I don't. I've abandoned a story or two partway through because no one was enjoying it, including me, but I've also been pleasantly surprised by just how much the kids enjoyed a story, and we've had great discussions about them afterwards. So, I really don't see it as a waste to have lots of books of stories on the shelves waiting to be explored.

I want to mention a few more story collections. Starting in 1979, Isaac Asimov released a series of collections called *Isaac Asimov Presents The Great SF Stories*, editions numbered 1 through 25, containing stories originally published between 1939 and 1963. The last volume was published in 1992, shortly after the death of the editor. This is also a great series and I have some volumes, although I don't handle them much because I only have paperback copies, and like many paperbacks published during that period, they were printed on acidic paper, and so are crumbling badly. And books from this series seem to fetch collector prices, possibly because Isaac Asimov's name still equates to dollar signs in booksellers' eyes.

I have a few more collections that I prize, containing stories published before the "golden age" of science fiction; in particular, I am fascinated by stories from the radium age. Maybe I will describe those at some point. There is so much I'd like to do with some of this old material — stream it, release my own audiobook readings, and turn them into radio drama. But copyright lags so far behind; in 2020, stories from 1924 are just now entering the public domain. So if I want to create derived works of some of my favorite vintage stories, I have to either wait longer, or risk some kind of legal challenge, which we could ill-afford to fight.

Friday

The pod people came and took away the second pod yesterday. So our driveway is now free of pods! We were pretty sick of having these giant things blocking our driveway.

How Not to eBay

I ordered a book a while back from an eBay seller called "worldofbooksusa." It was an out-of-print story collection. The condition was listed as "very good." When I received the book, I discovered that the pages were intact, but the cover had visible water stains in several places, was "bumped" on the corners, and was heavily "rubbed," so much so that portions of the cover art was rubbed off. Even the book title on the spine was partially rubbed off and barely readable. No

reputable bookseller would have graded this book “very good.” Personally, had I been grading it for sale, I’d have described it as “fair to good” and mentioned “tight binding, clean intact pages, cover has minor water stains, bumping, and heavy rubbing of cover artwork.” The reason this matters is that this is a somewhat scarce, out-of-print book, and the difference in price between a copy in very good condition and a copy in acceptable condition is pretty dramatic: sellers ask for two, three, or even four times as much money for a copy in very good condition. Feeling cheated, I wrote to them initially asking for half my purchase price back, due to the large difference between the description and the actual condition of the book I received.

Hello,

I am writing because the book I received should never have been graded in “very good” condition. The back cover and spine have several spots that are water-stained. The printing on the spine and covers is partially rubbed off in spots.

I paid quite a bit for this volume because of the listed condition. Copies in good to fair condition usually go for less than half what you charged. See: <https://www.alibris.com/search/books/isbn/9780747587033?qwork=14479577>

I am requesting a partial refund of \$19.30 (half the item price) due to the misleading condition description. Thanks!

Here’s what I got back:

Hello,

Thank you for your email.

On behalf of the company I sincerely apologise for this issue with your purchase.

We regret on this occasion the condition has fallen below the expected standard, but we will endeavour to resolve this for you.

Please can you provide no more than 2 pictures of the condition in which your order has arrived.

Once we have the pictures we will be able to investigate further into this matter on your behalf and contact you with a resolution to the matter.

We look forward to receiving your pictures and again apologise for any inconvenience caused.

Kind Regards,

Sarah
Customer Service Advisor

OK, that seems reasonable. I sent them two pictures illustrating the water-staining and the rubbed-off title and artwork. I also said:

Please note also that I did not save the packaging, but I did not see any evidence that the package had gotten wet, so I don't think the water-staining happened in shipping. Thanks!

Here was the reply:

Hello,

Thank you for your email.

We sincerely apologise for this issue with your purchase.

We regret that on this occasion, the condition has fallen below the expected standard but we will endeavour to resolve this for you.

Currently, we do not have any more copies in stock but we can offer a 30% discount off the total amount paid for the item, or alternatively, please return the item for a full refund?

Please could you advise us of how you would like to proceed?

We look forward to your reply.

Kind Regards,

Sarah
Customer Service Advisor

They offered me 30% back, not 50%. I felt that this was a pretty obnoxious move, so, I called their bluff:

I will return the book. Do you have a shipping address, and is there an RMA number I need to use?

Thank you!

They then changed their tune:

Hello,

Thanks for your email.

On this occasion, we would like to offer you 50% off the total amount paid and retain the item should it be of any use to you.

If you wish, you can return the item for a full refund, however we would be unable to reimburse any costs incurred in returning this.

Please let us know how you wish to proceed?

I look forward to your reply shortly, and again apologise for any inconvenience caused.

Kind Regards,

Analise
Customer Service Advisor

So, someone realized, belatedly, they didn't *want* the book back because it was going to be hard to sell such a badly damaged book again and they have already lost money on the sale. Had they agreed to my initial request, we'd have been done by now. But I'm not playing this game; I want all my money back now because, well, their waffling has pissed me off. So I wrote:

I would prefer to return the book. I will pay return shipping. Thank you.

They replied:

Hello,

Thank you for your email.

Please return the item to us and we will refund you as soon as we have received it.

We will cover up to \$5 for return postage. Please retain proof of postage.

Please ensure you do not cover the Print ID or Order ID details found on the address label, as we will then be unable to process your return.

Our returns address, if not on the packaging, is:

World of Books Inc
C/O EXPEDITORS
10600 TOEBBEN DR

INDEPENDENCE
KY
41051-5100

If you have any issues doing this please contact us.

Kind regards,

Analise
Customer Service Adviser

I do have issues. I did not have an address label. Note that they have not answered my question about whether there was an RMA number I needed to use. Their message mentions "Print ID" and "Order ID details." I don't have the original package. They had not provided a return mailer or label. Companies like to make this difficult so they have excuses to refuse to issue credits. If you don't include the right magic numbers, either on the outside or on the inside of the package, they will delay crediting you or claim the item is lost or even refuse to sign for the item, and so it will be bounced back to you. So I wrote again:

I'm sorry, can you please clarify for me what exactly needs to be on the address label?

Will this work:

World of Books Inc
RETURN ITEM #303424660749
C/O EXPEDITORS
10600 TOEBBEN DR
INDEPENDENCE
KY
41051-5100

or should I include some other number?

Thank you.

They replied:

Hello,

Thank you for your email.

I am sorry to hear that you no longer require your order. Please return the item to us and we will refund you as soon as we have received it.

Please ensure you put a note within the package of either the Order

ID or Print ID.

Our returns address, if not on the packaging, is:

World of Books Inc
C/O EXPEDITORS
10600 TOEBBEN DR
INDEPENDENCE
KY
41051-5100

We will cover up to \$5 for return postage. Please retain proof of postage. If you have any issues doing this please contact us.
Kind regards,

Sarah
Customer Service Adviser

They still have clarified as to exactly what the “Order ID” or “Print ID” should be. So, we’re gonna go around yet again.

I am trying to verify exactly what number to include, so it is not delayed or bounced back to me for not having the correct number. I do not have the original packaging. eBay shows me an item number, 303424660749, and an order number, 20-05246-59807. Should I include that eBay item number as the Order ID? I don’t have a Print ID. Maybe that was on the packaging?

Thanks.

At this point they have wasted an enormous amount of my time and their money dragging out this process. And, at this point, it is obvious that doing this is their *policy*.

Hello,

Thanks for your email.

The eBay order number is 20-05246-59807.

The Print ID is 100040070838.

Please put these numbers on a note, and place the note inside the package.

If there is anything else you need, please just drop me an email and I will be happy to help.

Kind Regards,

Analise
Customer Service Advisor

Finally, some clarity! So I did just that.

And I heard nothing.

For 3 weeks.

So, I contacted them yet again.

Hello,

I shipped this book back via UPS on 7/17/2020

According to UPS tracking it was delivered 7/22/2020

I have not gotten any confirmation that it was received, and I have not received my refund. Could you please check on the status of this item? Thanks.

And so they replied.

Hello,

Thank you for your email.

Your order hasn't been returned to us as yet and once we have received the order we will notify you via email.

However, if you have tracking information indicating otherwise, could you please send this to us? This will expedite the process.

Kind Regards,

Analise
Customer Service Advisor

I had the tracking number, because this is not my first rodeo. So I replied:

Here is the UPS tracking info: <https://www.ups.com/track?loc=&track-num=1Z2E75810362496710&requester=WT/trackdetails>

And I received another copy-and-paste job back; note the repeated sentence saying "your order hasn't been returned to us as yet." Which I just demonstrated isn't true. Or, at least, I demonstrated that it went to the place they asked me to send it.

Hello,

Thank you for your email.

Your order hasn't been returned to us as yet and once we have received the order we will notify you via email.

If there is anything else you need, please don't hesitate to drop me an email and I shall be happy to help.

Kind Regards,

Sarah
Customer Service Advisor

OK, she's not even responding to what I said. They're also insisting on making a distinction between "we" and "the place we asked you to send the book" and I really don't *care* about this distinction, nor should I need to. I was getting fed up, but it occurred to me that I wanted to remind them of this little detail:

Earlier I was told:

"We will cover up to \$5 for return postage. Please retain proof of postage."

I am attaching 2 pictures of my receipt from my local UPS store showing that I paid \$11.67 to return this book via UPS (plus packing materials, etc.) so that it would not be damaged in transit and so that I had a record of the delivery. Please reimburse me for \$5.00 postage in addition to the refund for the book. Thank you.

I attached two high-resolution images of the receipt (because it was long and had a lot of gibberish and boilerplate text on it).

Did I mention that they respond only once a day, so that every round of our back-and-forth discussion takes two days?

I bought this book on June 18th — 50 days ago. I finally went ahead and left negative feedback, and also filed a request to return the item through eBay, instead of communicating directly with the seller. That's so I can ask eBay to intervene; the web site won't let me even click the button that says "Ask eBay to Intervene" unless I've jumped through the hoops and waiting the required number of days.

Leaving negative feedback is something I've almost never done on eBay. I don't actually want to do any material harm to individuals like me who use eBay the way I do, as a kind of garage sale. I've been on eBay since 1999, and I think I've only left negative feedback once before, at least fifteen years ago, because an item was badly mis-represented in the listing. Overall, my experience with eBay — selling dozens of items, and buying hundreds of items — has been great. Shipping times have been a problem this year, but that really isn't the seller's

fault in most cases. And some sellers have been slow to send out items, because their businesses have been struggling, but if they tell me to expect that, I don't hold it against them in the slightest.

On the rare occasion when I've been dissatisfied with a purchase, such as when I was sent counterfeit cell phones, I've been able to return the items successfully without a hassle. And honestly, I don't think I would have left negative feedback, if the seller didn't keep pasting in boilerplate text in their replies to my questions rather than responding clearly. But this is a company behaving badly, not individuals; the individuals responding to me are just dithering to avoid paying the refund, and pasting in boilerplate text. They're doing it because they've been instructed to do that, to delay things as long as possible, because the company is trying to make dissatisfied buyers give up. I've spent way too much time trying to give them a chance to make things right, but I finally had to declare it a lost cause. I will never purchase books from this company again.

Sunday

I haven't been doing so well, dear readers. My physical and mental health have taken nose-dives recently. I haven't been handling stress so well. On Friday I needed to go into work to pick up a new laptop and set it up on the local wired network. We had just gotten new directives from corporate on COVID-19 safety and mask-wearing in the workplace, and all employees were being asked to read a document, initial a series of items, and sign and date it, and to have our managers sign and date it as well. Corporate is getting more forceful about mask rules — every employee is expected to wear a mask when working in any indoor space, with a few exceptions for people working in separate offices with doors, or eating, or working alone in conference rooms, and in these cases, there are added sanitation requirements and employees are asked to leave three hours between staff members.

On the same day, in our office, my manager was not masked at all, and another older employee was not masked at all either, while everyone else was masked.

The document asked us to initial two sections: one, declaring that our work environment was fully implementing all the newly expanded safety protocols, and two, declaring that we have read and agree to follow the safety protocols ourselves.

Because for various reasons I don't feel like I'm in a good position to pick a fight, I did not discuss their open defiance of the masking protocol with them, and I initialed and signed the document. Then I went home.

Friday evening the cognitive dissonance caught up with me hard. I had some very upset exchanges with trusted co-workers. I learned that it is even weirder than I knew; apparently, in our regular conference call with the CEO, our manager was complaining and joking about being asked to wear a mask at his desk.

I was gratified to find out that several of the other most senior engineers are also quite upset about our manager and the example he is setting, and they have contacted him about it. So it is possible I may be able to sit this fight out, which I think would be helpful in maintaining my equilibrium. Meanwhile, I am planning to continue working from home — *per corporate's policy* — as often as I can still get my work done, or at least the bulk of my work done, effectively from home.

I've also been struggling more with just keeping my sanity at home, after months of lockdown, feeling like pariahs; we're struggling to keep the kids on task with chores, and with home-schooling; we're struggling to get the basics done so that we can do some other things, often the things that help me unwind and keep myself sane: taking walks, reading stories, watching movies.

I don't get my "third place" time anymore, and haven't for months — being able to go to someplace that isn't home and isn't work. I used to rely heavily on this to decompress.

In the last few days, I've been, not to put too fine a point on it, losing it — snapping at people, picking fights; I've frequently found myself so inarticulate with frustration and confusion that I've been unable to even speak about what I need and ask for help. I describe this to Grace as my brain "short-circuiting" — my somewhere-on-the-autism-spectrum brain becomes too over-stimulated to process everything I'm feeling and thinking and seizes up like a car engine throwing a rod. So that's been happening and it isn't fun.

At least it isn't the same sort of regular depression I became accustomed to in the late nineties — this is something different.

The anxiety and stress is exacerbating my physical symptoms. The pain in my right shoulder has spread to my left shoulder and my back. This is something that runs in my family — a tendency to "somaticize," to turn mental health problems into physical health problems. It's not the same as hypochondria; the physical manifestations are real, showing up in my jaw and muscles and tendons and heart rate and blood pressure.

I got to spend some time working on the gardens last night, and so things are just a little bit better today. Which means it is time for a...

Garden Update

We harvested some corn. We got about one and a half good ears (one very nice one, one that had nice kernels on about half of it). So we ate those last night. They were slightly past their prime and thus a bit starchy, but it was still very nice to taste some corn from our garden.

We harvested another ear that was horribly inflated, and looked like something out of a story by H. P. Lovecraft. The ear was covered with corn smut, known as *huitlacoche*. This is a hideous-looking fungus that grows on corn plants, inside

the ear or on the stems. It looks terrifying but it is actually edible; I've had it before. In fact if you can get the mushroom-like lumps while they are young, and cook them up, they are delicious, almost like a truffle. So we will be making *huittlacoche* quesadillas later today. I'm not sure if the kids will even be willing to try them, but I'm excited.

I've been hacking back the mint plants aggressively — they actually thrive on being cut back, and grow back bushier rather than spindly. So we've got big piles of three kinds of mint currently drying: peppermint, orange mint, and apple mint. Grace is going to make a syrup out of the apple mint to use as a soft drink. I also cut some more chocolate mint, which as I've mentioned, I love using to make a drink along with black tea; they go very well together.

I also worked on some herb butters. we've now got frozen loaves of herb butter made with a number of different herbs: thyme, dill, fennel, chives, and sage. I want to try making some infused oils, too.

The dill seed heads I stuck in paper bags a week or two ago were about as dry last night as they were going to get. I had been hoping the seeds would all fall off, but they didn't. So I sat in bed late last night, after the kids had finally fallen asleep, and picked them off, over a paper bag. Most of them went into the bag, but a few of the little dill seeds tended to fly everywhere. Especially, they seemed to like to stick in my leg hair. So this is definitely one of the stranger things I've ever been covered with, in bed.

But we now have a *lot* of dill seed, ready for — something. I know we can make pickles with it, but what else? I'll have to do some reading.

We're going to have to process tomatoes very soon, as they are all starting to ripen nearly at once. I love to eat heirloom tomatoes such as our Black Crim in season, but I can only eat so many; they actually make my mouth break out in sores, due to the acid. We could can them, but I don't think these varieties are great for canning, and I just don't think a full-blown canning session is going to be possible — we'd have to take over the whole kitchen and keep the kids out of it for hours, and Elanor (43 months) and Malachi (19 months) don't take well to being separated from their mom for hours. So I think instead we'll be looking into roasting some tomatoes and freezing them. We might turn the Amish Paste tomatoes into paste — we've done that before and while the Amish Paste don't taste very good for eating fresh, they really do live up to their name and make amazing tomato paste!

We've got powdery mildew on the cucumber and zucchini plants. One of the zucchini plants in the kitchen garden bed was entirely a collapsed heap of yellow leaves, so we went ahead and pulled it out of the bed. There's another one that was partly yellowed but it still producing new flowers, so I hacked off all the yellowed leaves and stems and we'll see if it will give us a few more zucchinis. We are still getting cucumbers from the plants in the separate fire ring bed, but the cucumber plants in the kitchen bed have pretty much had it. There's another

zucchini plant in the corn bed. The corn in that bed is still very small and short, but the zucchini plant is doing well, so we expect to get a few more.

Elsewhere, things are going great in the pepper bed. We are still harvesting bright red cayenne peppers every few days. Grace made a hot sauce by blending up prunes, vinegar, olive oil, salt, and whole cayenne peppers. Prunes sound like a strange ingredient but they have an *umami* quality that goes very well with hot peppers, a bit like tamarind, and the resulting sauce is delicious, while still being hot enough to make you break a sweat. It tastes kind of like a Sriracha (the sweet and hot “rooster sauce”), but in my opinion, tastier. We might also try a fermented pepper sauce, although I’m not sure how many more cayenne peppers we will get; we are drying most of them and so those won’t be suitable to blend into a sauce.

The paprika peppers are growing very well now and many of them are turning lovely shades of deep orange. Some of the plants are so heavily-laden that we have had to stake them up, because they were falling over under the weight of the peppers. These peppers confused me because they started out a very pale yellow-green, color, almost cream-colored, with the fruits on top of the plants, pointing straight up, early in the season, and spent months looking very pale. I expected them to turn a deep red color. Well, apparently this is just how they roll — they ripen late in the season. So I think some of them ought to be ready to harvest and dry and grind in September. Although the plants are just now producing some new fruits, cream-colored again, and I don’t see how there will be enough growing season left for those to ripen, but we’ll save as many as we can.

The scotch bonnet plants are producing fruit, too, and some of the fruits are quite large, although they are still completely green. But it looks like we will have enough of them to make some very spicy dishes in the fall — maybe jerk sauces, maybe salsas. We might even try a fermented sauce with scotch bonnet peppers, if we get enough. So I’m excitedly looking forward to their arrival.

Elsewhere in the yards there are more plants ripening and fruiting. Joy acquired some groundcherry plants, and the bushes are small but they are producing a few delicious little yellow groundcherries, which are little tomatillo-like fruits that appear inside small lantern-shaped wrappers — their own natural packaging! They are delicious to just pluck and eat, or slice in half and toss onto salads. There aren’t very many fruits yet but if things go well they will come back in future years. And there are more tomato varieties getting ready, including gorgeous Black Beauty tomatoes. Meanwhile the sunflowers are at least twelve feet tall and definitely sporting flowers that we can just make out, way up there in the distance; they have not opened yet, but we are expecting them to begin a startling display of color any day now.

Sweet and Savory

I made myself a nice breakfast today — the kids got bacon, and oatmeal, and I re-heated some oatmeal, and topped it with butter, honey, and a sprinkling of orange thyme leaves.

We usually have a tendency to classify dishes as sweet or savory. I like oatmeal either way: with honey or jam and maybe walnuts, or with butter and salt and pepper and maybe also with walnuts. I like sweet scones — raspberry or cinnamon — and I like savory scones — cheddar and herb. There's a tendency to think that herbs belong with savory dishes and not with sweet dishes. I'm intrigued by herbs in just about everything, if I can find the right one that perfectly accentuates the flavors. This combination was good but I'm not sure it was the best combination. More experimentation is called for.

We're going to take the kids for a walk in the woods today — we just didn't manage it yesterday, because of all the problems getting chores done. But I've put some time into the kitchen and it isn't too bad.

I still have a number of things I want to briefly mention — things that have been rattling around in my brain for a while now. So here they are. They aren't necessarily connected to anything in particular.

The Thirty Second Problem

I've mentioned before that my Mac Pro no longer plays back audio reliably, and it used to, and I haven't been able to figure out what the problem is, except that it seems to be an operating system problem. I've done some further testing and diagnosis. I've followed a dozen online tutorials. I've run diagnostic programs. I've re-installed the operating system. Nothing fixes it; when I'm using a USB audio interface — one of several I tested — the glitching in the audio occurs regularly. In fact, there is a glitch every thirty seconds.

That sounds suspiciously like some script or application running a **cron** task that does some kind of check or writes to a file every thirty seconds.

The thing is, this just shouldn't be happening; the audio drivers ought to be operating at a higher priority than any of these tasks. They should be able to interrupt the other tasks and always get the audio data transferred, even when the system is heavily loaded. Keep in mind this system has eight CPU cores. And it isn't heavily loaded at all during these experiments; this happens even when nothing seems to be running on the computer, except the program playing audio. It even happens with iTunes.

It seems to be somewhat better when using a FireWire audio interface, which is especially odd because FireWire devices are no longer officially supported. But it still happens — I still get these glitches. Just not on the same regular thirty-second schedule.

I've also noticed that a lot of tasks which used to be blindingly fast are no longer fast. For example, it used to be possible to browse through my iPhoto library so fast that if I held down the arrow key to move to the next picture, the pictures would flash by like frames of a video, at twelve frames per second or more. Between the nice video card and the Xeon processors, rendering JPEG files from an SSD to the screen should be very fast. But it's no longer fast. The built-in photos application, now just called Photos, is hard-pressed to display more than one or two pictures per second, and it displays them in irregular "bursts."

"Bursty" is a term that is used to describe computers that aren't handling their loads well, whatever those loads may be; it can apply to anything from massive web servers down to cell phones. This Mac Pro wasn't "bursty" but now it is and it isn't the hardware that has changed. So, I'm gritting my teeth and contemplating possible plans to retire this computer and, somehow, move the tasks I do with it to other computers that are better-supported by their operating systems.

The Modern Web is Full of It

Do you, like me, get the impression that both your computer's software, and the web, are on a persistent downward trajectory, as far as usability? Here's another data point.

There's a bread recipe that the kids have been using; I've mentioned it before in this newsletter. They lost the print-out of the recipe, so I went back to the page and tried to print it again. I forgot that I wanted to put the page into some kind of printable mode before I hit command-P to start printing. I just went ahead and started it printing, then went to use the bathroom.

When I came back, my printer had spewed out an amazing *eighty-eight pages*. Only about a page and half of that was the actual recipe. The rest of the pages contained a huge mess of introductory material, pictures, ads, and dozens of pages of comments.

Not exactly what I had in mind.

What were they thinking? They were thinking about ad revenue, and not the usability of their style sheets.

Another anecdote: a while back I ordered a book from the Folio Society. This was a special edition of a novel by Philip K. Dick. They sent me an e-mail asking me to write a review of the book for their web site, so I followed the link and did so. When I tried to post the review, the site kept flagging it with messages saying it contained inappropriate language.

To make it more appropriate, I changed all the references to Philip K. Dick's last name to "Penis," which it apparently found perfectly appropriate, so that's how the review reads on their web site today. I also mentioned at the start that

I had done this because the auto-censorship refused to allow me to include the author's name.

I was amused that when I sent a tweet to the Folio Society describing what I had done, they did not take down the review; they just replied that they had asked many times to have this feature changed.

The Internet infrastructure is not everything it could be, which is especially worrying in a time when so many of us are forced to do more things online for our work and school than we usually do. In late July there was an outage that affected almost every web site that I was trying to use on that particular day. A company most people don't even know exists, Cloudflare, had a big failure.

It's a little worrying.

So is the state of the climate, but I feel like I'm running out of ability to worry myself and also to tell people what to worry about at this point.

I'm switching to tea for a while.

So.

*Take down your clock,
and if slash when you can,
observe the time in
a flowering mint,
a swelling tomato,
or shriveling herb
as it goes to seed.*

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