

I Was Told There Would Be Carrots

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Hello, Dear Readers — it’s been a while. I hope you are keeping safe and staying well.

I’m writing today in my relocated home office, at my standing desk, which is set to a height of 42.4 inches. I’ve been meaning for some time to bring this desk upstairs, but it was a fairly big job to clear the computer gear off it (including a very large monitor with an adjustable stand that clamps onto the back of the desktop), make space for it upstairs, partially disassemble the desk itself, bring the pieces upstairs, and get it reassembled. I’m happy that I was able to disassemble it without having to take out the wood screws that attach the bamboo top to the frame. Instead it is possible to take the frame apart without too much difficulty by removing 4mm machine screws. I am favorably impressed by how well this desk, an Uplift brand “V2-Commercial” model with a bamboo top, has held up.

Unfortunately, even though the air conditioning is running, it is not keeping up; it’s been over 90 degrees and very humid every day this week, and it isn’t much cooler in the upstairs. I do have a window to look out of now, but I’m keeping the curtains closed to reduce the heat. I guess it shouldn’t be surprising that we might need to upgrade the air conditioning.

Behind me Joshua is playing my nylon-string Godin guitar. A few days ago, he asked me to show him a few things on guitar. I taught him the very first exercise in *The Art of Contemporary Travis Picking* by Mark Hason, which is a book I got a lot out of myself about ten years ago. He took to it immediately and has been working through the book and a number of beginner YouTube videos, practicing for hours every day. I have tried to teach him in a way that will make things a little easier for him, long-term: I am encouraging him to practice lines beginning very slowly, using a metronome, and to start working on accompanying himself singing as soon as possible. We also have much better music gear than I ever had access to as a kid, so I can help him get different kinds of tones out of a number of different guitars. For example, he can use a Rode AI-1 to listen to a track on an iPod, on headphones, mix in the output of the guitar he’s playing. So, I’m glad I can help with that.

Garden News

Grace and I did not attempt to do anything terribly ambitious with the garden beds this year, but we did wind up getting a start on a very large hügelkultur bed. We bought a limited number of starts. But here's a list of what we've got going:

- dill (it keeps coming back, and I'm drying dill leaf and dill seed)
- several kinds of oregano and marjoram (so far I haven't managed to harvest and dry any)
- several kinds of sage (some plants survived the winter, and some are new)
- basil in pots (sweet and opal; the sweet is coming to the end of its season)
- mixed lettuce greens and pea shoots in pots (they are fading because it is late in the season, but we've been getting some lovely salads)
- lovage (which we've had to hack back brutally, as it keeps coming back and keeps getting bigger and bigger)
- anise hyssop (which keeps coming back and is very vigorous)
- epazote (over-wintered in a pot), which we add to bean dishes to reduce gas (it really works!)
- a couple of "super cayenne" pepper plants
- one habañero pepper plant
- four or five different types of eggplant plants (we've gotten only a few fruits so far)
- bunching onions
- chives (so many chives!)
- garlic chives (with a similar taste, but it's a very different plant)
- leeks (these are mostly growing in low gear, but they will rev up when it gets into fall)
- several kinds of tomatoes in pots, mostly paste and grape
- rhubarb
- rat-tail radishes (which we will pickle)
- several kinds of thyme, which I've been harvesting and drying
- bronze fennel, which I've been harvesting and drying
- lemon verbena, which I've been harvesting and drying
- raspberries (the canes are a mess, but we're getting a few fruits)
- more mint that we can possibly use (I keep hacking the plants back)
- blue potatoes
- sweet potatoes (a bit experimental; they are alive but not growing much)
- orange balm
- chamomile
- groundcherries

And, in several beds, a lot of different decorative plants, including hen-and-chicks and other succulents of many types, and a number of flowers.

Benjamin's scraggly apple tree is producing some small apples, to his delight. It straightened up somewhat and we've been applying fertilizer around the base. I

think it still could use some more straightening, but we don't really know much about working with fruit trees.

It's been pretty dry compared to the last few years, so I've been out watering tomatoes every morning. The tomatoes, peppers and eggplants seem to love the heat, but I don't think they love the humidity so much. Tomatoes apparently don't produce fruit as readily when the humidity is very high. So, despite fertilizing them and giving them plenty of water, I'm not sure we will get very many fruits from our tomatoes and eggplants this year. Some other plants such as lavender would also prefer dryer air.

Stings and Arrows of Outrageous Fortune

A few weeks ago Grace was sitting on our back deck and somehow disturbed a small nest that wasps had built directly under the deck. She was stung four times. Grace is somewhat allergic to stings — it wasn't a life-threatening emergency and she didn't need to use an epinephrine injector, but the bites swelled painfully and the pain lasted for weeks. That night I went out after dark and sprayed the nest, which seemed to kill them all. But just a couple of days ago, while we were having coffee on the deck again, she was stung, again — this time by only a solitary wasp, fortunately. I'm not sure why they are targeting her. That night I went out and sprayed the nest again, but it was falling apart and did not seem to contain any live wasps at all. I looked around for any other nests but did not find them. So we're not sure what to do. She is in pain again, using a combination of antihistamines and pain relievers, as well as ice packs to bring down the swelling. If it doesn't seem to improve she will have to consult with her doctor and see if she can get something more effective. Meanwhile I'm not sure if we want to risk having her sit out on our deck again. Oddly, no one else has been stung this summer. They seem to know that she is the one who has a bad reaction and go after her. We don't want to kill pollinators on our property — a while back we were setting up bee houses for mason bees. I've worked among bees constantly in the garden and I've never been stung. We don't want to harm the helpful bees, or the wonderful butterflies, dragonflies, or the gradually increasing firefly population — but hornets, wasps, and yellowjackets are not to be trusted and must go.

My Work Situation

I'm going to talk a bit about my job, which I haven't written about very much before. I was working for Argo AI, which Wikipedia says

is an autonomous driving technology company headquartered in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. The company was co-founded in 2016 by Bryan Salesky and Peter Rander, veterans of the Google and Uber automated driving programs. Argo AI is an independent company that builds the software, hardware, maps, and cloud-support infrastructure to power self-driving vehicles. Argo has two major investors:

Ford Motor Co. (2017) and the Volkswagen Group (2020). Argo's Self Driving System (SDS) technology will be incorporated into vehicles manufactured by the auto-makers through these partnerships.

In early 2021 after my employment with Thorlabs ended, I was contacted by a recruiter for OSI Engineering, a staffing company based in California. They recruited me to start work as a contractor with Argo AI. I was fully remote and never went into any Argo work sites while working as a contractor.

After working for OSI Engineering for just a couple of months, I was told that Argo wanted to bring me on as a regular employee, so I started as an Argo employee June 1st. For the next year and five weeks, I continued to work mostly remotely, although I did go into the Allen Park facility sometimes.

Because I've signed nondisclosure agreements, I'm not going to go into much detail about my work. In general, I was impressed by the near-universal friendliness and helpfulness of my co-workers. I got to know some people on the Slack; I spent a good chunk of each day in Zoom meetings. Argo had a "Neuro" support group for people who identified as neurodivergent, or who wanted to support neurodivergent people. That was interesting to me. I had some good chats with people in that group, including a lunchtime Zoom call with an employee in Pittsburgh, although I never did go to one of their game nights in the cafeteria due to my concerns about COVID safety.

I worked hard for Argo AI, as hard a pace as I could sustain given the circumstances of the pandemic and my lingering illness. I believe that I did some excellent work for them.

On Thursday morning, July 7th, a human resources staff member put a Zoom meeting on my calendar. My heart sank because when human resources contacts you out of the blue, it's never likely to be something good. In that very brief meeting, I was told I was being laid off due to business conditions. I asked a few questions. The staff member told me that everything I was asking would be answered by the paperwork I would shortly receive. Immediately after the meeting I was logged out of the Slack, and my Argo Gmail account, and kicked off the VPN. I could not say goodbye to co-workers. There was nothing I could do but shut down the laptop, pack it up, and clean off my desk. My official last day was Friday the 8th, but there was nothing for me to actually do on Friday.

I was later to read that Argo AI laid off about 150 people.

What Now?

It is hard to shake off doubts, but I really feel that I did the best I could at this job, given the various circumstances. Looking back over each interaction with co-workers or bosses that I can recall, I can't really think of much that I would do differently, especially given my somewhat compromised health.

Today is the two-week anniversary of the day I was laid off. I have been doing a

little bit of decompressing. I've been trying to "catch up" on sleep (which isn't exactly possible, but failure to rest adequately seems to be implicated in failure to completely recover from COVID, and in long COVID). With some more sleep than I was typically getting over the last few months, my symptoms seem to be improving somewhat, although our household of seven kids really just can't be a very restful place.

I have been talking to a few friends and a few recruiters, looking at a few job postings, and considering my options. Working with recruiters is usually awful, although I have gotten several jobs over the years via recruiters, so I can't afford *not* to try to work with them. Most recruiters have very little understanding of the kind of work they are recruiting me to do, though.

Fortunately, Argo will pay me a couple of months of severance. We have some savings, although because the site prep for the play structure went far over budget, not as much as I hoped to have if such a situation arose. The big "tent-pole" is health insurance; I will be able to purchase COBRA to continue our health insurance, but it costs an awful lot. So we might have to make some choices; I could probably stretch two months of severance pay and some savings into three months, or a bit more than three months, of "runway." Or, I could start paying COBRA and shorten that severely.

Many of the contract jobs I'm discussing either don't offer health insurance, or partially subsidize a very inadequate insurance program.

I can apply for unemployment, although the severance pay will result in the state withholding payments until it runs out. Michigan still pays a maximum of \$362 a week (the "enhanced unemployment" that helped keep us afloat during the summer of 2020 is long-gone). That's not much compared to our basic expenses — it won't cover the mortgage, for example, or a month of food expenses — but it's something, so I will grit my teeth and start the paperwork. We may be eligible, again, for food benefits, although again, I don't think they will pay anything until we have burned through our severance and remaining savings.

So, I am looking for work, but I know that my "marketability" is a bit compromised. At present, I am only looking for fully-remote work. I'm not willing to fly. I'm not even willing to commute, unless it is an exceptional situation where I feel that COVID safety isn't compromised.

The recruiters I speak to are not very happy about this. Some like to argue. I don't get angry, but if they want to talk about it, I will make the case for why I don't want to get, or spread, the BA.5 variant, or the BA.2.75 variant. I know what I'm reading in the journals and I know what my friends are experiencing; I'm hearing from more and more people who are fully vaccinated and boosted, and are being re-infected with BA.5. It isn't necessarily "mild." I've had enough of a taste of long COVID to know that I don't want to be reinfected. We really don't know just what the virus will *do* to people, long-term, but we've seen enough to know that it won't do anything good.

Really, it's not that complicated — I'm working for the long-term good of my family. Re-exposure to COVID raises that risk to a level I find unacceptably high. We're being told that COVID safety is our personal responsibility now and we can't expect governments or businesses to do anything to help ensure our safety. But when I do that — take personal responsibility by setting clear boundaries — everyone wants to tell you “not like that!”

At some point I might be forced into an unsafe workplace situation again, but I'm not going to *open* negotiations by offering to infect myself, or my family, or spread the virus to anyone else.

They also aren't very happy when I tell them how much I want to get paid. But it's not really my job to make them happy.

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