

Wringing Out the Year

Paul R. Potts

31 Dec 2020

Endlessday, Ohnober 366th, 2020

The Nashville Suicide Bombing

Some more information about the bombing in Nashville has come to light. It seems to have been a suicide bombing planned to damage infrastructure. Terrorism includes criminal acts intended to generate terror in the general public for political purposes. Given that the bomber took pains to minimize casualties, I am calling this a suicide bombing rather than a terrorist attack *per se*, since it doesn't seem that terrorism was the main goal, although I have gotten push-back on this already.

I have not heard anything clear about the bomber's political views. The bombing certainly was a violent criminal act, but was it political? The targeted infrastructure was an AT&T building. Was this some kind of an attack against wireless network infrastructure, motivated by conspiracy theories about 5G, and/or an alleged link between 5G and COVID-19? I don't know, and I'm not sure we will ever know.

We're now hearing that someone acquainted with the bomber had taken steps to warn the police that he was building bombs, yet they didn't do anything effective to stop him.

The characterization of the bomber as a "loner," "hermit," or person who "kept to himself" concerns me. These are common tropes applied to information technology workers who tend to be on the intraverted side and, perhaps, somewhere on the "spectrum" of autism. I find it worrying that people like the bomber — and like me — may wind up profiled as potential terrorists.

In my view, someone who commits this kind of violent suicide is by nature suffering from mental illness, and we should be thinking about how to help meet the needs of people like this who are isolated and, perhaps, slipping towards mental illness, fed by conspiracy theories promoted by groups like QAnon. The pandemic and our gigantic failure to protect ourselves certainly can't have helped.

The New COVID-19 Strain

I'm starting to read troubling information about another strain of COVID-19 that may be more infectious than the earlier strains. I'm cautiously waiting for authoritative, peer-reviewed articles, but preliminary data is very worrying:

We estimate that VOC 202012/01 is 56% more transmissible (95% credible interval across three regions 50-74%) than preexisting variants of SARS-CoV-2.

But fortunately:

We were unable to find clear evidence that VOC 202012/01 results in greater or lesser severity of disease than preexisting variants.

What would a greater transmissibility mean? It's hard to say yet, but:

Our estimates suggest that control measures of a similar stringency to the national lockdown implemented in England in November 2020 are unlikely to reduce the effective reproduction number R_t to less than 1, unless primary schools, secondary schools, and universities are also closed.

Someone I follow on Twitter, Tomas Pueyo, broke down what he thinks this means. I don't know just what kind of authority he is, and his comments should be taken as speculative at this point, but I do think it's important to look ahead at what might be coming in 2021. I have edited his comments, taken from several tweets:

If it's 60% more infectious, R_0 has gone from 2.7 to about 4.3 on average. Countries that stopped the virus from spreading got R_0 from 2.7 to 1... now they need to reduce R_0 by about 75%. But remember: all the low-hanging fruit is already used (masks, social distancing). The next measures are all more expensive. We just went from herd immunity reached at about 60% of the population (through vaccines or recoveries) to reaching it at about 75-80%... it also means a delay in herd immunity from vaccines. If a country with 10% of the population recovered expected to vaccinate 5% of the population per month, immunity would be reached by about September. Now it would take until December or January.

There's more, and it isn't encouraging.

I've recently read that the strain has been identified in Colorado and California, and it was detected in people who have not recently traveled, meaning that it is already spreading in communities in America.

Grace and I are wondering if we can get our hands on N95 masks. We haven't sought them out, primarily because we didn't want to ever wind up taking masks for our own protection that are actually needed by medical personnel. I've been feeling pretty comfortable with our risk mitigation efforts that involve using

the non-medical masks and careful distancing, staying away from groups in poorly-ventilated spaces. But I think we've got to improve our game, especially through to spring. We are trying to give up going into stores at all. If I can completely avoid going into the office while other employees are present, I will, although I'm not sure I can; sometimes we do actually need to work together.

The Vaccines

The vaccine roll-out is showing signs of not meeting early projections, as far as the numbers of people actually vaccinated. There are many reasons for that, but the biggest one seems to be a lack of Federal funding, leaving broke states to try to organize and pay for vaccine distribution.

Obviously it is still early in the process, but this is a story I'm following closely, because it will help us understand when it might be our turn to get vaccinated, without taking doses that might benefit someone else who is at higher risk than we are.

Although it hasn't been good for anyone's mental health, simply being *able* to lock down and stock up isolate ourselves the way we are reflects our privileges, privileges that many other people don't necessarily have. Of course the aggravating part of that analysis is the number of people who *could* isolate, but don't, because they find it unpleasant or inconvenient, rather than a requirement to pay for rent or food.

We're also now pawns in the stimulus check shell game, and that's fun too, I suppose. We don't need it to be able to pay our mortgage and pay for food, at the moment, but we certainly could make good use of it. If we receive money, at least some of it will probably go immediately towards repairing or replacing our oven. And we've got a pile of bills including the heating repair bill from December. I'm planning to send them half this month and hope that they will accept the rest in a month.

On to Less Grim Subjects

As I write this on Tuesday, December 29th, we're still waiting on delivery of *Captain America: Civil War*. I ordered the disc on December 11th, from a seller in Sterling Heights, Michigan (about fifty miles away). The online tracking shows that it left the Sterling Heights post office on December 14th. There were no updates until the 24th, when it was marked as "PROCESSED THROUGH USPS FACILITY" in Pontiac. Then on the 27th, it was marked as "DEPART USPS FACILITY" in Pontiac. Then on the 28th, it was marked (again) as "DEPART USPS FACILITY" in Pontiac, then "PROCESSED THROUGH USPS FACILITY" in Detroit. We might get it by the first, but I'm not holding my breath. The kids are adamant that we can't watch *Avengers: Infinity War* and *Avengers: Endgame* until we've seen *Civil War*. So, we're waiting.

I can't really complain too hard about the mail — after all, we're waiting on a

movie, not urgently needed medication, or something like that. And all the rest of our late packages have showed up.

We've been staying home all day, almost every day. On Sunday I went in to the empty office to work on some code for a while. I went back in for a while Tuesday evening. No one was demanding that I come in, but I needed to get away — I'm just not used to being around the toddlers all day, every day, and it was starting to get to me. Then, yesterday, Grace and I went out to pick up a few groceries from Meijer, using curbside pickup.

Our plan for 2021 is to use curbside and parking-lot pickup as much as possible, and go into stores as little as possible, for as short a period of time as possible. However, we are not going to support companies that use services like Instacart to do this. That “disruptor” business model, similar to the one used by Uber, is just not something we want to support. People who work for these services are not classified as employees, and often receive what is effectively less than minimum wage. We have learned that Meijer stores are actually hiring additional, unionized, regular employees to offer their parking-lot pickup, so we will be using them as much as we can. For financial reasons I don't feel that we can give up warehouse-style stores like Costco and GFS altogether for bulk items, but we're looking for alternate sources for much of our foods, even if we have to drive much farther to do the pick-ups.

Even though our oven is down, we did manage to make a very nice Boston brown bread with cornmeal, almond meal, and molasses in the Instant Pot. I toasted half of that loaf for breakfast, and it was good. Then Elanor got her hands on the rest of the loaf, and destroyed it. Grace salvaged the smashed-up bread by adding persimmons, dried plums, walnuts, almonds, coconut, cranberries, and goat cheese, turning it into a sweet bread pudding, and made a hard sauce to go with it. But we wanted something the kids could use to make sandwiches with our lunchmeat, so we made a run to Meijer for parking-lot pickup, and got a number of loaves of Italian bread. This morning I made myself a couple of fried egg sandwiches.

Wringing Out the Year

Yes, I meant to write “wringing,” not “ringing.” This year hasn't been a ringing success in any sense, but having mopped up the mess as best I can, I am now trying to wring out what droplets of joy I can and recall the good that happened. So, I'm going to close out the 2020 newsletters by mentioning a few things that made my year bearable.

Better Homes and Gardens

A major source of joy and sanity this year was the opportunity to work on our garden projects, work largely spearheaded by Joy. If you've been reading these newsletters over the course of the year, you're probably sick of hearing me rave out our herbs and tomatoes and greens and flowering plants. I won't try to recap

all the wonderful things we grew and how much satisfaction they gave us, but it was the most gardening we've done since we had our beds going in Saginaw, before I lost my job and we things got difficult.

A second source of joy and sanity was the baking. It took many attempts to get the kids up to speed, and right now our oven remains broken, but the kids have learned to make bread successfully and nearly without supervision, making us just a little bit less reliant on commercially-made bread. Veronica's spice cookies have also been a very nice treat.

Columbo

Grace and I enjoyed old episodes of *Columbo* this year. We haven't watched all that many, only working our way through the first season, but these episodes are wonderful. I think my single favorite episode from the first season is number six, the one called "Short Fuse," guest-starring Roddy McDowall. McDowall is the heir to a chemical company who rigs up an elaborate car bomb in a cigar box. Besides the intricate plots and the acting, I really love watching what was considered stylish cinematography and editing at the time — it's often very pretentious, but also really enjoyable to watch. And I love just looking at the world of these films, including the very ordinary street and interior scenes, because so much of what we see is long-gone. Just looking at the furniture and cars and clothes is fascinating.

I discussed a few episodes of *Columbo* back in the May 2nd issue of this newsletter.

Steven Wilson's Remixes

I've mentioned a number of Yes albums already, and I wrote about XTC's *Skylarking*, but music really helped me get through 2020, especially the music of Yes, and especially Steven Wilson's remixes of classic Yes albums. I've been listening to Wilson's versions of *The Yes Album*, *Fragile*, *Close to the Edge*, *Tales from Topographic Oceans*, and *Relayer*, and his meticulous work is a huge improvement over the technologically-limited original mixes that pushed the envelope of what could be done with analog consoles and tape machines back in the day.

Star Trek: Lower Decks

The kids and I had a good time watching the first season of a light-hearted, hilarious animated *Star Trek* series. I wrote briefly about it in the September 9th issue.

Over the Garden Wall

The kids and I loved this animated miniseries from 2014. I wrote briefly about it in the November 10th issue.

Films

I particularly recall and appreciate watching the following films:

- *Until the End of the World* (discussed in the January 5th and January 19th issues)
- *Shin Godzilla* (discussed in the January 26th issue)
- *Weathering with You* (discussed in the February 9th issue)
- *Zatoichi: The Blind Swordsman* (set of 25 films; discussed in the June 21st issue, and others)
- *Wayne's World* (discussed in the August 3rd issue)
- *The Blues Brothers* (discussed in the August 3rd issue)
- *Drunken Master* (discussed in the August 18th issue)
- *A Shot in the Dark* (discussed in the November 10th issue)
- *Mad Max: Fury Road* (discussed in the November 18th issue)
- *Big Night* (discussed in the November 18th issue)
- *Captain America: The First Avenger* (discussed in the December 19th issue)

There are a few more films that we watched that were especially memorable, but I did not get around to writing about them. We showed the kids *Black Stallion*, the 1979 film, using the Criterion Collection Blu-ray. That's a gorgeous film.

We also showed them *Amadeus*, the 1984 film, on Blu-ray, the Director's Cut. I have not seen it in decades and was concerned that the kids would be bored. In fact they weren't bored at all. It is even more enjoyable than I remember, and I like the additions for the Director's Cut. The film is not terribly accurate, strictly speaking, and takes great liberties with the available historic facts about the lives of Mozart and Salieri. But the movie is so engaging that it is hard to be upset about that. When I watched *Amadeus* in college, it was not my first exposure to opera or classical music, but it was one of the earliest stories that encouraged me to think about the personalities *behind* operas and classical works, and the cultures and time periods that produced them.

Operas

Speaking of operas, we saw a number of operas in 2020. One of the last things I saw in a theater before going into lockdown was the Met's live stream of *Agrippina*. We also watched, or at least partially watched, a number of the Met's free online streams — they have been an amazing gift. Of these operas, we especially enjoyed:

- *Porgy and Bess* (viewed in a theater; discussed in the February 9th issue)
- *Agrippina* (viewed in a theater; discussed in the March 8th issue)
- *Das Rheingold* (viewed online; discussed in the March 30th issue)
- *Il Barbiere di Siviglia* (viewed online; discussed in the April 5th issue)
- *Don Pasquale* (viewed online; discussed in the April 12th issue)
- *La Sonnabula* (viewed online; discussed in the May 31st issue)

- *Hänsel und Gretel* (viewed online; discussed in the June 13th issue)

Books

It just hasn't been a great year for reading, especially compared to previous years. I'm not even going to try to reconstruct a list of what I read this year, because the list is so pathetically short, and of the books I started to read, I finished only an embarrassingly small fraction of them. But I did note a few books that I especially enjoyed:

- *Becoming Superman* by J. Michael Straczynski (discussed in the February 9th issue)
- *The Complete Book of Nonsense* by Edward Lear (discussed in the August 3rd issue)
- *Dead Lies Dreaming* by Charles Stross (discussed in the December 6th issue)

I also greatly enjoyed reading stories from some of the many science fiction story anthologies I picked up over the course of the year (discussed in the August 9th issue).

And, finally, I also enjoyed reading George Orwell's essays (I discussed my shelf full of Orwell in the August 18th issue).

Wring In the New

We have a lot of things on our agenda for 2021. First and foremost is to try to keep everyone safe and sane.

Infrastructure

I've waited most of the year to try to acquire more of the bookcases that I want from IKEA. They were briefly available earlier in December, but only for a few days, and then the inventory ran out again. I had hoped to get out to IKEA after work one night and buy several of them, but I wound up working late several nights that week, so it didn't happen. I am hoping that next year I will be able to get more books out of storage — hopefully, my books, Grace's books, and Joy's books as well — setting up at least the beginnings of a community library.

I've got to find ways to make progress on setting up the basement space so it is really, truly usable — with shared workshop space, office space, Zoom space, and workout space.

The fancy ergonomic keyboard I bought earlier in the year is unfortunately not working very well. It's developed a problem with keys that get stuck repeating, and the problem has gotten worse over time. So I need to solve that. Solving it might involve ordering another one to use while returning the one I have for

repair. It's not exactly what I want to do, but I really don't want to lose access to this keyboard, which really has helped me work more comfortably.

After upgrading my Mac Pro to El Capitan (MacOS X version 10.11), my computer has given me constant grief. Four different FireWire and USB audio interfaces no longer work reliably at all, where they used to be extremely reliable. The supplied Mail application crashes constantly, sometimes just when I'm scrolling through messages. The Photos application is very "bursty," freezing briefly, when scrolling through pictures. The system log is constantly filling up with obscure errors. I've mentioned the audio glitching problem.

It is enough to make me concerned that my system hard drive is failing. I keep multiple backups, so I'm not terribly worried about losing data, but replacing drives is a pain. But no — having run all kinds of checks, there's no evidence that the drive itself, an SSD, is failing. And searching for people reporting crashes in the mail application included with El Capitan yields many, many people reporting similar problems. Apple shipped a crappy, poorly-tested OS release, and they are no longer patching it. And in addition, later versions of the OS won't install on my 2008 Mac Pro at all, although the hardware is still going strong.

It's enough to make me want to go backwards, to the most reliable operating system I ever used, which was Snow Leopard. But that's really not easy to do.

I've been using Windows 10 on a laptop bought from Costco a couple of years ago and it's been quite reliable, although it keeps bugging to sign up for cloud services, and the pressure ramps up with each unwanted OS update that I don't seem to be able to opt out of. One of the nice things about Windows 10 is that I can still install iTunes on it, and this means I can share music from the music library on my Mac Pro. That works wonderfully, and I love this feature, and so of course Apple has eliminated this feature in later versions of their operating system along with support for iTunes.

We've been using Linux on three other computers in the house and desktop Linux doesn't seem to be improving, as far as I can see. It isn't really the fault of the Linux developers. It's the fault of the hardware vendors who refuse to support open-source developers. So our old used Dell PC still doesn't reliably send audio through the HDMI port, and throws system errors all the time, and we have to reboot it frequently to get the audio back. The two HP laptops I bought to run Linux work, mostly, except that the microphones don't work, so we can't use them for Zoom, and they also throw system errors all the time. Certain things are also strangely unreliable; they won't re-connect to a Wi-fi network on login. There are a lot of annoying user interface glitches. For example, when I use the "Connect to Hidden Wi-Fi Network..." command from the drop-down menu, apparently nothing happens. This is because the system opens a window allowing me to choose a network, but it opens it *behind* whatever other windows I have open. I apply updates constantly, but it seems that nothing is ever fixed.

I'd like to do some computer infrastructure upgrades in our household in 2021.

It's probably time to retire my 2008 Mac Pro. I'd like to try one of the new M1-equipped Mac Mini machines, because they really are probably quiet enough to use right in my studio room while recording. This would allow me to keep using Logic, which I've been using since the 1990s, rather than rendering all my existing music projects obsolete and trying to learn a new workflow from scratch.

But decades of experience tell me that if I don't want to watch things crash constantly, I'd probably be better off waiting until the next generation of these machines is available, with "M2" processors. I'm tempted instead to spend much less and buy a 2012 Mac Pro, the last PC-shaped model before they went to the round one (which you might charitably call jet engine-shaped, or uncharitably call trash can-shaped; because these things are very unreliable, I lean towards the latter).

I'm just not feeling confident about either Apple or Microsoft these days; I'd love to go entirely open-source, but having used Linux on at least a dozen machines since the nineties, I'm still just not impressed with the reliability and integration of software and hardware.

Miscellany

I'm going to have to bug an eBay seller that took back a defective imported CD, several months ago, but never reimbursed me for it.

We're going to have to figure out how to get a working oven; it might wind up being more cost-effective to just buy a new oven.

We're going to have to get some repairs done on the Suburban.

I really don't know how things are going to go, at work, in 2021. The long-delayed TLX3 laser product I've been working on for over a year will be completed. There's a line item in the 2021 budget to allow me to hire a less-senior software engineer to help me with my workload, but I really don't quite know how I'll be able to do that, as the pandemic continues to rage. It will be interesting.

Reader, my fondest hope is that by this time next year, we'll all be a bit safer and saner. I think things are going to improve only very slowly, but I do see signs that they might improve. Thank you all so much for reading, providing me a small outlet for my compulsive graphomania.

I may take a break from these newsletters, as I feel the need to do something different in 2021. I haven't quite figured out what it should be, though. I'll keep you posted!

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