

Merry Xmas

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IT WAS GOOD TO SEE

most of you again, after far too long, this summer for Grandfather's funeral.¹

So far, I've avoid most of the fallout from our economic troubles. In fact, I obtained most of my technical writing contracts without even interviewing for them. Managers just picked me on the basis of my resume.²

But in January, I worked a contract at ____ headquarters that was so disorganized the company hadn't bothered to provide me a cube or a telephone and number. (That's just one anecdote about the growing trend in corporate chaos we consultants have notice lately. We've discussed insisting in our contracts that the clients have these matters arranged before we set foot on the premises, but the economy might grind to a halt if we did insist.³ Come to think of it...)⁴

I managed to work around that limitation at ____, but that experience, prompted me to join the 1990s. I'd held off for years because I could function without

one. And every time I asked my friends about the matter, I heard a litany of complaints about the phone itself or the service provider. So now I have one, and I hardly ever have to use it.⁵

Regardless, all this frequent work has made it likely that I'll pay off my car note in January, about 18 months after I bought it at the dealer price. It helps to have connections in town.⁶

After driving my Honda for nearly a year, I've determined that the design changes to the model for safety's sake are a wash in terms of safety.

This model has side-curtain air bags, which means the side curtains are wider than on older models. Increasing the width of the side curtains has created blind spots in the front of the car. Trade-offs.⁷

Just for Laughs

I also became involved in writing for a proposed local TV sketch comedy-variety show. This started in June when I saw an ad

on craigslist.com. I auditioned at a local library branch.

Keep in mind, all of were versed in comedy styles and sources from the '70s on, but my "competition" is generally younger, has formal training in this sort of work, and is au courant with the various tributaries of the media torrent, a mainstay for comedic grist. Whereas I'm self-taught in the mechanics of comedy and script writing.⁷

Still, my material made the producers laugh. Unfortunately, the project seems to have stalled for lack of financing and other demands on the producers' time.⁸

Say Ahhh

In February I underwent my second and last wisdom tooth extraction. It was preventative maintenance. It also seems to have reduced my allergies.

I used the same surgeon as before. I negotiated about \$300 off the fee, and afterward, I drove myself to the pharmacy to pick up medication. "Are you sure you had sur-

gery?” Mom asked when she called the next day.⁹

Liquidity

Organizers held the 2008 Austin Wine Festival over Memorial Day weekend at the new upscale, mixed-use shopping mall built near my apartment. I drove by the specific locale before the festival, and it looked to be a case of reality not matching the hype. In reality, attendees paid up to \$55 to drink alcohol outdoors in the humid mid-90s, plus the occasional rain shower, under some skimpy tents close enough to the expressway to inhale the exhaust fumes but far enough away from any parking to require walking over uneven terrain in said heat. The smart thing would’ve been to hold it indoors, so it wasn’t subject to the vagaries of late spring Texas weather. (On May 21, a heavy storm with a “dangling tornado” knocked out power to much of Austin – though not my neighborhood – and damaged City Hall and other properties.) How come I understand this, and I’m not even an event planner?¹⁰

About then, I discovered that canned coffee plus a can of condensed milk created the sweet, viscous concoction I thought adults enjoyed when I was a child old enough to have thoughts. Why else would they be drinking coffee all the time and not letting kids have any? Until Dad let me have a sip of his – straight black. It was watery and bitter, nothing like I imagined. I didn’t drink coffee again until I was 28.

This was a sometime treat until the FDA recalled the cheap brand I’d bought because it contained melamine. Unless that was the secret ingredient.¹¹

Order in the Court

In mid-June, I sweated in the courtroom of the 126th District Court, on the fourth floor of the Travis County courthouse. And I hadn’t even done anything wrong then.

Judge Darlene Burns apologized to the venire for the failing air conditioning in the edifice, built in 1931. Some 48 of us from the jury pool awaited in the gallery for the voir dire proceedings.

The sheriff had summoned me by mail during Memorial Day weekend. It was a distraction. But Texas law insisted I had to be blind, retarded or insane to avoid the jury selection process.

For two weeks prior, I could focus on little else but studying the role and rights of a juror. I arrived at the Travis courthouse, where I was mistaken for a lawyer with my jacket, tie, and briefcase – as the summons required “clothing reasonably befitting the dignity and solemnity of the court proceedings” – and prepared to invoke the doctrine of jury nullification, shy of doing time or paying fines.

Instead, the venire was empaneled for a civil trial, over payment for physical injuries the plaintiffs sustained in a 2006 East Austin auto collision. Burns promised the

case wouldn’t last more than three days.

The plaintiffs’ lead attorney told the venire that the jury verdict in a civil trial requires a preponderance of evidence for the burden of proof, i.e., “more likely than not.”

He asked potential jurors by number whether they agreed with this burden of proof. Then he asked us if a 51-percent, or perhaps 60-percent, preponderance of evidence was acceptable.

“‘More likely than not’ is acceptable,” said I, potential juror No. 34.

“Is fifty-one percent acceptable?”

“These things can’t be quantified like that.”

We recessed for 20 minutes. Then the defendant’s attorney questioned the venire. And we questioned him.

“Wearier the insurance companies in all this?” I asked. How did a two-year old matter, dealt with by them, in my experience, wind up in state court?

“That’s immaterial,” the attorney said.

During voir dire I took notes. I guessed who among the venire, by number, the lawyers would likely reject, and how it affected my potential selection.

Close to 5 p.m., I sauntered out of the courthouse. Predictably, recruiters had filled my answering

machine with messages during my absence.

Suburban Wilderness

One prospect was located in the hinterlands of Cedar Park, beyond the tangle of Lakeline Mall and the Highway 183A toll road, where I seldom venture. So I drove up there the day after my court appearance so I could find the place with ease the day of the interview. But you can't always look for the building and check the map and watch for other drivers and shift to the correct lane at the correct time, particular when the roads aren't platted on a grid. I missed the exit at Avery Ranch Boulevard and wound up at a nearby 183A exit toll.

The 50-cent toll required exact change. I didn't have change. And I couldn't get change, because the toll booths have been unmanned since Dec. 1, according to the booth signage. Nobody was behind me. Regardless, approaching other drivers would've been foolish – if only because I was in a nostril-flaring snit by that point.

NOTES

- ¹ AD No. 114 (July 27, 2008).
- ² AD No. 103 (Dec. 22, 2007); AD No. 109 (May 11, 2008); AD No. 118 (Oct. 27, 2008).
- ³ Eisler, Dan. Letter to Mary R. Kiser, 11 Aug. 2008.
- ⁴ AD No. 118, op. cit.
- ⁵ Eisler, op. cit.
- ⁶ AD No. 98 (June 11, 2007).
- ⁷ AD No. 112 (June 22, 2008).
- ⁸ Tucker, Marc. "Keep Moving Forward." E-mail to Texas Comedy Connection, 24 Oct. 2008.
- ⁹ AD No. 106 (Mar. 7, 2008).
- ¹⁰ AD No. 110 (June 1, 2008).
- ¹¹ AD No. 118, op. cit.
- ¹² AD No. 112, op. cit.
- ¹³ AD No. 117 (Sep. 15, 2008).

So I threw a limp dollar bill into the basket – fully \$1 more than the system deserves – and drove past the red light.

That evening, I attended the Semantic Web Austin Launch Party at Union Park about half-way through the party to avoid rush-hour traffic. I wandered upstairs to the rooftop lounge where some musicians' group was meeting. A musician noticed my badge and asked what Semantic was and what it did.

"I have no idea, and I'm in the computer business," I said. "What does that tell you?"

"Probably that you need to find another line of work," said a brunette in a summer dress who languidly reclined on an outdoor chaise lounge.

Obviously, this wasn't my day. I told the musician about the toll booth. He said the same thing had happened to him and a friend of his. Neither of them has so much as received a ticket in the mail.

But I've still been looking over my shoulder since.¹²

Let the Hurricane Snore

In September, Hurricane Ike inconvenienced my friend in Houston and actually improved my life during the weekend. For once, fools stayed off the roads, and events like the UT football game were postponed. The skies were overcast with a few sprinkles until the sun reemerged around 4 p.m. on Sep. 13. The only negative impact was the lack of choices in the bread aisle and a dearth of skim milk pints at the supermarket. In the near term, gas prices are expected to rise again. But the hurricane took its sweet time getting to Texas, which allowed the Statesman to hype it on the front page for about a week straight.¹³

Wishing all of you a Merry Christmas and Happy New Year,

Love,

Dan