

Transmission Received

Paul R. Potts

26 Jan 2022

It's the evening of January 26th, 2022 and I'm taking a moment to catch my breath and start on a newsletter. I'm writing this on one of the shared HP laptops that I bought a couple of years ago. This is the one that still has a working trackpad and a screen that isn't cracked, although since the kids use it, there is some kind of gunk all over the screen.

That Was the Week that Was

Last week was hard, and we're still recovering a bit. To explain why last week was hard, I have to go back another week.

On January 8th, we went to County Farm Park to take a short hike in the woods with some other families Grace knows. She had arranged these outdoor get-togethers so that Grace and I, and our kids, could get out and get a little exercise and talk to people in a setting we believed was about as COVID-safe as could be. We were outside; the people we were meeting up with were also cautious about COVID; we couldn't ask for better air circulation; we were masked, just in case someone was infected and didn't know it; and we maintained our distance from each other.

It was a lovely walk. Only two other small families showed up, but it was a beautiful day. Only one of our kids was willing to come with us, so there were just three Pottses. There were about ten of us in total. Our child played with another younger child on an outdoor play structure for a while. We did notice that the younger child wasn't great about keeping their mask properly on, but that's not unusual at all. It's not really fair to expect very young children to manage personal protective equipment. We knew there was a small risk of transmission between the children since they were closer together than the adults, but we thought the risk was pretty small.

Chilblains

The only thing that really went wrong, I thought a few days later, was that I hike so rarely these days that I no longer have decent hiking boots. So I wore sneakers, and my toes got very cold. Not cold enough to get frostbite, but

apparently cold enough to trigger another after-effect of cold exposure that is milder and less immediate than frostbite, and which shows up several days later, a condition called chilblains. My toes started to feel burned, and became visibly red and slightly swollen for several days. This kind of thing never happened to me when I was younger, even when I got my feet cold and wet under similar circumstances. I really didn't expect it, but several age-related conditions have snuck up on me a bit.

When it showed up, I was actually wondering if I might have a condition called "COVID toes." But I had taken a home antigen tests a few days after the hike, my only known exposure risk, and the result was negative. So it seems like chilblains from cold exposure was the most likely diagnosis. If the problem had gotten worse or persisted, I would have sought medical attention, but after keeping my toes warm in socks and slippers for a couple of days they seemed to improve, so I didn't think much more about it. Grace ordered me a pair of warm hiking boots to try, and some nice warm hiking socks to use next time.

Transmission Received

We've been nervously watching the progress of the panemic and the Omicron variant, hoping especially to keep our daughter Elanor, who is at elevated risk due to her Down Syndrome and related congenital heart defect (surgically repaired, but still a risk factor). Because she was not yet five, we had not been able to get her vaccinated yet. We suspect that our whole family may have had an early COVID infection prior to the March 2020 lockdown, but there's no way to know for sure at this point, so we have to operate under the assumption that she hasn't had a prior exposure. We've been considering how, in the spring, when case counts drop, and Elanor is fully vaccinated, we'll feel a little safer, collectively. But we've just trying to make sure everyone stays healthy until then. Malachi also can't be vaccinated yet. COVID does occasionally produce severe symptoms in toddlers, but since he has no special risk factors, his risk of serious illness if infected is extremely low. So he is not our biggest worry at present; Elanor is.

Quarantine

We were mildly surprised, but not actually shocked, when on Saturday, January 15th, exactly one week after our hike, our son complained of a headache, and so we tested him with a home antigen test — and he tested positive. And so, we decided that we needed to implement an internal quarantine within our home. The three of us who went on the hike locked ourselves up in our bedroom and bathroom, told the kids not to come into our room without masks on, and to use the upstairs bathroom, and then did our best to remain masked and isolated for the next week.

I did not feel great myself, and did briefly show a low-grade fever, but I didn't ever test positive on antigen tests.

Give me Steam

It was a really boring week. Our son is a very active kid. He loves to play video games, so we let him play a lot of video games on the new mini-PC, Melchior, in our bedroom. Melchior is not really “gaming PC,” as it doesn’t have a high-end video card by any means, but it does a perfectly acceptable job of playing games that were created years ago for much older PCs, or for games deliberately designed to be “retro.”

Portal

I played Portal for the first time. I’ve had the game in my Steam account since 2013, but back in Saginaw I didn’t ever actually play it myself, but instead watched the kids play. And I hadn’t signed into my Steam account since at least 2015. Honestly I was pleasantly surprised that after a password reset and some two-factor authentication to prove it was my account, I could sign in again and my handful of Steam games were still there, ready to play.

How did I do? I’m currently stalled in level 18, which I’m told is the hardest level. Years ago I would have worked obsessively on the game until I solved it, but some of my obsessions have simply faded over the years, perhaps to be replaced by other obsessions.

When I installed Steam again, and got into my account, I also put a small amount of money into my Steam account and bought a couple newer games for the kids to play. My son is really enjoying an open-world role-playing game with very old-school graphics called Terraria.

Terraria

Terraria is sort of a 2-dimensional cross between Minecraft and the old-school role-playing games of the Ultima series. The graphics are blocky and use a limited number of colors, but the developers have done wonderful things with this deliberate limitations, including gorgeous lighting effects. The worlds to explore are very large and there are many, many monsters to fight and treasures and items to find. You can also mine raw materials and combine them to build things. So my son had a great time mining and building an elaborate mine-cart railway that extended for miles. He also made some pets of ghosts. The music in Terraria is fantastic, like the best audio that could be created with a high-end sound card in 1990. Terraria *looks* like a game you could have played on a PC in 1990. But because modern computers can push so many more pixels, and our 4K display is widescreen, it’s like a 1990 game opened up to be many, many times larger and more inviting.

VVVVVV

I also really enjoyed playing a very inexpensive, extremely old-school platform game called VVVVVV. (Yes, the name consists of six vees. The names of the

characters in the game are Viridian, Vitellary, Violet, Vermillion, Verdigris, and Victoria.) I like this game because it is very low-resolution, using blocky graphics, modeled after the graphics of the original Commodore 64 home computer. The gameplay is quite difficult, but fortunately there are checkpoints everywhere, so when your character dies, which happens constantly, you only have to replay the last few seconds of the game. So in a gaming session you might die dozens or hundreds of times as you try to get through difficult rooms. If you find this frustrating, you can also cheat: there's an "invulnerable" mode. You can also slow down the gameplay to make it much easier to perform the elaborate jumps that are needed to get through some of the game rooms.

In VVVVVV, the soundtrack is designed to sound like it was created by the original Commodore 64 sound chip, called the SID. This is particularly nostalgic for me because I had a Commodore 64, back in the day, and a variety of programs to create music with it, including a program called Music Construction Set, and I also learned to program the SID chip directly to create custom sounds. SID chips are still highly prized by some musicians and often emulated by people who love the old "chiptunes" sounds that could be created with these unusual partially-analog, partially-digital devices.

We made it through the weekend, and fortunately it was a 3-day weekend and I had Martin Luther King Jr. Day off. So I didn't have to figure out what to do about my job until Tuesday. I wound up taking my work laptop up to the upstairs bedroom and working up there, with a blanket wrapped around me, and the laptop sitting on a box on the floor. I told my co-workers what was going on and they were quite understanding. I worked a slightly reduced schedule last week, although even that reduced schedule was hard, because I still had lots of scheduled meetings and things I needed to get done. So, I've unfortunately fallen behind in my work, and that's never a good feeling.

The Kids Step Up

We asked a lot of the rest of the kids. For the most part, they stepped up — they made sure the babies had their diapers changed regularly and got their teeth brushed. They made sure everyone was fed. Veronica put together several dinners. The three of us in quarantine didn't leave the bedroom without putting masks on, and we spent as little time as possible out in the other parts of the house. To reduce possible viral load on each other, as we didn't know who might be developing an infection and who might be spreading one, we also wore masks *in* the room much of the time, although my son and I were not able to sleep with masks on. We kept the windows partially open, part of the time, for additional air circulation, although I did frequently get too cold and shut them up for a while. Grace did need to nurse Malachi a couple of times a day, and we had to go out make coffee in the mornings. We got takeout a couple of times and ordered pizza once. Once a day I went out and took everyone's temperature and measured their blood oxygenation level, and quizzed them briefly about any symptoms they might be showing. No one else was sick. I didn't want to test

everyone, since that's a lot of tests, but we tested Veronica every couple of days, and she never had a positive test.

Test Results

We also went to get PCR tests. The three of us went to a pop-up PCR testing facility for saliva tests, the day after my son's positive antigen test. Here's where things get strange. All three of us tested negative on the PCR.

So, the next day we tested our son again, and he had a second positive antigen test.

So, we then had a telemedicine appointment for him with his regular provider, and they had him come in and take another PCR test — a nasal swab test. They met him and his mom right out in the parking lot to administer the test rather than bring him into the building. We had to wait a couple more days to get the result, but that PCR was also negative.

A couple of days later we went ahead and used up a lot of our precious antigen tests and tested everyone. Everyone was still negative except our son, although the red stripe on his third test was quite faint.

Leaving Quarantine

At this point, having been in our best-we-can-manage internal quarantine for 7 days, we decided to end it the next day, and so Sunday afternoon, January 23rd, we gave our son a bath and a haircut and the three of us resumed our regular contact with the rest of the family.

We had a lot of cleaning up to do. During the week they had relied very heavily on our video collection to keep the younger kids distracted, and their schedule had shifted even further out of sync with our schedule; they were staying up to watch movies half the night, and then sleeping until early afternoon. So we've been trying to drag them back into sync with the rest of us so that I can maintain a sane work schedule.

The Testing Conundrum

So, what happened exactly? As far as I can tell, and this is really just my best guess based on what I've read and heard about the various tests, my son really did catch a “breakthrough” case of COVID-19, probably the Omicron variant, despite being fully vaccinated. Fortunately he had only extremely mild symptoms. We did hear from their family that one of the children who was with us on our walk also tested positive. It seems that the transmission likely took place via their young child, who was attending school and probably got it there.

If there had been only a single positive antigen test, I might have dismissed it as a false positive, as I did with my own single positive antigen test last summer. (It's possible it wasn't a false positive — that it did in fact register the tail end

of an asymptomatic infection with the Delta variant). But our son had *three* consecutive positive tests. The odds of three false positives in a row, after a confirmed exposure, are really too low to consider that a likely explanation at all.

Keep in mind, the antigen tests are a *lagging* indicator: they register antigens indicating that the tested person's immune system has been fighting a COVID virus. The PCR test registers positive faster; it indicates the presence of fragments of the COVID virus RNA in saliva or mucus.

It's hard to be sure, but I think what *might* have happened is that our son's vaccine-boosted immune system had largely fought off the virus during the week, and he didn't really even have any symptoms to report. By the time he complained of a headache a week after exposure, he wasn't shedding any viral RNA to register on a PCR. But there was still the antigen aftermath of his immune system's fight with COVID.

As for us not passing it on to anyone else in the household — well, the vaccines may have helped. I was vaxxed and recently boosted. And we *did* quarantine, I didn't think we started early enough or quarantined well enough, though, so I think it is possible that my son *did* spread Omicron, but no one else developed enough of an infection to show symptoms or trigger a positive antigen test. Or, since Omicron is very easy to transmit, maybe we just got lucky. I'd say that if my son had been fully symptomatic that first week, the odds of him *not* transmitting it to his siblings would have been very low.

Fraudulent PCR Tests

Maybe the PCR tests weren't reliable. They're supposed to be the gold standard of tests, but there have been a lot of fraudulent PCR testing sites out there recently. It's possible that the pop-up testing site in the strip mall parking lot that we used just threw our samples in the trash, billed our insurance, and sent us a fake negative test result.

It seems less likely that the second test administered through our regular provider was fake or fraudulent in some way, but I suppose that's also possible.

I'm wondering if our insurance company is going to make us pay for the second test on the grounds that they don't think it was necessary.

Last year we were able to get boxes of free antigen tests from the Washtenaw County Department of Public Health — I believe we went through at least three boxes of 25 tests each over the course of the year. But testing the whole family like we finally did, before we cleared ourselves to leave quarantine, uses a lot of tests. So normally we'd use the strategically, only testing one person a time a couple of days after a likely exposure, when that person was most likely to trigger a positive test result if they were actually infected. Because Grace and I are the ones who had to go out and do things like take the kids to doctor visits or go into an office, that meant Grace and I were usually the ones taking the tests.

We don't seem to be able to get any more free tests from the county, and tests are both expensive and in short supply, although if the pandemic response had been at all sane and effective, they'd be widely available and either free or very inexpensive.

The Biden administration is sending out up to four tests to addresses that request them. We requested them. We haven't gotten them yet.

We used, I think, at least fifteen tests during the month of January, while we were trying to monitor the situation in our household. Obviously we wouldn't use that many normally, but equally obviously, four tests for a household of *ten people* do not really comprise an adequate supply. And how long are those four tests supposed to last — the rest of Biden's administration, I suppose? Until the midterms? I have no idea — but this is completely inadequate. It is better than nothing, and they will claim that it is everything that we can reasonably expect, and therefore if we demand more, we are being unreasonable.

We can just hope that by time the next variant is producing another wave, probably in late summer, tests will be readily available.

Oh, and I also finally found a source for decent N95 masks, made in Indiana. I ordered three boxes of 25, for about a dollar each. I did this just a couple of days before the Biden administration finally announced that they will make masks widely available — another bold move, and an awfully late one.

In just under two months, it'll be the two-year anniversary of the start of our first major lockdown period, when I first began working from home, and then was put on furlough for three months, when the national unemployment rate went through the roof.

Meanwhile, so many people are saying they are done with the pandemic. The daily death tolls indicate that the pandemic isn't done with them, and likely isn't done with us, either. I am starting to feel a bit safer due to the success of the vaccine at reducing the rate of serious illness. But we are going to continue to do what we can to avoid transmission, and we'll be watching the numbers to determine if we might be willing to consider small gatherings later this year, perhaps including the small indoor gatherings we haven't been able to participate in for over two years.

Oh, and we keep inviting friends over for outdoor bonfires — but they keep telling us that they can't come because a co-worker was just infected, or they just had some other exposure, or near-miss. The virus is still everywhere, and even if it still seems to be killing people at a lower rate per infected person now, because so many people are becoming infected, there is still a lot of death. And we don't really know for sure how much long-term disability will result from this wave.

Elanor's Birthday

Elanor's fifth birthday was Monday January 24th. She didn't seem to have a favorite home-cooked meal, but her food preferences seemed to indicate that she wanted takeout chicken nuggets. So, that's what she got. We had bags of Culver's chicken nuggets and fries for dinner, along with another Elanor favorite, mashed potatoes and gravy, and some containers of steamed broccoli to help counteract the effects of all those chicken nuggets and fries. Elanor's cake was a banana split cake — Grace made a wonderful 3-layer cake with vanilla, chocolate, and strawberry layers, with banana pudding between the layers, and iced with non-dairy whipped cream. It was a thing of beauty, and quite tasty, even for the grown-ups, since she had made it relatively low in sugar, but high in flavor. And Elanor didn't seem to want to eat any. But that's all right.

She's now old enough to be vaccinated, and so I am feeling a slight sense of relief, as her risk of serious illness, should she catch COVID, will be markedly lower, at least while the vaccine-induced immunity lasts, which may not be that long; that part is still a bit unclear. Even if the full immunity doesn't last very long, her immune system should no longer find Omicron, or a future variant, quite so "novel," and so should be at least somewhat prepared to fight it before it can trigger the widespread inflammatory response and vascular damage, as well as other forms of damage we're only really just beginning to understand, that makes it so dangerous; more dangerous, by the numbers, than poliomyelitis was.

Potts Kid Update

I've gotten some requests to bring readers up to date on our seven kids at home. So, I wrote a few notes. Grace reviewed them with me and helped suggest some things to add and some things to remove. So, here are brief updates:

Veronica

Veronica is seventeen years old, which still seems ridiculous to me — how did this happen? — and is a twenty-first century punk rocker. Her favorite possession is her old iPod Touch, which is loaded with music from Twenty-One Pilots, My Chemical Romance, The Used, and similar bands. She is planning to go to her first big concert this summer. One of us has to go with her. That's a slightly daunting thought now that both Grace and I are... well, past the age when we would likely choose to attend a big, loud rock show. She's developed an Instagram persona and is now tweeting. Years and years ago, I made her a Twitter account. Her original username was **@veronicaruth**, but she changed it. When she took over her old account, it led to this amusing set of tweets:

Dad is setting up my account. He will have to type for me until I can read. (I posted this in 2009.)

I can now read. (She posted this on January 1st, 2022.)

Veronica is quite the artist, specializing in Manga-style portraits, and has also been writing fan fiction and stories. She has a Tumblr blog, and also briefly became “Reddit-famous” for a thread of pictures of her and her mom, when they were dressed up as Bucky Barnes and Captain America for Halloween.

Sam (Samuel)

Sam, fifteen, has the distinction of having the largest hair in the Potts family. He’s grown it into an enormous afro, a wonder to behold, as it makes him seem even taller than he is. Because he has grown so quickly, it is hard to keep him in pants that fit. He spends a lot of time writing in his journal and drawing. He has also been creating videogames with the Scratch programming language, and is working on a video project with his brother Joshua. He is very diligent when it comes to chores and has quite a serious manner. He likes to muse on abstract philosophical matters and enjoys reading *Current Affairs* magazine, as well as my back issues of *The Baffler*. He has begun enjoying a little coffee, but it does not seem to have stunted his growth. Sam gets out for a long walk in the neighborhood about four times a week.

Josh (Joshua)

Josh, thirteen, is the only Potts child to wear glasses and the first to need braces. He wears rather fetching green frames. Josh is good with technology and has been teaching himself how to use animation programs to create two-dimensional animated videos. He is working with Sam on a YouTube channel. His handwriting is terrible and he hates to do his homework, but makes up for it by being a shockingly quick study. He likes to read stories about zombies, the *Diary of a Wimpy Kid* series, and the *Hunger Games* series, and is still the class clown of the Potts House.

Pippin (Daniel)

Pippin, ten, puts a lot of work into hand-made costumes and props, such as suits of armor and swords, often made from leftover cardboard and foam, along with a lot of duct tape and hot glue. He is getting quite tall and loves the color yellow. Pippin has a sweet tooth and loves candy more than anyone we’ve ever met, although fortunately his teeth remain cavity-free. Pippin is usually quiet, but recently has become an expert at creating puns during mealtime, producing a combination of groans and laughter. Once a very picky eater, he now likes a much larger variety of foods, and slathers most of them with hot sauce. He recently completed reading the Harry Potter series.

Bilby (Benjamin)

Benjamin, eight, and loves the outdoors, especially the woods. He is on a first-name basis with many bugs as well as bees and caterpillars. He is a big fan of

trees and plants that attract pollinators. He's got his own apple tree, although it doesn't seem to doing very well, so we might need to get him another one. He is also a fan of video games, movies, and candy. Benjamin does not like movies he considers "scary," although sometimes it is hard to predict what will be scary for him, as he loves watching monster movies and Kung Fu movies.

Ellie Nellie Nor (Elanor)

Elanor just turned five. She is non-verbal, but very communicative, expressing herself through gestures, facial expressions, and wordless singing. She loves to run around and jump and, sometimes, climb the walls, literally. She is remarkably muscular and strong and can hold her body in amazing gymnastic poses. She loves pink and likes to play dress-up and choose her own outfits. She also loves to help in the kitchen and will happily wash and chop vegetables. She has excellent knife skills.

Chi (Malachi)

Malachi is three years old and is now talking quite a bit, often speaking in complete sentences and using a surprisingly large vocabulary. He's a very energetic little boy and does not like to wear much clothing or take "no" for an answer. He still nurses sometimes, but seems to be nearly done with that stage of his childhood. He sometimes sleeps in a bed in the boys' shared bedroom now. When he doesn't like something, he will let you know in no uncertain terms, yelling "I don't LIKE it!" For a time, all his "nos" were "no NOPE!" He never seems to be cold, even when the rest of us are shivering. He likes to stay up late, which often makes our evenings a bit difficult, and if he falls asleep in our bed, it makes for a rough night, since he has a habit of constantly flinging his limbs in all directions while he is sleeping.

The Back Catalog

I've been slowly cleaning up and editing mountains of my old writing — over a million words — and putting it on our hosted web site.

The NAS server I described last time is still working great, and the small Intel mini-PCs are working great too. So when I do my writing and editing work now, I'm using my new workflow. When I save this file, it's saved on the server, and when I generate the HTML files or upload them to my hosted web site, I do this by running commands on Balthasar, the tiny build server sitting on a shelf in my basement office. I'm using the laptops and other PCs just as "thin clients" using Microsoft Visual Studio Code. None of the source files live on these computers. It's a workflow I can live with, and continue to improve over time. It means that if any of these computers or laptops fail, I can easily replace them, as they have no irreplaceable files on them, and everything on the server is backed up multiple times, both on hard hard drives in our home, and also using a cloud backup service.

You can read some of the edited newsletters and blog posts on my writing archive web site.

Have a great week!

About This Newsletter

This content is available for your use under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0 International License. If you'd like to help feed my coffee habit, you can leave me a tip via PayPal. Thanks!