

We Scorched the Sky

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Tuesday (September 8th)

It was quiet in the office today and gray and rainy outside. My old work computer crashed a couple of times for no apparent reason, in spectacular fashion, a “snow crash” probably caused by the video driver, in which the screen turns into a wall of static and the audio turns to noise.

Yesterday Grace and the kids spent pretty much the whole day working on cleaning and re-organizing the family room. It looks a lot better, and it’s ready for us to put in our custom bookcases. In related news, we received a package containing a used set of Lemony Snicket’s *A Series of Unfortunate Events* books. We had copies of these years ago, and I read a number of them myself, but we wound up getting rid of them due to a fight with our oldest son. The details escape me, but it probably involved chores and screen time. In any case, I’m happy that our younger kids will be able to read them. We might be able to get back into a bedtime story routine.

I’ve never read, but long been curious about, another set of books, known as the Redwall series, by Brian Jacques. These books don’t form a single chronological sequence like the *Unfortunate Events* books, but jump around:

The book series does not chronicle any one particular timeframe. Rather, it covers many periods in the history of Redwall, but all are set in a medieval-like time, a world which encompasses Mossflower woods, surrounding islands, and a land called *Southward*.

I’ve ordered some inexpensive used paperback copies of the first few books (“first few” in publication order, that is): *Redwall*, *Mossflower*, and *Mattimeo*. I’ve also ordered a copy of a later book, *Lord Brocktree*, for me, because I thought it might be interesting to read a later book, the 13th published, but the book that takes place earliest in the in-world chronology. If the kids like these books, or I like these books, or we both like these books, there are *eighteen* more to read, so they could keep us busy for a while.

I didn’t use a keyboard at all yesterday, but my shoulder was bothering me again, and was hurting more than it was on Sunday, when I finished up last week’s

newsletter using my new ergonomic keyboard. I don't know what that means, but I'm going to have to try naproxen, again, and consider, again, whether I feel that the discomfort justifies taking the risk of an in-person doctor visit. This is frustrating because it seemed to be improving. I think it points out that after moving desks several times at work and finally winding up working at a lab bench, which comes closer to suiting my needs for space and equipment, this setup is not actually good, ergonomically, and making minor tweaks like using my new keyboard and trying different desk chairs at different heights will not be enough to fix it. I think the problem stems from working on laptops, but that's almost *de rigueur* now. So in many ways we've gone backwards in ergonomics from the hefty desktop computers with monitors on top and enormous noisy keyboards; at least back then, I could usually use a keyboard tray and was generally able to keep my body in a more neutral, upright posture.

In my line of work, I have a tendency, once I get into a state of "flow," to tune out everything possible, including minor physical discomfort; I go into the world of the code and everything else fades away. But it seems that even minor discomfort is causing escalating damage. It's different than the carpal tunnel syndrome I had in the early 1990s, but still painful and debilitating.

Local Currency

Last week we had an evening in which we had a little extra time after eating dinner and cleaning up dinner, and so finally managed to get a good start on our local currency project. During the pandemic, we haven't been handling currency, and haven't been going to the bank to take out cash in the denominations needed to give the kids their allowance. So we decided to create a local currency. To get ready for this project I ordered various bits and pieces from eBay sellers, including small blank "art cards" made of heavy stock, a set of rubber stamps with numbers on them and a dollar sign, some different colors of ink pads, a roll of duplicate numbered holographic stickers, and an anti-counterfeiting pen that writes in UV-reactive ink. I asked Veronica, our resident artist, to come up with four cartoon character designs that she can quickly render. So, we're making banknotes: each one gets stamped denomination, a hand-drawn cartoon character, and is colorized with watercolors. I add a sequentially-numbered holographic sticker, and each sticker has a duplicate so I can easily keep a record of the ones that we have issued. I then sign them in invisible, UV-reactive ink. The denominations will be powers of 3: \$1, \$3, \$9, and \$27. This is reasonably close to an optimal scheme for reducing the number of bills we'll need to make.

The idea is that we'll give the kids their allowances in our local currency. They can trade them with each other, pool them, or do whatever they want, short of counterfeiting. If they want to buy something, they can ask us to turn the local currency into real purchases online or at stores, on those occasions when we go out to stores.

So far, we've only finished the one-dollar notes, but we'll finish the next batches

as time allows.

Tuesday (Again) (September 15th)

Well, a week has gone by and I didn't manage to send out a newsletter. Things have felt a bit dark and difficult. The COVID-19 unemployment surge has caught up with some of my friends. One lost his part-time job, and was denied unemployment because he wasn't earning enough to qualify. (Yes, that is really a thing that happens; it makes a certain twisted sense, since unemployment is a form of insurance that your employer must pay into for you to receive it if you lose your job, but now he's gone from someone with a very low income to someone with almost no income and no working car). He is doing a little work as a caregiver for another friend's elderly mother, but now has to rely on very uncertain access to Lyft rides to do that job, since there is no public transit or traditional cab service where he lives. The rides are costing him most of his actual income. He's about my age, currently living with his elderly father and brother in a hostile and difficult situation. His father and brother are both COVID-19 deniers and refuse to take any precautions when going out.

His situation is not at all unique. He probably doesn't figure into the official unemployment numbers.

We hear from friends about "deaths of despair" in their families, and it's heart-breaking.

Newsletterversary

I've been sending this newsletter out weekly, more-or-less, for a year now. It looks like there have been 53 issues. I feel like that ought to be cause for some sort of celebration, or at least a moment of satisfaction — a minor milestone accomplished. I had been thinking of editing them all and turning them into an e-book, or something along those lines, but at the moment I'm not feeling it.

We Scorched the Sky

Yesterday, Monday night, Grace and I went to get groceries at Costco after I was done with work. All afternoon the light outside my office windows was hazy, and the sky had a slight reddish-orange tint, but it wasn't cloudy, and it wasn't sunset. It was smoke. An hour or more before sunset, it was possible to look steadily at the sun. It looked like an alien red moon. I snapped some pictures with my cheap cell phone camera, but they didn't really capture the eerie color, as strange as the time I saw a near-total eclipse.

The smoke is here again today. The smoke is made of California and Oregon. I can smell it, and I can feel it in my lungs, although I know we are getting just the tiniest taste of what the people on the west coast are experiencing.

In *The Matrix*, Morpheus tells Neo:

“We don’t know who struck first, us or them, but we know that it was us that scorched the sky.”

That grammar seems a bit wrong, although I haven’t studied grammar enough to know whether it really is technically wrong. “Us” is used instead of “we,” since “us” is an object and not the subject, and I think that is technically correct, but “it was we who scorched the sky” sounds better to me than “it was us that scorched the sky.” I’ve always thought that Morpheus should have said:

“We don’t know who struck first, us or them. But we know that we are the ones who scorched the sky.”

We *are* the ones. Present tense.

I always wondered how humans scorched the sky. I don’t wonder any more.

I’ve been in touch with my father and stepmother, who live in Vacaville, California. They did have to evacuate, briefly, but the fires did not actually sweep through their neighborhood. They know plenty of people who weren’t so lucky, though.

It didn’t sound like they were willing to consider moving. So I guess we’ll continue worrying about them, every fire season, until either age or fire comes for them.

My hope is that this helps convince a few more Americans that irrevocable, serious global warming is here, and it is real, and it is dangerous, although anyone still on the fence will probably believe this is all some kind of orchestrated hoax.

I won’t live to see the effects actually mitigated, and my children won’t live to see the climate actually become more hospitable. But we can still hope for harm reduction.

Political Paul

I’ve been hesitating to write about politics, because the news has been so grim, but I don’t feel that I can put it off any longer; I need to get a few thoughts out onto paper, or at least into a text file.

It’s possible that Biden will win the election, but I think it is more likely that he won’t, and the situation will be very similar to the one in 2016. He may very well win the popular vote, but still lose the same swing states that resulted in Trump winning the Electoral College votes.

But more importantly, I think we aren’t likely to have anything resembling a clear, quick vote count.

It seems to me that people aren’t thinking correctly about this election. Trump doesn’t actually have to steal it, and I don’t know that really has supporters placed in enough offices of Secretaries of State to steal it. He just has to cast serious doubt on the legitimacy of the results.

In fact, he doesn't even have to do that. He really just has to claim that the other side is planning to steal it, and that they have means, motive, and opportunity. And the small fringe of supporters that are primed to become weapons of stochastic terrorism will do the rest.

I'm expecting violence. I don't know how much to expect, but it's impossible for me to believe there won't be some.

Damon Linker writes in *The Week* about "the true Election Day nightmare scenario:"

It starts like this: Trump is ahead in the crucial battleground states during early counting of ballots on the evening of Election Day and declares victory without Joe Biden conceding. Later on, as mail-in ballots are counted, the lead shifts in the Democratic direction, putting Biden ahead. This eventually prompts Trump to reject the validity of the outcome on grounds of voter fraud, with the conservative media complex backing him up to the hilt. Imagine the multi-week legal and political battle surrounding the Florida vote count in 2000 but multiplied across numerous states and with Trump and his media cheerleaders pouring conspiratorial fuel on the fire every hour of every day.

Anyone reading this newsletter should understand by now that for Trump and his appointees and sycophants and mouthpieces, including many people in the media, there is no "bottom." There isn't going to be some *ne plus ultra* threshold they won't cross, because there will be no consequences for them, and only the upside of further gifting.

From my perspective, it looks like that is the plan, and it is shaping up nicely for them. Trump's mouthpieces are prepping his supporters, and Trump himself is prepping his supporters. I will share a few tidbits from recent news stories. Together they start to outline a picture of a situation that may seem unbelievable, if one believes that "it can't happen here." But in fact there is no doubt in my mind that it can happen, and in fact it has been happening.

The most disheartening aspect of this, for me, has been watching friends and relatives become "ordinary Germans," sinking into full-blown conspiratorial paranoia.

This is how it happens.

Ding-dong! Fascism calling!

In *The X-Files*, Mulder and Deep Throat have this famous exchange:

MULDER: They're here, aren't they?

DEEP THROAT: Mr. Mulder, they've been here for a long, long time.

Per The Daily Beast, a former CIA official, Michael Scheuer,

...calls Black Lives Matter a “terrorist organization” and a “semi-human mob.” On his blog and his podcast, Scheuer rages against a widespread, treasonous conspiracy targeting not only President Trump but the fundamental character of the American republic. It deserves “punishment... we’ve not seen before in this country.” Kyle Rittenhouse, the 17-year old charged with murder for shooting demonstrators at a Kenosha, Wisconsin, protest, is a “young hero.” If America is lucky, Scheuer wrote last week, “Rittenhouse’s necessary, patriotic, and constitutional actions will power the formation of militias across the United States.” In July, he wrote that “loyal Americans know their domestic enemies, as well as their locations, in detail, and will be able to act swiftly to eliminate them and the threat they pose.”

Per Slate, Michael Caputo, a Trump appointee and Republican operative, made a Facebook Live appearance in which he claimed that

...there is a seditious “resistance unit” within the CDC that is attempting to sustain the pandemic until after the presidential election — and said that he believes this unit is plotting to murder him. (Said Caputo: “They’re going to have to kill me, and unfortunately, I think that’s where this is going.”) In addition to this targeted assassination, Caputo asserted that left-wing activists are conducting “drills” across the country to prepare to kill Trump supporters in the event that Joe Biden does not win the election.

Per Salon, Trump has now gone far beyond the “very fine people on both sides” dithering to actually encouraging vigilantism and “retribution:”

U.S. marshals shot and killed Reinhoehl near Olympia, Washington, on Sept. 3, and justified the shooting by claiming he had pulled a gun, which at least one witness says is not true. But when Trump discussed the killing, he didn’t even bother with the usual talk about how it was necessary to protect the officers from harm. Instead, he claimed it was justified as “retribution.” And because Trump loves to play-act being a tough guy while avoiding all difficult decisions, he tried to take personal credit for ordering Reinhoehl’s death.

“Two and a half days went by and I put out, when are you going to go get him?” Trump bragged to Fox News host Jeanine Pirro. “That’s the way it has to be. There has to be retribution when you have crime like this.”

Retribution. Not justice.

Meanwhile, Trump continues to politicize mask-wearing, and so we have events like this:

Thousands of people flocked to Freeland, Michigan, Thursday night to hear President Donald Trump make the case for why he deserves a second term in office. Very few among those thousands wore a mask.

There was a New York Times journalist in the crowd, but they threw her out. She had tried to get a press pass so that she could sit in the press area, but her repeated requests were ignored. So, she bought a ticket and went in as a regular rally-goer. They identified her from her posts on Twitter and threw her out, allegedly because she wasn't permitted to do her reporting from outside the press area. That sounds a bit like the infamous "free speech zones" where protesters are encouraged to express their opinions behind chain-link fences.

If you'd like to read something long-form on the current state of the COVID-19 pandemic, and why it is not going away, consider reading this article from The Atlantic, *America Is Trapped in a Pandemic Spiral*, which describes how

The U.S. enters the ninth month of the pandemic with more than 6.3 million confirmed cases and more than 189,000 confirmed deaths. The toll has been enormous because the country presented the SARS-CoV-2 coronavirus with a smörgåsbord of vulnerabilities to exploit. But the toll continues to be enormous—every day, the case count rises by around 40,000 and the death toll by around 800—because the country has consistently thought about the pandemic in the same unproductive ways.

All along, we've needed to take a multi-pronged approach, driven by those well-informed about virology and public health. Instead, as the article describes it, we've engaged in "serial monogamy," briefly romancing one particular solution after the other, rather than pursuing multiple effective strategies simultaneously:

In July, Carl Bergstrom, an epidemiologist and a sociologist of science at the University of Washington, argued that colleges cannot reopen safely without testing all students upon entry. "The gotcha question I've handled most from reporters since is: This school did entry testing, so why did they get an outbreak?" he says. It's because such testing is necessary for a safe reopening, but not sufficient. "If you do it and screw everything else up, you'll still have a big outbreak," Bergstrom adds.

Indeed. It's a well-written article.

There's not a lot of gardening news, as the gardening is starting to wind down for the season. We made a magnificent lamb roast using parsley, rosemary, and thyme from our garden, along with a little garlic. OK, along with a lot of garlic. Perhaps half a pound of garlic.

Work is a slog, bills are coming due, and evening meals have involved an awful lot of screaming by our two youngest children. Evening story time hasn't been going well, as several of the kids are actively boycotting it for one reason or another, and several others have been spending the time loudly protesting it.

I wanted to go back to the café where I used to get sandwiches and coffee, to get takeout. I had only been there once in the last six months, a while ago, and decided it still didn't seem safe.

They've closed. Permanently.

I finally went into my favorite local independent bookstore, for the first time in six months. They are still open, and doing their best to make shopping safe. I bought a number of the books that I would have bought there over the last six months, in the hopes that maybe this will help keep them open. One of them was Jim Butcher's new Dresden Files novel, *Peace Talks*. I've been waiting some time for the next installment in the series and it's a very nice distraction to finally get to read it. I hear Charlie Stross's next Laundry Files novel will be out soon as well. Both of these storylines have gone into quite dark places, which is only fitting. Maybe I'll review one or both of those.

I'd been hoping to start hosting some small, outdoor evening get-togethers, inviting a few people to come and watch movies with us, physically distanced, on our backyard deck. I'm not sure we can go forward with that, though; Michigan is experiencing an outbreak of Eastern Equine Encephalitis, and the mosquitoes are thick and vicious in our neighborhood. Yesterday in the minute or two it took me to leave the house and get in the car, I was bitten three times. On Sunday I was out harvesting herbs, and got over twenty bites, most of them right through my clothes. Even setting up fans, I don't know if we can keep them at bay. Mosquito repellent also seems to be one of the things that is in short supply at local stores, although I suppose we could try to get something by mail-order. Several counties are going to begin rounds of aerial night-time spraying. Ours is not one of them, at least not yet, but there is a horse farm only a few hundred yards away, up the road from our home.

Have a great week!

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