

Rex Jaeschke's Blog Postings from
Tales from the Man who would be King
Volume 02 – Dec 2010 through Nov 2011

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Edition 1.0

Last Updated: 2021-04-15

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Introduction

When I decided to start a blog, I wrote the first three installments and let them “bake” awhile before I posted them and announced the creation of the blog. I wanted to get past the romantic aspect of dreaming something up, jumping in and doing it, and then, later, finding out it wasn't sustainable. Now, more than 11 years later, looking back, not only was I able to deliver a substantive posting each month for 132 months, I have 16 of the 24 postings for the next two years already written, and ideas for the remaining eight mapped out!

On a semi-regular basis, over a home-made [café-au-lait](#), I read an old posting, and I'm very happy to say that *I'm not embarrassed by any of them!* It surely has become a labor of love!

Over the years, a number of regular readers have suggested that I publish the postings in some sort of printed book form. Having written numerous technical books, many articles for technical journals, and a newspaper column, I am well aware of the formal publishing process, and the work involved in getting what I might consider to be a perfectly good manuscript into a shape that a publisher would accept. Regarding writing books, my financial return was probably far less than the minimum wage! Of course, I could self-publish, and, in fact, I have access to a facility to do just that at a very reasonable cost. After serious consideration and putting my ego aside, I decided that I would indeed re-publish the first 11-years-worth of installments, but in an electronic book form, [PDF](#). And I would do so, 12 installments (that is, one year's-worth) per Volume.

To make it worth having these Volumes available for downloading instead of readers simply going to the website for installments one at a time, I've added some small value to the Volumes. Here are the enhancement and/or changes I've made:

- Did some light editing: corrected spelling mistakes, improved punctuation, and tweaked some grammatical constructs
- Corrected factual errors
- Updated outdated information
- Added an occasional bit of extra relevant information as an aside
- Added *many* more links, primarily to [Wikipedia](#) and [Wiktionary](#)
- Added a few photos. [I write installments using MS Word, which easily allows me to arrange embedded photos. However, when I export the result to my blog (which is hosted by the freely available BlogEngine.NET), the result is far from pleasing. As such, after some early experimentation, I have included very few photos.]
- Added forward pointers to relevant installments that came later

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- Regarding links to other installments, links to destinations that are in the same Volume resolve to the corresponding chapter in that Volume; otherwise, they resolve to the blog web site.

Lastly, a very big “Thank You!” to my reviewers, good friends John Tew and Tom Plum, who have been with me from the beginning. Now I say “good” friends. There is a saying, “Friends help you move, but good friends help you move bodies!” I have not yet asked either to help in such a manner, but for now, I’ll give them the benefit of the doubt.

Happy reading,

Rex Jaeschke, April 2021.

1. December 2010, “Technology, Unplugged – Part 2”

In Part 1 ([November 2010](#)), we looked at the telephone, television, the internet, and recorded music. In this Part, we'll cover automobiles, still and video cameras, the written word, a digital data preservation strategy, and my right-hand gadget.

1.1 My Mid-Life Crisis

When more than a few men reach middle age, they splash out by buying a bright red sports car, some other expensive toy, or by finding a “hot babe” many years their junior. In my case, it was a 3-year-old, 2-door, subcompact [Toyota Echo](#) automobile with [manual transmission](#), for which I paid \$7,000. Not sexy, you say. Ok, you got me there. My car doesn't even warrant a name. It's a liability not an asset, and when I've driven it into the ground, I'll donate it to charity and buy another used one.

I work from home much of the time, and my clients are out there in the internet-o-sphere, so I don't need a car for work. When I do travel for work or play, it's a short taxi ride to the airport and a plane from there on. I rarely rent cars these days; I stay close to my destination workplace or I use public transportation. Each year, I probably drive fewer than 1,000 miles in my own car. And as I have no garage, my car spends most of its life submitting to the elements. [My previous car, which was the only new car I've ever owned, lasted 16 years. And if it had been stored in a garage it would have still appeared quite new. But bits kept on breaking mainly due to the extremes in temperature and humidity. It simply wore out from non-use!]

I love maps, of all kinds. I know which way is north and that the sun rises in the east [I just like learned that from Wikipedia. Who knew?], and before I get on the freeway in familiar or unfamiliar territory, I make a point of knowing where I'm going, so I can pay attention to driving safely. [Now there's a novel idea.] So, I don't need no stinking [GPS](#), thank you very much! “Oh, I see you've missed the turn, bother! Let me compute an alternative route.”

A year ago, I rented a car in Lexington, Kentucky, although the location is unimportant. On arrival at the airport, the car rental company upgraded me to some fancy model “at no extra charge,” don't you know! One night I was driving back to my hotel and I reached up to try and find the rearview mirror control that would reduce the glare of lights from behind. My fingers found a button and I pressed it. The next thing I knew was that the sound of a phone dialing was coming from the audio speakers. My car was “phoning home!” After several rings, a woman came on the line and asked, “What is your emergency please?” Apparently, there was a microphone hidden somewhere in the vehicle—Was there a video camera as well? Was I on some reality TV show?—and I responded that my “emergency” consisted of my not being able to find the mirror dimmer switch and that I was sorry for having troubled her. For the rest of the trip I kept my hands to myself [lest](#) there be other devices nearby plotting against me.

So, how do I plan a trip if I don't use GPS? Well, I pull out one of my paper-thingy-type maps, which I get free through my membership in the American Automobile Association (AAA) or I go to [MapQuest](#) on the internet and I print the relevant pages. That said, I must say that in some sort of consolidation of its map printing system AAA has combined maps and made them way too big. If you've ever tried to

open and close a road map having a scale that approaches 1:1, while sitting in your car you'll understand.

For years, I have marveled at the [TripTik](#) service AAA offers its member. You tell them the starting and ending point of your trip, and they print off a whole series of maplets and bind them together. They indicate the locations of gas stations and possible accommodations, when to pass gas, stop for a potty break, and when to breathe in and out. Now I know there are people who are directionally challenged, but coddling them won't improve their skills. How hard can it be to read a road atlas? [But of course, I'm forgetting that the heart of my country's economy is selling people things they don't need or can't afford.] I guess the main problem I see with such a detailed plan is that it hand feeds the motorist keeping them to the freeways when real life might be on the local roads nearby. Remember, it's the journey, not the destination.

1.2 A Picture is Worth a 1,000 Words

Although I've owned several still cameras over the years, I am definitely not "into photography." For sure, digital cameras make it cheap and easy with no film wasted on bad shots. It's a great application of technology. However, I find that still cameras—even cheap ones—have way too many controls and soft options. If my video camera can take near-perfect video in all sorts of conditions *without* my intervention, then why can't my still camera do likewise?

I bought my first video camera 23 years ago, and in the 16 years that followed, I shot 80-odd hours of video, which is all recorded on high-quality VHS tape. [I've made more than few attempts to convert them to DVD using several approaches, but have always ended up with a result that has lower quality than the 20-year-old original tapes!] In 2003, I bought a Sony digital video recorder, and once I got used to not having such a big and heavy thing in my hand, I used it with enthusiasm, to the point at which the result hardly needs editing. In the seven years since, I've shot and edited 60 one-hour DVDs. [Some people will offer to show you photos of their grandchildren. I'll offer to show you my home movies.]

For the most part now, I only use the still camera to take the shots I use to open each chapter when I edit my video.

I've learned some things from my camera use:

1. Always carry a spare battery with you and make sure that it is charged.
2. Always carry a spare memory stick or blank tape/disk.
3. Buy your blank tapes/disks at home where they will be much cheaper than in a gift shop in the middle of your trip.
4. Take enough memory sticks or tapes/disks for your whole trip.
5. Don't be shy about deleting all those truly crappy shots. (You know the ones I mean.)
6. Avoid having to keep those crappy shots "because they are the only ones that I have of Fifi before she was squashed by that big nasty 18-wheeler in front of my house," by learning how to use your equipment. I am constantly amazed by the number of people who return from a major trip only to find a lot of crappy photos or to see things go by so fast on their home video because they moved the camera too quickly. Plan for success! If you are going to spend serious

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money on a trip, why not invest a few hours in mastering your recording equipment before you leave?

7. Having your photos named Sony0001.Jpeg, Sony0002.Jpeg, and so on, isn't useful. If you don't give them sensible names (an art in itself, apparently) within one week of returning from your trip, they will likely never get them. By then, the trip is a fading memory, and you are back into your regular life. "I'll get to that later." Yeah, right!
8. A big promise of video is the ability to edit out the silly bits and those minutes of film of the ground as you walk along thinking you had switched off the camera, but hadn't. Plus, you can add from those thousands of transitions and special effects that came with the editing software. [For example, mine allows me to transition from one scene to the next by folding the final image into a paper airplane and then having it fly off into the next scene. Watching movies with such transitions would be like watching TV just for the commercials!] However, editing video requires some idea of how to make a movie, and no training comes with the camera. Be prepared to spend time figuring out what you'll need to do to be successful. [See my blog post, "[Shooting and Editing Home Video](#)", from May 2012.]
9. If you thought you could get by with only a few blank video tapes/disks because you can reuse them, you'd better be ready to edit your video and burn it to DVD within one week of returning from your trip. (See earlier bullets for details.)
10. Understand that if your VCR flashed the time 12:00 for several years because you never did figure out how to configure it then you are unlikely to assign sensible names to your digital photos, and you are unlikely to ever edit any of your video.

1.3 The "Printed" Word

I *LOVE* books and I *LOVE* reading, but I'm in no hurry to do it with a digital device. I love the feel and smell of books and I like books of large maps and pictures, and these don't view so well on a small screen, and certainly not on one that is black and white.

As for e-Readers, I can imagine downloading a bunch of e-novels and using the reader at the airport, on a plane, or in a hammock under the palm trees, provided, that is, the contrast was easy on my eyes [I never use a laptop computer outdoors, for that very reason] and the battery life was decent. But then I would only want to rent the e-books, not buy them.

In my 31 years of living in the US, I've never subscribed to a newspaper, although I often get the national daily when I'm on the road, as part of my hotel room rate. Occasionally, I go to a newspaper website, but generally not to read the news, just to do some puzzles and to get sports results.

1.4 Let's Backup a Bit

So, now that you have sold your soul to a bunch of silicon chips what insurance do you have that they won't lose all your data or that some malicious worm or virus won't eat your only copy? Sadly, for most people I've encountered the answer is, "None whatsoever." All those photos you took and painstakingly named, gone! All those hours of video you shot and edited, gone! All those songs you bought, gone! All those financial records entered and reconciled, gone! All your email addresses and contact info, gone!

I say, “If it’s worth doing, it’s worth protecting.” If you disagree then you are admitting that you can afford to lose any and all of your electronic files. That is, what you have been buying, collecting, creating, and refining has no real worth, which begs the question, “Why are you even doing it to begin with?”

So, what is my backup strategy? Call me anal, but when I am creating or editing files for work or play, about every 30 minutes, I make copies to three different places, and I don’t just mean by their original file names. I add a numbered suffix that goes up by 1 each time, so I have a complete audit trail of the file’s evolution. (Simply saving a copy every 30 minutes by the same name means you’ll only ever have the most recent backup. And no, making a copy of files on the same physical disk as the master set isn’t a good backup strategy.) Historically, I stored these copies on floppies and later removable Iomega Zip disks, then disks on other computers on my network. With the advent of cheap and high-capacity memory sticks, I now use those instead. They have no moving parts, they need no external power supply, they are portable, and I can move them easily from one computer to another.

At the end of each month, I perform a backup of all my data. [I do not backup any of my system files, as they can be recreated or reinstalled.] Initially, I stored that on magnetic tape, then CD-ROM and DVD, and now on the mother of all backup devices, a 2 Terabyte disk [that’s 2,000 Gigabytes!], which at \$175 cost a pittance. In fact, I have three such disks. One sits by my computer for easy access, one sits in my fireproof safe at home, and the third goes in my bank’s safe-deposit box. “Overkill,” you say? Ok then, if you lost all your electronic files, what would you be willing to pay to get them back?

Oh, by the way, I use MS Windows-based systems, but I never store any of my data on drive C:. Instead, I create a separate drive (usually E), so that on the off chance I need to reformat my system disk (C:) and reinstall the operating system, all my data remains intact. It also makes it trivially easy to back up everything on drive E without having to select some files but not others.

All too often, purchasers of technology don’t see—or don’t want to see—beyond the initial purchase price. However, as us old timers have learned repeatedly, the real cost of owning a car, for example, is its operation and maintenance. And, so it is with digital technology. If you don’t invest in a preservation strategy, you run the risk of wasting a lot of your time and money. And don’t forget that the cost of technology is more often time rather than money. (Managing backup and editing video are good examples.)

1.5 My Right-Hand Gadget

My one constant companion when I leave the house is my Compaq Personal Digital Assistant (PDA), for which I paid much more than my netbook computer! When I’m at my desk, this little pocket computer is linked to my desktop computer, so their calendar and contacts databases are synchronized. The PDA has a removable 4MB SD memory card to which I backup all my new and changed work and personal computer files. [See my backup strategy above.] That way, when I leave the house and take the PDA and its memory card, I have my electronic work and life with me for use and as an offsite backup. That backup combined with all the historical files stored on the big disk in my bank’s safe allows me to “hit the ground running” should my house be destroyed by some natural disaster or be the object of a burglary. And because I have this insurance, I’ll probably never need it. But, for sure, if I didn’t have it,

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I'd need it. I know full well that without a safe copy of my electronic records my business would be totally screwed!

Although I can surf the internet and do email from my PDA I choose not to, primarily because of the small screen and keyboard size, and the problem of synchronizing it with my desktop or laptop. And I don't use it to listen to music. I mostly use the calendar and contacts database, I use MS Word to write a variety of documents including all my travel diaries, and I view PDF files containing information useful to my trip, especially maps. I also use it to view photos. Thus far, I have been unable to get Skype working on it satisfactory, but if I do that, it will give me cheap international phone access at any wifi hotspot.

[Ten years later, I'm still using a PDA! In fact, when the company stopped making them, I bought a spare used one as a backup, and I alternate between the two.]

1.6 Conclusion

I use technology to help me in my work and play. I don't need everything "on-demand" and I don't want to be inundated with information or advertising. I prefer my social networking to be in person. That said, in recent weeks, the Apple [iPad](#) has gotten onto my radar. Rumor has it that a new, improved version will debut early in 2011, and I expect to get some hands-on time with one to see if/how it might fit into my life. [Ten years on, I still do *not* have a tablet computer!]

There are days when I truly wonder how the human race made it this far without distractions to fill every available moment and without countless "must-have" toys. I guess that's marketing at work; sell the consumer on the idea, push the impulse buy, and have them feel they must "keep up with the Jones." Sense be damned!

I spend a lot of time on planes [See my blog post, "[Travel - Fly Me to the Moon](#)", from May 2010] and sometimes on long-distance trains. In recent years, I've seen many of my fellow passengers playing games on their mobile phones or texting [more international flights now provide internet access], all while listening to their favorite 1,000 tunes. As for me, I look at travel time as disconnected time. I look out the window, I follow the route on a map, I daydream, I read an actual magazine or book, I daydream, I plan, I daydream, I write notes, I daydream, and I often write a trip diary. And sometimes I watch a movie or two.

By the way, if you add up the cost of all those "must have" services and toys you might have, it could very well equal a monthly mortgage payment. And making an extra one of those each year will reduce your total interest payment by an astonishing amount. I know, 'cos I made more than one of those each year. Now that is a good feeling, almost as good as driving my 2002 subcompact stick shift!

So, what's next in my quest for less-is-more? Downsizing my house. Hey, maybe I could live in my car. Now that would be like totally awesome!

2. January 2011, “Waiting My Turn”

Recently, I was sitting in the waiting room of an embassy in order to get a visa, and I started thinking about all those times I'd stood in line or taken a number and waited my turn. After 15 minutes, I had recalled quite a number of such occasions, and I decided to describe some of them in this essay.

2.1 Travel Visas

In 1979, after five weeks of travel through Asia and Europe, I arrived in London. The next day, I fronted up at the US Embassy to get my 1-year work visa with the very naïve attitude that I would be “in and out” in double-quick time. [Measured in geological time, I was!] After a considerable wait in line, I got to the end of a corridor, which opened out into a huge room populated by many hundreds of people waiting in lines that snaked back and forth across the wide room. I discovered that my little line was now at the very end of another very long line. Hours later, my paperwork was accepted, and I was told to come back in four days, which was about three days longer than I'd expected. [That was my very first time getting a visa in person; 31 years and a million and a half air miles later, I'm much wiser.]

In 1991, I received an invitation from a professor at a university in St. Petersburg, Russia, inviting me to go there and present a series of lectures over a 2-week period. After some dialog via email, I accepted his kind offer and decided to combine it with a holiday and to take my wife and son the following summer. I contacted the Russian embassy in Washington DC to see how to go about getting visas. They said I needed a letter of invitation on letterhead from the sponsoring organization. Less than a week after I conveyed that information to the university by email, I received a letter in the post from New York (where it had been hand-carried by someone on a flight from Russia) written in both Russian and English. I went to the embassy with my filled-out application form, photo, and letter. There were quite a few counters, but only one was open, so I got in the long line. When it was my turn, the officer took my papers and told me to sit and wait while the papers were examined. Sometime later, I was informed that everything regarding my application was okay, but where were the invitations for my wife and son? I explained that while I wanted a business visa, my wife and son would be going as tourists, but the officer insisted they still needed invitations. Two weeks later, I returned with said invitations, and was promptly issued three business visas. Yes, my 8-year-old son was apparently going there on business!

[By the way, I had to pay my own way to get to Russia, but the university provided me with housing and a translator/guide, and paid me an honorarium (which turned out to be 9 Rubles, less than US\$10 at the then rate of exchange). Also, like the then just-passed Soviet days, we were issued loose-leaf visas that were handed in when we left the country, which meant that we had no permanent record of having been there. I was actually in country a day or two when I noticed on the visa, text that said I had to report to my local area authorities to let them know my movements; however, that was another Soviet-era holdover, and I ignored it.]

I've traveled to South Korea twice now, and both times, I got a visa from the Washington DC embassy after the usual waiting in line and having them send me my passport by mail a week later. The Korean embassy on-line website rules are clear; I needed to have a visa, yet few of my colleagues got one and

they were admitted. And when I went through immigration each time in Seoul, no one seemed interested in checking if I had one. It was all quite odd.

My most recent experience was at the Chinese Embassy. On arrival, I took a number and sat, and to pass the time I made notes about this blog essay. Rather than come back and go through the whole process later in the week (the embassy required in-person pickup) I decided to pay for same-day service. I had arrived at 10 am, to discover that only those applicants with a number issued by 12:30 pm could get their visa on the same day. An hour went by then two, and I feared I'd been waiting for nothing when all of a sudden, a whole series of numbers that were called went unanswered, and I was at the counter lodging my application. I was told to be back at 2:30 pm sharp, and I was, to find a shiny new visa.

2.2 Waiting in Airports

Almost all of my flights have run pretty close to schedule and I've *never* lost permanently any checked luggage. However, I have had some delays at airports. Fortunately, none had any truly serious implications, and all have made me appreciate the success that occurs most often. You know, if you don't have bad times, you really can't appreciate the good times!

I was flying from [Linate](#), the old airport near downtown Milan, Italy. It's located in a low-lying area prone to fog, which contributes significantly to flight delays. And I fell victim. After a fog-related delay in Milan, I was connecting in Frankfurt, Germany, and soon after we touched down at FRA, we taxied past the very plane on which I was to go home to the US. However, FRA truly is a huge airport, and by the time we got to our gate in a completely separate terminal and I then got to my departure gate, my connecting flight had been gone 20 minutes. After a long wait in line, the airline took responsibility and checked me into the airport hotel. [I didn't mind getting home a day late, but my next trip was to Australia—in three days—so I didn't want to miss more than one day. As it happened, I slept through my alarm the following morning and nearly missed my make-up flight. Don't you hate that when that happens!]

After a grueling pair of flights from Washington DC to Sydney, Australia, via Los Angeles, I spent eight not-so-wonderful hours in an airport business lounge waiting for a flight to Singapore. And although that flight departed on time, the audio/video equipment was not working, which was a major embarrassment to the Asian airline staff. As a small token of appreciation for our understanding, they handed each boarding passenger a box of chocolate-covered macadamia nuts. I thanked them for the nuts and then promptly crashed for four hours of sleep. I awoke to find a flight attendant hovering near me waiting to get my attention. Using her flight manifest, she confirmed I was who she thought I was, and then asked me to follow her to the galley for a private chat. There, she apologized for the lack of facilities en-route and that as a distinguished [Star Alliance](#) customer I was entitled to more compensation than a box of chocolates, and she gave me a US\$75 voucher to spend in-flight from the duty-free catalog. On the return flight, I remembered the voucher and looked in the catalog to find something I might actually use, a 4GB computer memory stick, and for exactly \$75, don't you know! However, when I ordered that the flight attendant came to apologize that due to currency exchange rate fluctuations the price had increased. It would now cost \$76 instead! I cheerfully paid the dollar difference.

Many years ago, when my son was still quite small, we had an unexpected 8-hour airport delay, due to fog and low clouds. Being regular travelers, we always had a Plan B (even for Plan B), and we put that into action. We took out our [Uno card game](#) and started playing on a large table in the waiting area. Soon after, kids started noticing us having fun and they wandered over to take a look. Now the game requires no knowledge of any particular language, and soon, I was like the [Pied Piper of Hamelin](#), leading a whole bevy of kids from different countries, cultures, and languages enthusiastically calling out “Reverse,” “Skip You,” and “Draw Four.” [To this day, I continue to be astounded by the high percentage of parents who don't take activities for their kids when a wait of any kind is possible, be it at an airport, a train station, on a flight or train trip, waiting at the Doctor's office, and so on.]

Probably the worse delay-related event I witnessed at an airport happened on the way home from Puerto Rico one Christmas. We had to change planes in Orlando, Florida, and our airline—which had gone bankrupt some months earlier—had been taken over by a cruise line, which, it appeared, knew nothing about running an airline. Everything about the process from start to finish was quite chaotic. There is nothing like a disenchanting crowd to increase the stupidity level of some people. Once a series of delays and extended delays was announced, the natives got very restless, and policemen riding mountain bikes around the terminal arrived to “deal” with the situation. A super-aggressive woman traveling with several kids was arrested in front of us and her kids were taken away and placed in protective custody. Right about then, I steered my family out of the boarding gate area to the main check-in desk where we could reschedule our flight for the next day. Although we were second in line, the woman in front of us—who was stranded for the same reason—was so abusive to the gate agent that when her business was completed the agent went into the back room and didn't come out again for 15 minutes. The passenger's husband (who was minding their three kids nearby) was so embarrassed by his wife's actions that he apologized profusely. My son could not believe his eyes and ears that night.

At this point, I'm reminded of the story about the self-important person whose flight was cancelled as he waited in the boarding area. A gate agent announced if everyone would form several lines at the counter they would be placed on the next available flight. This insecure VIP-wannabe pushed his way to the front demanding he get special treatment, but the woman agent asked him politely to “Please get in line.” He responded by saying, “Do you know who I am?” The agent calmly picked up the PA microphone and announced to the waiting throng, “There is a man up front here who doesn't know who he is. If anyone can identify him, please come to the counter.” The angry passenger replied, “F**k you lady!” to which she calmly replied, “Sir, you'll have to get in line for that too!”

2.3 Security Checkpoints

In the late 70's, I landed at Bangkok's international airport. As martial law was in force, there were uniformed and heavily armed soldiers throughout the terminal. While I cannot honestly say there were lines, I'm pretty sure that if there were, I was quietly lining up in them with all the other also-very-quiet international tourists.

Several years later, I had my first trip to Germany at the height of the activities of the [Baader-Meinhof Group](#), an offshoot of the Red Army Faction, which according to Wikipedia was “one of Germany's most violent left wing groups.” On my departure, I had to put my checked luggage through a full X-ray scanner, which was a rather new idea at that time. German shepherd guard dogs also gave me a good

sniffing over while heavily armed Federal Police scanned the crowd with watchful eyes. It certainly was no time for levity.

Perhaps the most extreme case I've experienced with airport security was at Helsinki International in 1992. My family and I had been in Russia for two weeks, and when we got back into Finland on the train, we sent one large case on to Helsinki to be stored at the main train station while we toured the country on a 1-week rail pass. On our day of departure from Helsinki, we retrieved our case from storage and went to the airport. When asked if our luggage had been out of our control since it was packed, I answered in the affirmative and explained it had been in storage at the train station. That triggered the Mother of all Searches. The three of us were herded to a cubicle big enough for one person, and were directed to empty the large case, which was then X-rayed empty several times. The staff was not at all friendly, and seemed disappointed not to find anything suspicious. Sometime later, we re-packed that case, and checked it in. We then settled into the lounge at the check-in gate; however, when the in-bound flight arrived we were removed from the boarding area to an imaginary separate area, so we could have no contact with the passengers deplaning. It really was quite silly. The reason for all this was there was a G7 (or some such number) summit about to start in Helsinki, and world leaders were flying in to attend.

2.4 Customs and Immigration

My first memorable experience was in Bombay (now called Mumbai), India, at about 1 am, which is when many international flights arrive. [As a result, they depart again around 3 am.] After we deplaned, we seemed to go from one line to another exchanging a token of one color for one of another as we moved. At the end, we finally got our luggage, but not before one customs agent came across a nice pen I had and, clearly, he wanted it. When I played dumb, he offered me a drippy cheap Indian ballpoint pen in exchange, and in the interest of getting processed sooner rather than later I accepted reluctantly. As best as we could tell, the whole multi-line thing was simply to give people employment. There certainly was no obvious practical value to it.

At the very next stop, Rome, Italy, we had the most arrogant customs inspector. I had purchased a new briefcase in Hong Kong, and it had straps that allowed it to be expanded several inches, and the inspector figured it had some sort of false bottom. So rather roughly, he tipped out the contents on a table and searched the case for a secret compartment. When he found none, he threw up his hands in disgust and walked away. We didn't know where he was going, but after waiting a while and his not returning, we simply packed up and left.

I wrote in the April 2010 installment, "[The Road to US Citizenship](#)," 'I flew back to the US [from Peru] with a Peruvian airline, and came in through Miami, Florida, at around 6 am. There were three immigration agents, two handling American citizens and one handling the 150+ foreigners, me included. Once the handful of Americans had been processed, the two agents started chatting to each other. Eventually, they decided to help their colleague with his long line. But instead of taking the next person in line, one of them waved to me, where I stood about 50 people back in the line, and beckoned me to approach his desk. I told him that I was neither a citizen nor a permanent resident and he leaned over and spoke quietly in my ear saying, "I didn't think you looked like you belonged in that line!" Welcome to the US of A, the land of equality. Apparently, [some people are more equal than are others!](#)'

2.5 US Citizenship

Thirty days after I applied for US citizenship, I fronted up to a Federal Government facility to be fingerprinted. There were several hundred of us in line, and we were seated. As people were served off one of the lines of chairs, the rest of the line shuffled down to the end of their row or around to the next row. It was the only time I ever recall being in a seated line, and it worked remarkably well. The really amazing thing is that we all knew in advance that we'd have a 1–2-hour wait, yet very few people brought anything to do. And to top it off, mobile phones were banned. You had either to lock them in your car, or leave them at the desk when checking in. It was a very sorry looking, bored, fidgety group.

2.6 The White Man Cometh

My son was born in Washington DC, a federal territory of the United States. [For the purposes of this story, it is important to know that the majority of DC's population is black, and that my family is white.] Three months later, to get him a passport, we had to go to the District's "Births, Deaths, Marriages, etc." agency for a birth certificate. As he was born in the US of parents who were Australian citizens living legally in the US, he was entitled to dual citizenship, so we planned to apply for both US and Australian passports. As it happened, the Australian application required something special, a birth certificate that stated explicitly that it had been a live birth.

I recall clearly the day we went to get the two certificates, one for the US State Department, and one for the Australian embassy. It was a typical hot and humid summer's day and there was no air conditioning in the waiting room. There were a number of counters, but only one was open. And it looked like people had been waiting "forever" to get served. (As is often the case, you turn in your paperwork, then sit, and wait to get the results sometime later.) We got to the front of the line without much of a wait, and expected to have to sit for a good while afterwards while the paperwork was processed. However, the person at the counter had never seen a request for a live-birth certificate before, so she called her supervisor. Well, the supervisor knew exactly what was needed and promptly opened up a second counter, processed our application completely in double-quick time, and then closed the counter again. For about 10 milliseconds, we were very happy, until we turned around to see the faces on the room full of black people who had not heard anything about our "special circumstance." As far as they were concerned, once again the white man had gotten special treatment. It was a very humbling experience.

2.7 Foreign Languages and Customs

I was in St. Petersburg, Russia, in 1992, only a couple of years after things there had opened up. Although most things could be bought at free markets or on the street, the government controlled some staple things like bread and sugar. To buy these, one needed to go to one of a number of special outlets. So off we went, but we had our guide and translator, which was absolutely necessary. First, one had to get in a line to pay and get a chit for the purchased item. Then one had to get in a line at a counter to get the item. To try and avoid the cashiers selling things the store had run out of the cashiers were constantly calling out what they were selling, so the servers could keep track of what was popular. A similar thing occurred when I went to a department store to spend my 9-Rouble speaking fee on fine chocolates for the administrative staff that had supported my lecture series. Being an up-scale store, there were no lines, and I could go to the chocolate counter and see the items I

wanted and their price, but I didn't know the Russian words I'd need to go to the cashier way over on the other side of the floor to buy them. It's the only time in my international travels that I couldn't simply point at an item, hold out some cash, and have the salesperson take what they needed. Of course, the way they were doing it made no sense whatsoever; it simply was a holdover from the old Soviet days.

In the spring of 2009, I was at the main post office in Prague, Czech Republic, wanting to buy some postcard stamps. I waited for some time trying to figure out the line system when a helpful local took pity on me and led me to a machine that dispensed numbered tickets. It really is easy when you know how. So, don't you know, I was in a train station in Tokyo, Japan, and there were two quite separate lines both needing tickets to enter. However, as I couldn't read the writing that explained the difference between the lines, I stood there with a puzzled look. And it worked; very soon, a young Japanese man approached me, bowed, and asked in heavily accented English if he could help me. And help me he did.

2.8 Bypassing the Lines

If you are a regular traveler, you might have enjoyed the perks of frequent travelership. In my case, my airline gives me a priority line at check in and at boarding. And my local airport gives me priority security processing (as do many others for First-and Business-Class Passengers). And having membership of the airline's business lounge, I get to wait in comfort, only going to the gate at the last possible minute. My rental car company provides express delivery where the airport bus drops me at my car, which is running with air conditioner or heater on, as appropriate. The US Immigration service even has express lanes for passengers re-entering the country from abroad. But, of course, all things come at some sort of price, be it an annual fee or membership in a travel club.

One facility that has been around now in my area for several years is self-service checkout at some supermarkets and a large hardware chain. Basically, it's an honor system. The customer swipes each item's barcode over a reader, pays by credit card, gets a printed receipt, and bags the purchases, all without staff intervention. Although the process is wide open to theft, it's encouraging that companies are willing to take that risk, and it must be paying off or they wouldn't continue with it. As for me, I try not to be in a hurry when I'm shopping, and I prefer the social dialog with the staff.

2.9 Unusual Lines

One such line comes to mind, people waiting to visit a toilet. Now this was no ordinary toilet, and the people were lined up to *look* at it, not use it. After a day of meetings in the beautiful city of Montreux, Switzerland, at the eastern end of Lake Geneva, a group of us took the funicular railway high up a mountain to a café for some drinks. Someone used the toilet there and soon, the word spread about this state-of-the-art potty, so the techies amongst us just had to go and take a look. Well, it was quite a performance. At the end of one's business one pushed a button and watched the system go through its paces. The seat retracted into the body where it was washed and sterilized. The bowl flushed, it was washed, and the seat slid back out for the next person. Although my story might lose something in the translation, I must say it was worth the wait to see.

There's a famous Monty Python sketch in which a department store's customer service/complaints counter has a long line of people waiting to return or exchange things. One man has a defective flamethrower, which, from time to time, shoots flames all over the place. I'd say that was definitely an unusual line.

2.10 The Shortest lines

If you have to have a line, better it be shorter than not. Two kinds of short-line scenarios come to mind: using a very small airport and flying international First Class. And I have had the privilege of doing both on a number of occasions. The international airports on the Dutch Caribbean islands of Saba and St. Eustacius are 1-room huts. They take informality to a whole new level. You know, the guy who loads your baggage, stamps your passport, and issues your ticket, well he also gets in and flies your plane!

I flew in a jet aircraft from Helsinki, Finland, to Ivalo 200 kms north of the Arctic Circle in Finnish Lapland. Only a couple flights a day departed and arrived, and the terminal was a small log cabin. The plane carried its own retracting stairs, which were lowered as the cabin door opened. We were on the ground and reunited with our luggage within minutes. And to top it off a reindeer with a full rack of antlers wandered out of the woods to welcome us to Lapland and to pose for some photos. He sniffed around a bit and then went back into the trees.

As for the international First-Class experience, my first time with that truly was outstanding and has yet to be repeated even though I've travelled First Class a number of times since. I was one of only two First-Class passengers in an overnight flight from Chicago to Buenos Aires, Argentina. On arrival, I was met by a customer service agent who greeted me by name and took me to the First-Class lounge to wait for my connecting flight to Montevideo, Uruguay. Sometime later, they announced Economy-Class boarding and then Business-Class boarding. Just when I thought the plane was going to leave without me (I could see it boarding 200 yards out on the tarmac), they collected us First-Class passengers, took us down a ramp to a waiting limousine, which drove us to the stairs leading to the plane. The chauffer was careful to arrive only when all the other passengers had boarded, so we could go straight up the stairs without delay. As soon as we were seated, the doors were closed, and the plane took off. Now that's what I call *not waiting!* [And—don't tell anyone—but I was flying on a free ticket.]

If I understand correctly, when one has one's own private jet the lines are non-existent; however, I have yet to have that experience.

2.11 Conclusion

If you have never seen Mel Brooks' wild-west movie, "Blazing Saddles," I highly recommend it. The scene that is relevant to this essay is the one in which a gang of crooks is riding across the desert and they came across a tollbooth and have to form a line to pay and then pass through. As to why they simply didn't ride around the booth—there was no fence either side—is beyond me, but it was wickedly funny to watch.

I am also reminded of a joke about the Australian Prime Minister in the early 1970s. He claimed to have a solution to shortening the unemployment lines. When asked what it was, he said that the people should all just stand closer together!

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Finally, I don't understand all the fuss with respect to lining up for services; my recommendation is simple, tallest-to-shortest is fine with me. And I'm not just saying that because I'm 6'4" (190 cm) tall either.

Happy waiting now, y'hear, and for Heaven's sake take something along for you and your family members to do.

3. February 2011, "Talk is Cheap. Write it Down"

How many times have you heard people say something like, "I'd really like to travel more," "I've always dreamed of being a writer, actor, ...," or "I'd like to learn to play an instrument, learn a language, paint, ..., but I really don't have the time." Maybe you've heard yourself say it, or at least you've thought it.

In this essay, I'll explore what I perceive to be the four stages of turning a dream into reality and why many people don't have what it takes to go beyond the first one or two stages.

Interestingly, this essay is an instance of what it preaches. I've been thinking about this topic for a long while, and I've been talking about it and promoting it for a couple of years. Now, I've decided to follow my own advice and to *write it down*.

For the past two years, I've been mentoring high school seniors at a non-traditional school. Their ages have ranged from 18 to 22. One recurring event in which I participate is a Careers Day at which I talk about being self-employed. [See the essay "[Starting Your Own Business](#)" from October 2011.] One of the things I ask students to take away from my presentation is the subject of this essay. By following my own suggestions, not only am I producing something that future students can access readily, and read and digest beyond our meeting, I also get to test and refine the process along the way.

3.1 Stage 1: Dreaming the Dream

While talk certainly is cheap, daydreaming is free! Daydreaming really has no boundaries except those of your imagination. And if you are lacking in imagination, you are likely to be lacking in stimulation. Of course, there is no way to know what others daydream about, but I suspect that even the most outwardly conservative people can and do have vivid imaginations. The safest thing about daydreaming is that you can't embarrass yourself.

One thing that keeps us dreaming about a particular topic is what I call the *Romantic Factor*. We see or hear of something that interests us and we fall in love with the idea of doing it ourselves. Note carefully that I said, "... fall in love with the idea," which is *not* the same as actually doing something. For example, more than a few teachers of writing have said that most people who claim to want to be published are more in love with the idea of being published than they are with actually being published.

Let me provide a tangible example of a high Romantic Factor, speaking a foreign language. Perhaps you've seen some movies, read books, or spoken to people about travel abroad to a country whose language you don't speak. Wouldn't it be wonderful to be able to go there and bargain in the local markets, order food and drink at an off-the-beaten-track restaurant, shop in a supermarket, and walk the backstreets and chat to the locals about everyday life? [My view is that it definitely *is* wonderful even though my foreign language skills are basic.]

Here's another case, which involves the perceived glamor of being self-employed. Wouldn't it be great to be your own boss? You could work whatever hours you liked, take long vacations, lease a luxury car for business purposes, travel on business in style, and rub shoulders with the movers and shakers.

Dreaming is fine, but only up to a point. I'm sure than more than a few of us have dreamed about winning the lottery. However, that turns out not to be a good thing on which to base one's financial planning. [I once had a tenant who got so far behind in his rent that I evicted him. He left almost all of his belongings behind (including US\$125 in loose change scattered around the apartment). As I was cleaning out his kitchen drawers, I found dozens and dozens of lottery tickets, which he'd apparently bought in the hopes of solving his financial problems. Not only did he not win the lottery, but he'd also spent a lot of money trying.]

Sooner or later, for all but your admitted fantasies [for suggestions, see [Austin Powers'](#) list of "10 things to do before I die"] you should try to figure out if the dream can be made real, and if so, how. And if it really isn't going to happen, you can put more effort into other endeavors. If you don't get beyond the dreaming stage, you won't make any progress at all towards your supposed goal. That is not to say that dreaming about seemingly unreachable goals is wasted time. A little fantasy can help relieve the drudgery of everyday life, and it can challenge you to strive for higher goals.

In my own case, for years I had two significant things on my dream list: learning to play a musical instrument, and improving one or more of my foreign languages or learning a new language. After years of dreaming about playing a number of instruments, composing, writing lyrics, and producing, several years ago I admitted to myself that it was never going to happen. As I saw it, the main obstacle was simple: I wanted to be better than just okay at any musical pursuit, but I didn't have the discipline or want to give up the time it would take to practice to get to the level I wanted. It seemed to me that with music I'd have to put in a lot of effort before I could reap much reward whereas with a foreign language, every hour I spent on it could be useful immediately. [I expect to get comments on this especially from musicians who might respond that one can play quite a bit on a guitar, for example, after learning just a few chords. If they argue well enough, maybe I'll be convinced to put some form of music-related activity back on my dream list!]

In summary then, daydreaming is free, it's easy, it's temporary, and it carries little or no risk. It also requires absolutely no commitment, and therein is its limitation.

3.2 Stage 2: Talking the Talk

When talking, you generally get to choose your audience, the two main types of which involve friends and strangers. In the first case, there is little risk. In many instances, you are "preaching to the choir;" you and your audience mostly agree on the issue at hand, and your words need not be polished or even thought through. Many of your lines are throwaway. On the other hand, with strangers there can be a lot of risk. First impressions can often be lasting impressions, and unpolished words or half-baked opinions can and will count against you especially if you have to get along with the same people in the future.

Regarding commitment to what you say, consider the case in which your words are being recorded and could be played back by anyone at any time in the future (such as when you are running for public office). In such circumstances, you very likely will take much more care with what you say and how you say it.

If you have an idea about which you want constructive feedback, then choose your audience accordingly. For example, ask questions of others who are in the business of interest or might otherwise be qualified to comment. Speaking only with those who agree with you is unlikely to allow you to develop your idea fully. Also, start out with just one other person, and as your idea gathers support and you gain confidence, increase your audience. Be sure to acknowledge others' contributions and note that conceding points can enhance your credibility. The more flexible you are the easier and quicker you'll be able to move your idea along. Be ready to modify your idea as you get constructive feedback, and don't insist that your exact original idea be retained *at all costs*.

In summary, talking takes at least a little bit of effort, it can be easy or hard, it's as permanent as the listeners' memory, and it can carry little-to-lots of risk. It requires at least some short-term commitment, but you can do it with a different audience each time. And talking about a topic can help you determine whether you are serious about it.

Oh, by the way, when talking never miss a good opportunity to shut up! [Author makes note to follow this advice!]

3.3 Stage 3: Writing it Down

Of those ideas that make it through Stage 2, the vast majority don't make it through Stage 3. This stage pretty much weeds out the pretenders because it requires much more discipline than most people have. (Yes, dear reader, you may well fall in that category.)

It is most important to understand that what you write down in this stage is intended initially for an audience of one, you! The idea here is first to write down enough information to allow you to decide whether the idea really is viable and makes sense, and if so, then to write down sufficient detail on how to implement it. (These two activities might be iterative.) If you can't specify in writing what it is you intend to do and how you intend to do it, how can you reasonably expect to be able to implement completely and efficiently anything other than the simplest task?

While Stages 1 and 2 involve transient actions, Stage 3 is all about permanence, and this is your chance to eliminate the Romantic Factor I mentioned earlier. When we dream or talk about an idea we often dwell primarily—if not only—on the positive aspects. People are very good at putting from their minds the downsides of things. The challenge in this stage is to write down all your thoughts, both positive and negative. That way, when you next start to think about the topic in question, you have the cumulative knowledge you've written as a starting point. There is absolutely no point in omitting anything from the written log that might be relevant. If you find yourself doing that, you are being dishonest with yourself and you very likely will be headed for unpleasant surprises if not failure.

Let's revisit the perceived glamor of being self-employed mentioned in Stage 2. You could work whatever hours you liked and take long vacations: Ok, so who will cover for you when you are not on the job? Will you have a business partner? Will you have a key employee who you can trust to make decisions in your absence? If you have a key employee then you have employees, which implies a whole other set of issues with respect to payroll, benefits, and such. Who will sign the paychecks in your absence?

Ok, so you don't have a partner or any employees, then what happens if you get sick for an extended period? Who covers for you on projects that you are contractually committed to deliver by a certain date?

To write-off expenses such as a luxury car or traveling in style, first you have to make enough money to cover those expenses. And as far as rubbing shoulders with the movers and shakers, how will you get introduced to that crowd and how will you sustain your membership?

It has been my experience that newly self-employed people who have not done their homework seriously underestimate the cost of doing business. (Such things include the need for and subsequent cost of business licenses and retirement/health taxes, insurance, and benefits). They simply are way too focused on the Romantic Factor and almost certainly haven't completed Stage 3.

Note that it is okay to share your written work with others, and indeed, there are advantages to doing so. Just chose your reviewers wisely and ask for, and be ready to receive, constructive criticism. For big decisions, you definitely should share your written plan with others, and in some cases, you'll have to if you want their support. Better to identify any flaws during a walkthrough than to find them during actual implementation. The good news is that the process of writing it down quite often exposes any weaknesses it contains.

In summary then, if dreaming is raw and talking is half-baked, writing down an idea gives it a chance to get it baked enough that it can actually be achieved. Because of the effort needed to complete this stage, those ideas that make it through have a high probability of success.

It is important to recognize that, together, Stages 2 and 3 might need to be repeated as you get more and/or better information.

3.4 Stage 4: Walking the Walk

Assuming that you now have a viable plan for success, there still can remain some serious obstacles. For example, implementation might require spending a non-trivial amount of money. Do you have it? If not, can you get it at a reasonable interest rate? Can you bring yourself to write out that large check? Implementation might require the support of a friend, parent, or partner. Now that you are "down to the wire" are they really on-board with the plan?

While a theoretical plan might look good, are all your assumptions realistic? Although you may be a great technical person for the task at hand, are you willing and able to handle the supporting administration needed to make it successful long term? That becomes especially relevant if you consider hiring employees.

Consider a phased approach if possible; that is, see if there is a way to "test the waters" before committing to the whole project. Note, however, that a danger of this is that you will under-commit to the test implementation such that it doesn't have what it needs to succeed. [In my own case, I went into business for myself, I bought a house, and my first child was born, all in the same couple of months. I certainly had some incentive to succeed.]

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It is worth noting the following saying from US President Calvin "Silent Cal" Coolidge: "Nothing in the world can take the place of persistence. Talent will not; nothing is more common than unsuccessful men with talent; Genius will not; unrewarded genius is almost a proverb; Education will not; the world is full of educated derelicts. Persistence and determination alone are omnipotent."

3.5 Conclusion

It is possible that by the end of Stage 3, you have convinced yourself not to go down a certain path, and that's okay! It is far better to be going or not going in a particular direction by design rather than by accident. [In the words of "The Quiet Beatle" ([George Harrison](#)): "If you don't know where you're going, any road will take you there."]

Now, go forth and turn one or more of your dreams into reality by "writing it down!"

[Thanks much to Shawn for his careful review.]

[See the May 2011 follow-on essay, "[Planning for Success.](#)"]

4. March 2011, “What is Normal — Part 3: Money”

When I was eight or nine, based on an ad in a kid's magazine I sent off for a starter set of coins for a collection. Some of them were rather exotic and they all came from faraway places. Although I have only a few of those original coins now, I do have a large set of coins and banknotes that I have collected during the past 30+ years on my visits to 50-odd regions of the world. In more than a few cases, the country I was visiting was in the process of changing its currency, in which case, I often got a set of the old and the new. In the case of banknotes—sometimes called *bills* or *notes*—I limit them to amounts worth US\$10 or less. I also have a habit of looking at my change and I often spot an uncommon special-issue coin or banknote. After many years of having my collection stored in plastic bags and boxes, I finally got around to mounting it into sheets of plastic holders and 3-ring binders.

As we shall see below, not all monetary systems are created equal. Remember, normal is relative—things can and do vary dramatically from one country to the next.

4.1 How Well do You Know Your Money?

Most people take money for granted; they work, they earn money, and they save and/or spend it. [I've heard two theories regarding spending vs. saving: “Money is made round to go ‘round,” and “Money is made flat to put in a stack.”] Many people don't notice or know the names of the people and scenes depicted on the currency that they use every day. [Attention Americans: Which US banknotes feature people who were *not* presidents? On the penny, does Lincoln face left or right? No peeking now!]

Here are some questions for you regarding your own currency system, and money, in general:

1. Who are the faces on each of your coins?
2. Who are the faces, or what are the scenes, on each of your banknotes?
3. Some coins contain Latin inscriptions. If you have any such coins, what do the inscriptions mean? (For example, US coins have *e pluribus unum*.)
4. Why does my name (Rex) appear on some (typically older British Commonwealth) coins? And when might it start appearing again on new coins?
5. Are living people ever shown on coins or banknotes?
6. In some cultures, coins have *heads* and *tails* sides. What are the formal names for those?
7. Do different denominations of banknotes have different colors and/or sizes?
8. What anti-counterfeiting measures, if any, do your banknotes contain?
9. Why is the same person on contemporary coins from Australia, Canada, New Zealand, and Fiji?
10. Where in North America is the Euro legal tender?

See §4.12 for some answers and comments.

4.2 Currencies and Their Symbols

Most of us deal with one currency, our own local one, be it \$, £, ¥, or €, for example. However, if we read articles that involve multiple currencies, we might need more than local currency symbols. Let's take the case of Australia, Bahamas, Bermuda, Canada, Hong Kong, and the US, all of which use their own local dollar currency. How can we distinguish between them? Each currency has a 3-letter code of which the first two letters ordinarily correspond to the host country's code. The third letter denotes

the currency. Together, they make up the 3-letter international currency code standard, [ISO 4217](#). For example, the dollar currencies mentioned above have the following respective 3-letter names: AUD, BSD, BMD, CAD, HKD, and USD. Non-dollar currencies use the same naming scheme; for example, Chinese Yuan (CNY), Danish kroner (DKK), Japanese yen (JPY), South African rand (ZAR), Swiss franc (CHF), and UK pound (GBP). [Yes, the GB designation ignores Northern Ireland.] One exception to this naming scheme is the Euro, which has the 3-letter name EUR; it is not associated with any one country. Of course, if we read historic information about countries that have since adopted the Euro we'll see their previous currency codes; for example, Austrian shilling (ATS), French franc (FRF), German deutschmark (DEM), and Spanish peseta (ESP).

The most commonly traded currencies all have symbols, most of which are readily recognizable. However, if you have to write an amount in an electronic document and you have no way to enter the corresponding symbol, you can use the *generic currency sign* ₨ , assuming your software supports it. It's a small circle with four short lines radiating out at 90-degree angles, as shown. Computer keyboards for some European languages actually have a key for this symbol.

Currency symbols can be misleading. For example, "When is a ₨ not a dollar?" Not only is that symbol used for dollar currencies, but it's also used by peso currencies in numerous Latin American countries. [When Mexico issued its New Peso 20-odd years ago, it used the local notation N ₨ .] The Japanese yen and Chinese Yuan share the ₨ symbol. The UK pound and some other pound currencies share the symbol ₨ with some [lira](#) currencies.

4.3 Currency Divisions and Denominations

To many people, currency is made up of two different units of which one larger unit is made up of 100 smaller units. The UK decimal pound, dollar currencies, and the Euro are examples. However, some currencies have three units.

Before decimal currency was introduced in numerous British Commonwealth countries (including my own, Australia), they used a pound, which was made up of 20 shillings, each of which was made up of 12 pence. This pounds, shillings, and pence system was often written as ₨sd , or lsd, from the Latin words [librae](#), [solidi](#), and [denarii](#). Although many countries used a dollar for their decimal currency, the UK kept the pound, but instead of that having 20 shillings, or 240 old pence, it had 100 new pence.

In 2009, I visited Jordan, whose currency is the dinar ([JOD](#)), which is divided into 100 qirsh (or piastres) or 1,000 fils. It's a decimal system, but it has three units. However, it appears that fils are fading from use, as one cannot buy anything with such small-valued coins.

The currency of China is the [Yuan](#), which, domestically, is referred to as Renminbi. 1 Yuan is 10 Jiao, and 1 Jiao is 10 Fen. Again, it appears that the smallest unit is fading from use.

So are there any currencies that have only one unit. Yes, and probably the best known is the Japanese Yen ([JPY](#)). Prior to the Euro, Italy had a single-unit currency, the Italian lira ([ITL](#)). Italy was my first port of call in Europe, and I remember well buying a pair of shoes there for 30,000 lira, which sounded like a *lot* of money.

For the most part, coin denominations are unsurprising, such as 1, 5, 10, and 50; however, a few things warrant a mention:

- Dollar currencies in North America and the Caribbean use a 25-cent coin while those in Asia and Australasia use a 20-cent coin.
- Some dollar (and other decimal) currencies have a 2-cent coin.
- Various old-time pound currencies, in which the third unit was the penny, had a halfpenny (pronounced *ha'penny*), and a quarter penny (called a *farthing*).
- Some coins have their own names separate from their value; for example, in the US, a 1-cent coin is called a *penny*, a 5-cent coin is a *nickel*, a 10-cent coin is a *dime*, and a 25-cent coin is a *quarter*. To some old-timers, a quarter is also 2 *bits*. Some old British Commonwealth currencies had *quid*, *crown*, *half-crown*, *sovereign*, *guinea*, and *florin*.

4.4 Millionaire for a Day

According to Wikipedia, inflation “is a rise in the general level of prices of goods and services in an economy over a period of time Inflation.” As we have seen—and some of you might have experienced first-hand—there is inflation and there is INFLATION! While in western countries we talk about annual inflation in the order of 2–5% per year, the inflation rate in Zimbabwe in 2008 was 98% per day, which meant that prices doubled every 24.7 hours! [I'm reminded of a cartoon I once saw in which a shopper recalled how she used to take a purse full of cash to buy a cart full of groceries, but, these days, she spends a cart full of cash on a purse full of groceries!]

As inflation ramped up in Argentina in the 1980's, the government introduced the austral, which was equal to 10,000 pesos. But then came hyperinflation, during which prices climbed more than 100% some months, and 10,000; 50,000; and 500,000 australes banknotes were issued. I happened to be there in 1991, just before they introduced the new peso at a rate of 10,000 australes. When I changed money at the land border with Chile after having crossed the Patagonia, I got a bunch of those “big bills.” For a day, I was a millionaire, although the buying power of my stake was pretty low. One interesting byproduct of that was there were no coins. To use a pay phone, I had to go to a kiosk to buy a metal slug that I then inserted into the phone.

I was also in Mexico when they divided their peso currency (\$) by 100 to get the new peso (N\$).

Another well-known inflationary event took place in the Germany's Weimar Republic between 1921 and 1923. I have a 10 million Mark banknote from 1923.

4.5 The Euro

If you have traveled to Europe in recent years, you'll almost certainly have encountered the Euro. At a glance, the banknotes from each country look the same, and they are, except that the series number prefix does indicate the country in which each one was printed. The coins are another matter altogether. The design on the front of each coin is the same across all countries, although there are now two different sets. (A quick look at the older set shows that Norway is missing from Scandinavia leaving a suggestive image of manhood formed by Sweden and Finland.) Those countries that adopted the Euro after the second design was introduced only use that new one while the early adopters have both. The backside of each country's coins was chosen by various means within each country. For

example, Ireland chose the harp for all eight denominations, Greece chose eight different images, and some other countries chose one image for the 1-, 2-, and 5-cent, another for the 10-, 20-, and 50-cent, and a third for the 1- and 2-Euro. (See the [European Central Bank's web site](#) for the details of each coin and banknote set.)

In 2009, I was at the Vatican City [preparing for sainthood, as you might expect!], which has its own set of Euro coins; however, they are *not* in circulation. Like stamps, they make for a *big* money spinner from the tourists. When I went to a souvenir store to ask about getting a set, I was politely informed that sets started at €130, which for eight coins having a face value of €3.88 seemed like a sin! Needless to say, I do *not* have any of those.

As inflation has eroded the value of many small coins, some countries round all financial amounts to the nearest multiple of 5. [In the case of Australia, this resulted in its removing its 1- and 2-cent coins from circulation.] In the case of Finland, although 1- and 2-cent coins were minted [you can buy them from coin shops] they are not in circulation. Now, the 1- and 2-cent coins are legal tender in all countries that support the Euro. So, must a Finnish merchant accept five 1-cent coins from Germany or France, for example, as payment for a 5-cent bill? I don't know.

France has several overseas departments all of which are formally part of that country. As such, they use the Euro. These include Guadeloupe and Martinique in the Caribbean, French Guiana in South America, and Réunion in the Indian Ocean. Although numerous former French colonies used a franc currency that was tied to the French Franc ([FRF](#)), they do not now use the Euro. Instead, they use the Central African CFA franc ([XAF](#)), the West African CFA franc ([XOF](#)), or the French Pacific Franc ([XPF](#)), among others, which are tied to the Euro.

4.6 Uncommon but Valid Denominations

When I arrived in the US in 1979, a dollar coin had been introduced and there was a big promotion to get people to use it. However, as the new coin was almost the same size and thickness as the quarter (25 cents), this [Susan B. Anthony](#) coin never took off. A few years ago, a larger and different colored dollar coin featuring [Sacajawea](#) was introduced, but it too languishes. [In my humble opinion, so long as the \$1 bill is kept in circulation no dollar coin will become mainstream in the US. Note that a US\$1 bill wears out—and gets shredded—in less than a year while an equivalent coin will last many years.]

The US also has a 50-cent coin and a \$2 bill; however, they are almost “as rare as hen's teeth.” In fact, many Americans don't even know they exist. The main problem is that cash drawers do not have extra places to put these two denominations, so when they are received in payment, the cashier puts them in the space under the cash drawer.

More than 25 years ago, when I made my first trip to Disneyland, I got [Disney dollars](#), \$1 bills with Mickey's face on them. Interestingly, in recent years here in the US, there has been a surge in the creation and use of private currency that is only accepted within some small geographical area only. Apparently, this was to encourage inhabitants to spend locally.

4.7 Privately Issued Currency

The first time I came across an instance of a non-governmental name on currency was in 1979 in Hong Kong. Back then, equivalent sets of banknotes were issued containing the names *The Chartered Bank* and *The Hong Kong and Shanghai Banking Corporation*. [The latter's abbreviated name is HSBC, which is now a well-known worldwide bank.] When I went back to Hong Kong in 2005, it had become a Special Administrative Region of China, and an extra set of banknotes labeled *Bank of China (Hong Kong)* was in circulation.

The next instance was in Scotland where I found banknotes issued by *The Royal Bank of Scotland Limited*, *Bank of Scotland*, and *Clydesdale Bank PLC*. According to Wikipedia, there have been eight issuers of banknotes in Northern Ireland.

4.8 Just Where Can I Use a Given Currency?

Except for the Eurozone, for the most part, each country has its own currency, which is accepted throughout its territories. However, some currencies are used legally (and sometimes not so legally) outside their home country. The US\$ is probably the most common. It is legal tender in Bermuda, the Dutch Antilles, East Timor, Ecuador, El Salvador, and Panama, among others.

Numerous towns in countries bordering the Eurozone also take Euros.

In 1992, I went to Russia. During my two weeks there, I never did change money legally. Given the steady increase in inflation back then, everyone was eager to change Rubles into hard currency (GBP, USD, or DEM) as a hedge. So, whenever I needed Rubles, I didn't have to look far.

4.9 Special, Unusual, and Interesting Coins and Banknotes

Just when you thought you'd seen everything, along comes some new style of coin or banknote. Here are a few I've encountered:

- 50-cent banknote (BSD)
- \$3 banknote (BSD)
- 3 Ruble coin (RUR)
- Square coins with rounded corners (ANG, BSD)
- Coins with holes (DKK, JPY, NOK)
- A 12-edged coin (the current 50-cent piece from Australia; believe it or not there is a World Record for the number of these that can be stood on edge one on top of another)
- Coins having two pieces each made from a different metal (EUR, GBP, MXP)
- Aluminum money so light coins can blow away out of one's hand (INR)
- Bi-lingual banknotes (CAD, CHF, FIM)
- Plastic banknotes (AUD). Yes, they do shrink when ironed!

And, of course, there are plenty of special-issue coins.

4.10 Overseas travel and currency exchange

How much is my currency worth abroad? There are many web sites that can give you up-to-the-minute rates of exchange for all the mainstream currencies. However, there are some things to understand before you lock in on a rate:

- Traveler's checks are bought at a lower rate than that at which they are sold.
- If you buy traveler's checks a long time in advance of your trip, the exchange rate could become more or less favorable before you use them.
- Credit card companies often charge a 3% currency transaction fee when you are traveling abroad and using a currency different to that from home. This fee appears on your statement separate from the item bought, and might even be posted days later. Watch out!
- Some hotels give you the option of paying your bill with your credit card in the local currency or in your home currency (at least for EUR, GBP, and USD). Understand what charges your credit card company tacks on before you do the comparison. (It's probably a moneymaking racket for the hotel.)
- Too many people tell themselves that foreign money is confusing, thereby making it a self-fulfilling prophesy. Come up with a reasonable approximation of the local currency unit and don't hold out wads of cash to vendors and tell them to take what they *need*. Their needs might be quite a bit more than the transaction price.

Why do rates change? From time to time, national banks revalue their currency based on a number of factors that I won't go into here. Suffice it to say that a big swing can make your vacation abroad significantly cheaper or more expensive. (In recent years, I've stopped thinking about the cost when I use the EUR, GBP, and JPY.) In the 31 years I've been gone from Australia, the AUD went from USD 1.25 down to USD 0.65, and back up to USD 1.02.

Can I have a bank account in another country? Check with your tax agency. Most require you to declare foreign accounts, the account country might also need you to file a tax return in its country, and it might withhold taxes on any interest earned.

Can I have a bank account in the US recorded using another currency? I don't believe so. However, some countries do allow such accounts.

Based on personal experience, I have one warning to Americans in particular about using cash machines abroad, if they use a PIN containing letters instead of digits. US phones have had letters on them as well as numbers for a long time, and this trend naturally moved to keypads. However, this is not the case in many (most?) other countries. So, there I was in Alsace, France, wanting to get money from a cash machine; my PIN was alphanumeric, but the machine had only digits, and I didn't know which digits matched with letters. As a result, I now have a list of the translation from letters to digits stored in my pocket computer. I can attest that it is very frustrating to have all the things that you need to get your cash, yet not be able to get at your cash!

4.11 Formatting Currency Amounts

Give 10 different cultures the task of developing a system of formatting numbers and currency amounts, and you may well get 10 different results. As part of my work in developing international

standards for computer programming languages, here are some of the formatting differences I've had to deal with:

- The radix point for some is the period (.) while that for others is the comma (,), as in USD 1.56 vs. EUR 1,56.
- The “thousands” separator for some is the period (.) while that for others is the comma (,), as in USD 1,234 vs. EUR 1.234. The Swiss actually use a single quote, and, I believe, the French sometimes use non-breaking spaces. Now, I ask you, is *that* normal?
- Note the quotes around “thousands” above. Some currencies group digits in other than blocks of three.
- For some, the local currency symbol or international currency name is written as a prefix, while for others, it's written as a suffix.
- As to how positive and negative signs/amounts or Debit/Credit indicators are printed varies widely.

4.12 The Envelope Please

Answers to the quiz:

1. Who are the faces on each of your coins? That depends on your currency, but they probably are past presidents, royalty, or national heroes.
2. Who are the faces, or what are the scenes, on each of your banknotes? Again, that depends on your currency, but they probably are past presidents, royalty, or national heroes. In many cases, they look like they suffered from constipation or very much needed to pass gas to release some pressure. In the case of the “politically correct” Euro, they were deliberately chosen to be abstract and not actual places.
3. Some coins contain Latin inscriptions. If you have any such coins, what do the inscriptions mean? (For example, US coins have *e pluribus unum*), which means, “Give us your poor, your tired, and your hungry,” or in Chicago, “Give us your money, all of it!” (Actually, it means, “Out of many, one”.)
4. Why does my name (Rex) appear in some (typically older British Commonwealth) coins? And when might it start appearing again on new coins? *Rex* is the Latin word for *king* (hence the name of this blog). In Latin and romance languages, adjectives follow the nouns to which they apply, so King George is written *George Rex*. As the Latin word for *queen* is *Regina*, contemporary British Commonwealth coins carry *Elizabeth Regina*. Standby for *Charles Rex* (maybe) and *William Rex* (fur shur dude).
5. Are living people ever shown on coins or banknotes? Yes. Usually they are reigning monarchs or not-so-benevolent dictators.
6. In some cultures, coins have *heads* and *tails* sides. What are the formal names for those? For coins, the front/heads side is the *obverse*, and the back/tails side is the *reverse*. These terms can also be used with banknotes, flags, and medals, among other things.
7. Do different denominations of banknotes have different colors and/or sizes? That depends on your currency. US banknotes used to all be the same size and color; however, now other colors are being added with each new re-design. Australian dollar (and numerous other currency)

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banknotes increase in width and/or length with each increasing denomination. Most currencies use different colors on different denominations

8. What anti-counterfeiting measures, if any, do your banknotes contain? They probably have one of more of the following: special paper, ink, serial numbers, watermarks, metallic threads, and holograms.
9. Why is the same person on contemporary coins from Australia, Canada, New Zealand, and Fiji? Because she's the Queen of England (and the British Commonwealth) and you're not!
10. Where in North America is the Euro legal tender? Formerly an overseas department of France, the islands of [Saint Pierre and Miquelon](#)—that are just off the coast of Newfoundland, Canada—are now an overseas collectivity.

4.13 Conclusion

On average, I make 4–6 international trips a year. As a result, I often have leftover currency from a previous trip. In fact, for emergency purposes, in my computer bag I keep about USD 20-worth of banknotes in each of the following currencies: US dollars, UK pounds, Japanese yen, Swiss francs, and Euros.

From 1999–2008, the US stopped making “standard” quarters. Instead, it issued 50 [state quarters](#), 10 per year, in the order of each state's joining the union. Now if you have all 50 (I'm still missing a couple), you may think you have a full set, but quarters were also issued for each of the federal territories. And to make it more challenging, US coins are branded P or D depending on whether they were made at the Philadelphia or Denver mints, respectively. So, a full set is 50 Ps *and* 50 Ds! And now we've got special-issue nickels and dollars.

If you are looking for a unique gift for that hard-to-shop-for friend, see if your national mint (or private coin shop) sells packets of shredded banknotes that have been taken out of circulation. You might also be able to buy uncut sheets of banknotes. (For example, the US Mint sells sheets of sixteen \$1 bills. Hmm, I wonder what my creditors would say if I tried to pay them with such sheets?)

People around the world know that the US Secret Service is charged with protecting current and former US leaders and their families. You know, those men and women always talking into their lapel in movies! Nowadays, this service is part of the Department of Homeland Security; however, when the service was created in 1865, it was part of the Treasury Department, where its initial responsibility was to deal with crimes relating to that department, such as counterfeiting. It still plays that role today. It wasn't until 1901 that the service started protecting presidents (by which time three presidents had been assassinated).

5. April 2011, "Travel – FAQs"

Here are some of the Frequently Asked Questions (FAQs) I've received about my many years of business and personal travel.

5.1 Have you ever had an emergency landing or any in-flight trouble?

My first unscheduled landing was weather related. Even though it happened 30 years ago, I remember it well. I left Chicago's O'Hare International Airport (ORD) in a 20-seat commuter propeller plane. [Imagine if you will two adult elephants walking one behind the other, trunk to tail, with a newborn baby elephant way down below and between them. That's how my plane looked taxiing out to the runway between two wide-bodied jets!] I was headed for Bloomington, Indiana, a short hop to the south. Soon after takeoff, we ran into a serious electrical storm with lightening cracking around the wings. Well, in that little plane, we definitely were at the mercy of the elements, and we sure learned what turbulence was. Seconds later, the woman next to me was hanging on to my arm for dear life as though I had the power to save her. After what seemed like ages (but was probably no more than 5 minutes), we put down unexpectedly in Terra Haute, Indiana. There, we waited out the storm and then continued on to our scheduled destination. I can't say, however, that I "saw my life flash before my eyes" indicating I was going to die soon.

My second unscheduled landing was to refuel. I was on a Boeing 747 Lufthansa flight from Frankfurt to Washington DC and, as usual, the route for that flight went over the Atlantic Provinces of Canada and down over the New England states of the US. There was a widespread power failure in the greater New York City area over which we had to fly, and air traffic control was operating on a severely reduced basis. So, we flew "figure eights" over Massachusetts to kill time. Eventually, we put down in Boston to refuel. Unfortunately, as no one was expecting us, it took a while for anyone to come out to where we were parked. And then it took another hour for a fuel truck with all the right attachments to service a 747, to arrive. And as Lufthansa had only one flight in/out of Boston each day, and that was nowhere near the time we arrived, they had no staff on site to help things along. As it happened, more than a few people were ticketed to fly on to Boston once they landed in Washington DC. Of course, they started making noises about wanting to get off and go straight home, but customs and immigration refused to allow it. Eventually, they did relent, but deplaning passengers could take only their carry-on luggage. Any checked luggage had to continue on the flight to Washington and be flown back later.

On a flight from Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia, to Bangkok, Thailand, which followed along a mountain range, we'd just been served a meal with hot drinks when we hit some sort of air pocket. Well, we lost some altitude in double-quick time and the food and drinks went up in the air, but no one was hurt. I don't even recall the oxygen masks dropping down. [Each time I watch the animated safety video on a plane, it shows how calm everyone is when the masks drop down. I'm thinking that is highly unlikely for most people in a real emergency.]

Another time, I was taking off from Calgary in Alberta, Canada, in a Boeing 727. That plane has three engines, one on the top at the back, and one on each side of the body at the rear. There was a very strong crosswind and when we were about halfway down the runway there was a loud bang as the compressor on the top engine stalled. Well, that certainly got the passenger's attention. The pilot said

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there was nothing to worry about and that he'd simply taxi to the end of the runway and try again in the other direction. [From the reactions of some of the passengers near me, it seemed that they would rather have changed planes instead.]

Once on approach to Boston's Logan International (BOS) we came down through very heavy and low clouds, but all I could see below us was the sea. The pilot announced that, unfortunately, we'd missed the airport, so he was going to "go around and try that again."

In November 2009, I was on a Boeing 747 coming into the Ben-Gurion airport (TLV) of Tel Aviv, Israel. We were lower than 1,000 feet when the pilot decided to abort the landing. With a great roar, the four mighty engines sucked up at least a day's pay in fuel, and the giant plane climbed steeply. Whatever the reason, we circled back around the airport and landed on the second attempt. No explanation was given. However, I have to admit that it crossed my mind that the airport might be under a rocket attack.

Occasionally, when I'm halfway across the Atlantic or Pacific Ocean I think about how far we are from the nearest emergency landing place. In a real emergency, I think the answer is "too far," so it's best not to dwell on that and/or to have a(nother) stiff drink.

During the volcanic eruption in Iceland in 2010, stories surfaced about past aircraft problems with volcanic ash. I was pleased to hear that some years ago a Boeing 747 managed to glide for quite some time and distance after all four engines died after taking in ash, and that the pilots managed to get them restarted.

5.2 In your travels, have you run into any serious political or other unrest?

No, but I've been close enough to the fringes to have had my curiosity satisfied.

When I landed in Bangkok in June of 1979, there had been a military coup, and the airport was full of very short soldiers with very large automatic weapons. It was a little unnerving for a young lad from the bush, but I didn't feel at all unsafe. Outside the airport, there was no evidence of any security concerns.

A couple of years later, I departed from Frankfurt, Germany, where I experienced some very thorough security. This was back when the Baader-Meinhof Group (Red Army Faction) was active in Germany. Heavily armed soldiers were all over the terminal, and German Shepherd dogs sniffed my luggage and me. Apparently, that was normal!

My first adventure trip was to the Amazon River in northern Peru. To outfit myself I went to a military surplus store and spent about US\$25 on some khaki shirts, trousers, and a webbing belt, and the shirts even came with some rank and insignia. At the end of my jungle trip we were taken to the airport by bus where we waited by a hanger. Several military helicopters swooped in and landed near us and a whole bunch of armed soldiers jumped out. There I was looking every bit like a mercenary or gunrunner, except for one standout feature, the bright red laces in my hiking boots! It turns out they weren't after me, they were headed out on "pirate patrol" on the Amazon. [While on the river, I also saw evidence of that in the form of navy patrol vessels.]

On my first full day in Santiago, Chile, I went to an afternoon movie and when I came out it was dusk. As I walked down a street, I could see a large group off in the distance chanting and coming towards me. So, I went off to get a closer look. Apparently, something panicked them, and they started running towards me. Unfortunately, the quickest way out of the street for me was to run towards them and then to a side street, so I did that, and they and I turned off at the same time. Safe, I thought! Thirty seconds later, an armored car entered the intersection we'd just vacated and directed very high-pressure water cannons at many of the protesters knocking some of them over. Interesting thought I, and then I heard the sound of something metal rolling along the paved road and saw a tear gas canister coming my way. Let's just say that I moved quite quickly down the side street. Two hundred meters down, I ran into a whole squad of riot police in full gear quietly smoking and talking. Back at my hotel, I was told that students protested regularly over the disappearance of people who had been arrested by the government, and that the whole episode was carefully choreographed. The next morning, I was awakened by a public address system right outside my hotel window where a speaker for some freedom political party was addressing a rally. I was sure that a SWAT team would be rappelling through my window any minute, but after 30 minutes, the protesters packed up and left.

5.3 Have you ever run afoul at security screenings?

When I moved from Australia to the US, my port-of-entry in Europe was Rome, Italy. In Hong Kong, I'd bought a new attaché case and it had an expandable bottom. The very arrogant customs agent in Rome was convinced it had some sort of hidden compartment. He tipped everything out on a desk and was disgusted not to find anything and he threw up his hands and walked away. I waited for some time not knowing what to do, but when he didn't come back, I packed up and left.

In July 1992, I'd been in Russia for a 2-week lecture tour. Coming back from Saint Petersburg on the train, I sent my main case onto Helsinki to be stored while I traveled around Finland by train for a week. I recovered my bag on the way to the airport and admitted that it had not been in my possession for the previous week while it was in storage. In normally tranquil Finland, that week security was "over the top" because the leaders of some 10 countries (including the US) were coming to town for a summit. So, I was taken to a small cubicle. I had to take everything out of the case, and it was X-rayed empty to make sure nothing was hidden in the frame.

Once, I flew into Frankfurt from Berlin where I'd already cleared security. Although I was still in a secure area when I arrived in Frankfurt, I had to go through another security checkpoint, and it was operated by a woman who had all the charm of an East German border guard. She gave me such a hard time I thought she didn't like me for some reason, but it appeared that she didn't like anybody that day (or perhaps any day)! And 200 meters along from that checkpoint, I was stopped at another one. Don't you just hate that when that happens!

Several times, I've been chosen at random just prior to boarding for a thorough check of my hand luggage, even when I've been ticketed in Business Class.

September 11, 2001 was a Tuesday, and my wife and I were ticketed to fly from Washington DC to Kona, Hawaii, on the following Saturday. We actually got out via a different airport on the Monday, flew to Chicago, Los Angeles (where we made a last-minute change), and then Honolulu, Oahu, without our luggage. The next day we flew to the Big Island with only carry-on bags, and our luggage arrived

that afternoon. A week later, we departed from Kona airport, which is a sleepy place with palm-thatched roofs on small cabins, one of which houses security. They discovered a pair of stainless-steel folding scissors in my wife's carry-on bag, after she'd been through at least three lots of security the week before without their being detected.

5.4 Have you flown around the world?

I have flown around the world twice, but only once during the same trip. In the first case, I went from Australia to the US via Asia and Europe, but did not complete the circle until several years later when I flew across the Pacific from the US to Australia. My only around-the-world trip was flown in two weeks in 2008; it ranked only 11th by distance on my personal flight log as it was done in the upper half of the northern hemisphere. It was 18,692 miles (29,907 kms) and involved 57:45 hours travel time with 32:30 hours in the air. The route was Washington DC; Frankfurt, Germany; Milan, Italy; Frankfurt; Seoul, South Korea; Jeju Island, South Korea; Seoul; San Francisco; and Washington DC. It was a business trip and I wanted only two stopovers (Milan and Jeju), but to get a special fare, I needed at least three, so I stayed overnight at a hotel near Seoul airport. The good news is that I was in Business Class. [As a "practice run" for that trip, six days prior to starting it, I returned from a trip to Japan, 12 time zones in the opposite direction.] If one were planning to enjoy an around-the-world trip, one would take much longer, and one would almost certainly do it going west, to handle better the time changes.

In late 2011, I will do a similar trip, stopping off in Copenhagen, Denmark; Busan, South Korea; and Tokyo, Japan. However, I hope to spread out the flying over four weeks.

[In 2009, I visited the historic site of Petra in Jordan. While walking around the ruins I struck up a conversation with a retired man from Canada. He and a party of "well-heeled" tourists were on an all-First-Class National Geographic charter Boeing 757 that was going around the world in 30 days stopping off at major tourist attractions. The ticket price was around US\$65,000/person, meals and accommodation included! How many tickets would you like?]

5.5 Is there anywhere you haven't been that you really want to go?

Yes. To start with, Slovenia and Croatia, the Pyramids of Egypt, Southern Spain and Morocco, Greece, Turkey, Bolivia, and New Zealand. [I've since been to Slovenia and Croatia.]

5.6 What's your favorite place?

I don't have one, really! I enjoy every place that I visit. You can have a bad time in some exotic location and a good time in a third-world slum; it all comes down to the attitude you have and the people that you meet.

5.7 What's it like in Business and First Class?

If I told you, I'd have to kill you! Well okay, as long as you promise not to tell anyone else.

As you might expect, it's *much* better than being in Economy Class especially if you need as much legroom as I do. Besides, the seats don't lay back far enough in Economy Class for me to get any reasonable sleep.

Rex Jaeschke's Blog Postings: Volume 02 – December 2010 through November 2011

Being a frequent flyer, I get free domestic upgrades. Most domestic flights nowadays have only two classes of service, Economy and First, so I generally get to fly First Class without extra charge. (The domestic wide-body jet flights still have three classes.) Meals and drinks are sold up the back, but are complimentary up the front.

When flying international, the service is a significant step up from domestic, and most of my air travel now is international. My favorite plane used to be the Boeing 777, but now that United Airlines has converted its old fleet of 767s to lay-flat beds in Business Class, that is much nicer even though I'm still a bit long at one end to completely fit. You get a small suite with a large digital screen on a wall fixed in front of you, with movies, music, games, and language lessons all on-demand. Meals involve at least three main choices and are always excellent. You also get a bowl of warm nuts and a drink on takeoff and a hot towel before the meal. On one Airbus flight, my seat/bed had seven separate moving parts, so it took a while for me to get it "just right." Then I saved those positions in memory in case I sat up again to eat and wanted to restore that position again.

My first time in First Class was a memorable experience. And I'm happy to say that no one paid for it; I cashed in many frequent flyer miles. It was a Boeing 777 non-stop from Chicago to Buenos Aires, Argentina. There were 12 First-Class suites each of which ran the length of four side windows. I was one of only two passengers and we each had a flight attendant dedicated to us the whole trip. On arrival, I was met by a personal escort and taken to the First-Class lounge to await my on-going flight to Montevideo, Uruguay. When that flight was called, First-Class passengers were asked to stay behind until the last moment when we went down a private ramp to a limousine that drove us the 200 meters to the plane, arriving just as the last passenger disappeared up the stairway. The plane door was closed as we sat down, and we were off. I guess, if you are paying for a First-Class ticket, time really is money! Needless to say, that on the return trip I was infinitely wiser as I knew what to expect.

In 2010, I rode First Class from Frankfurt to Washington DC, and then in both directions from Washington DC to Tokyo. First-Class passengers have their own airport lounge separate from Business-Class passengers. In the Tokyo lounge, the first person I saw on entering was a former US Federal Senator who served as Secretary of Defense. Fortunately, he followed strict First-Class lounge protocol, and didn't make a fuss on seeing me!

By the way, on average, an international Business-Class ticket costs about four times that for Economy, while that for a First Class runs 10–12 times. Start saving your pennies (or frequent-flyer miles)!

5.8 Have you had any unusual flying experiences?

Several come to mind. The first took place while I was at a primitive jungle camp on the Amazon in Peru. We were about to board a boat for the 6-hour trip back to base camp when an oil-company [floatplane](#) touched down on the river next to us. After some discussion with the pilot, our guide announced that the pilot was flying to the same place we were headed and that he could take several people with him if we wanted to go, for about US\$30 each. The trip would take less than an hour. I volunteered as did one other guy, and we were off bouncing along the water trying to get enough takeoff speed. All the controls were in English, which the pilot didn't speak, and a few things seemed to be tied together with string, but, hey, it was an adventure. Being in a floatplane, we had to follow the

waterways so we could land in an emergency. It was only when the pilot took short cuts over the jungle that I worried a bit.

I flew from Caracas, Venezuela, in a Boeing 727-100, which is like a VW Beetle with a V8 engine! I was headed for Canaima near the base of [Angel Falls](#), the world's tallest waterfall. However, instead of stopping at the airport the pilot raced up the valley giving the passengers—first on the one side and then on the other—a bird's eye view of the 1,000-meter falls “just out the window.” It was not your typical jet flight and most tourist destinations would charge you \$100+ to do that in a small plane.

In central Maine, I went out in a small plane on a snow survey; that is, to measure how much snow was on the ground. We took off on wheels, but lowered skis to land on frozen lakes. At least one of the lakes had frozen during high winds resulting in ice that was far from flat, which made for a very rough landing. Note that you have no brakes when landing on skis.

5.9 Going the Extra Mile (or Not)

Sometimes things don't go right despite the best planning. I have been fortunate in my travels and hosting experiences; few bad trips or guests come to mind, and those that do were often the result of poor communication or over-optimistic expectations. I can recall four situations although none of them was a problem for me. In three of the cases, I had the means to solve the problem and I did. In the fourth case, the guest annoyed me to the point I no longer wanted to help her and was happy when she departed.

The first involved two young German students. They planned to go to Florida by driving a car there for a moving company that was relocating someone. There, they would buy a car and travel around the US. What they didn't know was that they might have to wait a week or more in Washington DC before a “moving job” came along. As they couldn't afford to hang around—and no job was forthcoming—they didn't know what to do. I suggested that they buy a car locally and drive that to Florida. So, I spent a day with them locating a dealer that sold cars for less than \$2,000, getting them insurance, registration, emergency roadside service membership, and travel maps. They had made no provision for insurance—which for single men under the age of 25 cost them 45% as much again as they'd paid for the car! On the 4th day, we waved goodbye and they drove right across country (via Mexico despite my warning that they not go that way) and back again, all in three months. They had one roadside emergency (for which they got free service) and one repair in Mexico, and at the end of their trip, they sold the car for the same price they'd paid.

The second case involved a nice woman from Sweden. She'd been in the US for four months attending some training program during which she'd decided to extend her stay afterwards for personal travel. She'd made the change with the airline over the phone, but had not understood that the change was tentative and that if she didn't go to a local agent's office to present the ticket and get the change authorized the change would be voided. Several months later, when she got to my place and we called to confirm her ticket we learned that with her special fare the change she thought she had would now cost a lot of money as it was high season. Not only was that a shock to her, but she didn't have the money. Anyway, I took her to the airport during a slow time of the day. We got a very nice and understanding agent who went off to speak to her (also understanding) manager. While they couldn't waive the whole fee, they did offer to reduce it significantly. I spoke to my guest and explained to her

that the ticketing endorsement process that she's failed to do was a common requirement and that they were being more than reasonable, so she should take the offer. When she raised the issue of the remaining money needed, I asked her if she was an honest and honorable person and she replied that she was. Then I offered to lend her the money. Some four months later, she sent me a bank draft for the full amount. The vast majority of people can be trusted!

The third case involved a Dutch woman at the Montevideo international airport in Uruguay. She had no traveler's checks or cash, just a cash machine card. Unfortunately, she couldn't get the cash machine to work, and its being entirely in Spanish didn't help. As I arrived, she was in tears with no Plan B and feeling very sorry for herself after a long flight from Europe. I too failed to get money from the machine, but I did have US\$100 in \$20 bills, so I went to the airport bank. Unfortunately, the bills had been printed/cut off-center, and the bank said they looked like forgeries and refused to change them. I pleaded for a bit and, finally, they relented and changed \$20. With the proceeds, I bought two bus tickets to the city center, and took my newly acquired Dutch friend with me. There, I found a cheap hotel and paid for two rooms. I found a moneychanger who happily changed the remainder of my "funny looking" bills and my friend found a cash machine that worked. With that, she was able to pay me back, along with 50% interest! (I'm joking of course; I only charged her 30%!)

The final case involved a teacher from France who was with us for 10 days as part of a teacher-hosting program. The basic program had them in country for 30 days, but gave them an option of arriving earlier and/or staying afterwards for an extended trip. However, to do so they must declare that *up-front*; being high season, they would *not* be able to change the trip once it started. Well little Miss Know-it-All claimed to be very well traveled, knew the airline policies, and was certain she could change her ticket at any time without penalty. However, when she tried to do so from my house she was quoted a change fee of more than \$1,000 and from that point on everything and anything American was associated with the Devil and she was the victim of discrimination (she was a black African originally from Senegal). As it happened, she couldn't afford the fee or didn't want to pay it and had to leave several days earlier than she'd planned. We'd organized a reception party for her with a group of our friends. As it turned out, she couldn't attend as she'd already departed, and I must say her presence was not missed one bit.

5.10 Conclusion

In conclusion, let me say that I have *never* lost any luggage for more than a few days. When I think of the huge numbers of planes, routes, and passengers all "in play" around the world at any one time, I truly am amazed that anything gets delivered to the right place at all let alone on time. It really is a logistics problem to be appreciated; yet most people only notice it when it breaks down. As such, I always say "Thanks" to agents and crew as I board or deplane. The vast majority of them really are doing the best they possibly can, and a kind word gets more assistance than does abuse.

6. May 2011, “Planning for Success”

For some years, I've been saying, “Success comes from planning, not from hoping or wishing.” Yes, you can plan for success, although I must say that this seems to be news to many people. More often than not, many people I have observed try something halfheartedly or in a disorganized fashion, and then when they fail, they rationalize that “it simply was not meant to be.” Not only is that wasteful, it's nonsense! Ignoring external factors, most people are exactly where they deserve to be; those who plan for success most often are successful, and those that don't most often are not. It's that simple.

How then does one plan for success? This essay is my attempt to answer that question. I start by introducing the basics steps of the process as I have determined them, and then I illustrate them using a scenario. Although the names of the protagonists and some of the details have been changed, the problem and solution are real.

Note that the approach I document relies heavily on one writing things down at every step of the process. As such, you would do well to read first my essay “Talk is Cheap. Write it Down” from February 2011. If you can't master the steps outlined in that essay, you certainly aren't planning for success.

6.1 Introduction

I'm a big fan of making lists, so let's begin with one that contains in order the main questions/steps in planning for success:

1. What is the problem?
2. Who is impacted by this problem and its resolution?
3. What constraints exist?
4. What is the solution?
5. What are the costs of solving this problem?
6. Who will implement the solution?
7. How did it go?

Now unless you are very experienced at problem solving, you would do well to follow these steps for even seemingly simple problems. If you cut too many corners too early in the development of your skills, you likely will not achieve the desired results.

It is important to understand the meaning of the term *problem* as used in this context. According to my dictionary (American Heritage), when used as a noun, **problem** is:

1. A question to be considered, solved, or answered.
2. A situation, matter, or person that presents perplexity or difficulty.

To many people, the word *problem* has negative connotations, as in “He's a real problem” and “She always was a problem child.” Such usage is not applicable to this essay.

As I stated in my first blog post ("Hi Ho, Hi Ho, it's Off to Blog We Go," December 2009), regarding emotion, I am a Vulcan. As you follow the steps above, be careful to temper your emotions with a generous dose of reality, especially when it comes to wants versus needs.

6.2 A Case Study

Several years ago, Robyn rented a 2-bedroom apartment, and to help cover expenses she sublet the 2nd bedroom to Julia. They shared the cost of the landline telephone, the high-speed internet connection, and the cable television service. Recently, Robyn announced that she was getting married and that her husband would move in with her. As Robyn and her husband would be a 2-income family and they desired privacy, they wanted the place to themselves. Julia would have to find somewhere else to live.

Julia had recently gotten a sizeable pay raise, and she wanted a place of her own. She did the math and determined that by going without a few luxuries and by keeping to a sensible budget, she could manage to rent a 1-bedroom apartment on her own.

6.3 Step 1: What is the Problem?

Define the problem by first thinking it through, then verbalizing it, and then putting it in writing. Make sure it is the real problem, not just the most quickly or perceived problem.

I cannot emphasize enough the underlined sentence above. Over the years, I have seen some very elegant, efficient, and cost-effective solutions; however, they solved the wrong problem! People in a hurry or without sufficient discipline quite often think that the first thing they see must be the real problem; however, that is often not the case.

For Julia to get her own place, she would have many issues to consider. However, for the purposes of this discussion, we'll limit them to just a few. The problem as she defined it was, "**Regarding telephone, high-speed internet connection, and television services, what is the most cost-effective solution for my current needs?**"

Let's revisit the issue of defining the real problem and the potential for "running off the rails" by making an emotionally charged decision. Many of us are being bombarded constantly with advertising promoting mobile phone options, super high-speed internet connections, and whiz-bang subscription TV choices. If we want to keep up with the "in crowd" or we have way too much money, we might write the problem as, "Which package is the best that gives me all these features?" In Julia's case, the problem statement contains "most cost-effective solution" and "current needs." Until she considers her current needs and constraints, she can't begin to answer her question.

6.4 Step 2: Who is Impacted by this Problem and its Resolution?

Ask, "Who is impacted by this problem and the actions taken? Who should be notified? Is there likely to be any backlash from any other party?"

Apart from others being able to reach Julia by phone and email, no one else is impacted by the problem or any solution.

6.5 Step 3: What Constraints Exist?

Consider if there are minimum or maximum time limits, or whether a solution is needed by a specific date. Is cost a factor? What other issues impact the solution?

Some sort of telephone service needs to be in place by the time Julia moves into her new apartment. If she chose a mobile solution, that service could start prior to move-in.

Although Julia enjoys renting videos occasionally, watching TV is low on her list of priorities. Her main recreational activity is reading.

It would be useful for high-speed internet service to be in place by move-in, but this is not necessary,

Julia is an elementary school teacher. As such, she cannot be interrupted during the workday by personal phone calls. Thus far, her landline at home has been adequate, and she projects that one just like it will suffice for some time yet. Her internet needs are minimal; primarily they involve web browsing and private email (which she is prohibited from doing via her work computer). With her local supermarket renting DVDs for \$1/night, she has no interest in downloading videos over the internet.

Cost is certainly a factor. Looking at nice-to-have features is okay, but she needs to separate wants from needs. However, she'd like to be able to add features to her service as she can justify and afford them.

Ultimately, Julia determined that her needs were as follows:

- A landline with a 50 local calls per month package. (Long-distance calls would be done via a discount calling card. International calls would be done via [Skype-Out](#) at 2 cents/minute.) She didn't need Caller ID, call waiting, or any of the myriad optional features.
- A broadband internet connection that permitted email with small attachments, and web browsing without large file downloads.
- No subscription TV service: she would buy and use an indoor antenna to access the numerous free channels available in her area.

6.6 Step 4: What is the Solution?

Identify the final decision(s) and state the actual steps needed for a complete, timely, and successful solution to the problem.

Here are the steps that Julia determined she needed to take:

1. Draw a table containing rows for each of the features available with phone and internet services, with one column for each supplier.
2. Contact each service supplier and record their information in the table, adding new rows, as new features become known. If features from one supplier don't exactly match those from another, try to weight them, so comparisons can be made logically rather than emotionally.
3. Choose one supplier for both services or different suppliers for each service.
4. For internet service, hook up the modem/router and install any required software.

5. For phone service, set up a Skype account, sign-up to Skype-Out, and set up a Skype-to-Go local number for access by regular phone. Configure Skype-to-Go speed-dial numbers via the computer.
6. For TV service, hook up the antenna and configure the TV tuner to the channels available.
7. Configure the DVD player to both play and record, and configure the VHS player to play.

6.7 Step 5: What are the Costs of Solving this Problem?

Consider the costs in time/money/resources.

Apart from actually paying for the new services, the main cost was the time it took to obtain and compare the prices and services from different vendors. There was also the cost of an indoor TV antenna.

[In Step 7, we'll see that recording to DVD resulted in an unexpected cost.]

6.8 Step 6: Who Will Implement the Solution?

Consider who will take the action, and, if outside help is needed, identify from whom.

Julia did the research herself. A friend helped her select and buy the antenna, and installed the internet and video equipment. She was able to set up Skype-Out and a Skype-to-Go local number herself. [Note that having a friend help can involve risk. Is that friend able to see the issues from the other's perspective or are they introducing their own bias to the solution of the problem?]

6.9 Step 7: How Did it Go?

Afterwards, do a postmortem as to what did or did not work and add any necessary improvements to the general plan. Did it succeed because of the plan; was it accidental, or influenced by outside forces?

How do you know you succeeded? After having spent time and money, but not necessarily having a defensible plan, many people rationalize that their solution "must be okay," even when it really might not be!

In Julia's case, the best phone deal included unlimited local and long-distance calls in the US for a reasonable fixed price. It also included DSL internet access whose performance was adequate. (While it wouldn't support high-speed video streaming, that was not a requirement.)

Although more than 35 digital TV channels were available over the air in the neighborhood, inside, the reception for many turned out to be poor or non-existent. Julia's apartment was on the second floor of a 4-floor building with large trees front and back. It was hard to get a good signal with an indoor antenna. That said the few channels she watched regularly generally were available.

Recording TV programs to DVD required an unexpected cost, of some \$300. The tuner in the TV was just for the TV, and like pretty much all digital TVs, her TV had no capability to output a signal to a recorder. (This task is usually handled by a cable or satellite box.) As such, Julia had to buy a new DVD unit that had a built-in digital tuner. This let her record one program to disk even while watching a different program live. The unit she bought was a combo DVD/VHS.

The bottom line was that the implementation was a success, and, except for the cost of the new DVD unit, it went exactly as planned. In fact, Julia would recover the complete cost of her new 40" digital TV, antenna, DVD/VHS unit, and 3-handset wireless phone system with the savings she'd make by not having subscription TV for the next 12–15-month period.

6.10 Additional Rules for Success

Once at short notice, I was asked to give some guidelines on being successful. Here's what I came up with:

1. It is much easier to be different than it is to be better. (Think outside the box. Don't compete head-on; look for an angle.)
2. Always think that you work for yourself even if you really work for someone else.
3. Invest in yourself. (If you don't take an interest in yourself, why should anyone else?)
4. Do you really want to manage people? Be honest now.
5. Opportunities are all around us; they simply need to be recognized. They can even be created!
6. Good written and spoken communications are extremely valuable. (No matter how good your ideas might be, if you can't express them, they'll languish.)
7. Be true to yourself first, and then to your friends/family and employer/clients.
8. Treat every first meeting as the beginning of a potentially long-term relationship.
9. Don't be afraid to volunteer. (Being an organizer of an activity puts you at the center of that activity even if you are brand new to the group.)
10. Getting noticed could result in more opportunities, so don't be afraid to "blow your own horn" a bit.

6.11 Conclusion

There is an old adage, "Success breeds success." I've seen that happen and I've experienced it firsthand many times. If you plan for success, then except for faulty planning or factors beyond your control, why shouldn't you be successful? After all, you are as good as the next person, maybe even better. Right? Now go forth and succeed, and remember, if you tell yourself that you can't do something, don't be surprised if that becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy!

7. June 2011, “Just Me and MiniMe: Traveling with Technology”

Back in the good old days, businesspeople used to travel with a briefcase, which contained some stationary, their business papers, and some sort of paper-based calendar and contact list. [In my case, when teaching seminars, I also hauled along several heavy boxes of overhead transparencies.]

When records were kept manually, one had all one's eggs in the same basket; there simply was no concept of having a backup copy. One day, I was riding a car-rental bus to a west-coast US airport terminal and my briefcase—complete with paper-based calendar and contact list—was standing up front with all the other passengers' hand luggage. At the stop prior to mine, a passenger got off and pulled his bag out of the pile causing mine to tip out the bus into the gutter. Either no one up front noticed or bothered; in any event, the bus drove off. Of course, when it came to my stop, my bag was nowhere to be found. I thought for sure that my all-important diary and contact list were lost forever. However, that same evening soon after I got home on the east coast, I got a phone call from an airline ticket agent. When getting off her employee bus that morning, she'd found my bag, thought that it looked lost, and phoned me using the number on the business card luggage label. She then arranged to put it in cargo on the next available flight at no charge, and her airline wasn't even the one I'd used. I thanked her profusely and once the bag arrived, I mailed her a substantial reward. [Had this happened after 9/11, I expect the bag would have been destroyed!]

In this essay, I'll look at how business (and personal) travel has evolved since then, at least for me. I should mention that I always travel dressed way down in loose hiking clothes and walking shoes, and I wear a large *fanny pack* (which, because of the offensive connotations that name has in certain cultures, is called a *bum bag*) tied around my waist.

7.1 The Debut of Portable Computers

I say *portable* because I'm referring to the time before laptops. So, what does *portable* mean? After all, given sufficient manpower, I guess that my full-size refrigerator is portable!

In my case, it was the first commercially successful portable IBM PC-compatible computer, from Compaq. In truth, it was about the size and weight of a portable sewing machine. It had two small-capacity floppy-disk drives (one of which I replaced later with a 20 MB hard drive). For several years, I hauled it on flights up and down the east coast on a regular basis. On larger planes, it just fit into the overhead compartment. On the smaller “puddle jumpers” I got to carry it out to the plane where it was checked, and from where I retrieved it on landing. And not only did I carry that, but I also had to carry my oversize briefcase.

7.2 Laptop Computers

As with most new technologies, I was a late buyer of a laptop, waiting until the initial bugs had been ironed out, and the prices reduced before making the plunge.

Once I found a good program to manage my calendar and contacts list, I stopped using a paper version, which freed up a lot of space in my briefcase. Eventually, I was able to stop taking my briefcase altogether as I had on my laptop electronic versions of most things and could put papers and stationary in the laptop bag.

I am on my third laptop, all from [Dell](#). The first was small and could actually fit on my lap. The second was big and clunky, and, technically, was called a *portable desktop*. The heat it generated actually came through most tabletops on which I placed it! My current one truly is large and heavy. No matter how many times I upgrade my eyeglass prescription I still don't seem to be able to read screens all that well, so I prefer them to be as large as possible. (My desktop screen is 27".) And with a 17" screen, my current laptop is heavy. In fact, the power adaptor alone weighs more than some really light machines! Often, progress simply is change!

The great news is that laptops are no longer significantly slower than are their desktop counterparts, nor do they have less storage. In fact, when I travel, I take a complete copy of all the data files from my desktop system with me, and can run my business very effectively while on the road.

7.3 Netbook Computers

For years, the emphasis was on making portable computers more and more powerful. And then a few companies decided to go in the opposite direction, towards a smaller, slower, and cheaper machine, now known as a *netbook computer*. In my case, it was from Asus and had a 10" screen, a 75%-of-full-size keyboard, plenty of memory and disk, and a built-in web camera and stereo microphone, all for under US\$400. (Prices for capable netbooks start at \$200.) I called it *MiniMe*, named for Austin Powers' miniature clone in his second and third movies.

I love my netbook; I can run my whole business on it (albeit more slowly than on my other computers), I can use it to play music, watch movies, and to phone via the internet. And it weighs next to nothing and fits into a very small carry bag. In fact, it's so small, that whenever I carry it during travel, I fear I'm going to accidentally put it down and leave it behind.

As MiniMe's carry bag is just a bit bigger than MiniMe, there is little room for anything else; however, I manage to squeeze in the power adaptor, some cables, and a mouse (as I don't care for touch pads).

I pretty much restrict my use of MiniMe to vacation trips where I can use it for email, phone calls, and light editing. For my big fingers and poor typing skills, the keyboard is too small for lengthy editing tasks. And the screen is small.

7.4 Pocket Computers

As I wrote in, "[Technology, Unplugged – Part 2](#)", in December 2010, I take my Compaq Personal Digital Assistant (PDA) with me at all times.

While my PDA fits easily into my fanny pack, it does require a charger/cable, and if I want to synchronize it with my laptop or netbook, I need to take a data cable as well.

7.5 So, What's in my Laptop Bag?

When my laptop bag is fully loaded, it weighs a lot! Apart from my large laptop, here's what it contains:

- Power convertor brick and cable
- At least one international power adaptor plug set that handles sockets in the US, UK, Europe, and Australasia

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- A 3-way US power plug, so I can charge multiple devices at the same time
- Smaller-than-full-size wireless mouse (being wireless, I can't use it in-flight, however)
- Mouse pad (light-based mice don't work at all well on glass conference tables)
- Several Ethernet and USB cables
- An RJ11 phone cable (a hold-over from the old days; now that broad-band internet access is available pretty much everywhere I go, I no longer need to take international phone adaptors)
- Spare batteries for the mouse and laser pointer
- At least three memory sticks of varying capacities
- A very strong security cable with which to lock the computer to a desk or some other fixture (like many meeting/conference attendees, very often, I leave my laptop unattended in a semi-public place during lunch breaks)
- A folding headset for internet-based phone use (I had an expensive Bluetooth earpiece, but that died, so I'm back to cheap headsets)
- Basic office supplies: business cards, ruler, business stationary, pads of paper, pens, pencil, pencil sharpener, laser pointer, US postage stamps
- Earplugs (for those nights in hotels with noisy/inconsiderate neighbors)
- Paper maps of the US and the world
- Some headache tablets
- Some emergency rations
- US\$20-worth of bills in each of four or five foreign currencies
- A printed copy of my flight itinerary, hotel, and car rental details, and some reading material (all in an easily accessible side pocket)

7.6 Camera Gear

There is no room in my laptop or netbook bags for any camera gear. Occasionally, I travel with a small still digital camera, and that goes in my fanny pack. If I take my digital video camera, I also take my still camera, and they have their own small shoulder bag, which can also accommodate a paperback novel and some emergency rations, some business cards, and pencil and paper.

7.7 Music

For the occasional musical interlude, I have ripped a number of favorite CDs to disk on my laptop and netbook. [Recently, I won an iPod shuffle music player; however, I have yet to configure it.]

7.8 Telephone

I use Skype with Skype-Out via an internet connection. If I owned a mobile phone, it would need its own charger and data cable to sync with the laptop or netbook, but hopefully, it would replace my PDA.

7.9 Conclusion

In the early days of my teaching seminars and lugging my old Compaq around, I also hauled a projection system. Now that had to be checked in my luggage, packed properly so none of the glass parts would break. These days, all my clients have standard projection systems in their conference and training rooms.

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As you might expect from my “lost briefcase” story earlier on, now that all my records are electronic, I am very conscientious about backup. As I’ve often said, “If it’s worth doing, it’s worth preserving!” So, apart from a copy of new/changed files on my laptop or netbook’s hard disk, I put copies on at least two USB memory sticks and another stick that goes in my PDA and/or digital still camera. One backup stick goes in my fanny pack, and another goes in my checked luggage. Call it a case of “suspenders and belt,” but it works for me.

On a few occasions, I’ve traveled without a computer or camera bag, and boy does it feel strange. I keep getting the horrible feeling that I’ve left something behind. However, it does make security checking much easier.

If the next time you go through an airport, you see a very tall guy with one arm longer than the other from carrying all that equipment, it may well be me. Say G’day!

8. July 2011, “A Walk along the River”

When I turned 50, I decided to take on a challenge that was neither too easy nor too difficult, yet would give me some significant sense of accomplishment. Based on a documentary I saw on public TV, the first candidate was to hike the [Hadrian's Wall Path](#), along the border of Scotland and England. And while that path isn't so long (84 miles/134 km), the weather that far north is unpredictable, the terrain is quite hilly, and there appears to be little support for getting into towns to stay overnight. [I didn't want to carry sleeping and cooking gear.] While visiting that path's [website](#), I followed a link to the website for the [Thames Path](#), a path I had discovered in 1999 when my son and I walked the five miles from Runnymede to Windsor. That path had also been turned into a National Trail, and as it ran alongside a river—and rivers tend to run downhill—I thought, “How hard can that be?”

8.1 An Overview

In May and June of 2005, I hiked the Thames Path (184 miles/294 km) along the [Thames River](#) in England, end-to-end in 21 days (15 days walking and 6 days resting). I started at the “official” source in a farmer's field, and ended at the [Thames Barrier](#), downstream of Greenwich. I followed the official guidebook, which broke up the walk into 15 segments with each one covering about 12 miles. Here's my day-by-day itinerary:

- Walking Day 1: The Source to Cricklade (12.25 miles/19.7 km)
- Walking Day 2: Cricklade to Lechlade (10.75 miles/17 km)
- Walking Day 3: Lechlade to Newbridge (16.25 miles/26 km)
- Walking Day 4: Newbridge to Oxford (14 miles/22.5 km)

- Rest Day 1: Tour Oxford and stay with host family 1
- Rest Day 2: Tour Oxford and stay with host family 1 and 2
- Rest Day 3: Tour [Blenheim Palace](#) in Woodstock and stay with host family 2

- Walking Day 5: Oxford to Culham (12 miles/ 19.3 km)
- Walking Day 6: Culham to Wallingford (13 miles/22.3 km)
- Walking Day 7: Wallingford to Tilehurst (13.25 miles/21.6 km)

- Rest Day 4: Rest day and stay with host family 3

- Walking Day 8: Tilehurst to Henley (11.5 miles/18.8 km)
- Walking Day 9: Henley to Marlow (9.5 miles/15 km)

- Rest Day 5: Rest day and stay with host family 4

- Walking Day 10: Marlow to Windsor (14.25 miles/23 km)
- Walking Day 11: Windsor to Chertsey (12.25 miles/19.4 km)
- Walking Day 12: Chertsey to Kingston (11 miles/17.7 km)

- Rest Day 6: Rest day at a hotel in London
- Walking Day 13: Kingston to Putney Bridge (13 miles/21.2 km)
- Walking Day 14: Putney Bridge to Tower Bridge (10 miles/16.9 km)
- Walking Day 15: Tower Bridge to Thames Barrier (10 miles/16.1 km)

At the end of Walking Day 12, I was on the outskirts of London, at which time, I took a train into the city and checked into a budget hotel for four nights. For each of the final three days of walking, I rode the Underground to where I'd finished the day before and walked from there carrying only a small daypack instead of that and my backpack (which I refer to below as my *full pack*), which I carried on all other days.

8.2 Getting Prepared Physically

I had never hiked with a full pack before and I am not a fan of exercise, so I thought, perhaps, I should have a trial run before I committed to the whole walk. Some years ago, the Washington and Old Dominion train line ran 45 miles from the northern Virginia countryside towards Washington DC. Although that line had been removed, a sealed path had been put in its place for hiking, biking, rollerblading, and horse riding. My plan was to hike it in three consecutive days, each of 15 miles, carrying a daypack.

After a restless night and a rain shower the next morning that delayed our start, my son and I set out on the first leg. Although we completed the planned section, we were too fatigued to enjoy it. It was pretty much "one foot in front of the other!" Although the rain stayed away all day, the Heavens opened when we were a few hundred yards from our pickup point, and we got seriously wet. The next day, we hardly got out of bed. The third day, I hiked 10 more miles on my own. Several weeks later, we hiked five more miles, and months later, we covered another seven and a half. To this day, I still have seven and a half miles to go. But you know what; you can have *too* much practice. Sometimes you just have to do it for real!

8.3 Getting Prepared Mentally

I can honestly say that I did nothing special in this regard. While I had no doubt that the task would be challenging, I had no reason to believe that I couldn't meet it. After all, the whole point was to push myself within reasonable limits.

8.4 What to Take?

I bought a new backpack with internal frame and was happy that the salesperson fussed a long while over getting me strapped into it "just right." Here's the gear I carried or wore on any given day:

- 2 pairs of hiking trousers with zip-off legs and lots of pockets
- 3 light-weight hiking shirts
- 3 sets of underwear
- Lots of hiking socks and wicking socks to wear under them
- A pair of hiking boots
- A pair of superlight-weight slippers for indoors

- A zip-up inner jacket with long sleeves and lots of pockets
- A GORE-TEX® weather-proof outer jacket with hood and lots of pockets
- A woolen cap and a baseball cap, each of which I could wear under my jacket hood
- A pair of thick gloves
- A basic first-aid kit
- A light-weight digital video camera, charger, power adaptor, spare battery, and spare tapes
- A compact digital still camera, charger, spare battery, and spare memory card
- A microcassette tape recorder and spare tapes
- A PDA (Personal Digital Assistant) pocket computer and charger
- Emergency rations of dried fruit, nuts, chocolate, and candy
- 2 half-liters of energy drink (I never was a plain water drinker)

I'd bought a pair of aluminum walking poles, but after several test runs, I decided not to take them.

The video and camera gear I used throughout the day was contained in a small shoulder bag. The charging equipment and used and spare media were in the backpack. A large fanny pack (*bum bag* for those of you Down-Under) around my waist held my passport, wallet, pocket computer, and change.

8.5 The Official Record

For most of my trips, I keep written diaries, but for this one, I decided on audio and video records instead. I bought a microcassette recorder that fit into an easily accessible outside jacket pocket. Any time I felt euphoric, depressed, crazy, or frustrated, I whipped out the recorder and spoke my mind, unedited. I finished up with five and a half hours of tape. The video was more staged; I rested a bit until my heart stopped thumping, then I thought about what I was going to say, and then I shot the film with narrative. [*Have you ever noticed how few people speak while they are shooting video? Hmm, silent home movies; now there's an idea!*] After editing, I had five 1-hour DVDs.

8.6 The Thames Source

There is considerable disagreement as to where the Thames River really starts. As I was using the official path guidebook, I decided to follow its interpretation. I arrived at the Kemble train station and walked to the river, which at that stage was a few inches deep and about six feet wide. I walked a mile upstream to an old Roman well that appeared to be the current source of the water. I then walked another mile along a dry bed to the spot where a small marker declared the site of the "original" spring. For some years, a statue of *Old Father Thames* used to stand there, but due to the isolation of the place and the danger of vandalism it was moved to a manned lock downriver.

8.7 The Weather

Although the first four days were clear, there was often not a lot of cover and a strong wind blew. I had one very wet and miserable day and another mildly so. The weather was mostly cool, but one day it got up to 86 degrees F (30 C), so I unzipped the legs from my pants, took off both jackets, and even put on sunburn cream. [*That day, Big Ben's clock in London slowed and then stopped for only the 4th time in its history, apparently due to the "extreme" heat!*]

More rain fell during the nights than the days, which was just fine with me. However, that meant that some sections of path were quite muddy.

8.8 Incidents and Accidents

After the first (and very) wet day, I developed some serious foot sores and blisters. This was directly due to my ignorance of not taping my toes and feet in advance of starting out. The resulting limping caused some hip problems. A case of painful shin “splints” in my left shin was still with me after 12 days. On the very last day, as I approached the [Millennium Dome](#), I had a nasty fall when I failed to see a lot of small, near-spherical pebbles on a section of concrete path. I went from vertical to horizontal very quickly. As I lay there looking at the sky, I was sure I'd broken my neck or back. As it happened, the only injury was to both hands, which I had instinctively put down behind me as I fell, and which had been driven into the gravel. Fortunately, they were only bruised; the skin was not broken. Some teenagers nearby came to my “rescue” with a hand up and a bottle of water. Fortunately, this was before the days of YouTube; otherwise, they'd have had the whole thing on the internet in minutes.

Having had two major knee surgeries over the years, I was constantly trying to watch where and how I stepped to avoid twisting a knee.

8.9 Accommodation and Meals

The first five rest days were spent with four different [Servas](#) hosts each of whom I stayed with for two nights. The final rest day and nights were spent at a hotel in London. All other nights were spent in hotels or [B&Bs](#) en-route, the existence, and location of most, of which were adequately documented in the guidebook.

At the end of two different days, there were no places to stay near the path. In the first case, I walked some distance off the path to a quite small village. The first and second pubs I found didn't open until the evening. The third was open and the barman was happy to serve me a drink and snack, but that pub did not provide accommodation. However, I met a young woman waiting at a bus stop nearby, and she lived right next door to that pub and her family ran a B&B. No one was home, but the barman kept calling there until someone answered, and I stayed there that night. In the second case, there were some hotels nearby, but they were outrageously expensive, and I finished up walking two miles off the path before finding a cheaper place.

Breakfast was included with each place I stayed, and when it was a typical “English” breakfast (as in two eggs, two sausages, two strips of bacon, four slices of toast, baked beans, etc.), I wrapped half in foil [the best thing to carry with you anywhere!] and ate it for lunch or supper. A few times, I stopped in pubs for a hot lunch, and pub fare usually sufficed for the evening meal as well.

8.10 Unexpected Difficulties

You would think that walking next to a river that runs downhill would be quite easy. However, in places, steep hills run right down to the water's edge and there is no place for a path near the river. As such, the path goes up, around, and about. In other places, sections of the path were undergoing

maintenance, so there were detours. And in some places, private landowners refused to give right-of-way across their riverfront property. As a result, I walked more than a few miles uphill.

There are many, and such a wide variety of, gates to pass through and [stiles](#) to climb over. In a few places, some so-called [kissing gates](#) were too narrow for me to get through with a backpack on. In those cases, I had to take it off, drop it over the fence, go through the gate, and then put the pack back on. [I swear that the pack got heavier each time I lifted it!] In one instance, I wasn't able to put the pack over a high fence, and I had to backtrack and find a way around that section of the path.

8.11 Is there a Follow-Up Act?

Before I'd even started the Thames Path hike, I was already thinking about future walks. However, I quickly forgot all about those on my first really wet and sore-feet day. Then, not too long after completing the walk, I started to think about other possibilities. Hadrian's Wall has come back into consideration, as have some of the cliff top walks in Devon/Cornwall, England. And when in Normandy, France, a few years ago, I discovered the customs inspector paths along the coast. Every now and then, I think about the Appalachian Trail here in the US, but after a few milliseconds, I come to my senses about walking that (although I have walked short sections of it). The [Heysen Trail](#) in my native South Australia has also gotten onto my radar. Although it's 750 miles/1,200 kms long, my interest is in the southern-most 156 miles/250 kms that end at the sea.

8.12 Goals and Lessons

There are a lot of interesting and/or historic places along the Thames, and my initial plan was to stop off and visit and video them all. It was a noble goal indeed and it worked fine up to Oxford and its surrounds. However, once I get wet feet and I started limping, I became totally focused on completing the walk. So much so, for example, that I distinctly remember coming to the town of Windsor and its dominating castle and saying to myself, "Yep, that's [Windsor Castle!](#)", but walking right on through the town without stopping to go look at it any closer.

Of course, the main goal was the personal endurance as well as doing it solo. [*My friend Astrid did accompany me for the first two days.*] I had built-in flexibility in that I didn't have a fixed schedule. And not once during the walk did I think about quitting.

Regarding lessons, I guess the main one was to have better foot preparation.

8.13 Conclusion

I must say that the completion of the walk was quite anticlimactic, really! When I got to the Thames Barrier, the town band was *not* there to meet me, the mayor was *not* there to give me a key to the city, no-one gave me a certificate of completion, and the local shop didn't even have a T-shirt saying, "I Survived the Thames Path." I even found it hard to figure out how to get back to London.

In hindsight, would I do anything differently, such as perhaps preparing more? Nothing comes to mind. It really was one of those cases of having a basic defensible plan and then, "Just go do it."

Numerous people have asked me, "Whatever possessed you to do this walk?" In fact, I've asked myself that same question. Of course, the answer is, "Because it's there!" or perhaps, "Why not?" In any

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event, as Nietzsche said, "Was mich nich umbringt, macht mich stärker." That is, "What doesn't kill me makes me stronger."

9. August 2011, “Teaching English as a Second Language”

For some years now, countries in the Western world have seen a huge increase in legal (and illegal) immigration. And the US is no exception. Many of these immigrants have little formal education, yet to be integrated in any reasonable form, they need to grasp the fundamentals of the host country's language. Here in the US English-language classes are offered cheaply or free of charge by many church and community organizations. In general, such classes have been labeled as teaching *English as a Second Language* (ESL). However, given that many immigrants never formally learned their first language, or speak more than one language, in recent years such training has become known as *English for Speakers of Other Languages* (ESOL).

One national organization whose mission it is to teach English in the US is [ProLiteracy](#). I learned of this group through its local affiliate the [Literacy Council of Northern Virginia](#), which advertises its student and teacher-training classes in local newspapers. Having time on my hands, I decided to get more information about being a tutor for individual students. Two training courses were on offer: teaching English to someone who was illiterate in his or her own language; and teaching reading and writing to someone who already spoke and understood English. I was most interested in the second group. However, training sessions for trainers of that group were far less frequent and the next one scheduled was months away. So, I decided to take the plunge with the first group before I found excuses to do nothing.

9.1 Training the Trainers

The training involved three half-day sessions on consecutive Saturdays, and about 40 people took part. There were five instructors. Until we were trained, we wouldn't be assigned a student, so we had no idea what language they spoke or if they were illiterate in their native language (that is, whether they could read, write, and do basic arithmetic). The challenge then was the following: Imagine teaching an adult to read and write English when their native language is written right-to-left, does not use the Latin alphabet used by English, they have no English at all, and you have no language in common. In order to make it realistic (not to mention to put the Fear of God in all of us would-be tutors) part of our training was conducted in [Urdu](#), a language spoken in Pakistan and Afghanistan.

We spent quite some time learning the names of six objects, which included *tomato*, *eggplant*, and *padlock*. We also learned the words for the concepts of *here*, *there*, and *over there*. As we could not fall back on English to ask questions and nor could the instructor use that language, it really was like a game of charades. And progress was slow. Come the second week, most of us couldn't remember many of the words we'd learned the previous week, yet if we were to tutor, we'd expect our students to learn lots of new words each week. It was a humbling experience to say the least.

9.2 Getting a Student

I was assigned a man about 30 years old; let's call him Juan. Juan had a wife and baby and worked long hours at two jobs to make payments on a house mortgage. He came from a formerly war-torn Central American country, he was orphaned at a young age, he had no more than two years of formal schooling, and he was functionally illiterate in his native language, Spanish.

As I had some basic Spanish, we would at least have some common ground; however, I fell into the trap of using that too much, as is common with tutors. During training, numerous tutors had expressed concern that they didn't speak any language other than English. They were told, repeatedly, that not only was this not an obstacle, it could even be an asset. The sooner the student could get "up and running" in English the better, and letting them fall back to a language they already knew really wasn't helping them. [This is also the main argument of opponents to bi-lingual education in some US states.]

Each student accepted for tutoring was evaluated by a professional who determined which of three different programs (and associated books and materials) that student and his/her tutor would use. In my student's case, the plan suggested four weeks of conversation and concept building before embarking on reading and writing. Students and tutors each bought the recommended set of materials with financial assistance being available for those students who could not afford to pay.

9.3 Location and Frequency of Tutoring

In my case, a neighboring town had a large Hispanic immigrant community, and the town had a non-profit support organization to help them integrate. This group nominated my student for the program, and it provided rooms for classes and one-on-one teaching. We used that for some weeks. The public libraries also made available meeting rooms.

It was recommended that we not tutor in our homes, although I never did get a satisfactory explanation why that was the case. In any event, after Juan and I got to know each other, I invited him to my house an afternoon each weekend, and his wife and baby came too and sat in another room during our lessons. Then they joined us when we had afternoon tea. But how to have him find my house? "Easy," you say; "Just give him the address and some directions." Remember, he reads almost no English and he has no background in reading a map in any language. Everything is visual and learned by experience. So we solved the problem by having him meet me at the initial tutoring site and then follow me home noting all the turns we had to make, yet not being able to write anything down either in English or in Spanish! We did this a couple of times, after which he had it mastered. Note that Juan had a cell phone, but he had great difficulty understanding messages I might leave; it was hard enough communicating by phone when we spoke live!

We started out meeting twice a week, mid-week and on the weekend; however, with Juan working two jobs, very quickly it was clear that he was way too tired to concentrate after a very long work day, so we cut back to once a week, on weekends.

9.4 Starting to Read

After a few weeks of conversation, it was time to break out the introductory reader.

The sentences were relatively simple and were accompanied by pictures of the subject nouns, for example:

This is a man.
This is a girl.
This is a cup.
This is a dog.

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The idea is to introduce a pattern and to substitute different nouns thereby building vocabulary using pretty much the same sentence. However, progress was painfully slow. Each lesson, we had to start back at the beginning, which meant that after some weeks we had made no real progress. And then I had my “Aha!” moment. Juan had no concept of a pattern. In essence, he didn't have any idea of how to learn! In retrospect, this should have been obvious given his major lack of formal education. No one read to him as a kid and he didn't have the luxury of watching Sesame Street on TV every afternoon.

As I was going through this exercise, I noticed a few things. We really couldn't talk about grammar, parts of speech, punctuation, or even capital letters, yet each letter had an upper- and a lowercase version, and when it started a sentence, you had to use the uppercase version. But then why did other words in the middle of a sentence sometimes start with an uppercase letter? It didn't help that Juan didn't ask questions. [As a seminar leader in my professional life, I've always taken silence as indicating, “Everything is okay,” and I tell that to my students at the start of the course. I also tell them that, “There is no such thing as a stupid question, only stupid answers!”]

I was very frustrated as I'm sure was Juan. We'd been at it for quite some weeks with very little to show for it.

9.5 Starting to Write

Fortunately, Juan had a pretty good handle on numbers and counting, although he constantly had trouble differentiating the words (but not the values) thirteen and thirty, fourteen and forty, fifteen and fifty, and so on. So, while we started on letters, we also practiced writing numbers.

What do you think would be the easiest number-writing task one could do? From my humble perspective, I figured it would be writing a line full of the digit 1. We used ruled-paper intended for learning writing, and I wrote three digit 1's at the start of a line, and asked Juan to fill in the line with more of the same. The first two he wrote were fine; they were almost identical to mine and they stood straight and tall. However, as he went on, each one leaned further and further to the right until those near the end of the line were practically falling over; I kid you not! Instead of copying the first few each time, he was copying the one he'd written previously, so they got progressively more slant on them. When I pointed this out to Juan, we both laughed.

Unfortunately, it was no laughing matter when things hadn't improved after several weeks. When it came to writing other digits and the letters, there is a recommended way one is supposed to teach, by starting the pencil at a specific point and continuing from there. However, that proved way too difficult for Juan who for the digit 8 preferred to draw one circle on top of the other. And that was just fine with me; at least he could read, write, and understand the result, as would other people. It was right then I realized we'd be having a modified version of the course, adjusted from time to time to cater for the individual student. [I don't know if that was a good decision or not, but both Juan and I needed to see some progress.]

9.6 Support Materials I developed

In order to provide reinforcement on the numbers and letters we covered, I used Microsoft Word to make lots of tables, which in the case of numbers, showed both the value and the spelling. I used a colored printer to teach about colors. I also used Word to help with check writing (see below).

[If you'd like to have a copy of the materials I developed, [send me email.](#)]

9.7 My Student's Main Goal

While being able to read and write in general would be wonderful, Juan had one specific goal, to be able to write checks to pay his monthly bills. That sounds simple enough, right? Wrong! Let's look at the elements on a blank check, at least as used in the US:

- Date: Does one write July 3, 2011; 3 July 2011; or 7/3/2011? As all are valid for the US and all would be understood, it really was a matter of picking one format and sticking with that. And as Juan was only just learning to write, the all-numeric form was easiest and most reliable. [Note that in some parts of the US postdating checks is illegal!]
- Payee: This seems simple enough, copy the "pay to" name from the statement. But if you can't read, how do you locate the "pay to" name? And even when you can tell from the familiar Visa credit card logo on the letterhead, for example, that you need to pay Visa, that doesn't help you figure out you need to make the check payable to Chase Bank's "Chase Card Services", for example.
- Amount in numerical form: This seems simple enough, copy the "pay to" amount from the statement. Again, you have to be able to read the statement to find this among the many numbers in various columns.
- Amount in text: Let's use a check for \$123.45 as an example. In the US, the corresponding text needs to be, "one hundred [and] twenty-three [and] 45/100 [dollars]," where [...] indicate optional words. In the case of [dollars] that word is usually preprinted on the check. When one knows about fractions, 45/100 makes perfect sense, but fractions were a topic way beyond my student. After trying several times on different occasions to explain this, I decided to say that was just the way it needed to be with the number to the right of the slash—calling it the *denominator* would be even more confusing—must always be 100. [Note to Microsoft Word users: Word supports *fields*, dozens of special control sequences that can be used for all sorts of things from adding cross-references, index entries, and, yes, check amounts in text. For example, if you insert a field (you'll need to figure out the right menu to do this depending on your version of Word), a pair of curly braces ({...}) will appear. If you enter "=123.45 * DOLLARTEXT" in between those braces and right-click on the field to toggle it to text, you get the text version of 123.45 as accepted by banks in the US. For those of you using versions of Word sold in other countries, I'd be most interested to hear from you if this works for European amounts written as 123,45, for example.]
- Signature: Fortunately, Juan could sign his name using something that was not quite so easy to forge as printed letters.
- Memo: This is intended for the check writer to make a note of the purpose of the check. For example, over time, one might write a number of checks to a school's Parent-Teacher Association, using the memo field to say that one was for the fee for a field trip while another was for the next month's lunches at the cafeteria. However, in other cases, this field is mandatory. For example, many bills require one to put here the number of the account being paid. But if you can't read, how do you figure out if such information is required?

9.8 Student Evaluation

Every few months, the Literacy Council sent me a blank form on which I was to report our activities for that quarter. And each time, I reported that we had made little progress and that my student's main goal remained the same, to be able to write checks to pay his bills.

9.9 The Handoff

After about eight months, my business situation changed; I took on a new contract that would occupy me fulltime and then some for an extended period. [Contrary to my longtime work rule of having at least three months off each year, this opportunity was too good to miss.] It would also involve travel out of town once a month. As such, I saw no way I could continue to invest the effort needed. And, frankly, what I had learned most was what not to do, and I figured it was better for Juan to have a different tutor. My frustration level was also extremely high; I too needed a change.

9.10 Conclusion

I very quickly reminded myself why I had avoided previously teaching real beginners in just about any topic. I simply didn't have the patience, or indeed sufficient training. In hindsight, I should have waited for the other training course. And now that I've written this essay, that idea is back on my radar.

One amusing byproduct of the whole exercise was getting to hear Juan speaking certain words with a distinctly Australian accent, although he never did master "G'day mate!"

10. September 2011, “What is Normal — Part 4: Dates and Times”

“What is the time now?” and “What is today’s date?” seem like straightforward questions. However, you might be surprised at the answers as you move from one “normal” context to another.

I remember well one of my first trips to Japan where I bought a ticket to ride on some public transportation in Tokyo. (This was well before the days when ticket machines displayed a variety of languages including English.) I looked at the ticket to see if I could understand anything, and I noticed what looked like a date, but then again not! I don’t remember the exact details, but it was something like “20-IX-03”. In fact, it was that day’s date, using modern Japanese style. Specifically, it was the 20th day of September (the 9th month) in the 3rd year of the current emperor’s reign (*Heisei*, the name of Emperor Akihito’s reign). Being a computer nerd, I immediately saw the problem in dealing with such dates; without also knowing the emperor on which the date was based, the date was ambiguous. Now, I was quite willing to have the Japanese use Arabic numbers for days and years, and to use an era system for years, but the use of Roman numerals for months seemed odd. Is that normal? As they say, “Whatever floats your boat!”

In this installment, we’ll look at some interesting aspects of calendars, dates, and times. However, before we set out on that adventure, let me give you something to think about in the meantime. How often do leap years occur? If you think, “Dah! Every 4 years, of course!” you’d be right most of the time, but not always. We’ll revisit this question later. Oh, and by the way, not all minutes are created equal; some have more than 60 seconds.

10.1 Calendars

Well now, what could be simpler than a plain old calendar? What indeed!

A *solar calendar*—like the one I use in Virginia—is based on the cycle of the sun, which involves the 365-and-a-bit days it takes the earth to go around the sun.

The *Julian date system* is simple; each day has a number 1 more than the previous day, starting at January 1, 4713 BC at noon in Greenwich, England (otherwise known as *Julian Date Zero* [JD0]). Fractions of days are supported, as are negative values, which indicate days prior to JD0. Whoa, who uses that system? Apparently, astronomers do, but you know how spaced-out they are!

Now one must not confuse Julian dates with the *Julian calendar system*, the latter being put into service by Julius Caesar (the guy who invented Caesar salads, I think) way back in 45 BC, when he retired the old *Roman calendar*, whose warranty had expired many years earlier. Under the Julian calendar, days were numbered from 1–365 in non-leap years and 1–366 in leap years. This allows day n in one year to be much like that same day in any other year, which makes it convenient for agricultural activities like planting and harvesting. Unfortunately, anyone wearing a Julian calendar watch quickly noted that this calendar system gains about three days every four centuries. [Don’t you just hate that when that happens! People arrived late for castle sieges, and some even missed short wars completely!]

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If you look closely, the Julian system still manifests itself. Desktop paper calendars and diaries are still sold with the Julian day number shown for each day. Sometimes each day page also shows the number of days left until the end of the year (365-or-366 minus the day's Julian number).

Sometime in 1582, Pope Gregory XIII had way too much time on his hands (as Popes often did back then), and he put into effect the—da da—Gregorian calendar. [Did he name it for his best friend Bob? No, it was all self, self, self! Poor Bob had to wait some 410 years until Microsoft named a product after him.] Anyway, at the stroke of midnight at the meridian that passed through the Vatican's main outhouse, Wednesday, September 2, 1582 gave way to Thursday, September 14, 1582, and 12 days went missing. [Despite rumors at the time, they were *not* the 12 days of Christmas!] Today, much of the world uses the Gregorian calendar.

The era calendar used in Japan is a bit like a very simplified Julian date system, but not altogether quite, if you get my meaning.

It should be no surprise then that a lunar calendar involves the cycle of the moon. The Islamic calendar is lunar. Certain religious celebrations are based on the lunar cycle. For example, according to Wikipedia, "Easter is a *moveable feast*, meaning it is not fixed in relation to the civil calendar. The First Council of Nicaea (325) established the date of Easter as the first Sunday after the full moon (the Paschal Full Moon) following the northern hemisphere's vernal equinox." But then, you already knew that, right? As a result, Easter can fall as early as March 22 and as late as April 25.

Now while Pope Gregory may have had time on his hands, others had even more spare time, and they invented lunisolar calendars, which—yes, you guessed it—had aspects tied to both the sun and the moon. [Actually, I think these were April Fool's pranks that simply got out of hand, much like the German language.] In fact, strictly speaking, the date of Easter is a combination of solar and lunar considerations. The Hebrew and Hindi calendars are lunisolar.

For a list of calendars used around the world, click [here](#).

10.2 Dates

I grew up thinking that month and day names began with uppercase letters, and that each had a long form and a 3-letter abbreviation. However, that is not the case in many other cultures.

Now as to how one might write a date is wide open. In an earlier essay, I mentioned how an Australian was traveling around the US and sent me email saying she was coming to my area on 6/5. My challenge was to figure out if she meant June 5 (US format) or May 6 (Aussie format). Yes, some cultures write *dd/mm/yy* while others write *mm/dd/yy*. These days, much of my business and personal correspondence goes to an international audience. As such, I write dates as *yyyy-mm-dd*, using the century and leading zeros, if necessary, to be completely unambiguous. [The ordering of parts in this format is understood pretty much universally although in some cultures the dash is replaced by a slash or period.] In another essay, I commented on the proliferation of the US date 9/11 (the day the World Trade Center in NYC was destroyed) in countries that would otherwise write that date as 11/9. There are always exceptions to the rule, I guess.

10.3 Seasons

In Part 1 of this series I wrote, “On what date does summer begin? In the US summer begins with the Summer Solstice, on June 20th or 21st, when the sun is furthest north. For countries in the southern hemisphere, the Summer Solstice is on December 20th or 21st. However, in some places equinoxes and solstices are considered to be in the middle of the respective season or at least some weeks after that season’s start, but never actually at their start. For example, in Australia, summer starts on December 1 and ends the last day of February.” [That’s what happens when you drink too much beer for breakfast!]

10.4 Time

Fortunately, there seems to be general agreement around the world that there are 60 seconds in a minute, 60 minutes in an hour, and 24 hours in a day. The differences then in writing a specific time come down to whether one uses a 12- or 24-hour time format, the hour/minute/second separator, and the set of symbols used to represent the corresponding values 1–12 or 0–23. [Although the Arabic number system is widely used around the world, it isn’t the only number system.]

I’ve lived my whole life using a 12-hour system, as in AM (*ante meridiem*, Latin for “before noon”) and PM (*post meridiem*, Latin for “after noon”). However, I have spent many months traveling in countries that use a 24-hour system. Once I got a digital watch (and now a pocket computer) that supported both systems, I changed it accordingly when I traveled. I did this partly so my watch would match transportation schedule signs at airports and train stations; I also did it to try and “get with the program.” Basically, if the locals could master such a system then why couldn’t I? After all, this was the normal way of doing things in their environment. After some years of doing this I freely admit to still getting confused by times after lunch; for example, distinguishing between 17:00 and 7 pm.

So, how does one write the 12-hour suffix? Take your pick from a.m./p.m., am/pm, AM/PM, and A.M./P.M. As to whether one puts a space between the time and the suffix is a personal choice; I use a space followed by am/pm, but remember I’m not normal. And what about the separator between the hour and minute value? Most commonly used are the colon (:) and the period (.), although some French-speaking cultures separate them with “ h “.

Although I’m a 12-hour person, that system has the anomaly that times like 12:05 are earlier than 1:05 when *everyone* knows that 1 comes before 12. In reality, the 12 acts as zero!

Several times I’ve visited US Government Department offices where I’ve seen analog wall clocks with 24 hours around the face (fortunately in Arabic numerals rather than Roman). That takes some getting used to; for example, what at a glance appears to be 6 o’clock is really 12 noon! There also are analog timepieces with two concentric circles; one numbered 1–11 with each number paired with an inner ring of 13–23, with 12 paired with an inner 0 or 24. And even the use of Roman numerals can cause some grief; apart from the “usual” way of writing them, alternate versions use IIII instead of IV, and VIIII instead of IX.

When I fly, there usually is a duty-free catalog by my seat. Whenever I flip through one and come across a *very* expensive watch, I’m amused by the fact that it can keep such accurate time, yet one can only read it to the nearest 5 minutes!

Now if you asked a good lawyer, “How many hours are there in a day?” you might get the answer, “How many do you want there to be?” And, indeed, politicians (who often have been trained as lawyers) can “stop the clock” or “extend the day.” For example, some years ago, I visited the State House in Carson City, the capital city of Nevada, and sat in on a legislative session. Afterwards, I was reading some information about the legislature. Members meet every two years and can meet up to 120 days, but they only get paid for 60 days. By law, they must conclude their business before the start of the 121st day. On a number of occasions, as midnight on the 120th day approached, it was clear that more time was needed, so the members passed a bill that extended the day by several hours, having 13 o'clock pm, then 14 o'clock pm, and so on. I have heard of other situations where the chamber clock was stopped, so, technically, the official time stood still while business was finished.

10.5 Time Zones

Back in the days of travel by foot or horse, one could not go large distances in short times, so one couldn't see the impact of the earth's rotation in relation to movement on the earth's surface. Fast-forward to railways, and passengers needed to make connections; timetables came into being. It was no longer acceptable for each town to have its own idea of the time; some synchronization was needed. And once planes and cars arrived, it was possible to travel long distances much more quickly. And so the idea of time zones came about with the earth being divided into 24 1-hour vertical zones (called lunes), nowadays starting at the meridian running through Greenwich, England, whose zone is known as Greenwich Mean Time (GMT). [In military parlance, time zones have designated letters with GMT being “Z/Zulu” time.]

Within most countries, there is only one time zone, and in most cases, the difference between adjacent time zones is one hour. I just happen to be from a country that is abnormal. Australia has three time zones; however, the central zone (in which my hometown is located) is 30 minutes behind the eastern zone, and 90 minutes ahead of the western zone. Other countries/areas that have half-hour differences include Afghanistan, Burma, India, Iran, Newfoundland (Canada), and Venezuela. Nepal has a 15-/45-minute difference from its neighbors. I now live in the US, which spans six time zones: Eastern, Central, Mountain, Pacific, Alaska, and Hawaii, going east-to-west. Only Russia spans more time zones (10), and, in some cases, its neighboring zones differ by two hours instead of one. (Given the width of China, one might expect it to have multiple time zones as well, but it has only one.)

10.6 Summertime/Daylight Saving Time

The idea of moving clocks forward to increase the number of working daylight hours is not new. However, it is more prevalent in areas outside the tropics as tropical places already have more daylight hours even in winter. In fact, in the tropics, one doesn't talk about seasons as summer through winter; one talks about rainy and dry seasons. This difference manifests itself in Australia. For example, Queensland and the Northern Territory (states that are in adjacent time zones) are in the tropics, and don't have summertime. On the other hand, South Australia, New South Wales, and Victoria (among others) are much further south, and they do have summertime. In summer, you get the interesting situation in which South Australia is 30 minutes behind both New South Wales and Victoria, to its east, yet 30 minutes ahead of Queensland, which is also to the east. And Queensland is an hour behind its neighbor to the south.

And let's not forget what my dear old Mom used to say, "That daylight savings business is silly and, besides, all that extra sunlight has caused my curtains to fade!"

10.7 Back in the Good-Old Days

Back when I was in history class in primary school, I learned that the modern western calendar was based on the birth of Jesus Christ, and that dates before that were written with the suffix BC or B.C. (English for "before Christ"), while dates afterwards had the prefix AD or A.D. (*anno domini*, Latin for "in the year of our Lord") or no suffix at all. [Contrary to a vicious rumor started by members of the People's Front of Judea (or was it the Judean People's Front?) AD does *not* stand for *after death*.]

Apparently, not all the world is Christian—Thank God for that!—and in these politically correct times, we need a lay approach to dates from the pre- and post-whatshisname eras. So, AD became CE, which stands for Common Era or *Current Era* (or if you insist, Heaven forbid, *Christian Era*). And BC became BCE, which stands for *Before the Common Era* or *Before the Current Era* (or *Before the Christian Era*).

Now there is no year 0 in this system, but, when written on a time line, there is a single point that designates the change from midnight Year 1 BC to 00:01 Year 1 AD, which I am sure you are happy to know. However, the lack of a year 0 led to a huge problem that during the recent millennium change resulted in people arguing for days over when the new millennium actually began. Wikipedia (which you all know contains lies!) claims that, "most experts agree that a new century begins in a year with the last digits being "01" (1801, 1901, 2001); new millennia likewise began in 1001 and 2001. A common misconception is that centuries and millennia begin when the trailing digits are zeroes (1800, 1900, 2000, etc.); moreover, this convention was widely used to celebrate the new millennium in the year 2000." So, those of you who celebrated in 2000 had it all wrong, but then you could do it all over again in 2001 to make up for it. Oh, by the way, at an archeological dig in the Middle East, scientists recently found documentation of a previously unknown Y1K problem. It caused absolute havoc at Cash Machines at the "Scribes and Pharisees Savings and Loan Association," which had failed to recalibrate its abaci.

10.8 Leap Seconds

Has your life become a drag? Well if you have been paying very close attention you may have noticed that, lately, the earth isn't rotating as fast as it used to, and over time, we're losing some seconds. This proved too much for some lawyers (who, apparently, bill by the millisecond), so over drinks at a bar the concept of a leap second was born. Yes, dear reader, from time to time, when your back is turned, and without any warning whatsoever, an extra second is added to some unsuspecting minute, giving that minute 61 seconds. Now you might well ask, "Who is doing this?" and "How often are they doing it?" "Is it a ploy by my boss to get me to work longer without extra pay?" The simple answers are, "Bruce", "zero, once, or twice a year", and "Yes".

Now for those of you having atomic clocks in your basement, this is very important to know, because you should be making leap-second adjustments from time to time (get it?). For a detailed list of when adjustments have been made in the past, click here. The adjustments are always made at 23:59:60 on June 30 and/or December 31. It doesn't happen every year, and in some years, it happens at both times. As the earth slows down, leap seconds will need to be added on a more frequent basis.

Unfortunately, unless your timepiece isn't connected to the internet, you'll have to adjust it manually; just push the "add leap-second button."

Now the really good news is that the lawyers drinking at the bar that night were quite visionary. They not only allowed for the addition of an extra second, they also allowed for one's removal. So, if the earth should ever get struck by the Mother of all Comets at a very low angle from the west, and the planet starts spinning faster, we'll all die horribly. But we'll die—rest-assured—that our atomic clocks will still be keeping the correct time for the cockroaches and other primitive forms of life [shame on you for thinking "used-car salesman"] that survive the catastrophe!

10.9 GMT vs. UTC

Just when you thought GMT had been around long enough to be trusted, someone had to go and invent something else, namely, *Coordinated Universal Time* ([UTC](#)). GMT wasn't good enough for him; oh no, he had a *much* better idea.

The good news is that unless you are intimately involved with very high-precision timepieces (e.g., atomic clocks) or highly synchronized computer networks that manipulate the world's financial systems, you needn't worry about UTC, which by the way was responsible for all this leap-second nonsense. [By that way, it's actually quite surprising just how much money you can siphon off from the financial network in that extra second!]

10.10 Conclusion

Do you use the terms *this week* or *next week*? To understand what they mean, one needs to know what day it is today and the day of the week on which the week starts. In the latter case, there are multiple customs: many people start their week on Sunday, while others believe that Monday is the first day.

Have you ever watched a movie and thought, "When was that made?" Yet at the end of the credits, the copyright date is written using Roman Numerals, which, for films produced before 2000, makes it hard for most mere mortals to fathom. The general thinking about this is that is a deliberate [obfuscation](#) mechanism to hide the actual date, so you don't automatically think, "This is an old [as in lame or not up-to-date] movie."

As to the time right now and today's date, I'm sitting here in [Szczecin, Poland](#), where it's 15:05 and, according to the trusty Gregorian calendar next to me, it's Piątek (Pt), Lipiec 1, 2011 [3:05 pm on Friday (Fri), July 01, 2011; that is]. According to the [Um-al-Qura calendar](#), the date is AlJumaa, Rajab 29, 1432, whereas the [Hijri/Lunar calendar](#) says it's a day later at AlJumaa, Rajab 30, 1432. On the other hand, the [Saka era calendar](#) says it is Sukravara, Asadha 10, 1933.

Now back to the earlier question, "How often do leap years occur?" Using the Gregorian calendar system, a leap year is one that is a multiple of 4, but not also a multiple of 100, unless it's a multiple of 400. [Hmm, that sounds like it's related to the Julian date system, which gained about three days every four centuries.] So, while 1600 and 2000, for example, were leap years, 1700, 1800, and 1900 were not. As such, the next leap year after 1896 was 1904, a gap of 8 years. Now go and challenge your friends and neighbors with that, if you have time, that is.

11. October 2011, “Starting Your Own Business”

[If you have not already done so, I strongly suggest that before reading this essay, you read, “[Talk is Cheap. Write it Down](#)” (February 2011), and then, “[Planning for Success](#)” (May 2011).]

I started my own computer consulting business in July 1984, and it's been successful ever since. As far back as I can remember, I've wanted to be self-employed, and once I got permanent residency here in the US, I put my plan into action. I started my business, bought a townhouse, and my son was born, all within a couple of months. There's nothing like a little pressure to get the adrenaline flowing!

In recent years, I've been mentoring students at an alternative high school. For one or more of a number of reasons, the students there don't quite fit into mainstream schools, which is why they are at that school. The good news is that they all want to be at that school. More than a few of them think of themselves as [mavericks](#), and they dream about running their own business. Whenever I get a chance to talk to them about that possibility, I cover many of the points in this essay.

Following the main sections below, are short notes in list form. I leave it as a reader exercise to research each one in the context of the business being planned.

11.1 The Dream vs. the Reality

Yes, you can get all the rewards, but you get to take all the risks and responsibilities as well. There really is no such thing as a free lunch! So, while the idea of driving around in a souped-up convertible company car and flying Business Class might seem wonderful, sooner or later you have to have a defensible plan to make a profit (well at least to not lose money). Assuming that you want to enjoy your work, will people actually pay you to do what you enjoy?

11.2 Goals – What is it you really want to do?

To be sure, I didn't have a detailed written plan when I went into business. However, I put in a lot of time and effort thinking about it in the year before. I planned to be a computer consultant, but I recognized early on that I really needed to distinguish myself from the thousands of other people having that same title on their business cards. The big question was, “Why would someone engage me over someone else? Just what was my angle?” In truth, I was prepared to do whatever it took to pay the rent, and I certainly had a lot of skills. What I really needed was a specialty I could claim that would make me attractive. After identifying a short list of candidate topics, I selected one and rode that wave to the top.

Right from the start, I had two very important rules:

- Never ever ever hire anyone – From my short, but very hectic, corporate career I learned that I simply didn't like to manage people. I can work with people, but that's a whole different scenario.
- Take as much time off as I could afford – You can't buy time. So rather than work fulltime and retire at 65 (hopefully) with some money, but not necessarily with great health and any urge to travel, I wanted more than the usual time off as I went. [I came to the US from a culture that

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provided everyone with 4–6 weeks of vacation per year, and where people worked a 37.5-hour week with flexible working hours.]

I have never regretted either rule, and in fact, I've re-endorsed them both many times over. If I got a contract that was more than I could handle, I gave it to a larger player and subcontracted back a manageable part. And with regard to time off, I started with three months off in my first year, spread out over the year. [Except for three years in recent times—when I deliberately took on fulltime projects—I've taken off between three and six months each year.]

As far as I can remember, I've never heard an American say that they wanted to remain a 1-person company forever. The all-American goal seems to be that one is only a 1-person company until one figures out how to be a mega-corporation. But the evidence is well documented: Most small businesses fail in their first five years, and the kind of person who can run a small business is not at all like the one needed to run a medium-sized or large one.

A couple of years after I started my business, I took a break during which I analyzed my success. That's when I moved from being a brute-force success to a smart success. That is, by figuring out what made my business successful, I got smarter about planning. Either I could make more money for the same effort, or I could work less time for the same money. And I did some of each.

Many people have a narrow focus; they see only one path to their goal(s). They often place a lot of constraints on themselves. Are they able to travel out of town overnight? Are they willing and able to work long hours, weekends, or public holidays? Are they really prepared to “do whatever it takes within reason?” In my case, I figured that it would be hard enough to get potential customers to my door, so I didn't want to turn any away unnecessarily. As a result, I was prepared to be—and I remain today—very flexible.

Although I started out actually designing software systems and writing the programs to implement them, to help start my business, I began writing for publication with first one, and then a second magazine. Not only did this generate some cash flow, I got to keep all the rights to the intellectual property, I had a reason to learn and keep up with evolving technologies, and I had something to add to my resume. I was also getting directly to those who might want my services, and I could give potential clients copies of my published work. That led to my developing seminars using my published materials (some of which became books) and to the lucrative training business. With seminars, instead of charging per hour of work, you charge per person attending. The next step was starting the first of two publications, which led to editing and publishing. Now it's very rare that a client will hire one to learn on the job, so I had to find a way to do that myself. My solution was to get involved in national and international standards groups for my profession.

Twenty-seven years later, my business card still says, “Computer Consultant,” but my focus has evolved considerably, primarily because of my flexibility and the fact that about every three months I review my situation. Where am I now and where do I want to be in six, 12, or 24 months?

In reality, my consulting led to learning about topics on which I got paid to write. For topics I researched for writing, those skills could be sold as a consultant, as could those I learned when

teaching seminars in a variety of environments. And my standards involvement overlapped and reinforced all the other parts of my business.

In truth, how could I know with certainty 27 years ago where I wanted to end up? Most of the technologies I work on now didn't exist back then.

And while having goals is important, so too are having non-goals. In my case, I had no interest in building an empire. Now that doesn't mean that I couldn't run one; it just means that that doing so is not one of my goals.

11.3 Selling Services vs. Building/Selling Products

It takes time and expense to provide a service. To provide the same service to more clients, you need to extend your hours and/or hire others to help you.

It also takes time and expense to build a product, and unless you are in a lucrative custom-made situation, you'll need to hire others to help you. (They need not necessarily be employees, however; they could be subcontractors.) Then there are the inventory-related issues of storage, insurance, cost, shipping, and tracking, and excess and outdated inventory, along with sales tax collection.

In my case, I figured out a way to reuse some of my deliverables, namely, my intellectual property. I got paid to write it for publication. I re-used it as seminar materials, and I published it in book form. None of these activities required help or a physical inventory, which is worth keeping in mind as many economies move from manufacturing to service-based models.

11.4 Business Organization

There are a number of options for your business classification, including sole proprietorship, partnership, and various kinds of corporation. Each has its pros and cons. In my case, I decided to trade under my own name and to make that name my brand. After all, I was selling myself, not a product.

I've never been swayed by the argument that for a 1-person business like mine incorporating provides more legal protection. In these litigious United States, a determined plaintiff is just as likely to come after the individual owner(s) as he is to come after the company.

11.5 Are You in Business or Just Pretending?

If you don't have a business card, you won't convince me that you are in business, and you might not convince anyone else either.

Your business name should be important to you as a brand and you will want to promote it. As such, chose it carefully, protect it legally, and register it as an internet domain. Then put your website at that domain (of course, you'll have a website!), as in www.YourBusinessName.com, with your email address as YourName@YourBusinessName.com.

If you claim to be in business, then why not look like you are in business!

11.6 Conclusion

Each of us comes to a business with a set of skills and we'd like to think that we're at or near the top of the heap in our particular field. And maybe we are. However, to run any business successfully, especially one that has employees, you should be prepared to be a little bit of each of the following: a lawyer, a salesman, an accountant, a bookkeeper, a tax expert, an office manager, a negotiator, a promoter, a crisis manager, a psychologist, a psychiatrist, a marriage counselor, a motivator, and a sage. And when you've finished all those tasks, you might even get time to do the things you liked and were really good at to begin with!

From a book of quotes that I once read, comes the following: "No matter what your circumstance you should always believe that you work for yourself." It is highly unlikely that anyone cares about you as much as you should care about yourself. And frankly, why should they?

11.7 A Summary of Things to Consider

1. The Dream vs. the Reality
 - a. You get all the rewards
 - b. You get to take all the risks and responsibilities
 - c. Will people actually pay you to do what you enjoy?
2. Goals – What is it you really want to do?
 - a. Consulting, writing, speaking, making a product (multiple paths to some goals)
 - b. General guidelines are good, but don't be too rigid
 - c. What are your constraints?
 - i. Are you able to travel overnight away from home?
 - ii. Parenting duties
 - iii. Hours on working days
 - iv. Availability on weekends and public holidays
3. Services vs. Product
 - a. Services:
 - i. Time and expenses
 - ii. More services require more people
 - b. Product:
 - i. Manufacture requires more people (employees vs. subcontractors)
 - ii. Inventory (storage, insurance, cost, shipping, tracking), excess, out-dated
 - iii. Sales tax
4. Business Considerations
 - a. Organization
 - i. Sole proprietorship
 - ii. Partnership
 - iii. Subchapter S corporation
 - iv. Other corporation
 - v. Non-profit
 - vi. Woman/Minority-owned or small business certification
 - b. Who is your backup person?

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- c. State/county business license (maybe need from multiple states)
- d. Insurance
 - i. Liability
 - ii. Errors and Omissions
 - iii. Disability
 - iv. Medical/Hospital/Dental
- e. Taxes
 - i. Both employer and employee social security contributions
 - ii. State income (quarterly estimated)
 - iii. Federal income (quarterly estimated)
 - iv. State sales tax
- 5. Business Presence
 - a. Website
 - b. Email address
 - c. Business cards
 - d. Stationery (real and/or for Fax cover pages)
- 6. Marketing and Promotion
 - a. Advertising (print, web, direct mail, cold calls, ...)
 - b. Joining trade groups, associations
 - c. Speaking at events, free mini seminars
 - d. Writing articles in target-audience publications
 - e. Giving away time/products and getting publicity
 - f. Going after government contracts
- 7. Setting up an Office
 - a. Space – in-home office vs. professional office space (Do you really have the discipline to work at home?)
 - b. Telephone
 - c. Fax
 - d. Hi-speed internet connection with reliable up-time
 - e. Computer
 - i. Desktop, laptop, both?
 - ii. Wifi capability
 - f. Printer (color vs. black and white)
 - g. Computer file backup (frequency, on-site vs. off-site copies)
 - h. Shredder
 - i. Fire safe (documents and on-site backup media)
- 8. Billing, Payments, and Cash Flow
 - a. Accepting payment by cash, check, credit card, electronic transfer
 - b. Issuing invoices
 - c. Issuing receipts
 - d. Sales tax collection
 - e. How many days to pay?
 - f. Penalty for late payment
 - g. Travel time (local vs. out-of-area)

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- h. Need cash flow to cover 30–90-day net payments
- 9. Record Keeping
 - a. Financial software
 - i. Banking
 - ii. Invoices
 - iii. Accounts receivable
 - iv. Accounts payable
 - v. Tax preparation
 - vi. Expense tracking
 - b. Contact list/lead manager
 - c. Electronic calendar with alarms
- 10. Rates
 - a. Charging by the hour, day, or job
 - b. Are expenses included?
 - c. Things to factor in
 - i. No paid vacation
 - ii. No paid public holidays
 - iii. No paid sick leave
 - iv. No employer-provided health insurance
 - v. No employer-provided contributions to a retirement plan
 - vi. Administration, banking, record keeping, backup, marketing and so on all take non-billable time
 - d. What does your competition charge?
 - e. Are you a generalist or a specialist?
 - f. Pro-bono vs. full rate; should you ever discount your time?
- 11. Professional Services
 - a. Legal
 - b. Accounting
 - c. Payroll
 - d. Taxes
 - e. Safe-deposit box at a bank
- 12. Agreements and Contracts
 - a. Written vs. unwritten expectations
 - b. Explicit vs. implicit guarantees
- 13. Keeping Current: Clients don't hire contractors to learn
 - a. Books and videos
 - b. Training (in-person and self-paced)
 - c. Certification/endorsement

12. November 2011, “A Little Foreign Language Goes a Long Way”

[Readers of this essay may wish to read my essay from July 2010, “[What is Normal - Part 2. Writing Systems](#)”.]

In the past 30-odd years, I've flown more than 1.5 million miles (2.5 million kms), and that, along with my hosting activities back home, has provided me with a lot of occasions to be with people whose first language is not my own. Those of you who've met me know that I am a gregarious person. However, in order to socialize, one must be able to communicate, and that can be challenging, even intimidating.

I remember well the first time I really felt inadequate in the foreign-language department. [Most notably, it was *not* during the 5-week trip I took through Asia and Europe to get to the US initially. Everything then was so new and novel that I didn't notice that my foreign language skills were non-existent.] It was in 1985, and I was returning to the US from a vacation in Australia, when I stopped over in Tahiti, French Polynesia. Each morning, I shared breakfast with a number of other tourists, none of whom spoke English. Now when one makes eye contact with someone at close quarters, if one cannot speak to the other person in a common language, one's only option is a smile (and possibly a nod, assuming a nod has no negative implications in that person's culture). But what to do for Act 2? As it happened, I not only made eye contact, I shared a table with these people, which made for a quiet meal after I'd used up my 10 words of French and they their 10 words of English. Right there and then I decided that I really needed to do something about it. Despite the pervasive use of English around the world, I had no good reason to assume that other people could or should speak that language. At the very least, I should try to meet them on their home turf whenever practicable even if that meant learning just a handful of words and phrases. A little effort can get a lot of respect.

A second situation involved a trip to Germany where I stayed with a friend who spoke English. However, one afternoon, I spent time with her mother who had no English at all. I quickly used up my minimal German, but we pressed on and she helped me prepare food for a Chinese meal I cooked that evening. We had a task to do and we managed to communicate non-verbally. We also spoke in our own languages, not because the other would understand, but the tone one uses and where one puts the stress can communicate meaning.

In 1992, I traveled to St. Petersburg, Russia, to give a series of lectures. My wife and 8-year-old son, Scott, came with me. Scott is also gregarious, so when people made eye contact with him, he always said, “Hello.” On this occasion, our translator and guide had prepared a small card for him to carry that said in Russian, “Hello, my name is Scott, and I am an American.” Then when someone smiled at him or greeted him in Russian, he'd take out his card, smile, and show it to them. One day, the other person responded in English, but my son was expecting to hear Russian, so he didn't really listen, and was quite surprised when I explained what had happened. [During that same trip, several weeks later in Finland, he learned to communicate with others via music.]

As I stated in “[Travel: Home Stays](#)” in January 2010, I am a traveler, not a tourist, so I like to get off the beaten path. But even if one is a tourist, to take full advantage of one's travel experience one really needs to interact with the locals even if it's just to ask the price of something, to buy a coffee, or to find a public toilet. I urge you to take the plunge. Remember, nothing ventured, nothing gained!

12.1 Do You Speak English?

On many occasions while traveling, I've asked someone, "Do you speak English?" and often they've replied, "A little!" More often than not, their "little" really is quite a lot.

Although English is my first language, I really didn't get to study it formally until I was in my late 20's, when I started learning Spanish. It occurred to me very quickly that if I was to get a handle on Spanish grammar, I should probably understand the grammar of my first language. As a result, my formal English training took place in the US, whereas I'd first learned the language in Australia.

12.2 Sprechen Sie Englisch?

Growing up with parents and relatives who occasionally spoke an older variant of German, I got to learn a handful of words and phrases. However, the speaking of German was not promoted in my house even though it was the first language of my parents. [Although they were born in Australia, they spoke German at home and learned English in school at age 5.] A few of my oldest cousins had a decent grasp of the spoken language.

My first foray into learning German was the purchase of a Berlitz cassette course in 1980. It was rather dry and monotonous to work at on my own, and although I learned quite a bit, I never did finish the first 90-minute introductory tape. [Recently, when having a major purge of my stuff, I came across this course, still in its nice carry bag. I was delighted to find a good home for it with a friend. As he still owns a cassette player, I'd have to say that he's an *old* friend.]

Some 10 years later, I signed up for a 10-week course at Georgetown University in Washington DC. Each Saturday, I sat in class for 3 hours listening, learning, and speaking. The first week, the instructor arrived and spoke for 90 minutes, *in German only!* It was a shock to all of us attending, as we had not known it was to be a complete immersion class. The books we got were also in German only. I soon went out and bought an introductory German book in English, which saved me from complete failure. Each week for the first few weeks, fewer and fewer students showed up. I'm sure it wasn't nearly as romantic as they had imagined.

After that, I worked a great deal on my own with books learning more grammar and vocabulary. And as I traveled, I tried it all. However, my main problem was that I had no comprehension skills.

More than a few languages are Germanic, so some knowledge of that language has helped me read information as I've traveled.

After a month in Europe recently, with two weeks of that in Germany, I had four weeks of private German tutoring. It certainly was intimidating. I am told with great authority that, "It gets better/easier as you go along." In any event, I'm certain that I don't work that hard for money!

12.3 ¿Habla Usted inglés?

Years ago, I had been considering taking a formal German class, but as it happened, I got sidetracked into Spanish instead. In any event, some proficiency of Spanish seemed more useful here in the US, and as far as I could tell, Spanish was a lot easier to learn than was German. [While German has three

genders, Spanish has only two, which is still one too many! And whereas there mostly is no pattern to the gender of nouns in German, there is in Spanish. Thank Heaven for small mercies!]

My formal Spanish training was also done at Georgetown University. The first course involved 30 hours over 10 weeks. Thankfully, it was *not* an immersion course. I did well and I liked it; however, I put in a *lot* of work. Afterwards, I set out with my backpack and my present-tense-only Spanish to Latin America where I probably insulted or confused a lot of people with my efforts to communicate. A year or so later, I followed up with a second course although that was far less enjoyable partly due to the need to spend time recording and listening to one's own voice.

The Romance languages (of which Spanish is one) have many common words and constructs, which gives me a boost when dealing with Italian-, French-, and Portuguese-speaking people.

12.4 Anata wa eigo o hanashimasu ka

After my first trip to Japan, I learned that I had been completely unprepared for the communications barrier. So, before my second trip there, I set about learning some basic Japanese (as well as buying a bilingual map of Tokyo).

My goals were simple: I didn't need to be able to read or write (which would take a lifetime commitment, especially as there are three writing systems to learn) just to be able to speak and understand simple statements and questions. I did not attend any formal class; I simply studied using a small 120-page phrasebook. The good news came with the revelation that Japanese has the same five vowels as English with sounds approximating those in Spanish. Ok, no problemo!

One of the first things I learned how to say was, "I do *not* speak Japanese," in Japanese. This, of course, confused many listeners; after all, I had just spoken to them correctly in Japanese! Now no matter how little I can speak in any language I do try to speak correctly and therein is a real problem. If one sounds like one knows what one is doing, listeners assume that one really does!

Although I ignored reading and writing, I did learn to read the kanji digits 1–10. Prices in local markets and street food stalls are often in an interesting combination of kanji and Arabic digits. For example, a price of 400 yen is often written as 四〇〇, with a kanji 4 followed by two Arabic zeros. So, while I could figure out how much I was paying, I had no idea what I was buying!

In general, I found that once people believed me when I said I really didn't speak Japanese, they actually did understand the little I had. And my being able to remember the little prayer one says before a meal (*i-ta-da-ki-masu*) won me a lot of points. [There's also one to say after a meal, *go-chi-so-sa-ma*, but I rarely remember to say that one.]

During one trip, I was riding on a train and I wanted some information about my stop. Opposite me sat several Japanese teenage schoolgirls. When I asked them in what I considered was correct Japanese, they looked at each other and giggled out loud. Now as most Japanese since WWII have learned some level of English in school I switched to English in the hopes of a better result. Unfortunately, they giggled even more. Frankly, I suspect they would have giggled if I'd just held up my finger.

Now if you can get passed the reading and writing (as in, ignoring it), you might be pleasantly surprised as how simple the grammar is compared to Western European languages. Verbs are always used in the infinite form; there is no conjugation. YEAH! There are no articles (I think perhaps because German used up the whole world's supply) or plurals. To turn a statement into a question, one simply adds a suffix. In fact, speaking Japanese is as easy as using chopsticks; well, maybe not quite.

By the way, the title of this section is written in Romaji, the method of writing Japanese using Latin (Roman) letters.

12.5 Speaking in Numerous Tongues

I know quite a few people who are fluent in at least three languages, and a few who can get by in four, five, and even six. And I met one woman who managed seven, including Latin. Whereas in the US knowing a second language can command premium pay, someone selling international ferry tickets in Tallinn, Estonia, for example, might need to speak English, Russian, Finnish, and Swedish, just to apply for the job, and that's without much if any extra pay.

12.6 One Language at a Time, Please!

While some people can casually switch from one language to another when talking in a group, as for me, I can only handle one foreign language at a time. Any attempt to speak in a third language while I'm immersed in a second usually results in my talking in that second language instead.

I'm reminded of an incident during my first time in Costa Rica. There I was, immersed in Spanish when I came across two young women waiting at what looked like a bus stop in a small village near the Caribbean coast. I started speaking to one in Spanish and she replied in Spanish. It was immediately clear to both of us that neither of us were native Spanish speakers. It turned out she was German, and she spoke a bit of Spanish and quite a bit of English. So, English would have been the best language in which to communicate; however, her friend spoke only German. In order to allow the friend to join the conversation, I said, in Spanish, that I spoke some German. Then there was a big pause while I tried to think of some, but I couldn't even remember how to introduce myself and say my name. Basically, I told the first woman in Spanish that I really could speak some German, but right now, I couldn't really think of any as I was "in Spanish mode."

12.7 Literacy and Fluency

It is important to mention that it has never been my intention to be either literate or fluent in any language other than English. Yes, I can read various bits of other languages, and that is useful, but I really don't care to nor need to read much other than signs, notices, and menus. And I rarely need to write in another language.

12.8 Variations on a Theme

Of course, not all flavors of any given language are created equal. An American might travel to Australia and find she doesn't understand many local terms and has trouble with lazy word endings and run-on speech. A group of Germans, Austrians, and Swiss might all speak German, yet each brings to the conversation a whole other vocabulary and set of pronunciations. Likewise, for French speakers from Canada, Belgium, France, and Côte d'Ivoire (the Ivory Coast).

12.9 Basic Words and Phrases to Know in any language

So just how many words and phrases must one know to “get by” in another language? Of course, the more the better, but one should start with the obvious ones, as follows: *hello, my name is ..., yes, no, please, thank you, thanks very much, how much does this cost?*, and the numbers 0–20. Add to that the verbs *to eat, to drink, to go, to be*, and *to pay*, and a few adjectives like *much* and *very*, and one has a good start.

12.10 Faux Pas and Misunderstandings

I can hardly end without admitting to some of my mistakes. Here are a few.

I was in Antigua, the old capital of Guatemala, where I had two weeks of private Spanish tutoring. Each night, I ate at the same restaurant where I was served by the same waitress. She tolerated my poor Spanish and I tipped her well. Ordinarily, I don't eat big meals, but one night, I had room for dessert, so I asked her if she had any cake. She looked blankly at me, but didn't try to figure out what I was saying. After a number of attempts, I got annoyed. I was thinking to myself, “Darn it woman, don't you understand Spanish?” Several days later, I was clear across the country riding a bus when it occurred to me what I'd been asking for. I had the right word but the wrong language. Cake in French is *gateaux*, which is what I had asked for, but it came across as *gato*, which in Spanish means *cat*. So, it was no surprise I didn't get my dessert!

It was Todo Santo (All Saints Day), a big event on the Catholic calendar, and there I was as a lunch guest at a family in rural Mexico. From time to time, different people tried to get me involved in their conversation by asking me questions. I started talking about what I thought was His Holiness the Pope, but it soon became obvious that no one was following. As it turned out, I was using the feminine *la papa*, which means *potato*, when I should have been using the masculine *el papa*, the *Pope*. Potato, Pope; hey what's the big deal, right? [It occurred to me later that perhaps The Devil made me do it!]

When traveling with a 2-year-old, one tends to choose restaurants where one can get seated and served quickly. As such, on our swing through Belgium, my family and I ate at a number of Pizza Huts. Not only was their menu standard and much like their restaurants back home, but it had pictures. After I'd struggled to order from the menu in French, I handed the menu to the waiter only to notice that on the back page there was an abbreviated version in English. [C'est la vie!](#)

12.11 Conclusion

Back in the 1800's, the American writer, Mark Twain, went to Heidelberg, Germany, to study German. Afterwards, he wrote an essay called, “Die Schreckliche Deutsche Sprache” (“[The Awful German Language](#)”), in which he put the worst possible spin on that language, but in an entertaining way. Some years ago, I bought a copy of that book with alternate pages in English and German. I highly recommend it to anyone who has worked at learning a European language.

By far my most fascinating language moment occurred many years ago, during my first trip to Japan. There I was standing in Tokyo Central Station having just arrived from Narita Airport. I was looking at the black-line subway map (which, like most such maps was neither to scale nor with correct direction) thinking to myself, “How the heck am I going to figure out which line to get on, how to buy a ticket,

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and to know when to get off?" [This was in the days before multi-lingual computer information screens that are (fortunately) now prevalent around the world.] As I was pondering my predicament, a voice from behind me asked in German, "Kann ich Sie helfen? (Can I help you?)" I turned, smiled, and answered, "Ja (Yes)". As I looked to be a Western European, he used the only mainstream language he knew from that region, and it worked. So, there was an Albanian talking German to an Australian in Japan!

When you are in your own normal world, don't forget how intimidating it was when you were trying to communicate in someone else's language. Specifically, when you meet beginning speakers of your language, speak more slowly and use a simpler vocabulary without being condescending. And when you are in their normal world, be polite, by trying to use their words, pronunciations, and customs.

And watch out, those darn foreigners appear to have words for everything!

Annex A. Cumulative Index for Volumes 1–11

A.1 Postings in Reverse Chronological Order

Here are the essays posted thus far, with the most recent listed first:

A.1.1 Volume 11

- #132 November 2020: [Signs of Life: Part 22](#) — Switzerland
- #131 October 2020: [School Days: Part 2](#)
- #130 September 2020: [Travel – Memories of Russia](#)
- #129 August 2020: [Signs of Life: Part 21](#) — the Northern Neck of Virginia, USA
- #128 July 2020: [School Days: Part 1](#)
- #127 June 2020: [Travel – Memories of Chile](#)
- #126 May 2020: [Signs of Life: Part 20](#) — Edinburgh, Scotland; London, England; Beijing, China; and more
- #125 April 2020: [The REALLY BIG Picture](#)
- #124 March 2020: [Travel – Memories of the US Desert Southwest](#)
- #123 February 2020: [Signs of Life: Part 19](#) — Edinburgh, Scotland
- #122 January 2020: [Football, Aussie Style](#)
- #121 December 2019: [Travel – Memories of Yorkshire](#)

A.1.2 Volume 10

- #120 November 2019: [Signs of Life: Part 18](#) — Japan
- #119 October 2019: [Washington D.C.](#)
- #118 September 2019: [Travel – Memories of New Mexico](#)
- #117 August 2019: [Signs of Life: Part 17](#) — Texas and Utah
- #116 July 2019: [My Experience with Airbnb](#)
- #115 June 2019: [Travel – From Adelaide to Washington DC](#)
- #114 May 2019: [Signs of Life: Part 16](#) — St. Croix
- #113 April 2019: [Law Enforcement in the US](#)
- #112 March 2019: [Travel – Memories of Abu Dhabi, UAE](#)
- #111 February 2019: [Signs of Life: Part 15](#) — Norway
- #110 January 2019: [My Time in Maine](#)
- #109 December 2018: [Travel – Memories of Prague, Salzburg, and-Munchen](#)

A.1.3 Volume 9

- #108 November 2018: [Signs of Life: Part 14](#) — Croatia, Slovenia, and Italy.
- #107 October 2018: [Living in Chicago](#)
- #106 September 2018: [Travel – Memories of Puerto Rico](#)
- #105 August 2018: [Signs of Life: Part 13](#) — Croatia.
- #104 July 2018: [A Little Bit of Religion](#)
- #103 June 2018: [Travel – Memories of Sacramento, Tahoe, Reno, & Napa Valley](#)
- #102 May 2018: [Signs of Life: Part 12](#) — Vienna, Austria, and Seoul, Korea.

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- #101 April 2018: [These United States](#)
- #100 March 2018: [Travel – Memories of The Dalmatian Coast](#)
- #99 February 2018: [Signs of Life: Part 11](#) — US states of Idaho, Wyoming, and Montana, and Korea and Japan
- #98 January 2018: [Having a Plan B](#)
- #97 December 2017: [Travel – Memories of The Hill Country, Texas, Y'all](#)

A.1.4 Volume 8

- #96 November 2017: [Signs of Life: Part 10](#) — Hawaii
- #95 October 2017: [English – Part 7: Adverbs](#)
- #94 September 2017: [Travel – Memories of Aruba, Bonaire, and Curaçao](#)
- #93 August 2017: [Signs of Life: Part 9](#) — Barcelona, Spain
- #92 July 2017: [What is Normal – Part 10. Automobiles and Driving](#)
- #91 June 2017: [Travel – Memories of Jordan](#)
- #90 May 2017: [Signs of Life: Part 8](#) — France, Finland, California, Croatia, England, Korea, and Washington State
- #89 April 2017: [Oh, the Things that I have Eaten](#)
- #88 March 2017: [Travel – Memories of Southeast England](#)
- #87 February 2017: [Signs of Life: Part 7](#) — Italy, Jordan, and France
- #86 January 2017: [Travel – Airports](#)
- #85 December 2016: [Travel – Memories of Cornwall and Devon](#)

A.1.5 Volume 7

- #84 November 2016: [Signs of Life: Part 6](#) — Various countries
- #83 October 2016: [A Little Bit of Astronomy: The Moon](#)
- #82 September 2016: [Travel – Memories of Poland](#)
- #81 August 2016: [Signs of Life: Part 5](#) — Various countries
- #80 July 2016: [It's all Greek to Me](#)
- #79 June 2016: [Travel – Memories of South America](#)
- #78 May 2016: [Signs of Life: Part 4](#) — Australia
- #77 April 2016: [English – Part 6: Verbs](#)
- #76 March 2016: [Travel – Memories of Switzerland](#)
- #75 February 2016: [Signs of Life: Part 3](#) — London and Yorkshire
- #74 January 2016: [Accidents and Incidents](#)
- #73 December 2015: [Travel – Memories of Germany](#)

A.1.6 Volume 6

- #72 November 2015: [Signs of Life: Part 2](#) — London and Yorkshire
- #71 October 2015: [What is Normal – Part 9. An American in Australia](#)
- #70 September 2015: [Travel – Memories of Austria](#)
- #69 August 2015: [Signs of Life: Part 1](#) — London and Yorkshire
- #68 July 2015: [Confessions of a Canine Companion](#)
- #67 June 2015: [Travel – Memories of Mexico and Central America](#)

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- #66 May 2015: [What is Normal – Part 8: Public Holidays](#)
- #65 April 2015: [Travel – Memories of Asia](#)
- #64 March 2015: [A Little Bit of Royalty](#)
- #63 February 2015: [Travel – Memories of the Eastern Bloc](#)
- #62 January 2015: [Sockets, Plugs, and Cables](#)
- #61 December 2014: [Travel – Oh the Places I have Stayed](#)

A.1.7 Volume 5

- #60 November 2014: [English – Part 5: Adjectives](#)
- #59 October 2014: [Travel – Memories of the Benelux Countries](#)
- #58 September 2014: [Abbreviations and Acronyms](#)
- #57 August 2014: [Travel – Memories of Japan](#)
- #56 July 2014: [Technology, Revisited](#)
- #55 June 2014: [Travel – Memories of Australia](#)
- #54 May 2014: [What is Normal – Part 7: What's in a Name?](#)
- #53 April 2014: [Travel – Memories of Ireland and the UK](#)
- #52 March 2014: [A Little Bit of Mathematics](#)
- #51 February 2014: [Travel – Memories of Scandinavia](#)
- #50 January 2014: [The Cost of Bad Weather and Natural Disasters](#)
- #49 December 2013: [Travel – Memories of Italy](#)

A.1.8 Volume 4

- #48 November 2013: [English – Part 4: Pronouns](#)
- #47 October 2013: [Last Writes](#) — Leaving an audit trail for your executor and/or loved ones
- #46 September 2013: [A Little Bit of Kulcha – Part 4](#) — Gardens, Theme Parks, Parliament Houses and Capitals, National Parks and Historic Places, and some Odds and Ends
- #45 August 2013: [A Little Bit of Kulcha – Part 3](#) — Museums and Art Galleries, Libraries, and Aquariums
- #44 July 2013: [English – Part 3: Nouns](#)
- #43 June 2013: [A Little Bit of Kulcha – Part 2](#) — Royal Hangouts and Military-Related Places and Things
- #42 May 2013: [A Little Bit of Kulcha – Part 1](#) — Ancient Civilizations and Old Sites, and Religious Places and Artifacts
- #41 April 2013: [Standards – The Secret Life of a Language Lawyer](#) — A look at some everyday standards and conventions
- #40 March 2013: [What is Normal – Part 6: Weights and Measures](#)
- #39 February 2013: [The Big Move](#) — preparing and selling a house, finding another one, and moving.
- #38 January 2013: [Starting your Own Non-Profit](#)
- #37 December 2012: [Symbols and Marks](#)

A.1.9 Volume 3

- #36 November 2012: [English – Part 2: Pronunciation](#)

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- #35 October 2012: [A Little Bit More American Civics](#) — The Congress, Presidential Succession, The Supreme Court, and the Flag
- #34 September 2012: [A Little Bit of American Civics](#) — The Constitution, Presidency, Vice Presidency, and Cabinet
- #33 August 2012: [What is Normal – Part 5: Numbers and Counting Systems](#)
- #32 July 2012: [Are You Getting Enough Vacation?](#)
- #31 June 2012: [English – Part 1: A Potpourri](#)
- #30 May 2012: [Shooting and Editing Home Video](#)
- #29 April 2012: [Electronic Mail Etiquette](#) — Some of my pet peeves and observations about people who use email
- #28 March 2012: [How Committees Work](#) — My take on 40 years of committee participation, and how successful committees can and should work.
- #27 February 2012: [Living in Utopia](#) — Life in a planned American city.
- #26 January 2012: [Travel – Packing and Preparing](#)
- #25 December 2011: [Making Good-Looking Documents](#) — Some tips on how to take advantage of a word processing program.

A.1.10 Volume 2

- #24 November 2011: [A Little Foreign Language Goes a Long Way](#) — The advantages of having some basic foreign language skills when traveling.
- #23 October 2011: [Starting Your Own Business](#)
- #22 September 2011: [What is Normal – Part 4: Dates and Times](#)
- #21 August 2011: [Teaching English as a Second Language](#)
- #20 July 2011: [A Walk along the River](#) — A look back at my 187-mile hike along the Thames Path in England.
- #19 June 2011: [Just Me and MiniMe: Traveling with Technology](#)
- #18 May 2011: [Planning for Success](#)
- #17 April 2011: [Travel – FAQs](#)
- #16 March 2011: [What is Normal – Part 3: Money](#)
- #15 February 2011: [Talk is Cheap. Write it Down](#) — I explore what I perceive to be the four stages of turning a dream into reality and why many people don't have what it takes to go beyond the first one or two stages.
- #14 January 2011: [Waiting My Turn](#) — A look back at all those times I'd stood in line or taken a number and waited my turn.
- #13 December 2010: [Technology, Unplugged – Part 2](#) — I discuss automobiles, still and video cameras, the written word, a digital data preservation strategy, and my right-hand gadget.

A.1.11 Volume 1

- #12 November 2010: [Technology, Unplugged – Part 1](#) — I discuss the telephone, television, the internet, and recorded music.
- #11 October 2010: [Books by My Bed](#) — My love of books.
- #10 September 2010: [Making Allowances](#) — My experiences in setting up an allowance for my son.

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- #9 August 2010: [Confessions of an Obama Volunteer](#) — My involvement in the 2008 US Presidential election.
- #8 July 2010: [What is Normal? – Part 2: Writing Systems](#)
- #7 June 2010: [Australia and the U.S. – A Contrast](#) — A comparison of the following: politics and government, law enforcement, taxation, education, and changing light bulbs.
- #6 May 2010: [Travel – Fly Me to the Moon](#) — My flight log after 40 years of air travel.
- #5 April 2010: [The Road to US Citizenship](#)
- #4 March 2010: [What is Normal? – Part 1: Getting Started](#)
- #3 February 2010: [Where's My Damn Gold Watch?](#) — A look back at my first 40 years in the workforce.
- #2 January 2010: [Travel – Home Stays](#)
- #1 December 2009: [Hi Ho, Hi Ho, it's Off to Blog We Go](#) — The introduction to my blog.

A.2 Series: Travel

- #130 September 2020: [Travel – Memories of Russia](#)
- #127 June 2020: [Travel – Memories of Chile](#)
- #124 March 2020: [Travel – Memories of the US Desert Southwest](#)
- #121 December 2019: [Travel – Memories of Yorkshire](#)
- #118 September 2019: [Travel – Memories of New Mexico](#)
- #115 June 2019: [Travel – From Adelaide to Washington DC](#)
- #112 March 2019: [Travel – Memories of Abu Dhabi, UAE](#)
- #109 December 2018: [Travel – Memories of Prague, Salzburg, and-Munchen](#)
- #106 September 2018: [Travel – Memories of Puerto Rico](#)
- #103 June 2018: [Travel – Memories of Sacramento, Tahoe, Reno, & Napa Valley](#)
- #100 March 2018: [Travel – Memories of The Dalmatian Coast](#)
- #97 December 2017: [Travel – Memories of The Hill Country, Texas, Y'all](#)
- #94 September 2017: [Travel – Memories of Aruba, Bonaire, and Curaçao](#)
- #91 June 2017: [Travel – Memories of Jordan](#)
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- #67 June 2015: [Travel – Memories of Mexico and Central America](#)
- #65 April 2015: [Travel – Memories of Asia](#)
- #63 February 2015: [Travel – Memories of the Eastern Bloc](#)
- #61 December 2014: [Travel – Oh the Places I have Stayed](#)
- #59 October 2014: [Travel – Memories of the Benelux Countries](#)
- #57 August 2014: [Travel – Memories of Japan](#)

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- #55 June 2014: [Travel – Memories of Australia](#)
- #53 April 2014: [Travel – Memories of Ireland and the UK](#)
- #51 February 2014: [Travel – Memories of Scandinavia](#)
- #49 December 2013: [Travel – Memories of Italy](#)
- #26 January 2012: [Travel – Packing and Preparing](#)
- #17 April 2011: [Travel – FAQs](#)
- #6 May 2010: [Travel – Fly Me to the Moon](#) — My flight log after 40 years of air travel.
- #2 January 2010: [Travel – Home Stays](#)

A.3 Series: What is Normal

- #92 July 2017: [What is Normal – Part 10. Automobiles and Driving](#)
- #71 October 2015: [What is Normal – Part 9. An American in Australia](#)
- #66 May 2015: [What is Normal – Part 8: Public Holidays](#)
- #54 May 2014: [What is Normal – Part 7: What's in a Name?](#)
- #40 March 2013: [What is Normal – Part 6: Weights and Measures](#)
- #33 August 2012: [What is Normal – Part 5: Numbers and Counting Systems](#)
- #22 September 2011: [What is Normal – Part 4: Dates and Times](#)
- #16 March 2011: [What is Normal – Part 3: Money](#)
- #8 July 2010: [What is Normal? – Part 2: Writing Systems](#)
- #4 March 2010: [What is Normal? – Part 1: Getting Started](#)

A.4 Series: English

- #95 October 2017: [English – Part 7: Adverbs](#)
- #77 April 2016: [English – Part 6: Verbs](#)
- #60 November 2014: [English – Part 5: Adjectives](#)
- #48 November 2013: [English – Part 4: Pronouns](#)
- #44 July 2013: [English – Part 3: Nouns](#)
- #36 November 2012: [English – Part 2: Pronunciation](#)
- #31 June 2012: [English – Part 1: A Potpourri](#)

A.5 Series: A Little Bit of ...

- #104 July 2018: [A Little Bit of Religion](#)
- #83 October 2016: [A Little Bit of Astronomy: The Moon](#)
- #64 March 2015: [A Little Bit of Royalty](#)
- #52 March 2014: [A Little Bit of Mathematics](#)
- #46 September 2013: [A Little Bit of Kulcha – Part 4](#) — Gardens, Theme Parks, Parliament Houses and Capitals, National Parks and Historic Places, and some Odds and Ends
- #45 August 2013: [A Little Bit of Kulcha – Part 3](#) — Museums and Art Galleries, Libraries, and Aquariums
- #43 June 2013: [A Little Bit of Kulcha – Part 2](#) — Royal Hangouts and Military-Related Places and Things

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- #42 May 2013: [A Little Bit of Kulcha – Part 1](#) — Ancient Civilizations and Old Sites, and Religious Places and Artifacts
- #35 October 2012: [A Little Bit More American Civics](#) — The Congress, Presidential Succession, The Supreme Court, and the Flag
- #34 September 2012: [A Little Bit of American Civics](#) — The Constitution, Presidency, Vice Presidency, and Cabinet

A.6 Series: Autobiographic Essays

- #131 October 2020: [School Days: Part 2](#)
- #128 July 2020: [School Days: Part 1](#)
- #122 January 2020: [Football, Aussie Style](#)
- #110 January 2019: [My Time in Maine](#)
- #107 October 2018: [Living in Chicago](#)
- #89 April 2017: [Oh, the Things that I have Eaten](#)
- #74 January 2016: [Accidents and Incidents](#)
- #68 July 2015: [Confessions of a Canine Companion](#)
- #41 April 2013: [Standards – The Secret Life of a Language Lawyer](#) — A look at some everyday standards and conventions
- #39 February 2013: [The Big Move](#) — preparing and selling a house, finding another one, and moving.
- #27 February 2012: [Living in Utopia](#) — Life in a planned American city.
- #14 January 2011: [Waiting My Turn](#) — A look back at all those times I'd stood in line or taken a number and waited my turn.
- #13 December 2010: [Technology, Unplugged – Part 2](#) — I discuss automobiles, still and video cameras, the written word, a digital data preservation strategy, and my right-hand gadget.
- #12 November 2010: [Technology, Unplugged – Part 1](#) — I discuss the telephone, television, the internet, and recorded music.
- #11 October 2010: [Books by My Bed](#) — My love of books.
- #10 September 2010: [Making Allowances](#) — My experiences in setting up an allowance for my son.
- #9 August 2010: [Confessions of an Obama Volunteer](#) — My involvement in the 2008 US Presidential election.
- #5 April 2010: [The Road to US Citizenship](#)
- #3 February 2010: [Where's My Damn Gold Watch?](#) — A look back at my first 40 years in the workforce.

A.7 Series: Signs of Life

- #129 August 2020: [Signs of Life: Part 21](#) — the Northern Neck of Virginia, USA
- #126 May 2020: [Signs of Life: Part 20](#) — Edinburgh, Scotland; London, England; Beijing, China; and more
- #123 February 2020: [Signs of Life: Part 19](#) — Edinburgh, Scotland
- #120 November 2019: [Signs of Life: Part 18](#) — Japan

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- #117 August 2019: [Signs of Life: Part 17](#) — Texas and Utah
- #114 May 2019: [Signs of Life: Part 16](#) — St. Croix
- #111 February 2019: [Signs of Life: Part 15](#) — Norway
- #108 November 2018: [Signs of Life: Part 14](#) — Croatia, Slovenia, and Italy.
- #105 August 2018: [Signs of Life: Part 13](#) — Croatia.
- #102 May 2018: [Signs of Life: Part 12](#) — Vienna, Austria, and Seoul, Korea.
- #99 February 2018: [Signs of Life: Part 11](#) — US states of Idaho, Wyoming, and Montana, and Korea and Japan
- #96 November 2017: [Signs of Life: Part 10](#) — Hawaii
- #93 August 2017: [Signs of Life: Part 9](#) — Barcelona, Spain
- #90 May 2017: [Signs of Life: Part 8](#) — France, Finland, California, Croatia, England, Korea, and Washington State
- #87 February 2017: [Signs of Life: Part 7](#) — Italy, Jordan, and France
- #84 November 2016: [Signs of Life: Part 6](#) — Various countries
- #81 August 2016: [Signs of Life: Part 5](#) — Various countries
- #78 May 2016: [Signs of Life: Part 4](#) — Australia
- #75 February 2016: [Signs of Life: Part 3](#) — London and Yorkshire
- #72 November 2015: [Signs of Life: Part 2](#) — London and Yorkshire
- #69 August 2015: [Signs of Life: Part 1](#) — London and Yorkshire